

The Secret of Justification

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Bill Lewis
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Luke 18:9-14

[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Sermon

The parables of Jesus contain secrets...secrets of the Kingdom of God. When the disciples asked him why he always talked in parables, that’s what we said. Secrets that are not for everyone. Like Christmas gifts under a decorated tree, the wrappings of the packages hide what is inside. What is inside are secrets, intended to be opened and known by the one whose name is on the package. That’s what a parable is like, a familiar one of which we have before us today. And it is for us, is it not? He said the parables contain secrets for his followers. Are we not his followers?

Now one might be inclined to say. Now wait a minute! I’ve seen this package before...many times. This story of the Pharisee and the Publican...I know what’s inside. Don’t bore me with the task of opening it yet another time. Well...I hope our familiarity with the story does not dull our fascination with the package and our anticipation of yet finding yet another secret inside of it. If the package contains secrets, it contains surprises...always.

That’s partly because the parables are stories, and like any good story, one never gets to the bottom of them. The other day I re-read one of Flannery O’Connor’s stories, titled WISE BLOOD. I had read it a number of times before. But there they were! Like gems hiding in the corner of a Christmas package, missed on other openings, were secrets I’d overlooked. As I unfolded the pages of a carefully crafted tale of O’Connor, I came across things that had escaped my notice on previous openings of its package. Parables are like that. We never master them. They invite us, like excited children, to expect things we haven’t seen, or heard before. I hope we haven’t become so jaded, so familiar, or so confident that we already know what we need to know, that this parable does not arouse a kind of childlike excitement within us.

As you can imagine, I’ve been rummaging around in the package of this parable for a while. I have found a number of secrets, too many to adequately open today...because of lack of time. You’ll be glad to know that I quickly discarded the possibility of preaching for at least an hour so as to deal with more of the secrets. Maybe some other time! So on to what may be the big secret of this parable, that of justification.

The big secret is this: the way you and I think about justification may be faulty. That’s the secret. Now that’s a challenge for heirs of the Protestant Reformation! “Justification by faith.” Isn’t that the key

to our life with the Lord? If we know anything about being a Christian, that's it. "Justification by faith." Its meaning. Its significance. Its implications...those are not secrets? Not to us! Well...let's open the package and see.

Jesus says the Publican goes to his home justified! But how can that be...in terms of our current understanding of justification? How can that be? Obviously, the way Jesus tells the story, the Publican, as compared to the Pharisee, behaved in an appropriate manner when he prayed in the temple. He did the right thing. And because of that, he goes home justified, while the Pharisee, also on account of his behavior, does not. How can that be?

There's something wrong with that picture! We have always been told that there's no connection between our works (i.e., what we do) and being justified which, we have been told, comes by pure grace. And yet Jesus makes that connection in this story. I hope we see that. It will lead us into the big secret of this parable. The Publican's humility, however one understands it, is a good work. As compared to the Pharisee's pride, which is not a good work, the Publican's humility is a good work. And for that he is justified. There is no other way to read the parable. But then the way Jesus uses the word justification and the way we have been taught to use it clash...big time! There is some sort of secret here!

Unwrapping this secret is a big project. It's been going on among descendants of the Protestant Reformation for some time. That project is complicated and is making progress. Let me assure you of that without having to explain its details. I see the Church as traveling down a kind of road as its probes into this secret. And along the way there are some sign posts along the road that mark its progress.

These are some of the signs along that road. (1) One, our inherited notions of justification come mainly from Augustine and Martin Luther, an Augustinian monk. (2) The second sign post says, however, that their notions of justification, in both cases, were shaped by a serious, lonely, even frantic and private attempts to escape the condemning judgment to an eternal Hell by an angry God, an escape which they found in "justification by faith." That ensures that one goes to heaven, not Hell, when they die. (3) However -- third sign post -- this introspective agitation is not duplicated in either Paul's epistles, or this parable. (4) Fourth, the concerns of Augustine and Luther, though not entirely misleading, not only fail to do justice to what Paul and Jesus have to say, but distort "justification," and the Gospel, at various points. This is a serious allegation. Nevertheless, I have just reviewed with you the journey the Church has been taking in opening the secrets of this parable. If you are not acquainted with this road, just know that it is there.

The Bible does talk about one's being reconciled to God, but, in doing so, it doesn't use our accustomed language of "justification." In spite of that, Augustine's and Luther's lessons about justification -- over the years -- we have learned them well, and they will not be easy to change. There's Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," in what many take to be the most influential sermon ever preached in North America, which branded our souls with justification as being about escape from Hell. Then there are the cadences of justification as being a private matter between God and the sinner as we behold those walking the sawdust trails in the revival tents of the frontier. Or we hear it again in the softly sung altar call of an evangelistic crusade which seeks to confirm the tale, "Jesus is tenderly calling. Sinner, come home."

But sadly, and that is one of the secrets of this parable, these lessons from the past, still with us, distort the Gospel. That's what we find when we open this parable. I don't say obliterate the Gospel. I say distort. Like half-truths those early lessons obscure and/or distort the full sweep of the references to justification that we find in both Paul and Jesus. Both Paul and Jesus, as first century Jews, located the

word “justification” in a covenant context rather than an individual one, and that makes all the difference in the world. How so?

As Christians in the Reformed tradition we know something about that covenant, even though we are sometimes tempted to rewrite it in terms of a narrow, distorted notion of justification. What about that covenant which leads to a wider horizon.

Jehovah made a covenant with Israel, not for their own sake, not for their salvation alone, but for the sake of the salvation of the whole world. For that to happen, it was essential that the community be faithful to the covenant as God’s agents in the grand enterprize to save the world. Faithfulness to that covenant would justify (vindicate) the reason for the community’s existence. That is the more comprehensive meaning of “justification” that we find in the first century, and therefore in Jesus and Paul. The context of the covenant shifts the significance of “justification” from the individual’s getting into heaven to a means of identifying the community that has remained faithful to the covenant and is an agent of his saving the world. A community that stays with the covenant, along with the individuals in it, is justified.

This may all seems strange and new, but it isn’t. I don’t any better way to summarize this than to quote N.T. Wright, Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey, who has written eloquently of these matters. He does a good job, I think, of unwrapping this secret of justification. Permit me to read just a few of his words.

Justification in this setting [first century], then, is not a matter of how someone enters the community of the true people of God, but of how do you tell who belongs to that community... [Justification] is “not so much about ‘getting in,’ or indeed about ‘staying in,’ as about how you can tell who was in.” In standard theological language, justification isn’t as much about soteriology as about ecclesiology (where’s the Church); not so much about salvation as about that Body of Christ. (p. 119, What Saint Paul Really Said)

That’s the secret of this parable -- one of them. The way the Pharisee behaves shows that he has stepped out of the covenant community. The way the Publican behaves shows that he has not, and, therefore, it can be said of him, as Jesus does, that he goes to his home justified. That is, his prayers in the temple display that he is still located within the people of God, whereas the Pharisee demonstrates, by his prayer, that he has stepped outside the covenant.

That secret obviously, for us, turns things upside down. Some students of the Scriptures refer to it as the great reversal...a great reversal of our judgments, conclusions, understandings. Lukes’ Gospel is full of such reversals. This parable is only one of them.

Let’s consider this carefully. Without a doubt, this parable was a great shock to those who first heard it, as it may be to us. If anyone could go home from church justified, it would be a man like the Pharisee. He not only keeps God’s commandments. He does even more than they require. He is not a thief, he is not a violent man, he is faithful to his wife, he fasts, not once, but twice a week! He pays his share of the church budget making possible the salaries of those who preach sermons on the parables! His disciplined dedication to a high moral code would make him a good candidate for public office, to say nothing of leadership in a local church. He may strike us as being arrogant, but he is only telling the truth.

Contrastingly, the tax collector is a despicable man. He works for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people, probably taking more than he should. He participates in a cruel, unjust system

of oppression. Politically, he is a traitor. Religiously, he is unclean. Any respectable person ought not, would not, fellowship with him. BUT, he is justified. His behavior in the temple is appropriate for those in the covenant community. That's the point of this parable when it comes to justification.

We can spell this out a bit more. For one thing, his behavior is appropriate by virtue of the position he takes in the temple...by his position in the temple, the place where God dwells. I see him standing far off, in the back, not even daring to look up because he knows he cannot presume to look God in the eye, as I suppose the Pharisee does. The Publican doesn't have a lot to say because he is fully aware of the distance between himself and his Maker ("be merciful to me a sinner"). The Pharisee, by contrast, presumes to tell God what the score is, and he does! Their position gives them away. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. That's another secret of this parable.

Isn't this great reversal amazing! It's the one who acknowledges that he has violated the covenant who thereby demonstrates that he belongs in it...not because of the violation, mind you, but because he knows his place, in the back, with head bowed.

Now, I think Jesus understands the importance of one's position before God. According to Philippians, ch. 2, though in the form of God, he left that position and became obedient, even to the point of death, taking a position at the edge of, even outside of, the sanctuary. He's the one who, surrounded by bickering disciples as to who was the greatest, took the position of a servant, girded himself with a towel and washed their feet. He's the one who would position himself so as touch the lepers and the blind...unclean, unwholesome people. Alone on the cross he knew what it was like to be far from God. But in behaving the way he did, he was justified. He was vindicated. If anyone can tell us about the secret of justification, he's the one.

Thus, in a surprising way the secret of this parable comes down to Jesus. He displays in his own flesh the secret of justification. Need I mention that that is what this feast spread before is about?

Notice that he commands us to come to the table he has prepared. He doesn't say come if you feel like it, come if you are good enough. No! He says, I command you. Come! The Publican would understand that sort of language. With his deep awareness of the distance between himself and God, he would not presume to approach the table unless ordered to do so. He can only sneak into the back of the sanctuary, hang his head, and plea for mercy. But he is commanded to come. What a liberating word that was for him! I hope it is the same for all of us.