

Sin has a way of corrupting everything that we do. And I'm not just talking about the obvious things, the things that we do against God. I'm also talking about the good things that we do, the things that we intend to do for God. Sin can corrupt those things too. It's like one bad apple in the bucket. It can corrupt all of the rest of the apples so that even the good ones go bad. And the worst part about this, Christians, is that this can happen even before we're aware of it. It can happen even without us intending to do it. So we must be on guard against sin in everything that we do, including the things that we do for God!

And Jesus shows us this today in the parable that he tells us in our reading. Jesus says in verse 10: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." The Pharisee is the kind of man that we would expect to be in the temple. He is a man who's serious about God, a man who truly wants to follow after God. And even if he added a bunch of things to God's Law that he wanted to do, that didn't change the fact that he was very serious about wanting to follow the Lord. And today when he's going to the temple, he is going to go do what God certainly wants him to do. He goes into the temple to pray, to give thanks to the Lord for all that he has done. And that in itself is certainly a good thing!

The tax collector, on the other hand, is not the kind of man that we would expect to be in the temple. The tax collector collected money for the Romans. He was considered to be a traitor by his own people. He was not the kind of man you wanted to associate with, not the kind of man you wanted to be around. And tax collectors had a stereotype of being cheats and thieves, and for good reason. But this tax collector also on this day is going to the temple to do what God wants him to do. He is going to pray, to call on the name of the Lord. And that is certainly a good thing!

Just as it's also good for us to pray, too, Christians. God certainly wants us to pray. God wants us to come before him and to call on his name. Jesus, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount says, "When you pray." He does not say, "If you pray," as if it was left up to us. But he says, "When you pray, do this." Jesus expects us to pray. And Paul also says in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." So this is a good thing to do. And both the Pharisee and the tax collector are doing the right thing by going to the temple to pray, calling on the Lord just as we are also called to do.

What about what the Pharisee says? Let's listen to what he has to say. He says: "God, I thank you." And on a surface level, on a very basic level, what's wrong with that? Isn't it right to give thanks to God? Shouldn't we give thanks to him for all that he has done? He has given us so many blessings each and every day. There's all kinds of things that we can give thanks for. We can give thanks for the rain, give thanks for everything around us, give thanks for our many blessings. And if nothing else, we can also give thanks just for being saved. We can give thanks that we have been called out of the world, that we have been made Christians. Psalm 118, for example, says: "I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation." It is good to give thanks to Lord for all of these things. And so in that sense, the Pharisee has done nothing wrong. He is doing the right thing by giving thanks to the Lord.

The Pharisee also says: "I fast twice a week." Now, that was actually more than the Law required. The Law specified very few times that people were supposed to fast. The Day of

Atonement was one of them, and that only came once a year. So for this Pharisee to fast twice a week every week is certainly far more than God expected him to do. But there's nothing wrong with that either, Christians. There is no sin in doing more. We should not look on those who are fasting more as if they are hypocrites. That would not be the right thing to do. Just as we should not look on those who are doing less than we are as somehow being insincere. Fasting can certainly be a good thing. Jesus, again in the Sermon on the Mount, says: "When you fast." Not "if you fast," but "when you fast," so he expects us to do this as well. And fasting can help us. It can help us to exercise self-control. It can help us direct our eyes toward heaven. Fasting can certainly be a good thing to do. And so in that sense, the Pharisee has also done nothing wrong. He is striving to do what is good in the service of the Lord.

The Pharisee also says "I give tithes of all that I get." And honestly, that's again more than what the Law required. God's Law specified certain things that they were supposed to get tithes on, especially things connected to the harvest, things like crops. But the Pharisees gave tithes on everything, including their garden herbs, things like dill and mint and cumin. And honestly, that was okay. It's okay to give more to the Lord. It's okay to go above and beyond. There is no sin in doing that. After all, Paul says in 2 Corinthians chapter 9: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." And so if we are moved to give more, there's nothing wrong with that. If we don't give as much as somebody else does, there's nothing wrong with that either. What matters is that we give as we are moved to give, to give in proportion to what we have been given. And so in this sense, the Pharisee has done nothing wrong. Giving more in this way can also be a good and a godly thing.

So in all of these things, then, Christians, we have seen that the Pharisee is striving to do what is right. And yet we can't help but see that there is something wrong with what he says. Even though he is seeking after good, it has turned into something evil. We see this, first of all, in the way that he focuses on himself. The way that he only mentions God once, but he manages to mention himself more than five times throughout the course of his prayer. He is praying to God, but his eyes are firmly on himself. He is looking to what he has done. He is convinced that this is proof that he is a good man, that he is righteous in himself, even apart from the Lord. Sin has twisted this into something else.

But we feel it especially in the contempt that he has for other people. Because he says, "I'm not like other men. I am not like those extortioners, those unjust, those adulterers. I'm not even like this tax collector! I am something different." And even if you suppose that on a very technical sense he might be right, it's his spirit that says everything, the way that he approaches especially this tax collector who is praying. A living faith would have moved him towards compassion towards these people. A living faith would have moved him to pity the tax collector, to want to help him along the way, to show him the truth of God's Word, to help him be a believer, so that he too might be saved. But not this Pharisee! Convinced of his own righteousness and holding all others in contempt, he falls into sin. Sin has corrupted even what he meant to do for God into something else entirely.

Christians, this is why we must be on guard against our sins, because sin can take even the very best things that we do and pervert them into something else. Giving to help others, for example, is certainly a good thing. God wants us to do it. But giving to others can so easily lead us to think that we are good people in ourselves, that this is proof of how good I am. That it might even

cover over all those little mistakes I made during the week. Fasting often is certainly a good thing. It's a good and a godly thing to do. But fasting often can lead me to look down on those who don't do it, to say that I am somehow more serious about God than they are, that I'm taking this with a lot more seriousness, with a lot more focus than they could ever possibly do. And fasting less often can also be a good thing. It can be good and godly. But fasting less often can lead us so easily to look with contempt on those who do it more often. To say that they're just being hypocrites. They're not serious about it. They're not sincere. They're just doing it to be seen. So our sins, then, Christians, can corrupt these things in this way. And we have to be on guard not just against the obvious things, but even in the things that we do for God. We have to ask ourselves: "Why am I doing this? What is my intent? What is it that I hope to gain?" We must be on guard at all times so that we do not fall away.

But consider the tax collector in our parable for today. This tax collector does not boast in himself. He is not praying with his eyes looking at himself and what he does the way that this Pharisee is doing. This tax collector knows that he is not worthy of the things that he asks for. He knows the sins that he has committed. He is fully aware of all the terrible things that he has done in his life. This tax collector knows that he has no power in himself to turn away from those sins. But he also knows that there is power, a cleansing power in God to help him to fight against these things. And so this tax collector calls on God, saying, "Be merciful to me, a sinner!" He humbles himself before the Lord, and God lifts up the humble.

Because Christians, Christ has come to set us free from our sins. Jesus has shed his blood to wash us clean. Jesus lifts us up so that we are able to stand before him. Jesus makes us see ourselves rightly. He makes us see our sins, to see how much we have fallen before the glory of God, that we have fallen so short of what God wants us to do. But God the Father has promised to hear us through Jesus Christ. And because of Jesus, we are able to approach the mercy seat of God and to call confidently on his name, confessing our sins. We can know through Jesus that he has broken the power of sin and that he comes to make us like himself through the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can do what is truly good in the eyes of the Lord, not because of ourselves, but because of Jesus Christ alone.

So Christians, watch out for sin. Guard against it in all that you do. Do not let it catch you off-guard even in the things that you do for God. Fight against it with all that you have through the power that is yours in Jesus Christ alone. Because Jesus has come to set you free from those sins, and he will bring you to himself forever.

Let us pray. Lord God Almighty, who humbles the proud but exalts the humble, have mercy on us sinners and forgive us our sins, so that we may be made more and more like your Son, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.