

In today's Gospel, two people come up to the temple to pray. One is a Pharisee who notes his own righteousness, his own efforts, achievements and wisdom. He is grateful for who he is. The other one is a tax collector, a profession with a lot of discredit, because most tax collectors were known for being corrupt and unmerciful people. The tax collector recognizes his sinful life style and pleads for a gift: He asks for God's mercy upon him. The Pharisee is proud of being a good religious man and sees all his spiritual achievements as the result of his own efforts rather than as God's blessing. He despises those who struggle in being righteous people. Jesus our Savior, justifies the tax collector. A detail that manifests that it is not our righteousness, but Christ's righteousness that makes the difference in our status before God. Christ died for both righteous and sinners.

Dear brothers and sisters: Every Sunday we all come and gather around this altar. Sometimes we may behave like the Pharisee in the Gospel: We know we are good people, good Catholics, people of faith, people of generous charity and righteousness. We are good at being good, but we may think that there is little that we need God to do for us. Also, sometimes we may come to this church and feel like the tax collector: We recognize that we constantly fail in our efforts to do good to others and in our desires to be people of righteousness. We may not have a list of good and wonderful things done, and we may feel sorry for what we have done, or for what we have failed to do. And all we can say during those days is, "God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner."

Jesus teaches us today that when we recognize that we always depend on God's mercy, we will go back home justified, which means made right with God. The tax collector asks for God's merciful love and it is given to him. The Pharisee didn't need a gift: He is grateful for **who** he is. He feels self-sufficient. The teaching is clear for us all: Sometimes we act like the Pharisee and praise ourselves before God for the good we have done. And sometimes we recognize how much we depend on God to do everything in life, to be able to perform even the smallest act of kindness. If we are humble in our prayers we will realize that there is a lot to we need to ask for: Mercy, hope, strength, more patience, more tolerance, more humility, to be more generous, to be more loving and so on. And when we make this recognition, Jesus praises us and

gives us divine aid. But for all of us, pharisee and publican alike, whether we know it or not, whether we ask for it or not, there is always a merciful God who loves us and wants to give us more than what we dare to ask for and more than what we can ever imagine.

If we act like the self-righteous Pharisee, Jesus calls us to be humble, to remember that we all are stumbling disciples who can only succeed in life by God's grace. When God looks at us, God doesn't see the successfully good and righteous Catholics and the failing sinful and immoral ones. God sees all of us as we are - weak, needy, unloyal, sinful children who require God to do for us that which we can never do for ourselves. Prayer must be always a way to give thanks to the Lord for all He has given us, and to ask Him for the grace of wisdom and love that we need to succeed in our lives. Let's imagine for a moment that like the tax collector and the Pharisee, we will begin our day always praying. It will surely change our life. Let's also imagine how the world would change if the leaders of nations would always pray for wisdom and love in their daily duties. We are all called to turn to God, and in our daily prayers, to always be grateful and humble. Every weekend we come to Church to meet and to be met by a God who unconditionally loves us.