

## “The Right Place” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Ash Wednesday February 18, 2026

- I. **Luke 18:14** - For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.
- II. **The time of Lent is a season of self-reflection.**
  - a. You might say that the services and focus of our time together are a personal inventory of our walk with God.
    - i. It's not always easy to see ourselves for what's really going on in life, and the trouble we humans always battle is sin and the way it clouds our perception of self.
  - b. We've all done it... we see someone as we're out and about... we watch or read a news story... we hear about someone...
    - i. They are the people who are hopeless drug addicts... or the people who seem shameless in taking advantage of government support... or maybe a person caught in sexual sin... or a rioter breaking windows and spray-painting graffiti all over town... or an abusive person...
    - ii. ... and we say to ourselves... “At least I'm not like *that*.”
      1. At least I stand on higher moral ground than that drug addict... that shameless manipulator... that abusive jerk.
  - c. When it comes to self-reflection, our normal approach is to compare ourselves to others, judge them as deficient in some way, and then feel better about our own lives.
    - i. It takes an honest, humble person to admit the truth about our inner thoughts... but judging others to make ourselves feel better is a constant part of our sinful nature.
    - ii. We always look at the shortcomings of those around us so we can boost our self-esteem a little, as we shake our heads in disapproval or indignation at how bad the other guy is.
  - d. In those moments of comparison and our desire to feel better about ourselves and our life in Christ, it's important to get a reality check.
    - i. The Lord Jesus was the best at helping us to see our shortcomings and sin whenever we lift ourselves up and try to justify our behaviors.
    - ii. Of course, our main example was the Pharisees and their attitude of moral superiority... which is the story in our Gospel today.
    - iii. Yet it is so hard for us to see the Pharisee that resides in us!
      1. The pride... the comparisons... the judgment in our sinful nature is very difficult to recognize.
  - e. It's interesting, but I've noticed in recent years that more and more TV personalities and public figures wear their ash crosses for everyone to see.
    - i. It is certainly a statement of faith – similar to wearing a visible cross necklace – and we should not be ashamed of our faith or Jesus.

- ii. However, I wonder how many people get the ashes on their forehead in order to show others that they went to church today.
  - 1. You know, like a badge of honor that says I attended church and I'm a good Christian.
  - 2. Now, that might seem silly to us... and it should!
  - 3. The cross on our forehead is not just a sign of our righteousness – it is a sign of sin, brokenness, mortality... and sorrow for falling short of God's glory.
  - 4. The cross that we receive is a sorrowful sign we don't measure up by our own works or standards... and we never will.

III. **In our Gospel reading, Jesus is heading to the cross for our sins.**

- a. He has spent years arguing with the Pharisees about welcoming tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners to repent and be received into the kingdom of God.
  - i. Unfortunately, the Pharisees are still adamant that someone who is not doing their basic Jewish duties in following God's law cannot expect to have God's favor.
  - ii. In other words, if you are not doing the right things, God rejects you... if you do the right things, God accepts you...
  - iii. Yet Jesus continually says that a person's efforts and works will not save them... quite the opposite, the good works become an obstacle because we put our trust in our effort rather than Christ's sacrifice.
- b. Reverend Arthur Just, in his commentary on Luke, points out that today's parable is related to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, where the older brother was upset that his father restored the prodigal.
  - i. Another insight is the prayers that were offered by the Pharisee and tax collector were being done on the Day of Atonement.
  - ii. The Day of Atonement was when one goat was sacrificed and its blood was sprinkled in the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the sins of the people, while a second goat was sent into the wilderness, symbolically carrying their sins away.
  - iii. Now, keep that in your minds as we consider the parable Jesus tells.
- c. The first part deals with the Pharisee who is so sure of himself and his walk with the Lord, he doesn't even ask anything... he just makes statements.
  - i. He uses the first person a lot – I and me – and he simply thanks God that he is better than others because he goes the extra mile to follow God's law.
  - ii. This Pharisee trusts in his own righteousness and exalts himself.
- d. The tax collector is much less confident and assured... in fact we sense that he feels completely unworthy to be there at all as he hits his chest repeatedly and bows his head in shame.
  - i. His words are most often translated, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner," which is one way to say it... but Arthur Just explains the word

“be merciful” can also be translated, “O God, be propitiated toward me, the sinner.”

1. In other words, the tax collector is not just asking God to be kind and merciful to him... He’s praying and using the word for sacrifice... or atonement... like my sin is worthy of death.
  2. He’s not defending... justifying... comparing... or explaining himself... he is basically saying, “O God, please let the sacrifice count for me... I’m not just a sinner among many, but I’m the sinner who needs Your forgiveness.”
  3. Yes, and listen to Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15, “This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ -- and I am the worst of them all.”
  4. If we can repeat those words for ourselves, perhaps then we are in the right place.
- e. No one else is part of our self-reflection during this season of Lent, because we see ourselves as the worst of sinners, looking only to the cross and work of Jesus for our forgiveness.
- i. This is the right place... for my heart... for my focus... and my attitude... as I humbly see the great sacrifice that was required for me.

IV. **Regardless of our attitude today, we are all in the right place.**

- a. The Lord calls us into the midst of His Word and to hear the Law which convicts us of our sins, and the Gospel which points us to the sacrifice and saving grace of our Savior Jesus Christ.
- b. The heart of the Gospel, or the Good News of our salvation is the Atonement, or the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross to pay for our sins and redeem us.
  - i. In many ways, it makes the tax collector’s story even more powerful, because it points ahead to the Lamb of God who would be slain.
  - ii. And as Jesus said, he went home, “justified.”
    1. To be justified means God declares the verdict: not guilty... and so we, through the propitiation or payment that Jesus made, are pronounced not guilty.
- c. Yes, we can all fall short and try to justify ourselves, or compare our good works to others... or even think we are better than the next guy when it comes to our sins... but the right place is to humbly realize that we are the worst of sinners in need of God’s grace and Jesus’ sacrifice.
- d. The right place is not standing above others in pride... but standing before God in humility...
  - i. The right place is not trusting in ourselves but in Christ alone.
  - ii. It is only in Him and through Him that we are made right with God.
  - iii. The right place is always at the cross, where Christ alone makes us right before God. Amen.