

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

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Here's a joke you may have heard:

- ❖ A very distinguished gentleman walks into a beautiful church for Mass.
- ❖ Before entering his pew, he gazes at the crucifix above the high altar and says, "Before thee, Lord Jesus, I am nothing," and kneels down to pray.

A couple minutes later, another well-dressed and very dignified gentleman enters.

- ❖ Pausing at his pew, he also raises his eyes to the crucifix and says, "Before thee, Lord Jesus, I am nothing,"
- ❖ Then he also kneels, not far from the first man who gives him a warm smile and nods approvingly.

After a few minutes, the pious quiet is broken when a bleary-eyed, very disheveled man, clearly hungover and still stinking from the night before, loudly galumphs in.

- ❖ Never looking up from the floor, he flops down in a seat across from the first two men, puts his head in his hands, and says, "Lord, I'm nothin'."

Very much annoyed, the first gentleman leaned over to the second and said,

- ❖ "Well, look who thinks *he's* nothing."
- ❖ Clearly someone hasn't quite grasped the point, and that's what Jesus is showing us in his parable.

Heard the gospels so many times that we mix this up, but have to remember, the tax collector *really is a bad guy*;

- ❖ Basically a *criminal* and a *traitor*, which is *why* it made the Pharisees so *mad* that Jesus seemed to spend *all* his time with *them* and *other* notorious sinners.
- ❖ *Pharisees*, on the other hand, really *were* the *good* guys – not *all* scheming, nefarious; religious elite leading *renewal* of popular Jewish *piety* and *devotion*.

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But a zeal for piety and devotion can *easily* become a *trap*, like *this* Pharisee, whose *every* movement *screams*, “Look at *me*, I’m the *good* guy.”

- ❖ He comes in like he *owns* the place, strides *up* to the front, standing *confidently* before God, and then (*probably* loud enough for *everyone* to *hear*) lists *all* the people that are *beneath* him and *ticks* off the reasons *why*.
- ❖ But that’s not *real* prayer, and Jesus makes it clear that he’s *not* connecting with *God* when he says that the Pharisee “stood and prayed thus *with himself*”

When we *truly* connect to *God*, we see how *unworthy* we *are*, but *also* how much *greater* God’s *love* and *mercy* is than our *unworthiness*.

- ❖ And that’s *exactly* the *point* – the law, liturgy, our prayer – it’s *all* aimed at helping us *grasp*, *internalize*, and live *into* this reality.
- ❖ When we *get* it, the result is *not* that we think *less* of ourselves, but that we *think of ourselves less*.
- ❖ Then, as we’re freed from our *selfishness*, we’re *better* able to love God and reveal him to the world by loving our *neighbor* as *he* does.

But if we’re only connecting to *ourselves*, the *opposite* happens.

- ❖ We’ll begin to see our *piety* and *devotion*, our *sacrifices*, *even* our service to *others*, as the signs of our own *goodness*.
- ❖ And the *more* we notice what *we* do, the *more* we’ll notice what *others don’t* do.

Just like so many things, it’s hard to judge the *quality* of our prayer until we see how *well* it serves its *purpose*.

- ❖ So if the point of *prayer* (and *all* our religious activities) is to make us *humble* before God and *free* us to love *him and our neighbor* – we need to ask some hard questions about *how we’re doing*.

First, when was the last time you felt truly *humbled, maybe even a little frightened*, in the presence of the *Lord*?

- ❖ God is *Love* and *Mercy*, and also *Truth* and *Justice*, so when we *sin*, and we *all do*, he *is* offended and our relationship *is* impaired.
- ❖ Now I don't want you to *doubt* God's *love* for you or *agonize* over your *salvation*, but we *have* to take our sin *seriously*, seriously enough to *do* something about it.
- ❖ We can't say that we love someone if their pain doesn't move us to action; so even though God will never stop loving us, we have to take care that we don't let our selfish indifference unravel the relationship.

Now, because we can easily *deceive* ourselves when it comes to loving *God*, the *clearest* test is how we've treated what's *precious* to him: our *neighbors*.

- ❖ Once I've learned how to name my *own* sins, how *quick* am I to name someone *else's*?
- ❖ Do I reveal the *universal love* of the *Father*? Or do I play *favorites* and take *pleasure* in criticizing *others*?
- ❖ When people let me *down* or *hurt* me, do I suffer like *Jesus*, praying for others from the *cross*? Or am I immediately *harsh, impatient, or vindictive*?

St. Francis de Sales warns of the *grave* dangers of "*virtues meditated on, but not practiced*" and says that when we're fervent in *prayer*, but *not* in loving our *neighbor*, the good feelings are *nothing* but "*spiritual mushrooms*."

- ❖ I can say from much, *much* personal experience that this is absolutely true –
- ❖ and so I *can't* encourage you *enough* to take even a *short* bit of time every day to consider *how God* has loved *you* and how *you've responded*.

If you *do* that *day* after *day*, with an *honest* and *humble* heart, I can *promise* you *two* things:

1. At times, you'll be *unsettled* by how *quickly* you can go from *praising* God to *cutting* down your *neighbor*.
 - ❖ And in *those* moments you'll be *quick* to offer with *genuine* sorrow the prayer of the tax collector, "God be *merciful* to *me* a *sinner*!"

2. But *also*, *more* and *more*, you'll see the *proof* that you've been connecting with *God* in *how* you interact with your *neighbor*.
 - ❖ And in *those* moments you'll be *quick* to offer the *same* prayer for God to be *merciful*, *thankful* to be reminded that he *is*.