

Luke 18:9-14

Trinity 11, August 11, 2024
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He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector."* ¹¹ *The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.'* ¹² *I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'* ¹³ *But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'* ¹⁴ *I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

How good is your posture? Do you stand upright when you walk down the street, or are your shoulders bent over? Are you sitting upright in the pew right now, or are you slouched down a little bit? We've all been taught that good posture is important both for your health and for your appearance. I'm reminded of that frequently. To my great annoyance, I've been told *many* times that I look shorter than 5'11", and I think it's because I'm always slouching!

Good physical posture is a good thing to remind ourselves about once in a while, and it's a good thing to teach to our children too. Standing up tall and straight is good; slumping over low is bad. And our text for today is all about posture, it describes the correct posture for approaching the almighty God. The surprising thing is that good *spiritual* posture is exactly the opposite of good *physical* posture. Today, we'll be considering the theme:

Christians Need Correct Posture

- I. Stand tall in self-righteousness—God will cast you down
- II. Bend low in repentance—God will lift you up in Christ!

A person's posture—the way he sits, the way he stands, the way he walks—can tell you a lot about that individual's personality. You can tell if someone is confident or shy or interested or disinterested or introverted or extroverted. And I think given the choice, we'd all rather have that proud, upright appearance than be stooped over and slouching all the time. And if you're talking about *physical* appearance, that's fine. But when we come before God, we can't afford to take that posture. The first lesson of our parable today is clear: **Stand tall in self-righteousness—God will cast you down.**

Many of the Jews of Jesus' day—especially the religious leaders—had an attitude problem. They tended to think very highly of themselves and not very much at all of anyone else. To them, "righteousness" was a matter of looking good on the outside; and they were confident that they looked very good indeed. So on this occasion, Jesus *"told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.'"*

Jesus could hardly have chosen a better cast of characters for His parable. In the eyes of Jewish society, these men were exact opposites. The Pharisees were considered the very tip-top of good, upstanding, church-going, religious people. In contrast, the tax collectors were looked on as the scum of the earth. They were Jews who collected taxes for the hated Romans—taxes on land and crops, taxes on based on the members of the household, taxes on imports and exports, bridge-tolls, road-

tolls, town-specific-taxes—they'd force wagons to be unloaded and the contents to be fully counted, they'd even open up mail for inspection. And they were known to overcharge in the tax burdens, and the people of Israel were generally powerless to do anything about it. The law *said* that they could take the tax collectors to court if they felt they were being over-taxed, but the judges were direct beneficiaries of the taxes, so they always ruled in Rome's favor. Yes, the Pharisees were the best, and the tax collectors were the *worst*—on the *outside*, at least. But Jesus is about to show us that when you're standing before the Lord, it's *not* what's on the outside that counts!

“The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus...” The Pharisee picked a prominent place in the center of the temple. He stood up straight and proud. He began his prayer, speaking in a loud voice so that everybody around him could hear. And—did you notice—he wasn't *really* praying to God, was he? He addressed God, but you can tell by the content of his prayer that he was actually praying to *himself*! He was looking in the mirror of his own self-righteousness, and he liked what he saw. He was his own god; he was all that he needed. ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.”***

A person needs to have a correct posture when he comes before God, but this Pharisee had chosen exactly the wrong one. He stood tall in his self-righteousness. He wasn't really asking God for anything. He was *telling* God proudly how many sins he had avoided, how many good deeds he had done. He even had the nerve to look down his nose at the lowly tax collector in the corner, and say, “Thank you, Lord, for not making me a wretched sinner like this disgusting tax collector!”

He must have looked so good standing there proudly in the Temple, in his ornate garments. So pious, so righteous. But what was Jesus' verdict on the proud Pharisee? “NOT JUSTIFIED.” Because condescending pride and self-righteousness get you exactly nowhere with God. A much more *thorough* and *perfect* righteousness is what God demands. And for that sort of righteousness, you simply cannot rely on yourself, no matter how good you look on the outside. Jesus had once said to the hypocritical Pharisees, ***“You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”*** (Luke 16:15) Get the picture? **Stand tall in self-righteousness—God will cast you down!**

So, how's your posture? Your *spiritual* posture as a Christian, I mean. Don't think that the temptation to spiritual pride isn't there for us, too. I remember getting my annual church offering statement at the beginning of the year, and I opened it up and liked the nice, round number I saw for my annual contributions—*what a fine fellow I was!* That was spiritual pride. Maybe you've experienced the same. It's tempting to look at our offerings or church attendance or the things you do for others and then compare that to others who seem to be doing less and to feel pretty good about it! That's deadly self-righteousness.

And hey, we can take it so far that sometimes we might look at the unchurched, the people who don't believe in God and feel like they have no need for God in their lives, who feel like they're good people all by themselves, and think to ourselves, *“God, I thank you that I'm not like those people.”* As if our status as Christians and believers was in some way due to our goodness or wisdom or sensibility. And if we think that, then we're no different than the Pharisee.

It's ridiculous to compare ourselves to others like this, because we're all in the same boat. We're all sinners, and we're all desperately in need of God's forgiveness. Why kid ourselves? The Apostle John says, ***"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."*** But there's a flip side to that. John goes on, ***"If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*** (1 John 1:8-9)

Jesus uses the tax collector as an example of the perfect posture for you and me to assume when we come before Him in prayer. ***"But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast."*** Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector stood in a remote corner of the Temple, stooped in the shadows. And unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector wasn't very proud of himself. He didn't even look upward as he prayed. In his shame over his sin, he struck himself on the chest. And what did the tax collector have to say for himself? Not much. It wasn't a very long prayer. He didn't tell about all his good works. He didn't excuse himself by comparing himself to the other tax collectors that were worse than he was. In fact, he didn't *tell* God anything. He just *asked*. He made one request: ***"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"***

Are you looking for a good prayer that doesn't take long to memorize? Here it is: ***"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"*** When you say those words, you're owning up to your sins. You're admitting that, if you got what was coming to you, you'd be lost eternally as a consequence of your sins. And the Psalmist guarantees us that this is one prayer that God simply can't ignore: ***"A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."*** (Psalm 51:17) You're also confessing that you know there's only one way out of your sins, and that's through God's mercy. The tax collector found absolutely nothing in himself in which to place his confidence, so he took the only option that was left. He appealed to the mercy of God. And he got it! Jesus said, ***"I tell you, this man went down to his house JUSTIFIED."***

Here is the correct posture for a Christian: **Bend low in repentance—God will lift you up in Christ!** I wish we had time this morning to read every beautiful verse in Scripture that talks about God's mercy. It's described as eternal, ***"from everlasting to everlasting."*** (cf. Psalm 103:17) We're told that it's as high as the heavens and as deep as the sea. (cf. Psalm 103:11) His mercy never runs out—it's new and full for us every morning. (cf. Lamentations 3:22) The result of this mercy is that all the sins that plague your conscience are swept away when you come in lowly repentance and say the prayer of the tax collector: ***"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"***

For Jesus' sake, we too are justified—that is, declared "not guilty" before the almighty God. God took the punishment that we deserved—He lifted that heavy burden from your shoulders and laid it on the back of His Son Jesus. If there's any pride left to us, let it be pride in our loving Savior, who carried that burden to the cross of Calvary. There He paid the price for every last sin you've ever committed or will ever commit. There, He defeated the devil and robbed hell of its victims. There, on the cross, Jesus flung open the gates of heaven to every sinner—yes, even to such sinners as you and I. In one of my favorite verses of Scripture, God promises, ***"The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all unrighteousness."*** (1 John 1:7)

Years ago, at our sister-congregation in Marquette, MI, a man came into a church service one Sunday as a visitor. After the service, when he shook the pastor's hand, he said, "Pastor, I just want you to

know that your church is full of hypocrites.” The pastor looked him in the eye and said, “There’s always room for one more.” That man meant that the church was full of people that he *knew* to be sinners, and he thought they shouldn’t be in church pretending to be pious. But he *came* to realize, after he joined that church, was that the people didn’t come pretending they weren’t sinners. They came *because* they were sinners, and they knew they needed God’s forgiveness.

As you and I come before God today, and every day, let’s remember that we are sinners. Let’s assume the correct Christian posture, not one of self-righteous pride, but one of lowly repentance. Let us appeal to the mercy of God in Christ. And like that tax collector, we will not be disappointed! What a joy it is to know that at *this* moment, somewhere in heaven, your Lord Jesus is saying of you, ***“This person when down to his house JUSTIFIED.”*** Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.