

Luke 18:9-14

Holy Spirit, open our eyes, our ears, our minds, and our hearts to receive richly from your Word today. We ask that you change us and develop us as disciples as we ponder another way to communicate with you this morning. Be with us and build us up. In Jesus name, amen.

Yesterday here at church we celebrated the wedding of our own Sherry Dalton and Dick Loftus. It was a beautiful ceremony and a joyful occasion. The whole event was great and Sherry was beaming. When I attend events like this, joyful events where the church is invited, I'll keep my eye out for good stories to share with you all in sermons. Just part of the job. But this sermon is about confession, specifically the prayer of confession, and confession doesn't really come up in weddings. Now, I'm not complaining; I'm not saying that we should start incorporating confession into our weddings, can you imagine that – "before the couple exchanges their rings, we will provide an opportunity for the couple to confess their sins, we'll begin with the groom."

But confession gets a bad rap. If it's not a part of a wedding, it's certainly part of a marriage. It's an important part of a relationship, and it's crucial in our relationship with God. Here's what I want to do this morning: I want to demonstrate that confession can be joyful in a way. Confession is our action to receive God's forgiveness. Confession is opening our hands to receive a gift. We can't receive a gift with closed hands. Confession is recognizing that we are not perfect, and we need a perfect savior to help us. Too often, confession has a tinge of guilt and shame...we might think of it more as something to make us feel bad about what we've done or reminds us that we are bad people or something like that. Rather than shame, I want us to think of confession as humility. Confession is all about receiving forgiveness humbly, which is a joyful, precious gift that we receive from Jesus.

This morning we'll look at Scripture to help us learn more about confession, and then we will practice this prayer of confession in a different way than we normally do.

Pharisee and Tax Collector

Psalm 51 is probably the greatest example for us on confession in Scripture. It was the Old Testament reading this morning, but I'm not going to dive into it now, as I'll be focusing on it in a sermon next month. For now, I do invite you to read and meditate on Psalm 51. It invites us all to look inwardly and confess our sins to God.

While Psalm 51 is a great example of confession, Jesus talked about confession as well. But as Jesus often did, he did it in a more subtle way: he did it through stories. Let's look at one parable that Jesus tells about confession. For Jesus, the parable shows us the link between humility and confession. Humility in this case describing those who know they need to be saved compared to the proud, who either think they have earned it or can save themselves.

I'll read the parable again verse by verse from Luke 18:9-14

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

This parable is unique because Luke tells us that Jesus' intended audience: those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. In other words, those who are prideful. Jesus wants to teach the proud a lesson through this story.

Now it says that Jesus targets "some who trusted," meaning that some do this is perhaps others don't. But I would argue that even the best of

us have prideful moments every once in a while. There's a story in my family that we chuckle at. My grandfather and grandmother moved to San Francisco in the 50s, and when my grandmother's mother visited San Francisco they took her to Coit Tower overlooking the whole city, and she looked down at the city and she said, "Mmm mm mm, look at all those sinners..."

I would not consider myself a judgmental person as a whole, but that's something I've worked on and continue constantly to struggle with. I remember being in high school and my girlfriend at the time had a friend who annoyed me, and I think she suggested that we hang out with him or something and I said I didn't want to. She asked me why, and instead of saying something I thought was silly and vain like "he annoys me" I instead said, "because he's a sinner." It's funny how my great-grandmother and I jump to conclusions before we even get to know someone. We may all be tempted to do so every now and then. And so when we come to this parable, we should not think to ourselves that this parable is for *that* person or for *those* people, but we should be honest in listening to this story as people who have the temptation to trust ourselves that we are righteous and regard others with contempt.

¹⁰ *"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."*

The story has two characters: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Pharisees were religious and upright leaders of the faith, it took years and years of dedication and study to become a Pharisee, and at the time it was a position of great honor. Tax Collectors were anything but honorable – they were Jewish people who the Roman oppressors used to financially oppress their own people. They were untrustworthy and they were traitors. So at the beginning of this story, Jesus knows that the people

around him have this mindset: there are two characters: one is good (the Pharisee), and one is bad (the tax collector).

¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

Now we begin to see that maybe the traditional role of good guy might not be where Jesus is going with this Pharisee. Remember the intro to this story people “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Three problems I see with the Pharisee’s prayer: first, it’s about him (he’s thanking God for being such a good person, not even acknowledging that God did that); second, he’s putting others down in his prayer and comparing himself to “bad” people to make himself look good; and third, there is no humility or confession. It appears that he has done nothing wrong with his life. That’s how this Pharisee prays, so maybe he’s not the good guy in this story.

But surely, the tax collector is not the good guy. He’s a traitor. He’s evil. He’s the person we fear and hate. Can you think of a person you fear or hate? Here’s how Jesus describes that person’s prayer:

¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

Jesus describes the tax collector as a humble person, he takes a humble stance – he stands far off, he wouldn’t even look up to heaven, and he beat his breast – a sign of mourning, and he says “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” This tax collector, who the Pharisee mentions in his own prayer when he says, “I thank you that I am not like other people...even like this tax collector.”

First, I want you to notice how simple this prayer is. Confession doesn't need to be long and complicated. Second, it focuses on and asks for God's mercy. Third, the tax collector has the humility to understand that he has sinned *and* that he can't save himself from sin. He needs God's mercy. He needs God's forgiveness.

¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

Here we see the humility of confession. The Pharisee lacked humility. The tax collector exuded humility. The Pharisee looked outward – thank you for not making me like these *other* people. The tax collector looked inwardly – be merciful to me, a sinner.

Focus Inward

Confession is about looking inward. Confession is about look inward with honesty and humility. It's not always pretty – what we see when we look inward. But it's necessary for receiving forgiveness. When we focus inward and confess, our focus will turn to God and his goodness.

I began reading a book this week called "The Way of the Pilgrim" which is a 19th century Russian book on spirituality. It's about a man who experiences God's love and wants to learn more, specifically about the command in 1 Thessalonians to pray continuously, which he heard in a sermon. How does one pray continuously, he wonders. He is a homeless wanderer, and so he travels around seeking the answer to his question. He finds a wise monk who teaches him what we now call the Jesus Prayer – it's a prayer of confession. The prayer is just like the Tax Collector's prayer. It goes like this, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." It's that simple. The monk tells him to pray this every waking hour.

3,000 times a day. At first, it's difficult, but it actually becomes easy after a few days of practice. So the man goes back to the monk and the monk says do it 6,000 times a day. And this becomes easy too. It gets to the point that it's as natural as breathing – that when he wakes up these words are on his lips. This habit of prayer leads him to experience what it means to pray continuously, and it brings him great joy. Food tastes better, he treats people better, he loves God better. Life is better. He continuously focuses on God's goodness. And you might not expect that, because he keeps saying "have mercy on me" and some of us might focus on how if we need mercy we must be bad people but we are called, when we confess, to focus on God's goodness and how he shares that goodness with us. Confession is not about shame and guilt. Confession, at it's core, is about God's goodness. God's forgiveness. About Jesus' work on the cross that saves us from the sin that we see in us and around us. When we focus inwardly and confess our sins, our focus will eventually come to God's goodness.

Practice

So let's practice this. We'll do this prayer of confession in a different way than we did earlier in the service. We are going to use our bodies to help us understand confession. Now I'm not going to make you get up, but we are going to use our hands. I want you to get comfortable and focus. You can close your eyes, you can look at your hands, whatever helps you focus.

Fold your hands into a fist. In your hand, imagine something that gets in the way of you and God. We call this sin. Maybe it's a bad habit or addiction. Maybe it's lust, or greed, or shame, or fear. Maybe it's something you did one time that you can't stop thinking about. Imagine that thing in your fist. We often carry this thing around in fists because we don't want others to see it, and we don't want God to see it. We are ashamed of it. But Jesus invites us to show him this thing because he

can save us from it. Sin is safe in the darkness, but Jesus – the light of the world – invites his cleansing light to save us from sin. So open your hands, palm up. Feel the weight of this thing in your hands. Look at that thing and remember that you are not your sin. God does not see you or characterize you by your sin. Your identity has nothing to do with this thing in your hand. You are his beloved child. God sees you not by sin but by the mercy and forgiveness that Jesus provides us. Now slowly turn your hands so that your palms face the ground.

Imagine placing that thing in your hand the feet of Jesus. Say in your mind, Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me. Now your hands are empty, and ready to receive the gift. Turn our hand back, palm facing up, and imagine Jesus placing his mercy, his grace, his love, his forgiveness into your hands. What a great gift we have. Jesus replaces our shame, our guilt, our sin with his forgiveness. May we all live a life with hands open in confession to receive Jesus' gift of forgiveness rather than living with our hands in fists, fearful. Jesus' gift of forgiveness is so much greater than any other gift. Receive it through confession.

Lord, thank you for replacing our shame with joy. Thank you for replacing our sin with forgiveness. Jesus, thank you for your work on the cross that offers us salvation. We seek to continually receive that forgiveness through confession. Help us to focus inward, help us to be honest and humble with you, help us receive your gift. And what an amazing gift it is. The gift of grace, mercy, love, joy, forgiveness. We love you, Lord. In Jesus name, amen.