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Trinity 11
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Luke 18:9-14
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church in Muncie, Ind.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“This man went down to his house justified, rather than the other.”

Justification. The article on which the Church either stands or falls. Justification. The reality on which a person either stands before God in heaven or falls to the depths of hell. Justification. What we tell ourselves and others to explain why we did what we did. Justification. To be made right; to be declared righteous. Justification. Moral goodness and civic virtue.

Jesus says that the tax collector in the parable is justified and that the Pharisee isn't. But the tax collector isn't an ordinary sinner. No, he's a *repentant* sinner. And the Pharisee isn't condemned because he's a Pharisee but because of his self-confidence, his self-righteousness—because he thinks himself to be good.

People—probably you—think that people are basically good. If given the chance, they say, people will do the right thing. In the face of great evil, people will resist and do good. Last weekend, I was playing a game when the referee said, “I want to be evil,” meaning he wanted to do something nasty to the players. As a player, I said, “Resist your base nature,” meaning for him to resist the evil and be good and kind to us instead. His reply? “Well, since my base nature is good, I'll resist that and do the evil thing.” Tell me. People are basically good? Really?

The Pharisee had the same view of man and morality as that referee. It's the view of many honorable, hard-working, idealistic, and socially responsible people today. Those we'd call “good people.” People believe that we can live up to a moral law. If you've done the best you know how, you can't go wrong or be a lost sinner. I'm sure you've heard the sayings—or, at least, something like them: “Do you,” “It takes all kinds to make the world go 'round,” “Be true to yourself,” “Live your truth,” “Be the best that you can be,” “What's true for you may not be true for others,” and “Just do the best you can.”

Do you believe this? About yourself? About others? If you're good, why do you think evil thoughts, speak evil words, commit evil acts? Have you listened to yourself in your car lately? Also, why do you lock your doors? Why do you insist on all manner of laws to

protect yourself and others from others? Why did you buy that gun? Why do you want that wall? Why don't you trust just anyone with your Social Security number or mother's maiden name?

But, pastor, people are *basically* good, not *all* good. If given the opportunity to do good, they'll choose the good. Really? My dad told me, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Does that keep me from saying bad things? Sometimes, but not really. He also said, "A lock keeps an honest person honest." If given an opportunity to sin and get away with it (or think they'll get away with it), people are more likely to sin, to do the wrong thing, to commit evil. How many bad things does someone need to do before you call him bad? How many things does a person need to steal before he's a thief? How many people does a man need to murder before he's a murderer? How many sins must a person commit before he's a sinner? How much evil before a person is evil?

We said it earlier: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Do you actually believe that? If you don't, then you lied. That would make you a liar. Or, you'd be calling God a liar, because that's what His Word says. The ancient Israelites "each did what was right in his own eyes." This is both a statement and a condemnation. They made themselves the arbiters of truth and right and good—they judged God a liar and themselves as the bearers of truth. They did it back then; we're still doing it today. No matter how good a person looks on the outside—no matter how much you pretty yourself up with good civic deeds and the cosmetics of virtue—that person is still a gross and evil sinner. Put lipstick on a pig, and it's still... a pig.

But what about the Christian? What about the repentant sinner? When we really see what God expects of us we can never be satisfied with ourselves. There is no "good enough." Even when I have the will to do good, my evil nature leads me to jealousy, pride, and selfishness. It leads me to despise my neighbor—and I'm despising my neighbor when I stand by and watch him destroy himself with his own evil. Still, if I should keep the law in its entirety but fail in one point, then I'm guilty of all of it, namely of sinning against God Himself. Thus, the need to repent remains. "When Christ our Lord said, 'Repent,' He commanded the entire life of the Christian to be one of repentance."

Of all those who, like the Pharisee, trust in their morality and good deeds to justify themselves, it's still true as Jesus says, "They say, but they do not." When the Law says,

“Love the Lord your God with all your strength, with all your heart, and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself,” our mouths are stopped. We may not know all the hearts of others, but we know our own—and it’s reasonable to expect them to be not much different than we. So, the whole world stands guilty before God. None is righteous; no, not one.

Except for Jesus Christ. He alone is good. He alone has loved God with all His strength, heart, mind, soul, whole being. He alone has loved His neighbor as Himself. He alone is justified and righteous. He never had an evil thought, spoke an evil word, or committed an evil deed. Jesus wasn’t basically good; Jesus is good entirely, completely, perfectly. He didn’t need to justify His words or actions to explain why whatever He did wasn’t wrong. He alone had no need for repentance; therefore, He alone had no need to fear condemnation or punishment.

But Jesus was condemned and punished for all people—for me and for you. He suffered under Pontius Pilate. He faced the Father’s just anger for your sins on the cross. He took the punishment and condemnation all evil people deserve. Jesus didn’t die for those who are good. They wouldn’t need Him to. Jesus only died for bad people, for sinners, taking only their punishment. More than that, for the sinner Jesus also kept the whole Law, all of it, even the minutest part of it. He kept it all so that “by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous”; or, in other words, so that sinners will be justified. So, you confessed it earlier, but do you believe it? Raise your hand if you’re a sinner. Go ahead. If you’ve ever put anything before God, if you’ve ever harmed another, if you’ve ever done anything wrong, then you’re a sinner. So, raise your hand if you’re a sinner.

Now, keep your hand raised if you believe Jesus died for you and sinners like you. That’s right. You can put down your hands, but joyfully lift up your hearts. Lift up your hearts because of the truth we also said earlier: “But if we confess our sins, God, who is faithful and just, will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” If we are in Jesus—which we are, through faith—then we are justified. The beloved apostle writes: “If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” His righteousness will not be a judgment against us. Rather, His righteousness is salvation for all who believe in Him. We are justified not because we’re good enough, but because He is good to us. It’s a gift—a free gift. He paid for it with His perfect life and innocent suffering

and death. That means our sins are covered over by Christ's righteousness and that the Father doesn't count our sins against us—neither sins we've committed nor sins which are still part of our nature. We are justified by Christ. It's just as if we've never sinned.

So, we can try to be like the Pharisee and embrace a high morality or demand that we be regarded by God as holy because of all the things we do that we think good people do. No matter how much he claimed himself righteous, the Pharisee still belongs with those who can't keep the Law and actually be good in God's sight. If it's about what we do... well, it'll never be good enough. But if it's about Christ's goodness, then no matter what we've done we can still enter the kingdom of God. Christ's goodness is enough for tax collectors, prostitutes, druggies, and sinners of all stripes who repent and to turn toward Him. Because Jesus came to save sinners.

Are you a sinner? Jesus died for you. Believe, and be justified.

In His name.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ + Jesus.