

Luther and his Protestant colleagues grounded the Reformation in the issue of what brings justification before God. Two key affirmations arose. *Sola gratia. Sola fide*. By grace alone. By faith alone. How might that connect with Jesus here linking justification and humility?

Consider the origin of the word translated in this parable as “humbled.” In ancient Greek, before any ethical or religious connotation, it was a topographical reference. That is, it was used to describe places that were low-lying. Valleys. Plains surrounded by ridges or peaks. Put another way, places where one often had to look up simply because there were no vistas below.

That element of “lowness” often brought a negative sense to the way this word was used in Greek, closer in spirit to how we might speak of “humiliation” today. But in Jewish and then Christian usage, “humble” and “humility” took on far more positive meanings. Humility came to be viewed as a virtue. God’s favor and actions were often described as taken on behalf of the humble. The Magnificat of Mary sings of God “lifting up the lowly” (Luke 1:52). Jesus links greatness in the kingdom with “humbling oneself as a child” (Matthew 18:4).

In Jesus’ parable, two men pray. One offers a self-congratulatory litany that may well be accurate. One pleads for mercy as a self-confessed sinner, also likely true. But Jesus says only *one* went home justified. Both prayed about who they were. Only one prayed *humbly* about who he was. “I tell you, this man went down to his home **justified** rather than the other.”

This is not to say justification by humility replaces *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. It is to say: a spirit of humility opens us to the radical nature of grace, stripping away all pretense of grace being earned or limited by any human judgment. It is also to say that an attitude of humility prepares us to accept faith’s primal embodiment: trust. Trust in God, whose grace and love are for all . . . including self, including the other.

Sola gratia. Sola fide. Sola humilitas.

For Reflection and Action:

How does this parable affirm, or challenge, your ideas about humility?

When have you found yourself and/or others praying as the Pharisee; as the tax collector?

In what ways might the Church positively embrace and nurture the practice of humility?