



GOSPEL FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

1. This Gospel reading introduces us to two special persons, or two kinds of people from the group of those called God's people, who want to be God's servants, come before Him, and seek righteousness. It also depicts the two kinds of righteousness which are found on earth. The first appears to be great before all the world and in the eyes of people, and yet before God it is nothing and, besides, is condemned. The second is unrecognized by people, and yet before God it is called "righteousness" and pleases Him. The first belongs to the fine, arrogant saint, the Pharisee. The second belongs to the poor, humble, distressed sinner, the tax collector.

2. We also hear two amazing, unusual verdicts, completely contrary to human wisdom and the opinions of reason, even frightening to all the world: the great saints are condemned as unrighteous, and the poor sinners are accepted and pronounced righteous and holy. However, He is speaking about those saints (as the text itself shows) who think they can find in themselves and in their own lives and works a righteousness to which God must pay attention; and, in turn, about those sinners who from their hearts desire to be freed from their sins and sigh for forgiveness and God's grace. He is not speaking here about the other great crowd in the world, who are not like either this tax collector or the Pharisee, who pay no attention at all to sin or to grace, but who go away securely and carelessly, not caring about God, heaven, or hell.

3. We have previously in other Gospel readings¹ heard enough about what these two kinds of persons—the Pharisees and the tax collectors—meant among the Jews, namely, that the name “Pharisee” indicates the most excellent, honorable, righteous people, who with all seriousness have devoted themselves to serving God and keeping the Law. St. Paul even boasts that before his conversion he was one of them (Philippians 3 [:5]).

4. On the other hand, the name “tax collector” indicated among them a man living in open sins and vices, who served neither God nor the world, and who devoted himself only to robbing, fleecing, and harming his neighbor. They had to do this in the offices they rented from the Romans for great sums of money, if they wanted to take advantage of it. In summary, these people were regarded as nothing better than openly unbelieving, godless heathen (even if by birth they were Jews). Christ makes just that comparison when He says, “If he does not listen to the Church, regard him as a heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18 [:17]).

5. Now, it is certainly strange that Christ should put two such persons together, who are completely dissimilar and very far from each other. It is still more strange, even offensive, that He pronounces such an odd verdict, thoroughly condemning the Pharisee and pronouncing the tax collector righteous. Nevertheless, He speaks plainly about both in such a way as to show that He does not reject or want to have rejected the works about which the Pharisee boasts here. He wants to describe and depict him as a fine saint, with works that are not to be reproached or rebuked, but to be praised as good. On the other hand, He cannot praise or extol the tax collector’s life and works, for he himself must confess before God that he is condemned as a sinner and can mention no good works. Nevertheless, Christ investigates, tests, and tries both, so that He finds nothing good in the holy Pharisee (even though he has many excellent works), not because of the works, which in themselves are not wrong, but because the person is not good, but rather is full of impurity. On the other hand, He finds now in the tax collector, who previously had been a public, condemned sinner, a truly good tree with fruits, even though he does not shine with the great works of the Pharisee. For that reason, let us look at both persons a little.

6. First, you must properly praise and adorn the Pharisee as Christ Himself depicts him with his fine life. You are hearing about a man who dares to step before God and boast about his life before Him. (This cannot be false boasting, but is meant in all seriousness and truth.) In this way, he appeals to himself and calls himself as his own witness. He wants to demonstrate that he worships correctly and to give the account that his entire life is directed toward obeying Him.

¹ See sermon for Third Sunday after Trinity on Luke 15:1–10.

He begins with the highest and First Commandment and shows that he worships the one, true God and, above all things, strives after His kingdom and seeks His will. He confesses that he has everything he is and by which he lives from God, ascribes this to Him, and thanks Him for all He has given him, but especially for this distinct grace and kindness: that He preserves him from sin and shame so that he is not like the public sinners and tax collectors [Luke 18:11]. He prays that God will keep him in this and, further, give him His blessing and goodness. You see nothing here but fine works of the First Table and of all three commandments [Exod. 20:3–11]; he also observes the Sabbath, because he goes into the temple, where he wants to converse alone with God and pray, etc.

7. Then he proceeds to the Second Table [Exod. 20:12–17] and clears his conscience before God and the world, saying he is not unjust, a robber, an adulterer, etc., like the great crowd of other people. Thus the other five commandments are all combined, so that he is a man who can boast before all the world that he has wronged, violated, or pained no one, nor burdened or insulted anyone against the Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Commandments [Exod. 20:13–16]—and then anyone may challenge him if he can accuse him of something else.

Besides, he has also kept the Sixth Commandment, not committing adultery or living unchastely [Exod. 20:14]. Yes, he has even disciplined and kept a tight rein on his body by fasting twice every week [Luke 18:12]. This was not a false fasting (as that of our priests and monks mostly is), but a true fasting, as the Jews observed it from morning until evening when the sun had set.

Likewise, beyond not being unjust or a robber of his neighbor's goods or honor, he also gives a tenth of all he has honestly and honorably earned. Thus he obeys God by giving to maintain the worship and the priestly office from all God had given him, and saves or holds back nothing [Lev. 27:30].

8. In summary, here you see all the Commandments together, and the paragon of an excellent, righteous, and (as it appears to the world) God-fearing, holy man, to be praised as a mirror and example for the whole world. They could surely wish—and it would be well so to wish, and it would be excellent for the world—to have many such people.

9. If you now compare the other one, the tax collector, then you will find nothing at all that comes close to the holy Pharisee. Even the name points out that there cannot be much virtue or honor in such a man, and no one can think that he cares much about God or His Commandments. He not only gives nothing of his own to serve God, but instead he publicly robs and steals from his neighbor. In short, he is a man who publicly sets a [bad] example with his sinful life. The Pharisee even points him out as completely

wicked, a man who risks his conscience and from whom nothing good is to be hoped [Luke 18:11].

10. Now, how does such an absurd thing happen, that the Pharisee is condemned by God and the tax collector is pronounced righteous? Will He Himself now contradict and pass sentence against His Law? According to the Law, he who lives according to it and is righteous justly benefits from it and is preferred to those who publicly live in sin against it. Or has God now become a man who takes pleasure in those who do no good works but are nothing other than robbers, adulterers, and unjust? Surely not, but there is a different, higher tribunal here than is understood by the world or blood and flesh. This tribunal looks deeper into both hearts and finds in the Pharisee a great wickedness which destroys everything that otherwise could be called good, which the evangelist calls "those who trust in themselves and despise others" [Luke 18:9].

11. This is what is at fault in this excellent man; this is the villain, who is great in the world. Oh, that he was alone in this and had not left so many children and heirs behind! The whole world at its best, when it is or has anything good, is completely drowned in this vice; it will not and cannot escape. If people know of anything good in themselves, they must become overbearing and despise others who do not have it. That is, they exalt themselves above God and neighbor, and precisely in imagining that they are keeping God's Commandments, they are transgressing them. St. Paul himself says about his Jews that precisely in striving for the Law of righteousness, they did not attain righteousness (Romans 9 [:31]).

What strange ways these are! Those who diligently hold to the Law and have so much worship are not those who keep the Law, as he also says, "Those who let themselves be circumcised do not keep the Law," etc. (Galatians 1 [6:13]). Surely these are peculiar saints who, precisely in acting according to the Law, do not keep it but transgress it. Who, then, are those who keep it?

12. This is the nature of this Pharisee and those like him, with his fine discipline and honor, which is truly an excellent, glorious, fine gift, which must be praised and exalted in the world above all things on earth as the highest gift of God, much more beautiful than all beauty and finery, gold and silver, even sun and light. On this person (I say) the verdict is pronounced here that before God he is worse than any robber, murderer, adulterer, etc. Where will we get with this teaching among the great crowd of the world, whom we ourselves condemn because of their public contempt for God and all malice against God and people, which also cries out to heaven [Gen. 4:10] and has spread so much that the earth almost cannot endure it [Rom. 8:19-22]?

13. Well, as I have said before, the Pharisee should not be faulted and condemned for doing the works of the Law. Otherwise we would have to

condemn God's gifts and His own Law and praise the opposite. However, I say that here the person is placed before God's judgment, and things are found differently than the world judges, since, even though he has some fine, praiseworthy gifts, nevertheless a great blemish sticks to him: he misuses these gifts and perishes before God by doing so.

Here he is accused of sinning against God and people together and against the commandments of both tables. In the First Commandment [Exod. 20:3], arrogance especially and most highly is forbidden, that a person should not rely on himself or his gifts or be pleased with himself. That is what this work-saint does: he brags about and delights in the gifts he has received from God, makes an idol out of them, and worships himself, as if he were the excellent, holy man whom God has to respect and exalt.

14. It is, after all, the highest sin and vice, by which he runs directly against God, altogether blind and hardened, like an unbelieving heathen or Turk who knows nothing about God. He has no repentance; because of his great holiness, he wants to know nothing about sin; he fears no wrath of God; he presumes to overcome God's wrath through his own works. He does not at all see that he and all people, even the true saints with all their righteousness and life, cannot stand before God but are owed His wrath and damnation. David himself testifies: "Lord, if You impute sin, who can stand?" (Psalm 130 [:3]). "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for no one living is righteous before You" (Psalm 145 [143:2]). This is why [the Pharisee] does not seek grace or the forgiveness of sins and does not imagine that he needs it.

15. Now, because he runs so atrociously against the first and highest commandment with shameful and abominable idolatry, arrogance, and boasting about his own holiness; because here there is neither fear of God nor trust nor love, but he seeks only his own honor and reputation—it is certainly to be expected that he will not honestly and from the heart keep any of the other commandments. Everything he pretends in his praying and worship is false and lies; yes, he even highly misuses and reviles God's name to embellish his lies. By doing so, he only provokes God's wrath and severe condemnation against himself, as God said that He will not leave unpunished whoever takes His name in vain [Exod. 20:7].

What else is it than slandering and mocking the high Majesty when he prays and says: "I thank You, God, that I am so holy and righteous, that I do not at all need Your grace, but I find that I myself have kept the Law. You can find fault with nothing in me, but I have deserved so much that You must repay and reward me again for it temporally and eternally—provided that You want to retain the honor of being a real, true God," etc.

16. See how he tramples on and rages against his neighbor in the same way in the Second Table! There is not even a trace of Christian love or

faithfulness showing that he seeks and wishes his neighbor's honor and happiness. Rather, he simply goes ahead and completely tramples him underfoot with his shameful contempt; he does not even regard him as a human being. Yes, when he should help and rescue his neighbor, so that no wrong or injustice is done to him, he himself wrongs him most. When he sees and knows that his neighbor sins against God, he does not think how he can convert and rescue him from God's wrath and damnation so that he may improve. He has no pity or sympathy in his heart about a poor sinner's distress and misery, but thinks that it serves him right to remain in damnation and destruction. He deprives him of all the duty of love and service he owes him, which God has commanded him, especially with teaching, admonishing, rebuking, correcting, etc., to bring his neighbor out of sin and damnation into God's kingdom. Yes, the worst is that he is happy and cheerful that his neighbor is in sin and under God's wrath. From this you can see what kind of desire and love he has for God's Commandments and how hostile he is to vice.

17. How can such a person—who can still rejoice, even take delight and sincere pleasure, in the sin and disobedience of the whole world against God—be of use in God's kingdom? He would be sorry if anyone were good from the heart and kept God's Commandments. Even if he could in the least, he would be unwilling to help him do this or to prevent his neighbor's misfortune and damnation! What good would you seek or hope for from a person who is so thoroughly wicked that he cannot concede salvation to his neighbor?

The heathen themselves can speak of no greater wickedness nor portray a worse man than one who is so disagreeable and envious that he has joy and delight and rejoices only when things go badly for his neighbor. Some are so wicked that they themselves willingly suffer harm, if only another has greater misfortune. Such devilish, hellish wickedness cannot be as great in anyone as in such false saints who want alone to have the honor before God and the world, and therefore to be so pure and holy that all others stink and are filthy.

18. If in bodily matters you heard somewhere about a physician who wanted to be called a good, honorable man and who came to a mortally sick person and, instead of aiding and helping him to overcome his sickness, did nothing else than to laugh at and ridicule the poor man—who would regard such a one as anything other than the most damnable villain the earth can bear, since he not only withdraws his help from the miserable person in his greatest need but also delights and satisfies his spitefulness in his misfortune? How much greater is the malice of such a hypocritical saint who sees that his neighbor's soul is in danger and distress of eternal damnation, when he is obliged to risk his body and life to help him out of it, and not only does not do this—even if he could rescue him with a word or a sigh—but instead

reproaches him for it, takes joy in it, and as much as he can would gladly stick him still deeper into damnation!

19. What would such a one do or wish for the person who is hostile to him or has pained him, whom he nevertheless is obliged to love and help as far as he wants good to be done to himself [cf. Matt. 7:12]? How he would burst forth with anger, cursing, and striking, since he regards even manslaughter as no sin but holiness, especially on the person who does not want to regard him as righteous and holy! This is what the righteous fratricide Cain did to his brother [Gen. 4:8] and what his children still always do. Christ Himself says about them: "The time is coming when whoever kills you will think that he is doing God a service" [John 16:2].

20. Just as little will you find such a person keeping one of the other commandments from his heart, for he would just as little prevent his neighbor's wife and child from being ravished as help preserve their honor. Yes, if it were to happen, he would be glad and laugh behind their backs; or, if he had the opportunity, he would do it himself or help to do it. When he does publicly avoid this or that evil work, of course he does not do this out of love for virtue or in obedience to God. If he does not leave the need and misery of his neighbor's soul unharmed, how should he leave unharmed his or his family's honor? Much less would he pity or contemplate preventing harm to his neighbor's property, so that his things are not robbed, stolen, or otherwise destroyed, but much more rejoice over it and say, "It served him right." I will say nothing about the fact that he should help him in his poverty with his own property or give to him free of charge. Thus he certainly would not prevent it if he heard his neighbor's good name lied about and slandered, nor use his own honor to cover up and adorn his neighbor's dishonor, but rather will be happy and himself help to lie about him and cut him to the quick, as such saints especially love to do. This man lies to God about the poor tax collector and other people, whom he cannot truthfully accuse.

21. Look at what a disgraceful, horrible devil is stuck in such a fine saint, who can cover himself with the pretense of a few little works which he does before the people! Look at what he does with his worship, thanks, and prayers, by which he impudently, defiantly, and openly slanders and insults the high Majesty! He dares to boast before God of such disgraceful vices and to brag that He must regard him to be an excellent saint, to whom He must give heaven and everything for which he dares to ask out of debt and duty. Or, if he knew that He would not do it and would accept the poor tax collector more than him, then he would break out with such wrath and hatred, even against God, that he would dare publicly to twist the words in His mouth and say that He is not God but the devil from hell. If he could, he would gladly push Him off His throne and take His place. He wants what he does to be

considered good so that no one can rebuke him for this. Nevertheless, much more than all other blasphemers he deserves that God would this instant have the earth swallow him alive [Num. 16:31-33].

22. Here you can see what a man who acts out of his own free will or by means of his nature is and does. Christ sets forth this Pharisee as the highest example of what a person can do out of his own powers according to the Law. All people by nature, beginning with Adam, are certainly no better and demonstrate these same vices when they try to be holy before God and better than other people. This is nothing else but boldly despising God and all people and being delighted and rejoicing when people sin against God. They are twice as bad, even many times as bad, as the tax collector and public sinners like him, because they not only do not keep God's Commandments but also do not want them kept by anyone. They not only do not help anyone or do good themselves but also are happy at their destruction and damnation. On top of all this, they themselves still preen and try to be exceedingly holy, as with a condemned conscience they dare to slander and tell lies before the Majesty that they are not like other people but have kept God's Commandments—at which heaven could crack.

23. Now, on the other hand, look at this tax collector, who also comes into the temple to pray, but with much different thoughts and a different prayer than the Pharisee. First of all, he has the advantage that he must acknowledge himself to be a sinner; he is convicted and condemned by his own conscience, so that he can neither boast nor flaunt anything before God or the world, but must be ashamed of himself. Thus the Law has affected his heart so that he feels his misery and need, is frightened and alarmed at God's judgment and wrath, and sighs from his heart to be freed from it, but finds no remedy anywhere, and can bring before God nothing other than sin and shame. He is so burdened and oppressed with this that he does not dare to lift up his eyes. He understands and feels that he has earned nothing other than hell and eternal death and must condemn himself before God; as a sign and confession of this before God, he beat his breast [Luke 18:13].

In summary, there is truly nothing else here than sin and damnation—just as great before God as that of the Pharisee, except that the Pharisee does not recognize his own filth but still tries to make purity out of it. The tax collector, however, so feels his sins that he cannot hold his ground against them; he must confess that he daily angers God with his shameful ingratitude, contempt, and disobedience toward all the benefit and goodness of allowing him to live to this hour. That is why he cannot rely on himself or take comfort in his works, but must completely despair of himself, if he does not find grace and mercy with God.

24. Thus he cannot despise anyone or exalt himself above anyone, for he only feels deeply condemned and regards all others as more blessed and righteous, especially this Pharisee, who nevertheless is full of filth before God. In summary, you see here already the beginning of true repentance in such a person who has sincere remorse and sorrow over his sins and the serious desire to be freed from them; he seeks grace and mercy from God and also from the heart intends to improve his life.

25. But look at how the tax collector's words and prayer sound when he says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" [Luke 18:13]. Where did he learn to speak this way to God, or how does he dare to use, arrange, and put forth such words? This does not make sense according to reason and human judgment, and no one can obtain such a prayer out of his own heart and thoughts, even as short as it is. The Pharisee's words—"I thank You, God, that I am not like other people, unjust," etc. [Luke 18:11]—are what a righteous man certainly can and should say.

No one must be such a liar that, if he is not conscious of anything, he would fault himself for being a robber, adulterer, etc., but he must speak the truth and not let the reputation of a good conscience be taken away from him. Whoever truthfully can say this must be a righteous man. In turn, a villain could certainly speak the words "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," since they are spoken more by villains than by truly repentant, righteous people. Who else would speak those words but a sinful, condemned person? The verdict here is reversed and seems to be false on both sides, no matter how you twist and turn it.

26. However, it is fundamentally the kind of speech and example which belongs in the schools and theology of Christians (whom the world calls "heretical"). As I have said, neither reason nor any man—no matter how high, wise, and learned he is—can make sense of what the tax collector makes sense of here when he combines such contrary words in his prayer and concludes: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Yes, this is indeed the highest skill; it is completely outside of and above and beyond human understanding.

27. Words have never sounded this way since God in the beginning let Himself be heard and spoke with people. Scripture says that, in Paradise, God spoke to the man: "In the hour in which you eat from the forbidden tree," that is, the hour in which you sin against My commandment, "you must die the death" [Gen. 2:17]. On Mount Sinai, when God gave the Law, the words sounded this way: "I, the Lord your God, am very jealous," that is, an angry God, "who punishes the sins of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation" [Exod. 20:5]. In short, let it be known that sin is condemned, and God's wrath and punishment are spoken against it.

This does not at all seem to agree or to harmonize with the fact that such a sinful, condemned person dares to come before God and pray: "Be merciful to me, a sinner." The pair—sin and grace—are against each other, like fire and water. Grace does not belong where there is sin, but wrath and punishment belong there. How, then, does this man have the skill that he can bring the two together and unite them, and dares to desire and summon grace for his sin? There is more involved here than knowing the Law and the Ten Commandments, which the Pharisee also knew. This is a different skill, about which the Pharisee knew nothing at all, and all people of themselves know nothing.

28. This is the preaching of the dear Gospel of God's grace and mercy in Christ, which is proclaimed and offered to condemned sinners without any merit of their own. For him to step before God and make such a prayer, this tax collector must have heard this message, and the Holy Spirit must have touched and moved his heart with it (since he perceived his sins through the Law). He certainly believes and holds what he has heard from God's Word, that God wants to forgive sins and be merciful to poor sinners, that is, to turn His wrath and eternal death away from them for the sake of the promised Messiah, His Son. This faith has fastened and linked together these two contrary parts in this prayer.

29. Now, this preaching of the Gospel is certainly heard by many, and it appears to be an easy skill to speak it, but it is not as common as people think, so that everyone could do it. No one better understands how difficult it is than the few who are taught and deal with it, so that they also can believe and pray like the tax collector. This is because the righteous villain and hypocrite, the Pharisee, is still stuck in us, and he hinders and prevents us from bringing [sin and grace] together.

30. Yes, this must not be true in the external, worldly way of life and its righteousness, for there we must say and teach nothing else than that grace is not for the sinner, but only wrath and punishment, etc. Otherwise no one could live on earth, and God could not uphold His majesty, if He did not maintain that sin is punished and good works rewarded. Soon everyone would say, "Let us sin boldly, so that we will have all the more grace" [Rom. 6:1]. Thus things are reversed here in His spiritual kingdom, so that whoever is a villain obtains grace and is pronounced just, and whoever is called righteous is a villain and is condemned.

31. However, in this matter things are so: God's tribunal and the world's judgment are two very different things, separated as far from each other as heaven and earth. Before the world this must be true: "If you are righteous, you should have the benefit from that; if you are a thief, then people will hang you on the gallows; if you murder, then they will strike off your head." God

Himself must maintain this governance; otherwise there would be no peace left on the earth. However, in His own governance where He alone is the Lord and Judge without any middlemen, then it happens that He is merciful only to poor sinners. There nothing except sin is found, and before Him no one is innocent, as Scripture says [Exod. 34:7; Rom. 3:10–20].

32. Nevertheless, it is also true that sinners are not all alike, so that we must here again distinguish and separate those who belong before His tribunal and those who belong to grace. There are some coarse and insolent sinners—robbers, murderers, thieves, villains, fornicators—who are so bad they are drowned in sin, who always continue and never think or care about having a merciful God; they go on without a care, as if they were in no danger. St. Paul preaches to them in this way: “Do not be deceived: fornicators, adulterers, idolaters, thieves, misers, robbers, etc., will not possess God’s kingdom” (1 Corinthians 6 [:9–10]). Christ says, “I tell you, if you do not repent, you must all be lost” (Luke 13 [:3]). These are not like this tax collector, because they go off heedless, without repentance; they do not yet belong under God’s governance, but in the first governance of the world.

33. Accordingly, there are also other villains who try to imitate this tax collector, who also pray the Our Father; they have heard the words that God wants to be merciful to poor sinners and have learned to repeat these words. They also can beat their breasts and with words and gestures pretend to be so humble and penitent that people would swear—yes, they themselves swear—that they are just like this tax collector, and yet it is false and deceptive. They are no better than the Pharisee, and God is as merciful to them as to the Pharisee. Since they do not sense His wrath, He does not strike among them with His rod to punish them, but lets them remain evildoers.

These are called “false Christians” or “sectarians” and “false brothers.” There is a large crowd of them in our fellowship, who can speak the words, highly praise the Gospel and God’s grace, and acknowledge that they are poor sinners. But when it comes down to it and they are attacked and rebuked, they will not listen to it or tolerate it. They begin to be angry; they say that people are speaking against their honor and burdening their conscience. If they can do no more, they use all kinds of evil tricks against the Gospel.

34. They can pretend in words and appearance to be this tax collector, but really they are this scoundrel, this hypocrite. They speak and act the way they do only so that people must regard them as righteous, and so that no one dares to call them anything else. That lasts only until God assaults them a little through the devil, the world, or through His Word; then they are so tender that they cannot tolerate anything, but cry out about violence and injustice, etc. In summary, though before they were poor sinners, they now are genuine saints and so proud that no one can get along with their holiness.

35. The world is now everywhere full of such people, especially of the great and powerful noblemen and sophists. Yes, both townspeople and peasants have learned from our Gospel and want to accept and take comfort from the fact that God is merciful to sinners; yet they do not want to be rebuked and reprimanded as sinners by anyone. Nevertheless, they insist that God's Word cannot be silent about sin; but when God's Word rebukes sin, they want that applied as referring to others. They also say, just like this Pharisee: "I am not like the others, and whoever says I am is not being kind to me." If anyone should begin to list what they have done wrong, they allege that he is talking against the government and inciting an insurrection, etc. In summary, we are supposed to preach only what they like to hear; otherwise it is no longer to be called "preaching the Gospel." Such people are like all false, hypocritical saints who can certainly say that they are poor sinners, but who do not want anyone to think that it is true; they cannot tolerate it when others say it.

36. Well, both these factions on their own can all too easily make sense of these two points: "I am a sinner" and "God is merciful to me." However, in addition there is the third faction, who rightly should and gladly would say this, for whom it is very difficult to say these two things at the same time from the heart and to combine such a confession and absolution. They have in themselves two strong obstacles against this. On the one side, as I have said, there is still too much in us of the old villain, the Pharisee, namely, that we want to be righteous and just before God and better than others. This would soothe the heart and be the sweetest joy, if they could bring it about. We all would gladly aim at having God look at and be pleased with what we have done. We would gladly put our thanks into words and confess that it was His divine gift to us. But the door is barred and the way is blocked, just as the angel with the fiery sword was placed before Paradise [Gen. 3:24], so that no one may come and boast before God.

37. On the other side again, the tax collector must come before God with nothing but sin and shame, stripped of all his glory, and full of nothing but filth. There he is anxious and takes pains to lay hold of these words "Be merciful to me" and to apply them to himself. This is again restrained and hindered even more strongly both by his own fearfulness and by all human wisdom—yes, by the devil himself, who applies God's Law to him when he ought not, to bring him into danger and despair.

38. Therefore, it certainly is a skill above all human skill—yes, the strangest thing on earth—that a man can have the grace truly to know that he is a sinner, and yet can so turn around that he looks away from God's wrath and grasps nothing but grace. A heart which truly senses its sin cannot think or conclude otherwise than that God is unfavorable and angry with him. When Judas saw that he had betrayed Christ to death, he immediately began

to cry out against himself [Matt. 27:3-4]; his reason and heart acted as they usually do and put before him nothing but God's eternal wrath and damnation. No human heart can deal with this, for God's commandment and Law condemn you to death, and the devil drives and chases you to hell. How is it possible, then, to understand these words of the tax collector in the face of the Law, his own reason and senses, which present nothing else to his heart than wrath and hostility? Now, it cannot enter into any heart to confess sin, unless it has the Ten Commandments to show it what sin is and why it is sin. Therefore, the two contradictory points are at the same time opposed to each other: hearing the Ten Commandments, which condemn to death and to hell, and again losing them, getting free of them, and thus ascending from hell to heaven.

39. Therefore, whoever can learn should learn from this high wisdom and be this tax collector's student. Learn to distinguish both these points correctly, namely, that wrath does not remain on or cling to sin; rather, lay hold of reconciliation and forgiveness, that is, do not judge this matter according to human reason or according to the Law, but rather through faith grasp the Gospel's comfort and teaching about Christ. Faith alone teaches this marvelous combination so that we can harmonize these two words which nevertheless are farther from each other than heaven and hell. What else do the words "I am a sinner" mean than "God is hostile to me and condemns me" and "I have earned nothing else but eternal wrath, curse, and damnation"?

40. When it comes to the point that you sense this (it does not happen by beating your breast and trying to force it out with your own works; rather, it comes of itself when the Law truly affects you, and this will teach you to beat your breast and humble yourself), when (I say) you can do no more than say, "I am a sinner!"—then you are lost. The Ten Commandments will push and shove you straight into hell, so that your heart must say, "You belong to the devil, and God does not want you." Then you will begin to flee from Him, and, if you could, you would run through a hundred worlds, if only you could escape.

Here it is time for you to stop running in this flight and fright, turn, and say: "My dear Gospel and the righteous tax collector teach me that the highest wisdom before God is to know and believe that His intention is such and He has founded a kingdom through Christ in which He wants to be merciful and to help poor, condemned sinners." In this way the two are joined together into one word and confession: "I certainly am a sinner, but God is nevertheless merciful to me. I am God's enemy, but He is now my friend. I should justly be condemned, but I know that He will not condemn me, but will have me in eternal bliss as an heir in heaven. Yes, this is what He wants

to have and has had preached to me, and what He commands me to believe for the sake of His dear Son, whom He has given for me.”

41. Thus, in this tax collector, you have a beautiful example of true Christian repentance and faith and an excellent masterpiece of high spiritual wisdom or theology, of which the Pharisee and those like him have never received a taste or smell. Besides, you see the true fruits which follow faith, that he now is a different man, with a different mind, thoughts, words, and works than before. Now he gives honor and praise only to God for His divine grace; he implores and worships Him from his heart, in true confidence in His Word and promise—otherwise he could neither have thought nor prayed such words. In this way, he gives Him truly pleasing worship and correctly keeps the Sabbath. He now also has a heart that is opposed to sin and disobedience; he does not rejoice in these, but is sorry that he has lived against God’s Commandments, and now with his whole heart he seriously strives to cease and no longer to offend, deceive, lie, wrong, or do violence to anyone. He wishes everyone would live this way.

42. That is the description given by this Gospel reading of the two kinds of people among those called “God’s people.” One of them is the big faction of the false church, which still has the pretense and the name, as if they alone were the most righteous and holiest servants of God. The other is the little flock of those who are real members of the Church and true children of God, even though they do not have great fame and reputation before the world. We have heard sufficiently what the distinction is between them, through which each part can be recognized by its characteristics and fruits, by which the pretense and name can be separated from the true nature.

43. Therefore, see that you properly follow this tax collector and become like him. First, see that you are not a false but a real sinner; that is, not only with words but in reality and from your whole heart acknowledge yourself guilty before God of His wrath and eternal damnation, and thus truthfully utter these words: “to me, a poor sinner.” However, at once also lay hold of the other words, “Be merciful,” with which you can blunt the Law’s point and edge, that is, with which you can turn away from yourself the verdict of damnation which the Ten Commandments want to impose on you.

44. Thus, from this distinction between the two kinds of sinners, you can reach the correct verdict on both sides. God is certainly unmerciful and hostile toward sinners—yes, toward those who do not want to be regarded as sinners, that is, those who do not fear God’s wrath but go away secure and want to remain unpunished. On the other hand, God wants to be merciful to poor sinners who sense their sins and mourn and confess that they are condemned before God’s judgment. Thus here the status of the persons is completely reversed also according to God’s Word and verdict, so that

the Ten Commandments acquire the annotation that their verdict applies to those who try to be holy by not being called sinners, as if that verdict does not affect them, but the Gospel and the verdict of grace and comfort apply to those who are in fright and fear of wrath.

45. Second, you must also be like the tax collector in forsaking sin from now on. It is not said about him that he remained the way he was before, but he went away and took home the grace that God had justified him. The text says, "This man went down to his house justified," etc. [Luke 18:14]. These words do not say that he remained in sin, since he did not go to the temple and pray for that. Whoever wants to remain the way he is cannot pray for grace and forgiveness; rather, whoever prays that way wishes and desires to be just and completely freed from sins. You also must know this so that you do not deceive yourself. There are many who only see that the tax collector receives grace and forgiveness as a sinner but who do not consider that God wants to have them forget sin, and that the grace given must be powerful in them. They try to misunderstand this, as if God wanted to justify and save sinners so that they could remain in sin and unrighteousness.

46. For these reasons, Christians must contend on both sides against the devil and their own flesh. When they begin to repent and want to become different people, then they first feel how the devil works, hinders, and restrains them, so that they do not continue, but remain in their old skin, etc. Again, when this does not hinder them, and they are turning against the devil to God and calling on Him, then he attacks them with despondency and fearfulness. On the one side, he makes sin too insignificant and puts it too far away from human eyes and hearts, so that people despise it and do not desire grace, or even delay repentance. On the other side, he makes sin too great, for out of a spark he can blow up a fire greater than heaven and earth. Once again, it is difficult for people to lay hold of forgiveness or to take to heart the words "God, be merciful to me." This certainly is and remains a high skill, and we can certainly regard this tax collector with his example to be our master and doctor and learn from him to call on God, so that we, too, can arrive at our goal.