



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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## The Eleventh Sunday After Trinity, August 16<sup>th</sup> 2015

*“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.”*

### ✠ In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN ✠

Several years ago, my friends and I were doing what we did every Wednesday night; we were sitting on my back friend's porch for a weekly get-together. And we were doing what we always did at these get-togethers, we were having a bit to eat and a bit to drink, and we were solving all the problems of the world. While discussing the way people communicate with and about one another, one member of our group said that she'd spent some time living down south, and she noticed that southerners had a way of changing the meaning of phrases depending on what they were trying to say. They could and would take a phrase of endearment and affection, and quickly turn it into the stinging end of criticism or rebuke.

Her biggest example was “bless their heart.” She explained that where she'd been living, you could say **anything** you wanted about a person, so long as you ended it with “bless their heart.” “That gal isn't as smart as she thinks she is....bless her heart.” “That poor fella is ugly as fried sin, bless his heart.” “She's a hateful old bat....bless her heart.” I've often laughed at that over the years, because I hear people do it here now. And I thought of that when reading today's Gospel reading, because that is something we too often do with the centuries old phrase attributed to English Reformer John Bradford, “there but for the grace of God go I.” We quickly make ourselves into an analogue to the Pharisee or an analogue to the tax collector with just the slightest change in intent with that phrase. On the one hand, we can be acknowledging God's grace and mercy in our lives, in spite of our imperfection. On the other, we could

quickly be suggesting that we've merely done better than others; or worse, that we are somehow *more deserving* of God's grace, of which they are apparently unworthy.

The fact is, that's a terribly easy trap to fall into. Let's not forget that reason the Pharisees were often the target of Jesus' rebukes and derision was because they were supposed to be the religious leaders, but they got practically *everything* wrong about spirit and nature of God. Certainly there were perhaps some Pharisees with contrite hearts, but the spiritual pride shown by them as a group was enough to make them constant characters in Jesus' parables. Let's not forget it was the Pharisees and Scribes Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6:5, when He tells us “*And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.*”

For starters, the Pharisee here is already setting himself up above other people, as Jesus says he “*prayed thus with himself.*” The Codex Bezae, a fifth century translation of the Gospels and Acts even words it “the Pharisee stood by himself and prayed thus.” Right away, this supposed religious leader is standing away from the main body of worshippers, either because he views himself as being above them, or because he wants to draw attention to the pious show he's about to put on. And when he finally does start his “prayer,” he doesn't ask for the forgiveness of sins, and he doesn't offer any thanksgiving. Certainly, he says “God, I thank thee,”

but that's where any sense of piety or earnest prayer ends. He gives God a bit of the credit perhaps, but he otherwise takes all the merit and honor for himself.

Not only that, but the very things he's thankful for are basically a litany of prideful remarks about supererogatory acts. You see, the Jewish law only commanded one day of fasting *per year*, yet the Pharisee makes certain to point out that he fasts twice *per week*. Likewise, the law only required people to tithe on agriculture increase such as vegetables and cattle, but he makes certain to point out that he tithes ten percent of *all he has*. Just as bad, he points out that he's not a murderer or extortioner, as though that's somehow meritorious. It's like my own mother used to say, "never trust a man who brags that he doesn't beat his wife or cheat on her; he's proud of doing the bare minimum."

The tax collector on the other hand won't even lift his eyes toward Heaven, and merely asks forgiveness for his sins. That's it; no list of accomplishments or detailed accounting of his good works, just a simple request for redemption, because he *knows* he's a sinner.

The thing is, besides the sacraments, prayer is the closest and most intimate way we can know and be in the presence of God in this mortal life. When we pray, we are transcending the divide between the natural and the supernatural, the physical and the mystical. And that is why Jesus is so careful to tell us how to pray. God doesn't want our boasts. God sees both our actions and our intents and doesn't need an inventory of our accomplishments. Remember, when it comes to knowing if you've been bad or good, God makes Santa Claus look like quite the amateur.

Now, this isn't to say that God doesn't look favorably upon our good works, when they are done with a pure spirit. But even what we believe to be our most pious act is, to a perfect God, not much different than when your cat brings you a rodent it's killed, and leaves it on the front porch for you find in the morning; it's well intended, but still falls quite short of the mark. And God forbid those acts aren't done with a pure spirit, because then, as the prophet Isaiah writes, "*our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.*"

We cannot buy or earn favor with God by our actions or our deeds no matter how hard we try; but that's a good thing, because it means we don't have to knock ourselves out trying. The only thing we can offer

God is our faith, our love, and our contrition. As Psalm 51 says, "*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.*" And that is what God wants from us in prayer; not boasting, not false piety, but repentance from sin and thanksgiving for mercy and grace - no more, no less.

That is why the prayer of the publican is so important, because it merely asks "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*" He doesn't waste God's time or delude himself with a list of virtues; he asks, as we do in the prayer of thanksgiving at Mass, to "not weigh our merits, but pardon our offences."

And *that* is why it's so important for us as the church to not be silent about the grace and forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ - because **He** is the path through which God offers the world mercy; **He** is the ultimate answer to the prayer of the publican, "*God be merciful to me a sinner.*" It's a fond thing when people say that they simply believe in "being a good person." I'd like to think we all hopefully believe in being a "good person." But that's never been what God commands, and Jesus makes this point starkly clear that we shouldn't puff up our chests in pride, but beat our breasts in repentance, and seek to reconcile ourselves to a loving Father; and that He is the path by which we can that.

We open every Communion service with a prayer that is simultaneously the most terrifying yet most comforting prayer that I have ever heard in my life. It is terrifying because it reminds us that we can't hide our iniquity from God, but it is comforting because we can at least know that even if we don't pray well, or stammer and stumble because we're vexed or distraught, that God at least knows our needs, and will make us whole. Let us be sure to always say it with a clean conscience: "*Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy holy spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name: through Christ our Lord. Amen.*"