



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
www.mzluth.org

February 25, 2009
Ash Wednesday
Luke 18:9-14
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: 2 Samuel 12:1-13
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51a
Second Lesson: Acts 5:1-11
Gospel: Luke 18:9-14

Which Kind of Sinner Are You?

Comfortable
Confessing

Have you ever noticed how easy it is at times to divide people into two groups? Male, female; awake, asleep; conscious, unconscious; liberal, conservative; we have a tendency to want to group people into broad categories like this don't we? Sometimes they are fitting. They are pretty clear cut in some cases; male and female, right? Some are a little more nebulous; conservative, liberal. This dividing people into two different groups and applying that to everyone is kind of what this parable Jesus just told us is all about. Every single human being that is living fits into one category. That's sinner.

Jesus shows us there are really two kinds of sinners - those that know they are sinners and those that make excuses or deny their sin; those that are comfortable in their sin and those that confess their sin and cling to the cross of Christ for forgiveness. If we are to benefit from the disciplines of Lent that we are encouraged to undertake, we would do well to figure out not only which kind of sinner we want to be, we probably could figure that out all ready, but we would do well to work at it. There is a tendency I think in each of us at times to be more of the comfortable sinner than we would like to admit.

This comfortable sinner in this parable is pretty clear cut. The Pharisee was a man that was looked up to as a religious leader. He was looked up to as someone who had everything lined up in a row and in a straight row. They were thought of as people that you couldn't really bring charges of immorality against because they did so many things that went far beyond what the law of God said. When the Pharisee gets into the temple to pray, that's what he really does. He stands up and prays about himself. He didn't really pray to God. He just prayed about himself. He said, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like all these other losers that are around me. I thank you that I'm the great guy that I am. I fast twice a week."

In his law, God required his people to fast once a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when they took all the sins of the people and ceremonially placed them on the goat and sent the scapegoat out away from the people. That's when they were commanded to fast, once a year. This guy is fasting 104 times a year. One Hundred

Four times more than what the minimum daily requirement of what God has asked of him, right? This guy is off the chart spiritually nutritionally it looks like as people look at him.

He says, "I give a tenth of all I get." They were required to give a tenth of the produce of the field and the produce of the trees and things like that and if they had other income, like this guy might have had from something else, he was also giving that and he was standing before God and letting God know how great he was for doing all of this. He was going far beyond what God had required. So now when he stands and prays about himself as he has this talk I guess with God, he doesn't ask for anything, does he? He sees no need to. What was he to ask God for? He was comfortable. He could find people that were worse than he was. He was comfortable that God must accept everything he was offering up to him because he was doing more than God asked in certain areas. He was incredibly comfortable.

Like I said, I think there's a temptation for you and me to fall into this trap of being comfortable sinners. We know we sin, but it's not like we've killed anyone. It's not like we're cheating on our wives. It's not like we are habitual sex offenders. It's not like we are someone we would consider terrible. We do what we can. We give to the church. We serve in the church and we probably find ourselves at one time or another in the comfort of who we are and what we do thinking that "If only other people would do what I'm doing, the congregation would go a lot smoother."

An example of that I think is that whenever we are at a study or a meeting and we talk about how the church has an operating deficit, an operating loan and all of this, no one has ever yet that I can recall, maybe I'm wrong, I don't think I am, but maybe I'm wrong, I don't ever remember anyone standing up and saying, "If I would only give more, than things would be better." I have heard that if those people that give x, y or z would only do more, than things would be better. Is that an indication that we are comfortable with ourselves and we don't see a need at times to look deeper because we are busy patting ourselves on the back just like this guy was? If you have a sinful nature, there are times we think this way because our sinful nature wants us to be comfortable with our sin, doesn't it? Satan wants us to be comfortable with our shortcomings.

Think of how much we are like David. When we see the sin in someone else, we want to stomp and scream and hold our breath and say, "How could they do such a horrible thing?" But the same thing we don't often notice in ourselves or we can rationalize it or we can excuse it or we can push it off to the side and say, "Yeah, but," and make ourselves feel a little more comfortable. That is the nature of the sinful nature. And that is the nature of Satan to want us to be comfortable with our sin. He doesn't want us to be sad about it. He doesn't want us to mourn about it. He doesn't want us to go out of our way to feel bad about it. "That's what causes all the problems in life, dealing with guilt like that. That's why people have to go through all the troubles they go through in life. If they'd just do away with guilt, things would get better." That's what Satan's got many of us convinced of.

But think about it; if we're comfortable and don't see the true horror that is our sinfulness, then as we go through worship, those words at the beginning of a service, "Lord have mercy on me, a sinner" are just something we say because this is the time of the service we are supposed to say them. They become just mere repetition. We just go through the motions. We do it because it's what we've always done. If we're comfortable with our sin, we don't see that as "I am an abhorrent creature before my God and I have nothing to offer to God except to throw myself down and say 'Lord, have mercy because I can't earn your love or your forgiveness.'" When we are comfortable though, we mouth the words as we look around to see whose here, whose not here, and whose sitting in our pew. It's a dangerous thing to become comfortable with our sin, to become self-satisfied with how we live for God, and to confuse living for God with earning God's love.

The only answer to the times that you and I both become comfortable in our sins is to truly examine what sin is, truly examine what we are, and truly see what we have to offer to our God. This is the absolutely amazing thing about our God that sometimes we understand and sometimes I think we don't. Our God took the sins of a guy like this Pharisee that we read about that was so full of himself I don't know how his head fit through the door frame to get out of the temple. Our God sent himself, and Jesus was perfect in the place of a guy like that. He took all the sins of a guy like that and took them to the cross even though this guy would never love him, would never serve him truly out of love for him, and never would be a part of his family. Yet, our God loved him so much that that's who he died for. That's the sins he took away. He took away the sins of people who had nothing to offer to him, who wanted nothing to do with him. He took away the sins of guys like that and guys like you and guys like me.

We can't offer to God anything and when we understand that about the nature of sin, that we don't live for God so that he'll love us, we know we can't. We have nothing to offer him. When we understand that, then we stand at a distance. We throw ourselves, figuratively or literally, at God's feet and say "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." No excuses. No rationalizations. No comparisons. No "yeah, but;" just the frank brutal statement, "I am a sinner who deserves nothing from my God."

When we realize that that's who Jesus lived and died for, when we realize that the body and blood we receive in, with and under the bread and the wine is the body and blood that was perfect in our place and took the punishment of our sins, then we long for it. We want to devote ourselves to the disciplines of Lent, repentance and works of love and setting God apart in our lives in whatever way we might choose. Not because we are going to do it to earn his love, but because we want to say "thank you" for what he has already done for us.

When we see the depths of what he did for us, how can we not want to live for him? How can we not want to produce all the fruits of faith that we can as a way of saying "Lord, I can't believe how much you love me." Once we get over being comfortable and get disturbed by our sins, we get motivated by the Spirit who assures us we are forgiven to live for him, not because we have to, not because anyone says we have to, not

because that's the way it's always been done, not because that's what our forefathers did, but because the Spirit who lives in us leads us to say "I want to live for you Lord and this is how I am going to do it." Then we find a joy that is indescribable and sustains us through the bad stuff of life. That's what our God does for us.

To benefit from this Lenten season, be that confessing sinner who clings to the cross of Christ.