

### “Ironies of the Passion – This Man Went Home Justified”

“It’s not my fault!” Does that sound familiar to you? Maybe it does if you are a teacher, or a parent, or a supervisor in some capacity at work. And what usually follows? The student or child or employee tries to justify himself or herself, or to justify what he or she has done. In other words, they make an excuse or try to shift the blame to someone else, or something else. They try to get out of any consequences that might otherwise come their way. It is interesting and perhaps a bit ironic that we use the word *justify* this way in our everyday speech. We use it to mean make an excuse. But in the Bible, *justify* is an important word that means something very different. It refers to God declaring us “not guilty” like a judge in a courtroom would do. It’s almost an opposite meaning for the very same word.

In our midweek services during Lent this year, we’ll be talking quite a bit about irony. Our theme is “Ironies of the Passion.” And we won’t try to get bogged down in the precise meaning of irony, but to use it in this way: it refers to situations or circumstances or outcomes that aren’t what we might expect. And indeed, Jesus’ Passion, his suffering and death and the events leading up to them, were filled with irony.

Today’s irony comes from a parable that Jesus told. The irony, or the unexpected, came from the end result. This man went home justified. You heard the parable in the Gospel earlier, and you realize that “this man” refers to the tax collector as opposed to the Pharisee.

Now, you might say, “That doesn’t seem ironic at all.” And if you do, it’s probably because you already know something about the gospel. And even if you do, to really think about it, the gospel promises something that is the exact opposite of what we have a right to expect. And that is what Jesus wanted to convey in this parable. This man, not the one people may have expected, the one trying to follow the laws, this man went home justified.

Jesus told this parable to people who were confident in their own righteousness and who looked down on everyone else. It was a parable about two very different people and their very different prayers. The first man was a Pharisee who prayed, **“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”** Do you cringe at a prayer like that? What about the people to whom Jesus spoke? Jesus was telling them a story that they could relate to. This was their attitude. To them, there was nothing cringe-worthy about the prayer.

Part of our cringing might well come from our understanding of the word Pharisee. We have come to know Pharisees as enemies of Jesus. We use the same word even today to talk about self-righteous people, proud, even hypocritical. But to the Jews in the first century, this would not have been the case. So many at that time viewed the Pharisees as defenders of the Old Testament, holding to the truth of what God had said and staunchly defending it. They were very religious. They were the leaders.

So when this Pharisee said that he was not a robber or an evildoer or an adulterer, he was speaking the truth. He didn’t break into people’s houses or shoplift. He had never committed a crime that would land him in jail. He didn’t sleep around. In today’s terms, we might say that he didn’t even have a traffic ticket. There was a distinct and marked difference between this man and the other, the tax collector.

Tax collectors were collaborators. They had betrayed their own people by supporting their Roman overlords. They collected taxes from their own people in order to support the Romans. And more than that, they collected extra to line their own pockets with the threat of Roman might behind them. Who knows what else the tax collectors, those sinners, would have been involved in. Not our Pharisee. He gave 10 percent of his income to the Lord, and he fasted even more than the requirement. No wonder he was so pleased with himself. No wonder Jesus’ listeners could identify with him.

His problem was the same as theirs. It was pride. One of the ironies we recognize in Scripture is that even though we might be doing the right things, if we do them for the wrong reasons, that's sin. This Pharisee thought that his actions were the way to please God, the way to be justified. The reality, though, was that he had left out the important matters, like his attitude toward God, and replaced it with the things he could handle, like fasting and tithing. He may have been confident in his own righteousness, but his confidence was misplaced. He was still guilty in God's courtroom.

At times, we need to hear this parable for the same reasons. Our sinful natures wish to be confident in our own righteousness. At times we are tempted to think or to pray like the Pharisee, "I thank you, God, that I am not like members of other churches. My church maintains a purity of doctrine that so many have given up on. We're not like the Baptist church down the road or the churches that call themselves Lutheran in our area." Or maybe on a more personal level: "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like other people in this pornographic and materialistic society. I avoid internet sites that no one should look at. I don't beat my wife or children. I don't use drugs; I stay out of trouble. Look at all I do for my congregation! I am a Church Council member or a part of the Women's group. I give ten percent of my income to church and never miss a Lenten service. I even help with the meals."

Oh, it is likely that many of us could pray those very things, but the problem would be with our attitude and our pride. If we rely on what we do to make us right before God, while ignoring the sins that lurk in the darkness, then we stand before God as sinners, as guilty. Even our best efforts in this life are tainted by sin.

Jesus is the only reason that God accepts our worship and our efforts. Jesus died and paid for the sin in our hearts that otherwise contaminates all of our efforts. He paid for our pride, our chipping away at the laws of God that we don't care for because we don't follow them. His sufferings and death erase the record of all our sins before God. And his resurrection declares us not guilty in God's sight. Because God sees Jesus when he looks at us, what we do here does please him. Because we have been declared righteous—justified—because of what Jesus did, we want to serve our Lord with our offerings, our time, our efforts. With a whole different attitude, we avoid the temptations that might plague our entertainment choices and strive to maintain a pure doctrine, and even serve others within and outside of our congregation. It is the mercy of God in Christ that makes the difference between the two men praying in the temple in Jesus' parable.

The irony of the parable is that the one man, who thought himself to be a committed, churchgoing follower of God didn't understand his need for mercy. He didn't understand what it meant to repent. But the man who knew he was a sinner did. He repented. He begged for mercy. And he went home justified.

You heard how the tax collector stood at a distance. He didn't even lift his eyes up off the floor. He prayed very simply, "**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**" He knew that he had no defense before God in his courtroom. No slick defense attorney could hide his guilt. God had all the evidence before him. The case was airtight. Guilty as charged. Sinner.

His only hope was that God would have mercy on him, and God did. Mercy, that God looked down on someone in need and helped. God has mercy on sinners. Though we deserve death and hell, he wants us to be with him in heaven. So he sent his Son to live and to die and to rise again to wipe away our sins.

In mercy God comes to us in his Word to announce the good news: your sins are forgiven; you are justified. We respond to God's mercy by depending on it, relying on it. There is no excuse for our sins, and God doesn't make or offer us an excuse. He doesn't want us to even try to justify ourselves. Instead, he pours the waters of baptism over us to wash our sins away. He feeds us with the true body and blood of our Lord and Savior for the forgiveness of sins.

This Ash Wednesday, and all through Lent, we celebrate the irony that God justifies those who so clearly know that they cannot stand on their own. And so we humbly bow and say, "Have mercy on me, a sinner." And we go home justified, declared not guilty, for Jesus' sake.

The Text: Luke 18:9–14 (NIV84)

<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup> “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup> “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”