

“God, be Merciful to me, a Sinner!”

Luke 18:9-17

There is an old saying that “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” It is true that our often well intended actions backfire or turn out to be unprofitable for us or the one we were trying to help; however, I would argue that old saying is just an excuse for people to justify their lack of charitable activity.

The road to hell is not paved with good intentions. The road to hell is paved with the guilt of our sin. The problem is not our actions or lack of actions or actions that backfire. The problem is guilt. In our Old Testament reading, we hear about Cain and Abel. Cain and Abel both brought offerings to the Lord. Why was Abel’s offering noticed with regard? Was it because it was a really big offering? It was the firstborn of his flock. Abel gave his best to the Lord.

God was not pleased with Cain, because Cain gave his leftovers. They both made offerings, but their intentions were very different. Their attitude toward their offerings to God spoke volumes about their attitude toward God.

Intentions do matter. (In a few minutes/tomorrow), I will ask those going through the rite of First Communion, “Do you intend to continue to hear and receive the instruction of your Lord, confess your sins, and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully throughout your life? To which they will respond, “Yes, with the help of God.”

Do you intend? It is typically our intentions that make the difference in whether we are acting in a manner pleasing to God or not. We will never be without sin. We will always sin and fall short of the glory of God. We will never do everything and treat everyone with the love, honor, respect, and joy that God desires.

It is like when we come to church and participate in the confession of our sin and receive the body and blood of our Lord. Our attitude, our intention in coming here speaks volumes about our relationship with God. There are those for whom coming to God’s House is the high point of the week. The whole week just doesn’t feel right if we miss church – if we miss out on receiving Christ’s body and blood. It is like with those in the nursing home I spoke of last week, they miss this so much. Coming here is the one thing they desire the most.

And then there are some who decide on Saturday that they better try and make it because they haven’t been to church for a few weeks. Mom will be chewing on me if I don’t make it this week. That is dangerous way to live.

It is pleasing to God when our actions are fueled with good intentions – which is motivation we receive from the Holy Spirit. However, the

moment we think our good intentions come from our own good nature, we are once again out of bounds.

This is what we hear in our Gospel lesson with the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee was the pillar of the community, a pillar of the synagogue. He never missed a service. He fasted twice a week. He gave 10 percent of all that he had to the Lord. And he was thankful that he was not a sinner like these other people – especially that tax collector.

Here is a man who gave of his first fruits. Why did God not notice his offering with regard? All that he did, his gifts, his role in society, his prayers – they were all done for the glory of himself. His actions were admirable. If only everyone would act the way he did. It was his intentions that were the problem.

God is able to look into our hearts and see everything. He knows the depth of our sin and guilt. We are poor, miserable sinners who have sinned in thought, word, and deed – by what we have done and by what we have left undone, as we confess. We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves – we are selfish. We are filled with bad intentions. Guilt, iniquity (that's what the word means) guilt it is everywhere in our life. **You** can't get away from it. Yet, we have gotten away from it.

The road to hell is paved with the guilt of our sin. In Christ, we have been freed from the guilt of our sin. That is what it means to be "justified." Our Father is a God of mercy, grace, love, and compassion, but in order to demonstrate those primary attributes, He must maintain a proper understanding of justice.

God told Adam, “if you eat of the tree in the middle of the garden, you will surely die.” When Adam sinned, God could not act like most parents and say, “OK, the next time you eat of that tree, you will surely die. And I mean it this time.” There are no “do-overs” in the world of divine justice. There must be punishment for sin. The wages of sin is death. Be thankful that Christ paid that price for you.

And be thankful that God is not wishy-washy. When He spoke His word of judgment to Adam, “you will surely die”, and we see the first fruits of that with the death of Abel. This should give us confidence. If God’s word of judgment and death is sure and final, so are His words of life and salvation.

We come before our Lord like the tax collector – a poor, miserable sinner; deserving of judgment, deserving of death; and crying out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

We do this in confidence knowing that God’s word of life is true. Christ our Lord has suffered the death we deserve. He has come to take away the guilt of our sin so that we stand before our Father in true righteousness. We can lift up our eyes and look upon His friendly face, as He has showered His love and grace upon His children.

The broad and easy road to hell, paved however it is, is of no consequence to us anymore. Our guilt has been taken away. We have been justified. Being full of mercy, grace, justice, love and compassion, our Father has placed us on a very different road. Amen