

**Text: Luke 18:9-14**

**Theme: Church Is For Sinners**

**Date: September 23, 2007 (Pentecost 17)**

In the name of Jesus, who justifies the ungodly, Dear Christian friends,

**Imagine this scene:** A man walks into a doctor's office. The place is packed; all around him there are sick people. Little children are coughing and holding their heads with earaches. A young man has a cast on his leg, and there's a little boy in a wheelchair. A housewife is waiting impatiently with a bandage over a burn on her arm. Other people are waiting with handkerchiefs in their hands with flu and chest infections. There are elderly people who are so sick they can barely walk.

**In the middle of all this coughing and crying and nose blowing, the voice of the receptionist can be heard,** "Mr. Smith, the doctor will now see you." The man gets up and walks slowly into one of the examining rooms. The nurse asks him to be seated and says the doctor will be in shortly. When the doctor comes in, he asks Mr. Smith the usual questions about what has been bothering him. "Well, doctor," Mr. Smith says, "There's nothing really wrong with me. Actually, I've been feeling great."

"Well, why did you come to see me then?" the doctor asked. "Do you want me to run some tests or give you an exam?"

"No," Mr. Smith said, "I don't want to be tested, and I don't need any medicine. I just want you to tell me what I already know--that I'm in good health and that I'm not as sick or weak as all those other people waiting out there."

**Isn't that kind of a strange story?** I'm sure it has never happened, and it probably never will happen. At least, it never happens in a doctor's office. But it does happen all the time in another place that has been established for the treatment of sickness. It happens a lot in the church. Jesus is the great Physician of body and soul. And the church is the office where Jesus does the tests and the examinations to determine what is wrong inside each of us. And the church is the place where Jesus freely and graciously passes out the only medicine that can cure our sickness. Yet all the time people walk into Jesus' office like Mr. Smith. They are sure that there is nothing wrong with them. And they refuse to take any kind of examination that might prove them wrong. Jesus once told a parable for people like Mr. Smith. It's the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. The Bible says he told this parable to those **WHO WERE CONFIDENT OF THEIR OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS**. Since every one of us has an Old Adam that is confident of our own righteousness, Jesus told this parable for us. Today Jesus teaches us that as a doctors' office is for people who are sick, so is *the Church a place for sinners*. As we study this parable, we learn from Jesus 1) why we need him as our great Physician, and 2) why Jesus wants us to stop by his office.

### **1. Why We Need Jesus As Our Great Physician**

**Whether we are talking about sickness in the body or in the soul, there are really only two ways to feel good** about yourself. One way is to admit that you are sick and go to the doctor to get his help. The other way is to make believe that you are not very sick and take comfort in the fact that other people around you are a lot sicker than you are. Unfortunately, this second method is the method that the Pharisee in Jesus' parable chose. When the Pharisee came to God's office in the church, he prayed: **GOD, I THANK YOU THAT I AM NOT LIKE OTHER MEN--ROBBERS, EVILDOERS, ADULTERERS--OR EVEN LIKE THIS TAX COLLECTOR. I FAST TWICE A WEEK AND GIVE A TENTH OF ALL I GET.**

#### **The Pharisee was sick but he failed to recognize it.**

- He could read in his Bible how the sin of Adam and Eve was passed on to the whole human race. Could he deny that he belonged to the human race?
- God had told him in the books of Moses, "*Every inclination of man's heart is only evil all the time.*" Could he deny that he had a heart?
- The great Old Testament king David, whom the Pharisees greatly admired, had written by inspiration, "*Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*" Didn't the Pharisee have a mother? How could he pretend that he did not have the disease which infects every other person on earth?

There is only one way for a proud person to pretend that he is not sick. And that is to point the finger at other people whom he thinks are more sick. And that is what the Pharisee did. Look at all those sinners, Lord! Criminals, adulterers, cheaters, liars! I've got my faults, Lord, but look at my wife! Look at my husband! Look at my neighbor! Lord, look at my co-workers! Lord, you should what my fellow church goers do between the Sundays! I know I'm not perfect, Lord, but look at what those other people do! I know I should attend church and the Lord's Supper more often, I know I should read my Bible more often. I know I should use my time and talents and treasures to serve the gospel ministry, but Lord, look at what I'm doing and then look at what others are not doing.

Everybody wants to feel good about himself. And the way the Pharisee chose is a popular one. It's called justification by comparison. There is no real sorrow in the heart. There is no confession of sins. There is no admission that there is anything wrong. There is no examination of the heart, no humility, no plea for forgiveness. All there is is finger pointing and complaining about the sins of others. These were the kind of people to whom Jesus told this parable: **TO SOME WHO WERE CONFIDENT OF THEIR OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS AND LOOKED DOWN ON EVERYBODY ELSE.** He told the parable to those who wanted to feel healthy by making everybody else look more sick. Jesus told this parable to the Pharisee and today he tells it to you and me.

Finger pointing is not only unspiritual; it is dishonest. It denies the existence and knowledge of God. It points only at the outward sins that man sees. But it purposely forgets that there is a God who can see into everyone's heart. Jesus was speaking of every human heart when he said, *“Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, theft, false witness. These are what make a man unclean.”* Sin starts inside of us: the hatred, the anger, pride, envy, worry, the days and nights without prayer and peace. It was bad enough that the Pharisee pretended to his fellowman that he didn't have these sins, It was downright unbelief to talk to God as though he couldn't see inside the heart. We will never really feel good about ourselves doing that.

## 2. Why Jesus Wants Us to Stop by His Office

There is another way to feel good about yourself. Jesus also told about another man who went about it in a different way. **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.** Here is a man who came into the doctor's office and took all the tests. He didn't point his finger at all the other sick people in the waiting room. Under the x-ray of God's law, he saw the cancer of sin spreading all over his soul. When the test revealed that his disease was fatal, he couldn't even look up at the doctor. *“The soul that sins will die,”* rang in his ears. *“The wages of sin is death,”* was his diagnosis.

But then he remembered that the Doctor said there was a treatment. **GOD, HAVE MERCY ON ME, A SINNER,** he cried, *“Purge me with hyssop, and I will be clean; cleanse me, and I will be whiter than snow”.* *“Rock of Ages, cleft for me; let me hide myself in Thee!”* Forgive me, heal me, help me, save me! Take my sins away as far as the east is from the west. Hide me in my Savior's wounds. Let his blood cleanse me from all my sins. Let the radiance of his cross chase the darkness from my soul.

Who do you think left the temple forgiven? Who left the Doctor's office healed? We don't have to guess. Jesus gives the answer: **I TELL YOU THAT THIS MAN, RATHER THAN THE OTHER, WENT HOME JUSTIFIED BEFORE GOD.** The Pharisee pointed his finger at others. This man pointed the finger at himself. The other man didn't want an examination because he was afraid of what he would find. This man took the test and he received the treatment. The other man tried to justify himself by comparison. This man was justified by Jesus.

Jesus is the Great Physician. His office is the church and the Church is for sinners. The only medicine that can cure my disease and yours is the message of his forgiveness in the Word and the Sacrament. Receive his body and blood with a believing heart. To each of us personally he says, *“This is for you.”* Nobody's sins are too big or too many for Jesus to forgive. Church is for sinners. Jesus himself said, *“Those who are not sick do not need a doctor.”* We pray our Great Physician that none of us ever stays away from his office because he is sick. And we pray that none of us ever comes to church just to tell the Doctor that we are alright, that other people are more sick than we are. Church is for sinners. If we know that and believe that, then we also will go home justified before God. Amen.