

Luke 18:9-17

Church is for children. Once you reach a certain age you don't need to go anymore. Jesus even says so. "*Let the children come to Me,*" He tells His disciples. But in His parable, Jesus speaks about two men entering into church. They are not children, so why are they there? They come to the temple to pray, we're told. But we can pray anywhere: at home, at work, outdoors. So why come to church? Well, we're commanded to. But if that's why we come, it's not a very good reason; and it's not going to keep someone coming all their life. It's like giving an offering to the Lord, not from a cheerful heart, but because we're commanded to. That person won't give much, and won't give for very long.

The Pharisee in the parable comes to church with a cheerful heart. He is there to present his resume to God. He's an outstanding man in his opinion. No one else is like him. He's in a class by himself. He doesn't need God as much as God needs him.

The other man, a tax collector, also comes to pray. He, too, is in a class by himself. There is no one like him. The English rendering is not correct. It's not, "*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*" This man cries, "*God, be merciful to me, **the** sinner!*" The way he sees it, others are not like him because he is worse than everyone else. He is not one sinner among many; he is only aware of himself as being a sinner. "I am the sinner!" he cries. So this man comes to church, not with a cheerful, but with a heavy heart. He is troubled with guilt. He cannot even raise his head to heaven. He beats his breast over and over. He is not in church to give God anything...except his sins. He comes to receive.

This is the word Jesus uses when He speaks about children. "*Whoever does not **receive** the kingdom of God like a child,*" He says, "*shall not enter it.*" Children, infants, tiny babies don't give anything, except tears, throw-up stuff, and poop. But they are receivers. Children receive love, milk, care, clean diapers. This is why church is for children; because in church God gives, and we receive. Unless we receive God's gifts like children, we are not part of His kingdom.

The Pharisee is not in God's kingdom. He thinks he is. In fact, don't tell him, but he thinks that he is the only one in God's kingdom. No one else is as good as him. But he is no child of God. He comes to church, not to receive like a child, but to thank God...no, rather, for God to thank him for being so good. This Pharisee has no need of God's gifts. Just ask him. He is not like other men. What need does he have for grace and mercy? Other men need forgiveness, but not him.

The tax collector...he comes to church to confess his sin. He prays for mercy. He believes that God is merciful to sinners. This is why he is in church. He cannot raise his head, but he believes that God will raise His arms to receive him. He goes home forgiven, justified, full of peace and hope, and having a cheerful heart.

The other man goes home with a cheerful heart, but he shouldn't; for he is not forgiven. He is not just before God. Jesus says so. This man is not in church to receive, and so he goes home empty.

This Pharisee lurks within all of us. And so we are inclined to think well of ourself, but to have contempt for others. We are tempted to come to church with our own resume, spelling out for God why He is fortunate to have us as a member in His church; or we are tempted to not come to church at all because we're not desperately in need of anything that God can give us. We must repent of this blasphemous attitude. It mocks God. It belittles His gifts. It lifts our head up high with pride rather than lowering it with the tax collector.

That tax collector is no small child; he's a grown man, but he has one thing in common with children - the best thing. He comes to God's house to receive. He comes empty, but he leaves full. If you have come today with sin and guilt, you are blessed like that tax collector, for God is here to take your sin and guilt and give you a cheerful heart, a clean heart. If you come up to the altar today to receive, you are blessed, for that which God gives here is greater than anything the world can give. As you come like the tax collector, bearing the weight of last week - the hurtful words you spoke, the lust you had in your eyes and heart - Jesus takes your weight from you and He carries it. You come a sinner; you leave forgiven.

This is because Jesus lowered His head for you on a cross. His resume was spotless. He had no sin or guilt to confess. But your Lord did, in truth, on that cross become the sinner, the only sinner; for every sin of yours, and mine, and all people was charged to Him. Though no hurtful word ever came from His lips; though lust never entered His eyes and heart, Jesus was declared by God to be the sinner, and so He was punished in your place. You are forgiven. Whatever is in your past that haunts you, God does not see it. Jesus took it from you. You are declared justified by your God. You can raise your head in confidence. You can leave God's house in peace. You have come to receive, and God has come to give.

So when you come receiving like a child, you keep coming back. It's like going to a restaurant. If you come hungry, but receive terrible service and horrible food, will you come back? Of course not. But if the service is wonderful and the food is amazing, you will keep coming back. God wants you to come hungry to His house. He wants you to come like the tax collector. What Jesus gives you here will keep you coming back all your life. He gives Himself to you. He gives you the treasures of heaven. He gives you eternal life.

This is how you remain in God's kingdom always: seeing yourself as a child, as one who receives, as God's dear child who receives His gifts in Christ. No matter what your age, church is for you dear child of God. Amen.