

**Yr. C, Proper 25**  
**October 23, 2022**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**Christ Episcopal Church**  
**1436 Words**

**Lessons: Sirach 35:12-17**  
**Psalm 84:1-6**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

There was a woman, deeply disturbed by a local traffic report of a car traveling the wrong way on the highway where her husband commutes. She frantically dials his cell phone. “Honey, be careful!” she says. “There is a car traveling the wrong way on the bypass.”

“Sweetie,” he replies, “it’s *worse than that*. There’s dozens of ‘em!”

This silly joke...is the essence of the parable Jesus sets before us today. It’s about the folly of our assumptions about our own righteousness...our rightness...*and* it is also about our unfounded judgments of other people’s wrongness. Such arrogance can be life-threatening. Jesus wants us to know that such arrogance is definitely *soul*-threatening.

“Most merciful God, we confess that *we*...have sinned against you, in thought...and in word...and in deed...all the things we have done...(not to mention all the things) we have left undone...” Well, that pretty much covers *everything*, doesn’t it?

We’d like to say, “Lord, my thoughts weren’t really *that bad*, were they? Those words I spoke about other people were not *so awful*, were they? The things I did—they aren’t nearly as bad as what some folks do, right?”

We are *so tempted*—like the Pharisee in Jesus’ story—to be ‘relative thinkers,’ to think of ourselves relative to others. We compare ourselves with other people all the time. As long as we can find folks who don’t measure up to *our* standards—well then, we feel okay, don’t we?

You know this parable of Jesus is custom-tailored for folks like you and me...the Church-goers...the ones who pledge and who give generously...the ones willing to volunteer our time. Those of us who are *not even tempted* to commit murder, theft, or other high crimes. Like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, we are basically good people. And that is terrific...*until* we start to notice our goodness, and then begin boosting ourselves and putting other people down.

If our religion helps us become more virtuous, that is a good thing. If our religion helps us notice and put down the less virtuous, then it is not. At least it is not the religion of Jesus, who chose to associate with sinners all the time. His spirituality involves exalting the humble and humbling the exalted.

The Rt. Reverend Henry Compton was Bishop of London at the turn of the century—the 18<sup>th</sup> century. South Carolina was still a colony then. We *did* have a legislature, and they were not of one mind about how the Church should be organized and run. Bishop Compton sent a missionary—Gideon Johnston—to manage things over here. Johnston’s ship arrived in Charleston on March 2<sup>nd</sup> of 1708, the same year this Church was being built.

A funny thing happened this week as I was digging around in boxes to find a book. I stumbled across a manila folder with a scrap of paper clipped to the edge. On it was printed a random quotation I discovered almost twenty years ago in seminary...a quotation attributed to that Anglican missionary, Gideon Johnston, from a letter he sent to Bishop Compton back in London during the early 1700’s. It reveals what he *really thought* about our forebears in the faith.

Here's the Quotation: "The people here are the vilest race of men upon earth—a perfect hodgepodge of bankrupts, pirates, decadent libertines, sectar(ians) and enthusiasts. In other words, they are *not* our kind (of people)."

Mr. Johnston sounds a lot like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, doesn't he? Who knows? Maybe he was right about the people of the low country. But it was still tacky to put them down so ruthlessly. Regardless of whatever good Johnston may have accomplished here, we cannot un-hear the 'Pharisee-type derision in those words can we? It would have been better if this correspondence with Bishop Compton had been lost in the shipwreck that claimed Gideon Johnston's life.

"Most merciful God, we *have* sinned against you, In thought and word and deed, by what we have done, *and* by what we have left undone."

The Prayer Book just does not give us any wiggle room, does it? The wisdom of the prayer of confession is that it covers everything and everybody, *so completely!* No exceptions. You can't pray this confession and look askance at the person next to you. You cannot pray this confession and think, "This really doesn't apply to me."

The Good News is that our corporate confession is tailor made for each one of us. They are the words we need to say. It is the plea for forgiveness that we need to receive. This confession is good for our souls...because it compels us to give up all the broken things we cannot fix...all the words we cannot erase...all the mistakes we cannot undo. Our confession invites us to surrender the past in order to live a better future... reconciled with God and with our neighbors.

If you think about it, the last three weeks have been all about how to pray. Two weeks ago, we learned how to pray with gratitude. Jesus healed ten lepers, and then he exalted the foreigner who showed us how to express our thanksgiving to God. If a Samaritan can do it, then I suppose any of us can do it. The message is simple: gratitude is good for our souls. It keeps us humble about all that we have.

Then, last week, we learned how to pray with persistence and up close to God. There was a widow who refused to give up hope. If she can fervently pray and act for justice, then I suppose any of us can do it too. The message is simple: persistence is good for our souls. It keeps us humble about the Source of our strength and courage.

Finally, today we get a third story from Jesus about how to pray for mercy. Jesus exalted the cheater—not the righteous, religious person, but the scoundrel—in order to show us how to ask God for forgiveness. If a tax collector can do it, then I suppose any of us can do it too. The message is simple: confession is good for our souls. It keeps us humble about our need for mercy.

In his 2<sup>nd</sup> Letter to Timothy, from which we heard this morning, St. Paul is stuck in prison. He's not being arrogant, like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable. Rather, he's powerless. Paul has lost his freedom to move about, proclaiming the Gospel. All he is able to do is write a letter to his younger companion, hoping to inspire him to press on faithfully.

When we are mindful of St. Paul's circumstance, we can see that his words are not boastful at all...they are confessional. "As for me," Paul writes, "I am being...poured out as a libation (a sacrifice) to God. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Paul remembers being deserted by other people, but not with animosity or bitterness. Instead, Paul looks back over his life, and sees how our Lord, Jesus Christ, stood by him...through thick and thin.

St. Paul's life of prayer and service to Christ enables him to see so clearly and write so clearly about the love of God. Ever since his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, St. Paul practiced praying with gratitude, lifting up his heart with praise and thanksgiving. Despite ongoing struggles, rejection, threats, and imprisonment, St. Paul practiced praying with persistence, asking for strength and courage to glorify God and bless God's people. Finally, ever mindful of his own weakness and of his notorious past as a violent persecutor of the Church, St. Paul practiced praying for mercy.

Practice. Practice Practice. Prayer is a discipline we get to practice. The more we practice, the less we are tempted to trust our own righteousness. The more we practice, the less we are tempted to look down on other people. The more we practice, the closer we get to Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray—not for God's benefit, but for ours.

I'm glad you have found Christ Episcopal Church to be a place where you can practice giving thanks to God with a grateful heart, persevering in your prayers through times of trial, and seeking the tender mercy of Christ which sets our souls free.

By practicing these three simple, challenging disciplines of prayer, *we will grow* in love with God and with our neighbors.

This, after all, is what we prayed for in this morning's opening Collect: "Almighty and everlasting God, increase in *us*...the gifts...of faith, hope, and charity...through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.