

"The Perfect Resume"
Luke 18:9-14

October 23, 2016

23rd Sunday After Pentecost

I'm sure we've all had the experience, when applying for a job, of filling out a resume. A resume (which comes from a French word that means "sum up") is a document in which you get to write down all of the good things about yourself - your educational achievements, your past job accomplishments, your personal successes, the names of people who will tell a prospective boss what a good and honest person you are and what a competent and faithful employee you will be and so on. The purpose of a resume is to make yourself look as good as possible so that you impress your prospective boss enough to gain his favor and get a job from him.

In the grand scheme of life, we all face a much bigger "boss" – the Lord God Almighty – from whom we need much more than a job. We need His love and favor lest we die and go to hell. If you had to write out a resume to impress God and gain His love and favor, what would you write?

In our text, Jesus told a story about two men who went to the temple to pray in order to gain God's love and favor. The first man was a Pharisee. He was a very strict religious person and tried hard to do all the right things. This man had a long and glowing resume. Notice his prayer. He stands up straight and proud and prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." What he means is: "I'm a pretty good person compared to other people (especially that tax collector over there). I don't do terrible sins. And I'm a very religious person and do many religious things – including fasting (not once but TWICE a week) and tithing."

But he forgets something. He never asks for God's forgiveness. He apparently feels he doesn't need it because he has lived a good enough life and done all the right religious things. He also never asks for God's favor. He just expects God to show favor to him and bless him because of his impressive resume.

The other man was a tax collector. He worked for the Romans and collected taxes from the Jewish people for the Roman government. He probably cheated and acted dishonestly by overcharging Jews on their taxes. He often skipped going to temple for worship and probably wasn't welcome there anyway. He had no impressive resume to show God and merit His loving kindness. He fully realizes the magnitude of his sin and feels very guilty because of it.

Notice his prayer. He stands over in a corner. He refuses to look up as Jews customarily do when they prayed, but he beat his breast and said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He doesn't try to impress God, but admits his sin. He doesn't expect or demand God's kindness and forgiveness. He simply asks for God's mercy.

Which of these men received God's kindness and forgiveness -- the religious man with the long resume who was proud of it or the terrible sinner who had no resume but was humble? Jesus said, "I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified (declared right with God), rather than the other."

Many of us today are like that Pharisee. We approach God, feeling that we are pretty good people. We try to do our best to obey God's Law. We take comfort in the fact that we don't do any terrible sins - steal, commit adultery, or murder. We expect God's blessings and kindness because we are certainly better than all of those unbelievers out there. Maybe you have felt that way - satisfied with the way you have lived your life and proud of your accomplishments.

Or, maybe you feel closer to God and deserving of His forgiveness for any tiny errors you *might* have made because you are a religious person. You think, "Well, I believe in God. I was confirmed and am a member in good standing of a Lutheran congregation. I come to church fairly often when something else doesn't come along. And I always put something in the offering plate if I have my wallet with me."

Or, you may consider yourself to be a super Christian like the Pharisee (although you would never admit it out loud). You may think, "I thank God that I am not like inactive members. I not only come to church every Sunday, but I attend every midweek service for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, and every other holiday. I not only attend worship but I also attend Bible Study, not only Sunday morning but also the Bible Study for Wednesday Family Night. I also tithe in my offerings and use every envelope in my offering box."

But the Pharisee's way to God didn't work for him and it won't work for us. Why? The Pharisee depended upon himself and his accomplishments to gain God's favor. But he and his accomplishments were not enough. Although his resume appears to be glowing, it wasn't good enough. How does God judge people? God requires people to be perfect; not pretty good, not mostly good, but 100% absolutely perfect. Why? Because He Himself is 100% absolutely perfect and cannot accept less than that.

The Pharisee was not perfect. You and I are not perfect. No person in this world is perfect. The Word of God says, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12)

The Word of God declares that we all have been sinful since the moment we were conceived and the minute we were born. You cannot change that, no matter how good your resume is. It's like deaf people who are born deaf. They can't try hard to hear and thus become hearing. If they were born deaf, they will remain deaf. In the same way, we cannot try hard and become perfect as God requires. We were born sinful and we will remain sinful.

To make matters worse, we also commit sinful acts as a result of our sinful nature. The Pharisee was a pretty good man and you are pretty good people. You may not commit the terrible sins - murder, adultery, theft, and so on. But you do other sins: jealousy, anger, holding grudges, gossiping, strife, and so on. Your resume for God is not so good if those things are included.

The Pharisee deserved nothing from God because of his proud attitude, his refusal to admit sin, and his reliance upon himself and so he got nothing from God. If you have the same attitude - proud, thinking you are pretty good, and depending upon yourselves, you will get nothing good from God, too. You will get only His judgment and punishment.

But God has had mercy on us, even though we did not deserve it and had no right to expect it. He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into this world to save us from our sinful nature and our sinful actions. Jesus created quite a resume for Himself. He is, by nature, holy and He lived a perfectly holy life. He did all the good required by the Law of God. He avoided and did not do any of the evil forbidden by the Law of God. He alone had a right to brag about His resume, unlike the Pharisee.

But Jesus did not brag. Instead, Jesus humbled Himself. He gave up His resume of holiness and life and accepted our resume of sin and death. Our sins required payment and that payment was a perfect life in exchange for sinful lives. We could not make that payment because of our sin even for ourselves, much less others. Jesus, the only perfect and innocent person, could make the payment and He did. He suffered and died as the payment for all sinners and to take away all that sin earned for us: guilt, death, and hell. Jesus rose from the dead as proof that God accepted Jesus' payment on the cross and that He had earned complete forgiveness, release from death, and eternal life in heaven.

Now, God offers His kindness, grace, and forgiveness to all people freely. But who will receive it? People who are proud and rely on themselves get nothing. The Word of God says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." The tax collector understood this. He did not brag about or rely on his good actions. He recognized that he was a sinner and had no resume at all to present God. He confessed his sins and relied on God's mercy for forgiveness in saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And He received God's mercy. He received God's forgiveness. And he - the terrible sinner - became right with God while the Pharisee - the religious man - did not.

You can become right with God in the same way. Don't feel proud because you are pretty good and have done religious things and depend on them. But recognize your sinfulness. Confess it honestly before God. Depend upon His mercy alone. You shall receive it. You have no fancy resume to present before God. But Jesus' resume - His holy life and death on the cross - becomes your holy life. His punishment is effective for your sins. God sees you as holy, your sins gone, your punishment not needed. You have full forgiveness for all of your sins. You become right with God. And you will live with Him forever.

How will you stand before God? Will you stand like a Pharisee - feeling proud of yourself, showing your resume to God, and depending on that? Or, will you stand like a tax collector - humbly acknowledging your sin, confessing your sin, and trusting God's mercy through Jesus Christ? Your resume gets you nothing. Jesus Christ's resume which is yours through faith gets you everything - His favor, His love, His forgiveness, His blessing and peace, His life. Jesus' perfect resume makes you perfect before God. AMEN.