

# "Who Is Running the Verbs?"

Luke 18:9-17

October 17, 2010

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

Have you ever heard a description of something and you just KNEW something was not quite right but you couldn't quite put your finger on what it was? Maybe you had that feeling as you heard the Gospel reading for today. You just KNOW there's something wrong with the Pharisee. What is it? You know there is something right about the tax collector. What is it?

There's a lot right about the Pharisee. He is a very religious person. He's not timid or shy in his worship. He's bold in his prayer. His prayer is one of thanksgiving. He has done good things. He fasts, not just once a week, but twice a week. He gives a tithe – 10% - of all that he has.

And there is plenty wrong the tax collector. He is not naturally a religious person. As a tax collector, he is known to be a traitor and a cheat. He is timid in both his worship and prayer. He won't assume the normal prayer posture for Jews – hands outstretched and eyes lifted up to heaven. And there certainly isn't much to his prayer. It's rather short and uneventful.

So what is wrong about the Pharisee? Is it merely that he is prideful? What is so right about the tax collector? Is it just that he is so humble? The answer is much simpler here. The key to understanding this parable and in applying it to our lives is to look at the verbs. Who is running the verbs?

For the Pharisee, HE is the subject of all the verbs in his prayer. Five times in just two verses he manages to use the pronoun, "I". "I thank you that I am not like other men...I fast...I give tithes of all I get."

For the tax collector, God is the subject of his short and succinct prayer. He not only addresses God, but God is the implied subject of the passive tense verb in his very short prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

What difference does this make? It makes all the difference in the world. The person or pronoun which runs the verbs is the one in charge. And the one who is in charge determines the outcome.

We are all natural born Pharisees. Our two favorite words are “I” and “my”. Think about how often you talk about yourself, your activities, and your accomplishments on a daily basis. There is a lot of “I am going to do that” or “I think this” and “this is my work, my car, my home, my money” and so on. To defer to someone or something else may be seen as a sign of weakness or excessive humility.

This kind of language infiltrates our talk about spiritual matters as well. One thing that strikes me most about some contemporary Christian music is how often the word “I” is used. “Lord, I just want to praise you;” “Lord, I come to worship you;” “Lord, I lift your name on high;” “Lord, I give you my heart;” and so on. People will talk about “I made my decision for Christ;”, “I invited Jesus into my heart”, and so on. When trouble comes along, what gets people through it? “My faith gets me through this.” I saw an interview last week with Deanna Favre who was asked about how she was handling the difficulties of her husband, Minnesota quarterback Brett Favre, who has been accused of inappropriate behavior. She said, “Faith. I’m a woman of faith.”

You may say, “What’s wrong with these things? All those statements are religious in nature. They speak of God, worship, faith, and so on.” But remember that the Pharisee’s prayer was like that. He spoke of religious themes such as thanksgiving, fasting, and tithing. Yet Jesus said, “I tell you this man (the tax collector) went home justified, rather than the other (the Pharisee). Why?”

Even though the Pharisee talked about religious themes in his prayer, the focus of his prayer was himself. His thanksgiving was not for God’s good gifts, but for his own good behavior. The emphasis in his talk about fasting and tithing was not his motivation for doing these things (i.e. a response to God’s love), but his obedience in doing it. The subject of the verbs in all of these actions is himself. There is no mention of God’s action at all. Since he is running the verbs, the outcome for

his relationship with God will be determined by his action. And, quite frankly, as good as he thinks he is, the Pharisee is not good enough to maintain a relationship with a holy God who demands holiness. The Pharisee is not justified, that is, forgiven of his sins, not only because he can't accomplish it, but because he never asks for it nor even acknowledges a need for it. He depends upon his behavior.

Are we any different? As good Lutherans, I don't think any of us would come out and say, in so many words, "I have forgiveness and am right with God because the good works which I do." However, we may get very close to making that claim and sometimes cross the line when we talk about our relationship with God. We will blow through the confession of sins for a minute or two at the beginning of Divine Service, but then spend the rest of the time thinking we are doing pretty well. We may not blatantly pray to God about ourselves like the Pharisee, but, in our conversation and in our thinking, the focus may still be pretty much about ourselves.

We let ourselves run the verbs. Coming to faith is something I do as an act of the will instead of God's grace. Worship is something that I do for God through my praising, thanksgiving, and lifting the Lord's name on high rather than worship being a matter of God giving gifts to us. My faith is what gets me through hard times, rather than the object of my faith – the Lord – getting me through hard times. When we are the ones who are the subjects of the verbs, then the outcome for our relationship with God will be determined by our action. And, like the Pharisee, we are not good enough establish and maintain a relationship with a holy God. The Scriptures are very clear that "a man is not justified by observing the law." (Gal. 2:16)

What was different about the tax collector? It certainly wasn't his personal appearance, his natural worthiness or even the power of his prayer. The major difference was who was running the verb in his short prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Instead of using an active verb to describe himself and his actions, the tax collector uses a passive verb, with God as the subject, to plea to God for mercy.

It's more than a plea for God to feel sorry for him or take pity on him for his sins. The verb literally means "to be propitiated." In other words, "to make sacrifice for my sin and be reconciled." Not only did the tax collector admit that he was a sinner in need of forgiveness but he knew that only God could make the sacrifice necessary to do away with sin and reconcile himself to God.

God was only too happy to answer this prayer on behalf of the tax collector and of all people. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to do what the Pharisee thought he could do on his own and what the tax collector realized he could not do. Jesus actively and perfectly did all the good which God required of us. We don't have to come to God like the Pharisee to list all of our accomplishments in order to impress him. God credits the perfect righteousness of Jesus to our account. He is perfectly satisfied with each of us for Jesus' sake.

Jesus was also able to make the sacrifice for sin by which God would be propitiated, that is, His anger over sin would be appeased and He would be reconciled to humanity once again. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross paid the debt for all sin once and for all. Jesus' resurrection from the dead was God's stamp of approval on Jesus' sacrifice. We don't have to come to God, talking about what we have done with regard to our personal piety in order to somehow merit forgiveness for our sin. God gives us the free and full forgiveness for all of our sins earned by Jesus' on the cross. He has justified us, that is, declared us to be holy and right with him for Jesus' sake.

Jesus ends the parable with this admonition, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted." A good way to monitor yourself with this is to watch who is running the verbs when you talk about your relationship with God. If there are a lot of "I's" and "my's" in your speech, you run the danger of exalting yourself like the Pharisee did. If you do that now, you will be brought down later.

On the other hand, if, like the tax collector, you humbly recognize your complete unworthiness before God and have Him as the subject of the verbs when you talk about faith, worship, and good works, God will exalt you, if not in this life, then certainly in the life to come.

There is an old sports adage which says, "There's no 'I' in team." This is usually said to remind athletes that success in sports is dependant, not on the individual, but on someone else – in this case, the team. In a similar sense, we could say that, while "There IS an 'I' in sin," "there's no 'I' in grace." May this remind you that your standing before God is not dependent on you and your accomplishments, but on Someone else and His accomplishments, namely, the perfect life, the sacrificial death, and the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Him, our self-exultation is forgiven and, by Him, we are exalted to the presence of God, here on earth and hereafter in heaven for all eternity. Amen.