



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday After Trinity 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 & St. Luke 18:9-14 Fr. William Klock

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“Two men went up to the temple to pray,” Jesus said. The temple was the place where heaven and earth met. The place where men and women could go to be in the presence of God. Twice a day the priests would lead the people in prayers, at nine in the morning and at three in the afternoon, but people could go any time to pray and they did. They still do. Jews today gather at the Western Wall, not technically the temple, but part of the foundation of the temple complex and all that was left after the Romans brought it all crashing down. Jews still go there to pray. Two men climbed the steps to the temple courts to pray. “One of them,” Jesus said, “was a Pharisee.” It was perfectly fine to pray at home, but if anyone was going to go and pray at the temple, it would be a Pharisee. Their “thing” was to live their lives as if they served in the temple. They weren’t Levites and they weren’t priests, but they took great pains to always remain ritually pure like the Levites did. They would have been some of the most regular men to say their prayers in the temple instead of just at home.

But there were two men, Jesus said, who went up to the temple. “The other was a tax collector.” You could almost hear the boos and the hisses and “Eew, gross!”. Tax collectors didn’t belong in the temple. Jews had a whole category for people who had forsaken God’s law. They called them “sinners”. These weren’t people who slipped up and did bad things occasionally. Everyone did that—even the Pharisees—but they still

loved God, they still loved his covenant and his law, and the law made provision for atonement and they availed themselves of it. “Sinners”, on the other hand, they were people who had no regard for God’s law. If they sinned, they didn’t care and they didn’t seek atonement. They were Jews—ethnically speaking, at least—but they basically rejected or, at least, had no respect for the covenant. But in those days there was one special class of “sinner” that was singled out because of just how awful they were: tax collectors. So people would talk about “sinners *and* tax collectors”. Tax collectors didn’t just sin—they got rich stealing from and swindling their own people. They were collaborators with the evil, unclean Romans.

So Jesus went on with his story: “Standing, the Pharisee prayed to himself like this, ‘God, I give thanks to you that I am not like other men—like the greedy, like the unjust, like adulterers—or like *this* tax collector. I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of everything I earn.’ Everyone pictured the Pharisee, confidently making his way up the steps to the temple complex, confidently walking across the outer court—the place they called the Court of the Gentiles, because that’s as close to the temple as the Gentiles could go. And they pictured him confidently passing through the gate into the Court of the Women and then, still confidently, striding across that outer court and into the inner Court of Israel—the place where the great altar was, where the priests offered their sacrifices. And he boldly went and stood at the base of the steps leading up into the temple itself and he lifted up his hands and he prayed. And it was normal to pray out loud in those days, but he made a point of raising his voice so that everyone could hear his prayer, and he thanked the God of Israel that he was not like other men. His prayer of thanksgiving becomes a thinly veiled boast of his own faithfulness to God’s law—especially as he turns his head and looks back to the tax collector who

just barley dared to pass through the gate and was practically hiding behind a column.

In stark contrast, “The tax collector,” Jesus said, “standing far off, didn’t even want to lift his eyes to heaven. Instead, he beat his breast, saying ‘God, have mercy on me a sinner.’”

While the Pharisee strode proudly into the temple, the poor tax collector kneels—or maybe he even prostrates himself on the ground—off on the fringes, hiding in the shadows or behind a column and quietly utters his humble prayer for mercy. The Pharisee—at least as far as he was concerned—he belonged there. But the tax collector. He was a sinner and he knew it. He did not belong in the presence of the holy. Other people made that clear and he probably believed it himself. But he was desperate for God’s mercy and this was the place to ask for it. What happened to the tax collector that brought him to the temple? Jesus doesn’t say. For all we know, Jesus could be telling Matthew’s story here. Maybe he was one of those people to whom Jesus had pronounced, “Your sins are forgiven. Go and sin no more.” And so he followed it up the only way he knew how, by turning over a new leaf, by ritually purifying himself, and by going to the temple to fall on the mercy of the Lord.

“This one—the tax collector,” said Jesus, “he went down to his house justified, not the other one.” Why? “Because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Now, there’s an interesting twist in the tale. If you were following along in Luke 18 or if you were paying careful attention when the Gospel was read earlier, you might have noticed that I left out Luke’s introduction. At the beginning, Luke introduces the parable, writing, “Jesus told this parable to some who were confident in themselves, because they were

righteous and looked down on others.” In Greek, “righteous” and “just” are the same word, so Luke plays with that here. Jesus told this parable to some who were confident in themselves, because they were righteous (or just). The point is that they *knew*—they were certain they were “in”. Whenever the Lord came to judge the wicked and to deliver his people and to set the world to rights, they knew they’d be on God’s side. They knew they had a place in his presence in the age to come. But then in the end, who is it who goes home justified or in the right? It’s not the righteous Pharisee, but the tax collector who prayed for God’s mercy.

It’s not that the Pharisee—whether the one in the parable or the ones Jesus was telling the parable to—it’s not that they weren’t righteous. By all accounts they were. They were obedient to the law. They weren’t perfect, but if they made a mistake, they offered the appropriate sacrifices. That was part of being faithful to the law, too. They took part in the atonement for sins offered through the temple. They were righteous. And they were the opposite of the tax collector. The tax collector had no regard for God, for his law, or for his covenant. The Pharisee loved God’s law; the tax collector trampled all over it. And I think it’s important to add that it wasn’t just the Pharisees. When Luke says that Jesus told this to people who were confident in themselves because they were righteous, that included most of the people. The Pharisees may have set the bar higher than it needed to be, but the majority, most people who say themselves as good and upstanding Jews had this same problem. They were confident of their position before the Lord because they knew they kept his law: they were circumcised, they kept the sabbath, they ate only clean food, and they avoided gentiles.

And yet, at the end of the story, Jesus says, it’s not the righteous or the just man who goes away justified—

meaning declared by God to be in the right. It’s the scummy, unrighteous tax collector. Why? Well, to answer that we need to ask what Jesus meant that he went home justified. To be justified is to be found or to be declared to be “in the right”.

Think of a courtroom. Plaintiff and a defendant bring their case before a judge, they explain the circumstances and present their evidence, and the judge makes a ruling. The judge declares one of them to be in the right. The judge vindicates one of them. Maybe it’s the defendant, who proves his innocence to the judge. Or maybe it’s the plaintiff, who proves to the judge that he is truly the victim. One of them goes home vindicated by the judge. He goes home declared to be in the right. He goes home justified. But what’s the judge’s basis for determining who is in the right?

We really have to do is go back to the Old Testament and to the beginning of Israel’s story. Think about Abraham in Genesis 15. That’s where this got started. The Lord made a promise to Abraham—to give him a land and to give him a son and to make him a great nation. And it was absurd. Abraham went to the promised land and lived there—but he was just one man and even as rich as he was, with flocks and herds and servants, he only ever occupied the smallest corner of that land. And there he was, almost one hundred and his wife ninety—long past child-bearing years. How could he, a childless man ever become a great nation? But the Lord made a promise to him and Abraham believed. And, we’re told, the Lord counted that belief, that faith, as righteousness. Because Abraham believed that the Lord not only could, but somehow would pull off this crazy promise, he was counted as being in the right. There was no way any of it could happen, but Abraham trusted in the faithfulness of the Lord anyway. And in that, Abraham set the standard by which the Lord recognised his people: *faith*. Later the *torah* would mark out

this people of faith as a special people, visibly different from everyone else, but long before the *torah* there was faith, and faith was ultimately what it always was and always would be that marks out the people of God—faith in the God who promises crazy things and then never fails to do them.

And this theme echoes all the way through Israel’s story. It was the message of the Prophet Habakkuk who lived during the last decades of the kingdom of Judah, in the years before Jerusalem was defeated and destroyed by the Babylonians and the people taken off into exile. Habakkuk looked around him and saw the wickedness and idolatry of his own people and, very much like the psalmists, he cried out to the Lord. This is the opening of his lament.

**O LORD, how long shall I cry for help,  
and you will not hear?  
Or cry to you “Violence!”  
and you will not save?  
Why do you make me see iniquity,  
and why do you idly look at wrong?  
Destruction and violence are before me;  
strife and contention arise.  
So the law is paralyzed,  
and justice never goes forth.  
For the wicked surround the righteous;  
so justice goes forth  
perverted. (Habakkuk 1:1-4)**

Habakkuk knew that things weren’t the way they were supposed to be and he knew the promises of the Lord to his people and he and so many others had cried out and cried out—for centuries—and things only got worse. Wickedness and idolatry multiplied and from their perspective it seemed like the Lord wasn’t listening and that he was refusing to act. Judah’s situation seemed as hopeless to Habakkuk as Abraham’s situation must have once seemed to him. But that was just it. Habakkuk knew that the Lord is faithful and so he

continued to cry out. He trusted the Lord. He had faith, that one characteristic that defines the people of God above all else.

But then the Lord responds. He tells Habakkuk that he has seen the state of his people and that he is going to visit them, but that he will be dealing with their problem by sending the Babylonians to defeat them. That wasn't what Habakkuk wanted to hear. He argues with the Lord. The Babylonians are even more wicked and idolatrous than the people of Judah. How can defeat by them possibly be the Lord's solution? And the Lord responds and assures Habakkuk that while Babylon may be his instrument of justice against Judah, Babylon herself—and all the nations—will be held accountable and will one day be judged. The cycle of violence will be broken and everything will be set to rights. One day, he says, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. It's another one of those impossible promises—maybe even more impossible than the promise he made to Abraham. But what do the Lord's people do in the meantime?

Here's the Lord's answer—and Jesus' parable points us right back to these words. The Lord says to Habakkuk in 2:4:

### **Look at the proud!**

**His spirit is presumptuous  
and is not right  
But the righteous shall live by faith.**

The world is falling apart. Everything is wrong. The wicked prosper and are proud and presume on the Lord's faithfulness and the righteous are oppressed. By all human appearances it doesn't sound like the Lord is even listening. But those who continue to live by faith in the midst of tribulation, those who remember the Lord's promises in the midst of persecution, those who steep themselves in the story of the Lord and his people and

remember his faithfulness, those who continue to trust in him, they are the ones who will be vindicated by the Lord when he does come in judgement on the wicked. They are the ones who will remain faithful to the Lord and to his covenant, even when all the proud people around them do evil and bow to idols, they will remain faithful, because they know and because they trust that the Lord is always faithful. I hope that's an encouraging word for you already, but first we need to go back to Jesus' story about the two men in the temple.

There's the proud Pharisee. By the standard of the law, he is in the right. And there's the scummy tax collector. By the standard of the law, he's in the wrong. And yet in the end, it's the tax collector who goes home and is found to be in the right. If this were one of Jesus' "kingdom stories" it would be the tax collector who is welcomed into the kingdom, while the Pharisee is left in the outer darkness, weeping and gnashing his teeth. The tax collector would escape the coming judgement and know the life of the kingdom, while the coming judgement would fall on the Pharisee right along with all the other wicked in Israel. Why? Because below, underlying the law—it's foundation—was faith in the Lord. A faith that humbly trusted in his promises. A faith that humbly trusted in his grace. A faith in the sufficiency of the Lord, instead of the sufficiency of self. A faith that would rejoice in the presence of the Messiah and a faith that rejoice over the repentance of sinners.

Over and over Jesus was clear. He came not to the righteous, but to seek out the lost sheep of the house of Israel. At least in theory, the righteous were fine. They should have been expecting this all along. They were the ones who knew the scriptures so well, after all. But, ironically, they got angry when Jesus went to the lost sheep. And so Jesus told them stories to explain the joy in heaven over sinners who repent. The Lord is like

the widow who seeks and eventually finds her lost coin. He's like the shepherd who goes to great lengths to find his lost sheep. He's like the father, rejoicing and throwing a party when his prodigal son returns home. But so many in Israel were like the proud and resentful older brother. They'd been doing the right thing all along. Why wasn't Jesus throwing a party for them? And so, in their pride, they refused to enter the house and were left out in the darkness gnashing their teeth. And it would be like that, only much, much worse when judgement came. Because the law was not enough. Because in Jesus, the Lord was doing something new. In Jesus he was fulfilling his promises. In Jesus he was making a new people who would be finally and truly fit for the kingdom, a people forgiven once and for all and a people filled with God's own Spirit, a people with his law of love written on their hearts—a people fit for God's new creation. When Jesus told people they needed a righteousness greater than the Pharisees if they wanted to take part in the kingdom, that's what he was getting at. The Lord was finally giving something better than the law written on stone tablets. He was about to make a people with his law of love written on their hearts. But that people was centred in Jesus. So only those who trusted in this Messiah—this Messiah who was so different from their expectations—only those humble enough to recognise the new thing the Lord was doing in Jesus and to live by faith, trusting that Jesus really is the Lord's answer to all the problems of the world, only they will go home justified. Only they will be able to be part of the kingdom—forgiven and filled with the Spirit, because of their faith in Jesus.

This is what St. Paul is getting at in our Epistle from 1 Corinthians 15. He declares once again the good news about Jesus the Messiah who died and was buried and who rose again according to the scriptures. And he talks about the twelve who saw him

and believed and about the five hundred who saw him and believed. And then there was Paul. He heard the message, but he was one of those proud Pharisees, confident that he already had the right answers, confident that he knew how the Lord was going to deliver his people—and, most of all, confident that it wasn't through Jesus. The gospel was blasphemy as far as he was concerned. And so, he writes, he persecuted the church. And yet there's hope. Paul was stuck. He had a mountain of faith, but it wasn't in Jesus. The *torah* had been preparing Israel for Jesus all those centuries, but Paul and so many others just couldn't see it, couldn't make the leap. But even as he persecuted the church, the Lord was at work to transform Paul. "But by the grace of God I am what I am," he writes, "and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."

Brothers and Sisters, there's that righteousness greater than that of the Pharisees. There's the faith that humbles the proud and brings even the greatest sinner into the kingdom. Not because the faith is so great, but because it's in Jesus the Messiah. It's a faith that brings forgiveness and the life of the Spirit. Habakkuk wrote that the just shall live by faith and that's precisely what Jesus' people do. He gives us the very life of God, because we trust in him. And that life he gives—the law of love written on our hearts, the experience of God's love and faithfulness revealed so dramatically in our Saviour—that life fills our hearts with a faith that overflows. And that, Brothers and Sisters, is how we live in this in-between time. It's how those first Christians lived through the devastation of Jerusalem's destruction. It's how the next generation lived through Rome's persecution. It's how the saints lived, even as they were thrown to the lions. It's how the saints still live in many parts of the world,

imprisoned because they live by faith, tortured because they live by faith, martyred because they live by faith. And it's how the saints have lived in the midst of a world that still isn't right, that still anticipates the final consummation of the Lord's new creation. We live by faith as we struggle in our work.. We live by faith as we struggle with illness or frailty or cancer. We live by faith as we struggle to bring justice and mercy to a world that is so unmerciful and lacking in justice. We live by faith as we face droughts and floods and forest fires. We live by faith in the midst of difficult and broken relationships. And we live by faith as we live out our calling to proclaim the good news about Jesus in a world that thinks us fools; faithful to our calling to holiness in a world filled with idolatry and sin. It's how we live in hope, like Habakkuk, like the Apostles, like they martyrs, looking past this broken world and the evils of our time, and knowing that the Lord is faithful to his promises, that he will set this world to rights, and that in Jesus, he will surely finish what he has begun—we know he will, because he always has.

Let's pray: Lord God, you declare your almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: mercifully grant to us such a measure of your grace, that we, running the way of your commandments, may receive your gracious promises, and be made partakers of your heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*