

Pastor Oswald moved to the small town on the high plains of Western Kansas hoping that he would find peace away from the constant clamor of Philadelphia. He had not found peace. If anything, he found he was only getting worse. In the noise city, he could find relief from some of his darkest thoughts. The quiet of the endless fields only served to amplify his torment.

On one particularly bright summer Sunday, the pastor finally broke. “We must not entertain doubt,” he had said in his sermon. As he continued preaching, the thoughts kept coming. “You don’t believe any of this,” they told him, “How can you pretend to lead this flock?”

It would have been easier if these thoughts were true. He would have no fear of eternal punishment if he did not believe, but he did believe. At least he was fairly certain he did.

It was after the service, while Pastor Oswald was greeting his members one by one on the steps in front of the church that it happened. Katherine, who was seven, reached out her hand to greet him. The sun, reflecting off the white clapboard siding of the church, caught her hat in such a way that she appeared to have a halo. “How did Jesus feed the five thousand with five loaves and two fish?” she asked.

The pastor froze. He could not answer. All he could do was force a smile and nod.

As soon as he had greeted the last person through the line, he pulled the door shut and nearly ran across the lawn to the parsonage. Bursting through the front door, he ran to the bedroom, fell to his knees and cried out, “I have nothing left. All I can do is depend on your mercy.”

In response to that simple prayer, a different thought, a quiet thought filled his mind. “What have you ever had except my mercy?” it asked.

Pastor Oswald finally found peace.

What if the best of us are really the worst of us?

Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee. The other was a tax collector. Luke doesn’t state it explicitly, but they were going to the temple to pray at the time one of the two daily sacrifices. It was the time when the priest offered a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people.

In essence, the Pharisee’s prayer was, “God, I thank you that I have no need for atonement,” while the tax collector’s prayer was, “God, please let this sacrifice be of benefit to me.”

When we hear this parable, it is easy for us to think, “God I thank you that I am not like the Pharisee.” As soon as we do that, we become like the Pharisee. In the church the Pharisee and the tax collector have switched places in a way. When we hear the word, “Pharisee,” we automatically think, “villain.” When we hear, “tax collector,” we automatically think, “the hero of the story.”

There was nothing inherently good about tax collectors. In the gospels we read about tax collectors who repented. However, if they did not receive the offer of mercy given through Jesus Christ, they were no more heroes than the worst of the Pharisees.

There was nothing inherently wrong with being a Pharisee. There were Pharisees who followed Jesus. It is quite likely that Joseph of Arimathea was a Pharisee. Risking his own life, Joseph received the body of the crucified Jesus from Pontius Pilate and put Jesus' body in his own tomb.

Luke tells us that Jesus told this parable about some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. The difference between the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable was that the Pharisee thought he had no need of mercy. The tax collector recognized his ultimate dependence on the mercy of God.

Do we think that we are really pretty good people? Do we think, "Sure, we make mistakes from time to time. No one is perfect. But, we're better than most?" Do we trust in ourselves that we are righteous?

What is righteousness? Often, people think of righteousness as living by a code of morality. That is not righteousness. Righteousness is having a right relationship with God and others. It is being accepted in the presence of God with our fellow believers. It always comes as a gift from God. To be right relationship with God requires a recognition that all good things come from God. Apart from Him there is nothing good. Righteousness requires the recognition that we have not done anything to earn the acceptance of God. Nothing that we have done or can do makes us worthy of God's love. It requires a reliance on God's goodness.

Righteousness in relation to one another then demands an understanding that we are not better than anyone else who comes to God to receive His mercy. The Pharisee in the parable stood alone. He would not come to God with anyone else because he thought he was more worthy. He separated himself from the community of those who attended the sacrifice for atonement.

How do we approach this altar? How do we receive the offer of Christ's body, broken for us, and Christ's blood, poured out for our sins? At this altar, we have the opportunity for a weekly remembrance of God's offer to accept us in His presence through the merits of Jesus Christ. We come together with our brothers and sisters around the world. None of us have anything to offer except our dependence on the absolute mercy of God.

If we want to receive the righteousness offered by God in Christ, we must follow the example of the tax collector in the parable. We must say, "Lord, let the offering of the body and blood of Jesus be effective for me. Have mercy on me a sinner."

When we come with that attitude, stripping away any pretense that we have a righteousness of our own, we will be given God's righteousness. We will discover that we never had anything more to offer. We will find the peace of Christ, the peace that the world cannot give, the peace of knowing God's great love for us.