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Virginia is for Sinners

When I was in seminary, our class designed a T-shirt that said, “Virginia is for Sinners.”

It was our clever play on the state slogan, “Virginia is for Lovers.” On the back, we wanted to put Martin Luther’s famous line, “Sin boldly.”

The seminary administration wasn’t quite sure that message was compatible with our seminary’s biblically based mission statement. “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel.” So, they told us we could keep the front, if we added something a little more biblical to the back.

We chose a verse from the Book of Psalms: “As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us.”

I must confess that taken out of context, “Sin boldly” can certainly be misleading. But if you dig into that saying, you find that Luther never meant, “Do whatever you want because your sins are forgiven.” His intent was to emphasize the wideness of God’s mercy.

His point was this. True faith isn’t about avoiding sin. It’s about trusting in God’s mercy when we do sin. You will sin, and when you do, don’t get defensive and resort to self-justification tactics, which only makes it worse. Instead, own and confess your sin and trust God’s grace to absolve it. Whatever the consequences may be, that is the only way to make a new and right beginning.

About 400 years later, a Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, took that idea a step further: “The Christian life isn’t about cautiously avoiding sin, but about courageously doing the will of God.”

Grace frees us from the exhausting work of self-justification so we can finally turn our attention outward, to love and serve Christ in the other, to see others through the lens of compassion instead of the lens of comparison.

When faith becomes about checking all the boxes, our focus turns inward, and we miss the people right in front of us.

In today’s parable, Jesus means for us to find meaning through the tension of two truths. We are all sinners. But the good news is that God’s mercy is always bigger than our sin.

Luke tells us right up front what the story’s about: “Some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” The problem with self-righteousness is that it breeds contempt.

The Pharisee stands in the temple and begins, “God, I thank you...” which a good way to start any prayer. But before long, his prayer turns into a resume. “I thank you that I’m not like other people, thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

He lists his accomplishments: fasting, tithing, moral behavior. And then takes a shot at the guy standing next to him. He justifies himself by measuring himself against others.

It’s not that those practices are bad. They’re good. But somewhere along the way, his prayer stopped being about God and started being about himself. He’s measuring his worth by comparison. And comparison kills compassion.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows he has nothing to offer. He stands far off, can’t even lift his eyes, and prays the simplest prayer in scripture, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

He doesn’t come with a resume. And he’s the one who goes home right with God.

Jesus flips the story upside down. The tax collector, not the Pharisee, goes home justified. Because justification isn’t something we achieve; it’s something we receive. Justification is not the reward for being good; it’s the gift God gives when we finally stop thinking our goodness can make us worthy, and start trusting that only God’s goodness can make us enough.

We are already made worthy through the love of Christ crucified. In that light, we can stop trying to prove ourselves and start living for God and neighbor.

We live in a world that trains us to think like the Pharisee – a meritocracy. From the time we’re born, we’re measured by grades, by athletic ability, by salary, by success.

The message is clear. You are what you achieve. Your value depends on what you produce. So we work hard to prove ourselves worthy, and when we start believing we’ve done it, it’s easy to look down on those who haven’t. That’s how self-righteousness breeds contempt.

Arthur Brooks calls ours a “culture of contempt.” We don’t just disagree, we disdain. We don’t just think someone’s wrong, we think they’re less. And being right, or at least feeling right, makes us feel like we’re in control.

But the more we cling to the illusion of control, the more we lose sight of mercy. The Pharisee’s prayer could easily be ours, “God, I thank you that I’m not like them.”

Those with different political affiliations, different beliefs, different ways of sinning.

But Jesus desires to free us from this culture of contempt by showing us mercy.

Through his mercy, Jesus breaks open the walls we build around our righteousness. This frees us from the need to be right, from the culture of contempt, from the endless race to prove our worth.

If you keep reading Luke, right after this story, Jesus goes to dinner with another tax collector, Zacchaeus – that wee little man. And the crowd grumbles, “He’s gone to be the guest of a sinner!” But Jesus says, “Salvation has come to this house.”

That’s the good news. We don’t have to justify ourselves. We don’t have to live in the exhausting need to be right. We can stand vulnerable before God. and trust that as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us.

Grace frees us from the burden of proving ourselves so we can finally see one another with mercy. It turns comparison into compassion, and self-righteousness into love.

The Pharisee stood proud and went home empty. The tax collector bowed low and went home exalted – justified.

So come as you are. Sin boldly. Trust mercy more boldly. And remember. God’s mercy is always bigger than your sin.

Amen.