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LENTEN PASTORAL LETTER 2019

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN: SINS FORGIVEN

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

(Eph 1:2)

[1] Perched on Mount Moriah where God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem. Centuries later, Herod rebuilt and expanded it. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus lavishes praise on its beauty. "...The building wanted nothing that could astound either mind or eye. For, being covered on all sides with massive plates of gold, the sun was no sooner up than it radiated so fiery a flash that persons straining to look at it were compelled to avert their eyes, as from the solar rays. ... all that was not overlaid with gold was of the purest white" (Ant. 15.391-395).

[2] Every day at 9 am, the priest would sacrifice a lamb on the fires of the altar in the Temple. And, in the evening at 3 pm, the priest would sacrifice another male lamb on top of all the offerings made during the day on that same altar. This second lamb stayed smoldering on the altar throughout the night. The next morning the priest would remove the ashes and repeat the same ceremonies. In this way, there was *olah tamid*, a continuous burnt offering, a perpetual sacrifice, to the Lord (cf. Ex 29:38-46).

[3] In Jesus' day, pious Jews would go to pray during the morning and evening sacrifice offered in Herod's magnificent Temple. Like other faithful Jews, Jesus and his own disciples followed this custom (cf. Acts 3:1; 2:15). On many occasions, Jesus took in the sight not only of the crowds that gathered for prayer, but also of the individuals who came to worship God. From his keen observation of human nature, he told the short, but poignant parable of the *Pharisee and Publican*:

He then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:9-14).

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[4] In his gospel, St. Luke places this parable immediately after the parable of *The Persistent Widow* (Lk 18:1-8). The evangelist offers this parable as an example of “the necessity...to pray always without becoming weary” (Lk 18:1). As a result, many understand the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector as a further instruction on prayer.

[5] Thus, Jesus would be teaching that those who truly know the infinite greatness of God are always humble. And, when they come before God in prayer, their humility opens the path to the throne of grace. Only the humble can receive the gift of justification. Certainly, the very last line of the parable would favor this interpretation. Not only in prayer, but in every circumstance of life, “humility and knowledge in poor clothes excel pride and ignorance in costly attire” (William Penn).

[6] In his ongoing dialogue with the Pharisees who do not understand Jesus’ constant outreach to sinners, Jesus tells the parable of the Pharisee and publican who go up to the Temple to pray. While speaking of the way both individuals pray, Jesus is addressing an even deeper issue. He begins the parable by speaking of prayer. He ends the parable by teaching the very nature of redemption.

[7] In the parable, the Pharisee prides himself on keeping the law. He represents the many other Pharisees who sincerely believed that their obedience to even the smallest details of the law earns them the right to be justified in God’s eyes. The publican who is a tax collector stands for all those whom the Pharisees judge as sinners, because they do not or cannot keep the many laws that the Pharisees do.

[8] Many who gather around Jesus were Pharisees. They were good men, eager to hear Jesus speak. His fresh approach and his deep insights at first intrigued them. But, eventually, many of them turned against him, because he so freely welcomed sinners and tax collectors (Mt 9:11).

[9] In the parable, both men go up to the Temple to pray. It is the moment of public worship. The Pharisee distances himself from the crowd in the Temple court. He is better than everyone else. According to the Mishnah, if a righteous person even brushes against the clothes of those who do not keep the law, he becomes unclean. And, so the Pharisee deliberately stands alone. His pride in his own accomplishments separates himself from all others and causes his downfall. As St. Augustine once taught, it was pride that turned angels into devils; it is humility that makes men into angels.

[10] The tax collector also stands apart from the crowd. But it is his humility that makes him avoid being near the other worshipers. He is content just to be in the presence of God, even at a distance. His very position is a prayer itself, exclaiming, “Better one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere. Better the threshold of the house of my God than a home in the tents of the wicked” (Ps 84:10).

[11] How important is the House of God, the place where God chooses to dwell. In all his works of creation, we stand in awe before the power and beauty, the grandeur and goodness of God. But, in church, we are in the very presence of God. The church is the “temple sacred in the Lord...[it is all of us] being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:22). And, in that sacred place, through the preaching of the Word and the Sacraments, God enriches us with his blessings, strengthens us with his grace and crowns our lives with his mercy.

[12] Even as pious Jews do today at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, the Pharisee in the parable utters his prayer out loud. His words reek of the stench of self-praise and pride. He says, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector.” Far from being a prayer to God, his words are a ruthless attack on the tax collector. Instead of praising and thanking God, he is accusing another of the sin.

[13] Nothing is more abhorrent to God than the person who so glibly condemns another person of sin. In the

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words of the good thief crucified with Jesus, such a person has no fear of God. He does not recognize that all of us are under the same condemnation (Lk 23:40). “All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God” (Rm 3:23).

[14] Those who make it their business to publicize the sins of others close themselves off from God’s grace. Recognizing one’s own sins and not those of others is the prerequisite for forgiveness. “Stop judging and you will not be judged. Stop condemning and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven” (Lk 6:37). We use our conscience well when we examine the state of our own soul and not focus on the splinter in another’s eye, while ignoring the wooden beam in our own (Lk 6:41). Pride makes culprits of those who lash out at others in their personal crusade for justice and yet are woefully negligent of honesty about themselves. Their rebuke of others is ludicrous.

[15] After attacking his fellow worshiper, the Pharisee lists his own acts of righteousness. Moses mandated a fast for the Day of Atonement (Lev 25:29). But, this Pharisee fasts twice a week. He tithes not just the produce of his land as required but his whole income. He goes beyond the law and boasts for all to hear his good deeds.

[16] The Pharisee is not a humble man bowing before God. In the twenty-nine words on his lips in the Greek text, five times he says *I*; only once does he say *God*. As St. Bernard notes, he is not so much thankful for being righteous as for being alone in his goodness. There is not a hint of true devotion in his soliloquy.

[17] Jesus needs only a few words to paint for us his portrait of the tax collector. Only one verse. His body language speaks volumes. He does not even raise his eyes to heaven, as was the custom when praying. Nor does he raise his hands. Instead, he keeps beating his breast with his fists. This is a very unusual gesture for a man in Jesus’ day. It is an expression of deep sorrow usually done by women. The tax collector is truly repentant.

[18] His *mea culpa* goes straight to the heart, the source of all evil. “For from the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, unchastity, theft, false witness, blasphemy. These are what defile a person...” (Mt 15:19-20). His dramatic gesture of beating his breast express in deed the prayer of David “A clean heart create for me, God” (Ps 51:12).

[19] Keenly aware of his own sins, he prays with utter earnestness. The only thing he says about himself is that he is a sinner. No need to argue his case before the divine Judge who knows the secrets of our hearts. “God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). No need for long prayers. He simply says, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

[20] Unlike Bartimaeus, the blind beggar who encounters Jesus on his last journey to Jerusalem and cries out, “Have mercy on me,” the tax collector literally says, “make atonement for me” (ἰλάσθητί μοι). This word “to make atonement” (ἰλάσσομαι) is found nowhere else in the gospels. It is found, however, in Hebrews 2:17 where Jesus, our merciful High Priest, is said to make atonement (hilaskomai) for the sins of the people. Using the same word, Paul even calls Jesus, our atonement (Rm 3:24-25).

[21] The very same word ἰλαστήριον (hilastērion) that Paul uses to say Jesus is our atonement the Greek Old Testament uses for the mercy-seat, i.e., the lid or covering of the ark which was sprinkled by the high priest with the blood of the victim on the Day of Atonement. Since Luke was a close companion of Paul, he may well have heard Paul speak of Jesus in this way. And so when it comes to recording the publican’s prayer, he frames his plea for mercy in a way to remind us that Christ is the mercy-seat of the New Covenant.

[22] In his brief petition, the publican recognizes that he himself can do nothing to restore his broken relationship with God. Only God can. And God does in Christ Jesus. On the altar of the Cross, Jesus makes the perfect

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atonement for our sins and restores us to grace. Thus, we poor sinners can have confidence even in our weakness. For, “if anyone does sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is atonement for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world” (1 Jn 2:1-2).

[23] In response to the tax collector’s brief prayer crowded with the burden of his sins, his humility and trust, God immediately responds. He forgives him. And so Jesus abruptly ends the parable. The two men went up to the temple together, first the Pharisee, then the publican. Now they leave the temple in reverse order. The tax collector goes first, because God has heard his prayer and has justified him. The Pharisee lags behind. Not only has God not justified him, but his prayer has placed him in a worse spiritual state than he was before. He could not be forgiven because he did not admit his sin.

[24] Our modern society no longer believes in sin. It jettisons the moral law. It refuses to accept it as a standard for good and evil. As a result, it is sinning more and more and admitting it less and less. How often people simply say that everyone goes to heaven. Why, because there is no sin. When God is banished from society, how can anything ever be an offense against him? No God. No moral law. No sin. Only a society left to its own depravity.

[25] But we who believe in Jesus are not abandoned. “Once united with the Crucified as we are in the Mass, then we begin to understand that everywhere else others promise us sin excused, sin discounted, sin denied, sin explained away, but only at the foot of the Cross do we ever experience the beautiful divine contradiction of sin forgiven” (Fulton Sheen).

[26] For many in today’s world, it may take some time before they can cry out with the tax collector, “O God, make atonement for me, a sinner.” But until each of us do, there is no forgiveness. No healing for a broken spirit. No ointment for our wounds. There can be no redemption except from sin. A better future always begins with the tears of repentance.

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson,
on Ash Wednesday, the sixth day of March in the year of Our Lord,
two thousand and nineteen.*

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