

Hands of Repentance

Luke 18:9–14 (NIV) The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector ⁹To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ ¹³“But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ ¹⁴“I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

In Christ Jesus whose hands bear the marks of his love for us sinners, dear fellow redeemed,

I don’t know about you, but I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about my hands. And yet, I count on them for nearly everything I do, from brushing my teeth, to eating a meal, to typing an email. In fact, you name the task, and chances are our hands play a role in accomplishing it. Some of us even talk with our hands, don’t we?

So while we may not spend a lot of time thinking about our hands, the truth is, they are a pretty important part of our lives. Because this is so true, it should come as no surprise that human hands played a prominent role in the events surrounding our Savior’s suffering and death. That’s why the theme for our midweek Lenten sermons this year is “The Hands of the Passion.” But the hands we will examine today do not belong to Judas or Caiaphas or Peter or Pilate or even Jesus. Instead, we will focus our attention on two men that our Lord describes in one of his parables.

The parable of the Pharisee and tax collector is familiar to many of us, but as we study it once again, as we imagine what these men looked like and what their prayers sounded like, I want you to do something you have maybe never done before. I want you to try picture the hands of these two men. Why? So that you might make a connection between the actions of their hands and the attitudes of their hearts. And, then, I want you to take what you’ve seen and apply it to your own life so that you might better appreciate and embrace what it means to have HANDS OF REPENTANCE.

The setting of Jesus’ story is the temple in Jerusalem. There we meet two fictional—but very believable—characters. They have come to this sacred place for the same purpose—to pray—and both men begin their prayers in the same way, both calling on the holy name of “God.” But that is where all similarities end.

The first man is a Pharisee – a member of the spiritual elite within Jewish society. Pharisees were always quick to claim the moral high ground and with good reason, I suppose. They were, after all, more reverent and more obedient than their fellow Jews. They knew it and they wanted everyone else to know it. That’s why this particular Pharisee stood by himself, in a conspicuous place where he could be seen and heard.

He prayed, “**God, I thank you...**” (Luke 18:11). It’s a good start isn’t it? We teach our children to pray this way: “Oh give thanks to the Lord...” If only the Pharisee would have stopped right there: “Dear God, I thank you. Amen.” But he didn’t. He went on to show us that his prayer wasn’t a prayer of thanksgiving at all – at least not thanksgiving to God.

He said: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.” (Luke 18:11).** Now, in your mind’s eye, can you see this man’s hands? Maybe you imagine them folded together, or more likely extended heavenward in prayer. But now take a closer look. At least one of the man’s arms is bent backward – almost to the point of breaking as he pats himself on the back. He is so proud of himself. He isn’t a robber. He has kept the Seventh commandment. He is no adulterer. He has kept the Sixth Commandment. The way the Pharisee sees it, he has kept each and every commandment.

Actually, that’s not entirely true. The Pharisee doesn’t believe he has merely kept the law. He is convinced that his obedience far surpasses any and all requirements of the law. And just in case God hasn’t noticed, he tells him so: **“I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” (Luke 18:12).** The Law of Moses required faithful Jews to fast one day out of the year. This man fasted two days out of every week. And on top of that, he gave God back ten percent, not just on his income, but even 10 percent of what he buys with that income.

You must admit, on the surface the Pharisee looks good – very good. Because of his morality and his generosity, his fellow Jews probably thought so too and looked up to him. But what about beneath the surface? What was going on inside his head and heart? Why did he feel compelled to pray the prayer that he did?

Jesus doesn’t give us any insight into the Pharisee’s motives, but really there is only a couple of possibilities as to why he is the way he is. One possibility is that this man is really so impressed with himself, so blinded by sinful pride that he didn’t realize how arrogant he had become. On the other hand, it’s possible that this fellow knew himself better than he was letting on. Maybe he offered that proud prayer to mask his insecurity. Maybe he drew attention to the good things he had done in an attempt to deflect attention away from all the good things he had failed to do. Maybe more than anyone else, he was trying to convince himself that he was a special man who had a special relationship with God. No matter what his motive is, this man is in great danger.

The season of Lent is a time of self-reflection. As such, it’s a season in which we see and acknowledge our many sins and failures – not in a spirit of despair, but in one of repentance. By God’s own gracious invitation, we bring our sins to him, seeking his forgiveness. We look to Jesus as our only hope for salvation because salvation is found no one else. Do you see what that means for the Pharisee? Because he refused to acknowledge and repent of his sins, because he was unwilling to admit that he needed to be saved, it didn’t matter how many prayers he prayed, how many “worse” sinners he could identify and compare himself to, it didn’t matter how many good deeds he did. It was all for nothing. This man went home hopeless and helpless. He was the walking dead. He was the living damned.

That was the Pharisee. I’m guessing that most of the worshipers at the temple that day didn’t even notice the other man who was there praying. He stood at a distance. His head hung low. As for his hands, he was so ashamed that he clenched his hands into fists and beat his breast. He knew what he was. He knew what he had done. He knew what he deserved. But instead of giving up hope, he offered a simple prayer: **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Luke 18:13).**

The tax collector didn’t try to make himself look good by comparing himself to worse sinners. Nor did he rattle off a list of good things he had done in an attempt to make himself better. Instead he stared at himself in the mirror of God’s law where God speaks of the only comparison that matters: **“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2).** He saw himself for the helpless sinner he was, and he recognized that his only hope was to plead for God’s mercy.

His was not a long prayer – only seven words in English, but it was powerful because it came from a heart that God himself had filled with faith – faith that looked to God for help and received the same in peace and with great joy. How do we know this? Jesus says: **“I tell you that this man,**

rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14).

It’s important to understand that Jesus didn’t tell this parable to a specific person or class of people. This parable wasn’t addressed exclusively to Pharisees or tax collectors, or even the disciples. Luke tells us that Jesus was talking to people **“Who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else.” (Luke 18:9).**

Take a moment and stare into the faces of that crowd that Jesus is addressing. Do you recognize anyone who fits Jesus’ description of someone confident in their own righteousness? Maybe it’s the classmate in school who is always talking about how great she is. Maybe you see in that crowd the coworker who is constantly trying to tell you how to do your job better. Maybe you recognize the friend whose annual Christmas letter feels like an excuse to brag about his family. Maybe it’s the family member who is never wrong and can never say, “Sorry.” Now take another look. Do you see someone who looks a lot like you? Take a good look.

When we complain about the people who think they are better than us, aren’t we making ourselves out to be better than them? When we criticize the people who look down on the rest of us, aren’t we in a way looking down our noses at them? Oh, we would never stand up in front of church and call out another worshiper like the Pharisee did, but God, who knows our every thought, would have the right to condemn us for the way we pass judgment on one another in our hearts, wouldn’t he?

How many times, in how many ways has your inner Pharisee shown itself in just last 24 hours to say nothing of the past week or month? There’s no need to tell me. But please, join me in bringing all arrogance, all self-righteousness, all our sin to our God, not for fear of his punishment, but rather like the penitent tax collector in Jesus’ story. In fact, it’s for this very reason that Jesus tells us this parable, so that we willingly fold our hands and lay open our hearts, confessing to God, pleading with him, not just this day, but every day: **“...have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Luke 18:13).**

Why can we do this without fear? Because of the third person in the parable – the one who told it. If anyone had a reason to boast about himself, it was Jesus. He honored his parents. He obeyed the laws of the land. He kept every commandment of God perfectly. He did this all, not for his own benefit, not so that he’d have something to boast about. No, he did this all for you.

Think about it. If anyone had a legitimate reason to not be humble, it was Jesus. As true God, he knows all, sees all, and rules all, and yet the Creator of all things made himself nothing. He took on human flesh. He assumed the role of a servant. He allowed himself to be humiliated and ultimately executed, not to pay for his own sins, because he had no sin. Everything he did, he did for you.

In Jesus we find the very mercy we beg of our God. Because of his mercy, Jesus became your Substitute. He lived a sinless life in your place and died on the cross in your place. He did it all to make his place in heaven your very own.

Because of his mercy Jesus gives you his true body and blood in Holy Communion, and when you receive the sacrament, you receive the personal assurance of his free and full forgiveness. Because of God’s great mercy, you do not have to be weighed down by guilt. God has declared you “justified,” that is “not guilty” of sin for the sake of the one who took all sin from you and paid its penalty on your behalf. Because of his mercy, you have absolutely nothing to fear – not in life and not in death. You can leave this house of worship with humble confidence because you, dear Christian, are in good hands. You are in God’s hands, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.