

Text: Luke 18:9-14 Ash Wednesday. **February 18, 2015.**

God, have mercy on me, the sinner. Amen.

How do you feel coming here tonight? Feeling pretty good? Made it to church. Second time this week. Score one for me. Faithful to my spouse. My kids behave. Most of the time. I'm better than those who aren't here. Maybe you aren't feeling so good. Maybe you are feeling kind of stinky. I can't stop losing my temper. I can't stop looking. You might think I'm good on the outside, but if you knew what was in my heart, you would stay far away. And God would stay further away. God wouldn't want anything to do with me, a sinner, the worst sinner. I'm surprised the church hasn't fallen on me yet. Must be all the good people here holding it up. God, I bring nothing to the table but my sin. God, I can't do anything to make you love me. God, I can't say anything but, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner." God, have mercy on me, the sinner. God, have mercy on me the sinner.

Jesus told this parable to those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else. Isn't that you? Isn't that me? I'm better than those who stayed home tonight. I brought my kids. That's no excuse. So what if it's a weeknight. Don't you love Jesus enough to come one weeknight? To those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable.

Two men went into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisees were the best-looking, most religious people you would ever want to see. They stood on the street corners and prayed. Out loud, like this guy, for everyone to hear. They wore special clothes that showed how much of the Bible they knew. The word Pharisee even means, "set apart." They purposely and specifically set themselves apart from everyone else so they could look down on everyone else.

And then there was a tax collector. Ugh! Yuck! You would spit when you said the word, "tax collector." You would shake that horrible word off your body. Tax collector. They were cheats. The government sold the right to tax to the highest bidder and then allowed that bidder to get as much as he could. They were in cahoots with the hated Romans, collecting taxes for a corrupt government hundreds of miles away that robbed the people of freedom! Tax collectors were unclean. It was surprising to even see a tax collector in the temple. They had so much contact with Gentiles, they were often defiled by their presence and couldn't even enter the temple. So here's the scene. A Pharisee and a tax collector.

The Pharisee takes his stand, out in front for all to see, loud enough for all to hear. He prays and prays and prays and prays a little more. He really didn't come to pray. He came to announce to everyone, "Look at me! Look at how good I am! I'm not a robber or adulterer. I don't do any evil! And I'm certainly, a million times better than this tax collector." Can you believe this guy? He literally points to and yells out how much better he is than this other guy, standing right over there! What? Really? He goes on. "I fast twice a week." The law only required once a year. So he was going 100 times, 100 times above and beyond what the law required. "I give a tenth of all I get. Of all I have." Pharisees even broke open the spice rack and counted a tenth of all their mint and cumin at tithing time. Can we just say, "He sees no sin, so he sees no need for a Savior, so he still has sin." Think about that.

Now, in contrast to this Pharisee, we have a tax collector. I pray by the time we are done you can stop saying that with spit. The tax collector stood far away. Maybe that's why we still fill the back rows first. He didn't feel good enough to be there. It's like he didn't want anyone to realize he was there for fear

they might tell him, "Go away. You don't belong here." He knew he didn't belong close to God. He stood far away. He was not even willing to lift up his eyes. Maybe that's why we still bow our heads. He couldn't bear to look in the direction of heaven and the holy God. He shuddered with fear at the thought of even being there, of even saying any prayer. He beat his chest, a sign of sorrow. It made his heart hurt worse, if that were even possible. Try it sometime. Try hitting your chest and see what you feel. It did not compare to the guilt of this tax collector. How many had he cheated? How much? How had he spent the stolen treasures?

He can't come forward. He can't look up. He can't say much. He can't say anything but, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner." God, have mercy on me, the sinner. Yes. He called himself the sinner. The sinner. The worst of all sinners. The one, the well-known sinner. That's me. God, I'm a sinner. I can't fix it. I can't solve it. I can't choose my out of it. God, I'm the sinner! I need your mercy! God, I'm the worst sinner! I beg your mercy! God, have mercy on ME, the sinner!

God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy on us and has given his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy on us. Did you hear that? God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy on us! Hear it like you've never heard it before. God, our heavenly Father, has had mercy on us! God has had mercy! And has given his only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Our sins, mine, yours, the whole world's, were put on Jesus. God has had mercy on us. Jesus paid for those sins, yours, mine. God has had mercy on us. God has had mercy on us. God has had mercy on us. God, have mercy on me, the sinner! God did exactly that. Exactly that.

So how did these two guys go home? This man, the tax collector, went home justified before God, rather than the other, the Pharisee. Did you catch that? The Pharisee, the 100 times above and beyond guy, the loud and repeated pray-er. Went home more a sinner than when he came. The tax collector, the shy in the back not looking up beating his chest, seven word pray saying guy, went home less a sinner, in fact, not a sinner in God's eyes, but justified, declared not guilty of every sin. This guy, the tax collector, went home with a new status, "Not guilty!" The tax collector went home with mercy. The tax collector went home justified. Not the other guy.

You see what this means? If the Pharisee isn't justified by works, no one is! If the tax collector is justified by mercy, everyone is justified by mercy. If the Pharisee isn't justified by works, no one is. But the tax collector is justified by mercy, everyone is. No wonder we pray, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner."

So it really doesn't matter how you came here tonight. It matters how you go home. Go home praying the prayer of the tax collector, "God, have mercy on me, the sinner." Then go home confident, "God has had mercy on me, the sinner! God has had mercy on me! The sinner! God has had mercy on me!" Amen.