

Sermon for Reformation Sunday October 26, 2025 jj
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It is not saying too much when you claim that at the time of the Reformation, God began to shine a light of Gospel truth that for a long time had gone excessively dim. Luke chapter 18 began with Jesus asking the question, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?" With the world in which Martin Luther and other reformers lived, the situation for the Church of our Lord's faithful was just as bleak. And it wasn't just the political intrigue of the popes and the emperors, the indulgence-sellers and the relics-superstitions. Was there any faith left? Would God build His Church amid all this works-righteousness? Our Lord answered His own question when He told this parable: two men went up to the Temple to pray. One man came back down the hill to his house justified.

The first was a Pharisee, a professional believer, proud of his perfect record. Christians who are like this man today tend to come from a long, pious and upstanding heritage. He would not be a recently converted believer, and he would make that abundantly clear to you. What is more, there are probably tons of fellow church-workers in his family tree. His moral life would have been pristine, an excellent example of good stewardship and a very productive asset toward making the church grow. He would be convinced that those like himself who do not steal or cheat or commit adultery are held in high esteem by their neighbors and even deserve a little recognition every now and then. He would be the exemplary Christian man, publicly, repeatedly making his firm commitment to be loyal to his wife and family and God and making sure you know all about that, too.

He would tell you over and over again that if you don't covet, you'll become content with what you have, that charity enriches the giver, store up treasure in heaven, you know, he'd say all the right things, and truly mean them with all his heart.

This Pharisee was perfectly satisfied and happy with the way he fulfilled the law. He had found righteousness in this life by his own good works. He received honor and glory among his own people, and he deserved it. He had his reward. And he was such a nice man, that in his kindness, he looked for ways to help others achieve this peace that he had with God. He wanted others to read the Bible as diligently as he did, and to pray as impressively as he could. He wanted others to feel as close to God as he felt, and he was grateful to the Lord that he was not some miserable person without a clear purpose in life like that tax collector.

That was the second man in the Temple whom Jesus mentions. He was a traitor to his people, he oppressed them, actually he helped a foreign world-superpower government called the Roman Empire, and they oppressed his people, which was what made them consider him a traitor. Today you would find this cheating low-life at some sketchy cannabis store or pawn shop. He cheated his own flesh and blood and he knew it. He was not at all satisfied or happy with himself. He was ashamed of his behavior, of the selfish, hurtful choices he had made, of the disgrace he had become. His life was a total mess. No one trusted him. He was a sinner, the worst of them all. He knew it, and because of that, he felt alone

and afraid. How could he find a gracious God to smile on him?

So this tax collector came to the Temple, to the House of Prayer for all people, to the place of sacrifice and the holy Ark of the Covenant, in order to pray. Twice a day an animal was sacrificed there during what was called an atonement sacrifice, a morning sacrifice and an evening sacrifice. At both times it was allowed for God's people to lift up their hands in prayer to the Lord who promised a Savior to make the final, one-and-only atonement sacrifice. And so this poor man, who was materially rich from his unfair tax-collecting fees, stands on animal blood-stained pavement, standing at a distance from the other people and from the curtain that hid the Ark, hid God's holy presence, from his sight. In that Ark were the very tablets on which God Himself wrote the law for Moses to proclaim. It was the law that condemned this man. It is the same law that condemns you.

But over that Ark of the Covenant, between the magnificent golden cherubim (the angels), God promised to place Himself. He shielded His people from His own law. He was there on the "mercy seat," because that was the location where the God of mercy sat to remove this man's judgment. He protects you from the Law's condemnation; He satisfied the law's demands on your behalf. He ushered in the Gospel that gave great power to the Reformation that took off like wildfire after that fateful day, October 31, 1517.

The tax collector in Jesus' story came to the Temple, at the time of the atonement sacrifice in order to obtain that mercy from God. That's what the Reformers were looking for in their day, as well. This man

came to wrestle with God in prayer, he held God down to His Word. He pleaded for God to be true to Himself, to be merciful to him, a sinner, the worst of sinners. He had nothing to hope for but for God to be forgiving, to be satisfied with the sacrifice of Christ in his place, and to keep His never-ending promise of salvation. And you know what? God kept His promise to that man. For the sinner, the unworthy tax collector, and not the long-time professional believer, went home justified. As far as God is concerned, the tax collector was righteous, holy, innocent and pure, without any shame, regret, and even his sinful past no longer existed anymore.

This parable was spoken to some people who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous and had despised others. But those who would find mercy with God, must rather despise themselves, think as if they have little or nothing to offer. For as God's law reveals in you, you are unrighteous, sold as a slave to sin. Your only hope is to trust in Jesus, who alone is righteous and holy, and God has already promised to have mercy on you. Here is where you see the irony of the Christian Faith: those who are without sin, those who have been baptized, declared to be God's child, and forgiven, you know, people like you and the believing tax collector, you feel your sin. If anyone felt the pain of sin, it was Martin Luther, for sure! He had personal experience with the pain of sin. It hurts you inside. You don't feel like a Christian. It is shameful and awkward as you struggle with it. But those who are in sin, who embrace it and seek to justify themselves in the eyes of other people, like the Pharisee, they are the ones who are satisfied and happy with their lives. The devil doesn't bother them.

That is how it is in the Kingdom of God. It is a kingdom of ironies and opposites: God became Man, Death brought you Life, He who knew no sin became sin. The cross made from dead wood that brought extreme torture and bloody death was the Tree of Life and the new “mercy seat” on which the merciful God sat enthroned in ironic glory. The King in this heavenly Kingdom does not send soldiers off to die in wars that only benefit Himself and His subjects, like what happens in this world. Instead, this King, the Good Shepherd, lays down His own life! He dies in order to enrich the rebels and traitors who spoke against Him and wanted Him to die. He allows His enemies to destroy Him, and pleads to His Father to forgive them and accept His death as payment for their crime.

His life is given as the one and only atonement sacrifice that the repentant tax collector claims as his only hope, and what you claim as your only hope: because you pray every week for forgiveness for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of your beloved Son Jesus Christ, to be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being. This is how the Lord will answer His own question, how He will find faith on the earth, that is, He will find it in the most undeserving or unlikely people, namely tax collectors, sinners and infants who hardly can make any contribution on their own. He’ll find faith, even in your heart, because by His Holy Spirit in Baptism He put it there in the first place. Reformation doesn’t depend on big plans and large budgets. A true Reformation only happens when once we come to terms with how far astray we have roamed in our sin.

It is only the blind who are given sight.
Only the sick are healed by your great

Physician of Body and Soul. Only the dead are given life, and only the repentant are forgiven. Sinners like you are the only ones whom God sees as saints for the sake of Christ and therefore you depart from this holy place back to your homes justified.

Come, then, O Sinners! Reject the Pharisee that you and I can be from time to time. Participate in your own Reformation! Come to the Holy of Holies in this place at this Table to feast on Christ the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Come like that tax collector, bring your pain, your fear, your worries, and shame, and loneliness, your failures and disgrace. Come to where God promises to be, where He extends His mercy, where He gives Himself to you. The Lord has shone the light of the Gospel to illuminate your heart, when you read that you are saved by the Grace of Christ Alone, received through Faith Alone, as it is found written in Scripture Alone. Come to the Temple that is made without human hands, the Temple Jesus who was torn down by men on the cross, but raised in three days from the tomb. For Jesus, the propitiation and payment for your sins, He and His generous forgiveness comes this day to your ear and in Holy Communion comes right into your mouth. You the sinner now on this Reformation Sunday have been yourself reformed into the pure Temple of the Holy Spirit. Go home this day justified, for you are in the good company of Luther and all the Reformers, yes, the Church of all places and ages.

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.