

Sermon 10-28-18
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Trinity Lutheran Church
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Reformation Sunday

Know God! Know Yourself!

When I get into casual conversations with people who find out I'm a minister, inevitably they get to talking about their version of God and their relationship to their God. Mostly they'll talk about trying to do good and being a good person.

Having our own version of God is quite a useless thing. You might as well make a statue and call that statue your god. Our own versions of God are just as much idols as any statue.

The only way out of idolatry is to shut up and shut off your imagination and listen to the real God. It's like getting to know a person. You can imagine all kinds of things about that person. Or, you can let them talk and actually get to know them.

How do you let God talk to you? You let Him do it the way He has done it for the last 2,000 years. You read a bible and let His Spirit introduce you to His Son, Jesus. If you want to know God, you can know Him best through Jesus. For Scripture calls Jesus the visible image of the invisible God. (Colossians 1:15)

Now as you get to know Jesus, huge questions rise before you. Why was Jesus rejected and persecuted? Why did Jesus have to die on a Roman cross? In addition, why was He raised from the dead? And here's where we get into the issue of doing good and being a good person. For the bible announces that all this happened to Jesus precisely because we're not really that good.

Just how good are we? The only way to figure it out is to compare ourselves to Jesus. Are you so good and holy that angels announced your conception and sang at your birth? Are you so good and holy that you can lay your hand on any sick person and they're instantly healed? Are you so good that you can call upon God to resuscitate a dead person and the dead person is resuscitated? Can you love, pray for and forgive those who hate you, those who have done evil to you? Are you so good and holy that you can rescue someone else from a life of evil or debauchery? Am I? I think not.

When we look at the Jesus of Scripture, we see what true goodness and holiness really look like. We see what true goodness and holiness says and does. We see true godliness in a human being.

Jesus told a remarkable parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector. They both went into the temple to pray. Jesus narrated in Luke 18:11-14, "11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. 12 I 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 everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

What is the difference between the two men? The Pharisee was no doubt a good man. He had chosen a life by which to honor God. No doubt he was well respected in his community. But astoundingly Jesus said that this man did not go home justified before God.

Why not? One good reason is that the Pharisee expected God to see things the way he saw them. He expected God to see him as a good person worthy of commendation. But shockingly Jesus announced that God does not see things that way. Therefore, the Pharisee didn't really know God. In reality the Pharisee had an idol in his heart instead of the living God. In addition, the Pharisee didn't really know himself. He imagined himself to possess greater goodness than he actually had.

On the other hand, the tax collector knew God. He knew that God desires to have mercy on sinners. He also knew himself. He knew that he had fallen short of God's goodness, God's righteousness. He knew that he could never measure up to Yahweh's goodness and righteousness. Thus, he knew he was a sinner. But He knew God desires to have mercy on sinners. So he begged God for mercy. In this way the tax collector proved that he knew the true God. And he also knew himself. Therefore, the tax collector received God's justification, God's commendation.

And that's the key both to the parable and the key to life. Scripture flat out declares that no human being on this earth can match the goodness of God. Now, before you shake your head and agree, “well that's only reasonable because God is so much greater than we are,” there's something vital to be considered.

When God created Adam and Eve, He created them inferior to Him in every way except one. Made in the Image of God, they were God's equals in goodness and righteousness. For, in order to stand before God and be accepted, a created being must be as good and as righteous as God Himself is. Adam and Eve fully possessed God's righteousness before they listened to the devil's voice and fell into sin. The holy angels still possess that righteousness and goodness. That's why they stand before God in His presence. It's also why they can be quite frightening if they appear to human beings. The glory of God's righteousness is in them. So the key both to the parable and the key to life itself is that God meant us human beings to live with Him in the same glorious righteousness and goodness that He has.

The other day I saw a guy wearing a sweatshirt that said, “Do your best.” That's a noble sentiment and Scripture doesn't argue with it. But doing your best doesn't cut it with God. Before God, it's no use playing Pharisee, saying I did better than this other person over here. No. If we're going to talk about goodness before God, we can only compare our goodness with God's. And that's when we'll see it. As it says in Romans 3:23, we all fall short of the glory of God. We all fall short of His perfect goodness and righteousness.

And that can be a hard thing to accept. For when I talk to people I usually find out that, like the Pharisee, they're counting on God accepting them for doing their best to lead a good life. But our best cannot equal the perfection necessary to stand in God's presence. For this reason, we all need God's mercy and His divine

intervention in our lives. Like it or not, “God, have mercy on me a sinner,” is the correct prayer of a human being before the all-holy and righteous God.

And this is where we come back to Jesus. For in the suffering, death and resurrection of Messiah Jesus, God fully expressed His incredible mercy to rebellious humanity. That mercy is powerfully described in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him [Jesus] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the great cosmic exchange – our sin for God’s righteousness, our monstrous lack of goodness for God’s goodness.

Understand that God alone is good. He’s the source of all goodness. If we are not His equals in goodness – the one and only trait in which we can be equal to Him – then we have fallen short of His glory and must be rejected. But in Jesus Christ, God has mercifully paid the full penalty for our falling short. In Jesus Christ He has granted us the full righteousness necessary to be accepted before Him.

There’s only one problem. When Jesus died and rose again, He literally left this world to continue its course. All humans born here continue to be born into Adam’s original sin. By nature we are conceived, born and live here short of the righteous glory of God. We’re all subject to temptation and all too easily fall into it. To all outward appearances it looks like Jesus did absolutely nothing on this earth. Evil, sin, death and the power of the devil still reign here much to our distress.

But Jesus did not leave this world to its own course. He did not leave us to our own devices. What Jesus did changed the world and changed us. It’s now possible for human beings to have their sin totally forgiven. It’s now possible for human beings to be born again and thus be counted in the Kingdom of God. It’s possible for human beings to be filled with God’s Holy Spirit so that God’s kind of goodness can enter this world. Indeed, Jesus Christ created His Church for all these purposes.

But again, this world continues on its evil course. Christ’s Church is a persecuted church. What, therefore, is the power of Christ’s Church? It’s faith in the Jesus Christ who promised to come again and establish His Kingdom of righteousness on a new earth under new heavens where evil will be utterly banished. The resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of His Holy Spirit on this present earth are the down payment for His coming Kingdom.

Faith in Jesus the Messiah is the key that opens the door for every human being on the face of the earth. The Jewish people asked Jesus in John 6:28-29 “28... ‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ 29 Jesus answered, ‘The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.’” In other words, to believe in Jesus.

It comes down to this. We have two choices. Either we can believe our own righteousness to be sufficient in God’s sight, or we can believe that the righteousness of Jesus Christ alone is sufficient in God’s sight for us.

Here’s a slide show I’ve used many times. It’s entitled Faith versus Works?? But as I show on the next panel, starting at the bottom, it’s really faith versus faith. There are two kinds of faith we can have, faith in the good works of Jesus Christ or faith in our own good works. We can have faith in the righteousness of Christ or faith in our own personal righteousness.

On the next panel we read upward with the arrows. Look at the right hand column. Faith in our own good works leads us to present our own personal righteousness before God as something God should accept. This is what the Pharisee

did in the parable. But since our good works and our lives fall short of the righteous goodness of God, all who attempt this will be rejected. Therefore, faith in our own good works and good life leads to condemnation before God.

On the other hand, Scripture clearly teaches what we see as we read upward in the left hand column. Faith in the works of Jesus Christ – his suffering, death and resurrection on our behalf – clothes us in Christ’s righteousness before God. Scripture says that God will accept Christ’s righteousness as the equal of His own. Therefore, all who have faith in the works of Christ find acceptance and salvation at the judgment throne of the living God clothed in Christ’s righteousness.

So where would you rather place your faith this day – in your own goodness or in the goodness of Jesus Christ? The tax collector placed his faith in the mercy of God. That’s why he went home justified before God. Jesus Christ is the mercy of God.

Getting out of the trap of works righteousness is very easy. Pray this way with me. “Holy Father, forgive me for trusting in my own good works and inadvertently despising the holy work of your Son, Jesus. I renounce my reliance on my own good works. Send your Holy Spirit upon me. Give me total confidence in the work your Son, Jesus, did on my behalf, as it’s described in the pages of Holy Scripture. Let me receive the gift of faith in Jesus, so that I might become your righteousness in Him. Amen.”

Now, some people stupidly think that faith in Jesus Christ is a get out of jail free card to live according to the sinful nature. Such people are under a delusion of Satan. In reality they have no faith in Jesus Christ at all. Hear what it says in Romans 8:9-10, “9 You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

The only way anyone can put their faith in Jesus so that they are justified before God is by the power of Lord Holy Spirit. And when Lord Holy Spirit enters our lives things change. While the sinful nature will wrestle with Lord Holy Spirit for control within us, the Spirit eventually gains the upper hand in all those who call upon the Name of Jesus. To the extent we’re willing to humble ourselves before the Lord we become Holy Spirit controlled.

So here’s the final panel of the presentation. In the lower left hand corner is faith. Going upward we see that faith in the holy works of Jesus Christ on our behalf brings us the righteousness of Christ. And it is by the righteousness of Christ that we are saved and accepted into Christ’s Kingdom and God’s family. Notice that this is in the vertical dimension, upward toward God.

But in this diagram there is also a horizontal dimension. Lord Holy Spirit brings faith and by faith we become able to do the good works and live the life God has appointed to us. Lord Holy Spirit is the only power by which we can live lives pleasing to God on this earth. And in this way we live lives beneficial to our neighbors – those around us, especially those close to us. This, then, fulfills the word Jesus spoke in Matthew 5:16, “... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Notice something. Jesus didn’t say let your light shine before men so that they may praise *you*. That’s what the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable was looking for – praise from people. For a number of years I was always giving food to a lady who begged

from me week in and week out. She always wanted to praise me for doing so. I told her, "Don't praise me. Praise God." I don't know if she ever got that through her head. But that's the result God is looking for – praise coming up to Him from those His Spirit causes us to rightly deal with in life.

This is an accurate representation of the one true catholic and apostolic faith as it is summarized in Ephesians 2:8-10, "8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." This is the true gospel Luther and others fought for that we celebrate on this Reformation Sunday. Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the NIV.