

PENTECOST 14

August 21, 2016

Luke 18:9-14

"Beggars All"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

Do you suppose we could divide this room up into three groups of people:

- the Good Christians,
- the average Christians,
- and the bad, or should we say, less than average Christians?

Do you think we could do that? Strangely enough, lots of Christians seem to think that way, and imagine that God looks at us that way, too.

Jesus tells us a parable today that **blows that sort of thinking out of the water.**

Two men. One, according to the views of the world, was **a religious winner.** The other, **a religious loser.** Both of them are shown at prayer.

Let's look first at the winner. Jesus uses a Pharisee for this character, but just imagine any **upright, church-going citizen.** He's on the church council, or has been, anyway, and he attends Bible Study. Everyone thinks he's **a model believer.**

This winner points out to God all of the wonderful things he has going for himself: he's tried to keep all the commandments, he gives a tenth of his income as offering to the church, and he is clearly not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, and other various and sundry sinners. And, **lucky for him,** there's a **religious loser** right there next to him so he can easily **point out to God what a great contrast** the two make.

But **Jesus tells us** that **this winner is not a winner after all.** He does not go home justified – made right with God.

Now let's look at the man everyone thinks is a loser. In Jesus' story, he's a tax collector, but we can think of him as any **garden variety sinner.** To put it in modern terms, he probably **doesn't make it to church very often** - certainly not in the Summer. His **financial giving record is pretty spotty,** and almost anyone in town would be able to list a number of his **obvious shortcomings as a Christian.** **He doesn't offer God any evidence of his own worth – he just asks for mercy.**

And yet, **Jesus shocks us** by saying that it's this man who goes home justified – made right with God. **Really!?** That **doesn't seem quite right, does it?**

It's **so very hard** for us to **understand** one of the pillars of our faith, namely the truth that **we are justified** – we are saved from our sin – **by grace through faith.**

And, as the Apostle Paul says often, this is a gift, it is **not something we have anything to do with.**

This is what we proclaim. This is what the Bible teaches, and this is what we have been taught. And yet, **how often we seem to have the same mind-set as the Pharisee, the so-called winner** in today's story.

We think we **need to point to our efforts, our good works** in order to **impress God** and somehow **convince him that we are worthy of salvation**; worthy of his love and **forgiveness and eternal life**.

This can make me nervous that I'm not doing quite enough. And so **I may try to find someone who seems to be an even worse Christian** than I am.

Anyone with siblings, or any parent with more than one child, knows how natural this pattern is: to try to point to someone who's even worse than me!

In our spiritual life we do the same thing – look for someone who's an even worse sinner than I am – because if God is looking at both of us, then **maybe I'll look good by comparison**.

Jesus destroys this way of thinking. We **cannot climb our way into heaven on a ladder of good deeds**, unless we are **perfect**, and **that, of course, is impossible**.

We **cannot earn our way into God's favor**. No one can be saved by their own actions.

To the Pharisee in our story – and to the upright churchgoers in our midst – this might seem like **bad news**. They might think, *"You mean, I've worked so hard to be good, and it doesn't count for anything? It's just not fair."*

But, my friends, in reality, **this is the good news**. We **don't have to do the impossible**. It's **all been done for us**.

There's **NOTHING YOU CAN DO**. And with that knowledge, a great burden is lifted from your shoulders.

You **don't have to impress God with how good you are**. You don't have to try to impress other church members, or the pastor, either.

The **religious loser** in today's story has the **right attitude**. He doesn't point to any good deeds or upstanding actions on his part.

All he says is, *"God be merciful to me, a sinner!"* He points to God's mercy, not his own weak efforts. And **he goes home having been made right with God**.

Because **God does what we cannot do**. God doesn't watch and wait to see how far we can come on our own, and then step in to **help us the last few yards**.

No. **GOD DOES IT ALL**. He acts while we are incapable of making any moves towards him.

He puts to death the sinner in us and brings us forth as new creatures: forgiven and made clean by the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ. All of this is an **undeserved gift from our gracious God**.

One phrase I teach my confirmation students is this: *"Christians don't do good in order to be saved; we try to do good because we already are saved."*

We do acts of loving service for others **not because we want God to love us**, but because **God has already shown his love for us** on the cross at Calvary.

Our acts of loving service for others are **a way to say thank you to God**. As one of my seminary professors used to say: *"What are you going to do for your neighbor now that you don't have to do anything."*

Salvation by grace means we **don't have to prove to God that we are winners**. WE CAN RELAX!

Salvation by grace means that **God has chosen us: losers all**, and **declared us to be winners**. WE DESERVE NOTHING. But GOD GIVES US EVERYTHING.

To use an Olympic metaphor, if our faith walk is a balance beam routine, **we cannot, ever, stick the landing**.

Not even a little bit. We **always fall flat on our faces**. But **God gives us the gold medal of salvation anyway! How about that?**

Martin Luther understood this truth. And **it was a great comfort to him**.

We might think that he would be one Christian who could be confident that his actions had earned him salvation. But **he knew better**.

He knew he had nothing to offer God as proof that he deserved eternal life. He knew that when it comes to salvation, **our works count for nothing**. They are **all worthless**.

WE DEPEND SOLELY ON THE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE OF GOD.

But Luther could be at peace with that knowledge.

Because he knew, beyond any doubt, that **God had claimed him in baptism and promised to love him forever**.

Guess what, my friends? THAT'S TRUE FOR YOU AND ME, TOO!

It's said that the last thing Luther wrote, as he lay on his death bed, were these words, *"We are all beggars, it is true."*

Luther knew that, like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, we can point to nothing in ourselves or in our actions that would be deserving of God's forgiveness and salvation, and so, like the tax collector, we simply say, *"God have mercy on me, a sinner."*

But Luther was confident, as we should be, that **God will have mercy on all who are baptized and believe**.

He's made a promise. And GOD DOESN'T BREAK HIS PROMISES!

We **come to God like beggars, with empty hands**, knowing **he will fill them with love and forgiveness**.

Now, some of you may rebel against being called *beggars at God's back door*. **You want to be a winner, not a loser.** Relax! It's out of your control! But that's okay. **God loves us religious losers.** Each one of us beggars is precious in God's sight.

And the wonderful phrase, "*We are beggars, it is true,*" reminds us always that **we are precious only because**

- **God has made us,**
- God has redeemed us, and
- God has **declared us to be of infinite worth.**

What freedom this knowledge can give us!

I don't need to **constantly be looking at myself** and trying to **judge which group** I belong in: the **good**, the **average**, or the **bad** Christians. **Such thinking becomes obsolete.**

You see, **WE ARE ALL JUST BEGGARS.** But we are very special beggars.

We are beggars who are called by the Lord of all creation **to be a part of his family.**

We are beggars who are **sent out to tell other beggars where they can come to be fed and healed.**

One of my favorite Christian symbols is the white cloth – the pall – that is draped over the coffin at the beginning of a funeral.

The funeral pall reminds us that, **when we were baptized, we put on Christ**, just as if we were **putting on a garment.**

And the pall symbolizes that when we die and come before our maker, he **doesn't see us the way the world might see:** namely as:

- a good Christian,
- an average Christian, or
- a bad Christian.

Instead, **God sees only the righteousness of Christ**, which has **covered me and my sins** since the day I was baptized.

God sees A BELOVED BEGGAR, a PRECIOUS LOSER **who is a part of his wonderful family.**

And God says,
"WELCOME MY SON.

WELCOME MY DAUGHTER.

WELCOME HOME." Amen