

11th Sunday after Trinity, August 28, 2022

Readings: Genesis 4: 1-15, Ephesians 2: 1-10, Luke 18: 9-14

The Lord Lifts Up the Lowly

“And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard” (Gen. 4:1–15). For unlike Abel, Cain’s offering did not proceed from a heart that revered and trusted in the Lord. Thus, the lowly tax collector who prayed, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”* was the one who went down to his house justified before God, not the respectable, outwardly righteous Pharisee who trusted in himself and his own good living (Luke 18:9–14). *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast”* (Eph. 2:1–10). The one who penitently despairs of his own righteousness and relies completely on the atoning mercy of God in Christ is the one who is declared righteous. For Christ died for our sins and rose again the third day (1 Cor. 15:1–10). Therefore, *“everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

Sermon Transcript:

So for today’s readings, we have first Cain’s and Abel’s sacrifices. That’s always an interesting story. Then we have Jesus’s parable of the tax collector and the Pharisees. We’re going to see how these work together and why they were joined on this Sunday.

First off with the Old Testament lesson. Cain and Abel. Now, Cain offers a sacrifice to God, and Abel offers a sacrifice to God. Abel’s was acceptable and pleasing to God. Cain’s was not. There’s always been a question. Why was Cain’s not acceptable and Abel’s was? Was it just they didn’t understand the will of God? And so they didn’t know what they were supposed to do? That seems very unlikely. God has always been clear. Always wants us to know what it is that we must do in order to be right with Him. But the fact of the matter is that Cain’s offering, for whatever reason, and we’re going to get into some of the reasons why it might have been unacceptable. First off, let’s just look at the description. Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground. So, he gave grain and fruit and other things, things that grew in the land, and Abel gave the first born of his flock and of their fat portions. Abel gave the primary source, the first birth of his flock he gave as a sacrifice. Cain gave some wheat and some barley and some other grains and fruits. Now we could argue that Abel gave blood, whereas Cain just gave grain and fruit. Now that is one thing that we need to keep in mind.

Remember, last week we talked about the gift that God gave of the sacrificial system in the temple. It wasn’t meant to be an onerous task that you must do in order to be right with God. It was a gift that God gave them because we know already, as we read in Ephesians, that we are dead in our sins and trespasses. The wages of sin is death. Blood should have been spent, our blood, by God because He is justified in being angry and judging us. But in His grace, He promised to Adam and Eve already at the very beginning, He said, “I am going to send one of your descendants who will crush the head of Satan, who will destroy sin for all eternity.” And that, of course we know is Jesus Christ, the Son of God that takes away the sin of the world. But also in the meantime, as you are waiting for this person to come, I will give you the gift of the sacrifices so that when you shed the blood of the lamb or the goat or the bull, it takes the place of your blood, which should rightfully be shed as punishment for your sin. So, it was grace. You see, the people of the Old Testament were not saved by

the sacrifices, nor were they saved by being obedient to the laws that God gave them on Mount Sinai, the 10 commandments and all the other dietary laws and everything else that went along with it. They were not saved by following those things. They were saved by faith, just like you and me. Their faith was in the promise of God. They believed the Word of God to be true that said, sometime in the future, I will send someone who will crush the head of Satan. So they had faith in the Word of God. They believed the Word to be true. And that is what saved them, which was a gift given to them by God. Same as us, except for we know what happened and how it worked out. They had faith in what was to come. We have faith in what has already come, but it was always faith. But the Israelites, amongst others, get this wrong and get confused.

Here we get to the parable of Jesus with the Pharisee and the tax collector. Now the Pharisees we might think, because the Pharisees are always against Jesus in the New Testament, so in our minds, the Pharisees are generally the bad guys. But in the day, the Pharisees were the good guys or at least so people thought. When people looked at the Pharisees, they said, "Now, if anybody is righteous, it's them. They are doing it right. They're following the law of God the way they should be." Well, some might say they're self-righteous, but they're righteous. But the problem is the Pharisees thought that by obeying and following the law, that that is what made them right with God. So they were looking to themselves for salvation.

And, if we're honest, we might agree with them sometimes. I mean when we think about it, obviously Jesus, overexaggerates whenever he tells a parable. So it's doubtful that you and I are standing up in front of the assembly and say, "Look at me how good I am. I'm better than you. I mean, obviously I'm the preacher and I give my tithes, and I do all the right things. So obviously I'm better than everybody else." I don't say that out loud. And, I'm sure you don't say that yourselves either, but oftentimes don't we think, well, I'm better than most of the people out there. Come on, let's face it. I go to church on a fairly regular basis. I give my tithe most of the time. I fast occasionally when I remember it, if I think about it. I read the Bible usually most of the time, occasionally at least. We tend to think that often in our own private minds and judge ourselves based on how much we do compared to how much other people do. We're not as brazen as the Pharisee, but it's a temptation. So this is a very real thing for us to remember. We are not saved because we are here in church. We are not saved because we read the Bible on a regular basis or come to Sunday school or give our money, although all of those are good things and proper things to do. But we need to understand why we do them. That's the key.

Now we come to the tax collector. Now in everybody's mind, the tax collector is the bad guy. Even today, the tax collector is the bad guy. Nobody likes the IRS. Nobody says, "Hey, I get to pay my taxes this year. And they went up, yes! I'm excited about that." No. Tax collector's always the bad guy. And yet, in this story, the tax collector goes home justified. Why? Because he understood where he stood with God. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Period. There's no self-justification. God, be merciful to me, I am a sinner, but I'm not as bad of a sinner as them or that guy over there or somebody else. No, I'm a sinner. Blanket statement, no caveats, no exceptions. I'm a sinner. He went home justified because he recognized, as we learned in Ephesians, that we are saved by grace through faith. It is not of our own doing. It is a gift given to us by God.

And you see, that also seems to be the problem that Cain had. Cain didn't seem to understand that it was the faith that was important. He was just seeming to go through the motions. As we hear in the conversation that God has with him, God speaks to Cain and says, "Why are you angry? And why is your face falling? If you do well, will you not be accepted?" So he didn't do well. It sounds like Cain just said, "Well, I got to give something to God, so I'm just going to pick up whatever I find, and I'm going to give it to him." It was about

the motions of the action rather than the attitude of the heart. He just did what he thought was right because that was the thing you had to do, whereas Abel understood that it was the grace of God that he was honoring and cherishing and thanking for by his offering. So Cain, again, you notice, he never apologizes. He never confesses even when he's confronted with a judgment of God for murdering his brother. He doesn't say, "God, I'm sorry. You're right. I sinned." What does he say? "No, your punishment is too great." Even now, he's not really repentant. Even now, he's still trying to figure out how to get his way. God is too tough, and God tells him, "I know it's tough, but I still am going to protect you." Even then, even when Cain is sinning, even when he does not confess, God is still gracious to him. That's the character of God. He is gracious and loving.

The point of all of Scripture is not "Be a good person and do the right thing." That's not what Christianity or the Bible is all about. Christianity and the Scriptures are about this, that we are dead in our sins and trespasses and are made alive in Christ. Not by anything that we do, not by any of our own efforts, not by anything that we ... we can't even accept or seek after Him. God draws us and drags us into His kingdom because He loves us. And He wants us to know the love and the grace and the mercy that He has to give to us, more than we could possibly imagine, more than we could ever ask for. While we are yet speaking, He answers. Even when we don't have words to ask, He gives us what we need. That is why we tithe. See tithing is not bad. It's not an evil thing or not something you should avoid. It's just not done for our personal gain. It's done out of thanksgiving and trust.

Abel gave the first fruits of the lambs. In other words, the first lamb that was born, he gave to God, trusting that God would provide more in the future, trusting that God would give all that he needed to support this body in life. It is why we give of our tithes of the first fruits of what we make because it's a statement of trust. It's not a necessity because the church needs it or God needs it or this mission needs it. God can get the money wherever He needs. He's not dependent upon you or me. But we give out of thanksgiving and trust that God will provide. Even though we've given the first of our money away, we still trust Him that He will provide for us. See, it's the motivation. It's the trust. It's where we put our hope that is the most important thing. That's what Christianity is all about. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing. It is a gift of God. Not a result of works so that no men may boast. So we humble ourselves. We don't exalt ourselves. "Look how wonderful I am." But rather look how wonderful my God is and how much He has done for you and for me. We brag about God and His generosity and His faithfulness and His holiness and His righteousness. And I have nothing to do with it, except to thank and praise, serve and obey Him out of joyful response to my salvation.

So we are His workmanship. Whenever I read that we are His workmanship, I imagine myself as a block of wood that He's chipping away at or a piece of metal that He's hammering on to reshape into the image that He wants or some clay that He's smashing down and forming and molding. It's not always pleasant, but He gets the credit, not me. The vessel doesn't get any credit. The man who made the vessel, that's the one that we honor. I'm just a vessel. I'm just the clay jar. God is the one who created me, formed me, and gave me His gifts. And not only that, not only am I His workmanship, but even God created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Even my good works, I don't even count to my credit. They're already given to me by God.

Now you might wonder what are the good works? What are these things that God has crafted before Him that I should walk in them? Do you know? I'll give you a hint. He's laid it out for us. The catechism that we talked about, in the end of it, there's this table of duties. And God has given us good works. They're not magical,

strange things that are out of the ordinary that we must do. You must go on a mission trip, and you must do this thing or that thing or some strange thing. No, they're normal everyday things. What does the table of duties talk about? What does a congregation owe its pastor? What does a pastor owe its congregation? So how am I supposed to act? And how are you supposed to act? Those are good works. What a father and mother owes their children. And what a child owes their father, those are good works. Fathers, don't provoke your children to anger. Children, honor and obey your parents. Those are good works. Husbands, love your wives. Wives, submit to your husbands out of reverence for Christ. Those are good works. Citizens, be good citizens and pray for your leaders. If you're a leader, be a good leader and serve God and your people. If you're an employer, be a good employer. If you're an employee, work not to serve your employer, but to serve God. These are good works. It's nothing fancy. We all have the ability to do them.

Look to yourself. Who are you? Are you a father, a mother, a sister, a brother, a neighbor, a citizen? There's where your good works take place. There's where you serve God and give Him glory. Not because you have to, not because, well, if I don't, I'm not a good Christian. But you do all that because God has loved you because you were dead. And He made you alive. Now that you are alive in Christ, what do you do with that life? Well, you thank and praise Him and you serve and obey Him by serving your neighbor as well. We do not take any of the credit upon ourselves, "Look how wonderful I am," but rather how wonderful is our God who has given us salvation and even given us the good works that we might do to serve our neighbor and to give glory to Him. Everything is to His credit and nothing to my own. What a great place to be. No pressure. Simply hear the Word, trust the Word, and live the Word.

May His grace and His mercy and His peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting. Amen.