

This past week we gathered children and adults for a week of Vacation Bible School here at Grace, also known as the Circle J Ranch. Each day we worked and studied together and saw parallels between Jesus' life and ministry and the life of a rancher. I know that sounds a little strange at first, but we talked about how Jesus took a trail ride into Jerusalem, where he would suffer, die and pay for the sins of the world. We talked about a chuck wagon filled with food and drinks and saw how Jesus also feeds us with his word. We also learned about Jesus being like a rancher, or as he says, 'a Good Shepherd,' who loves us and knows each of us by name. On the last day of VBS, we saw how God provides protection and rest for his people, something that ranchers need, too, that's for sure.

On one of the days of VBS, Rancher Ray (my alias and now alter ego), told a campfire story that ended up with him trying to get away from a hungry mountain lion that grabbed onto his boot, bit down and started pulling his leg..."just like I'm pulling yours now." I just might use that story again some day. The main lesson had to do with Jesus telling stories, or parables. Some people might tell stories for fun and amusement, but Jesus told these stories to teach people about God and his kingdom. Through these earthly stories that Jesus told, we grow to understand more and more clearly the heavenly meaning of God's love.

That is precisely why parents and children go to VBS, right? We learn and grow in knowledge and faith in God's word. We gather together with other believers and enjoy our Christian fellowship. (Just ask the people who worked in the kitchen, and they'll tell you how much fun they had.) We serve our God with thankful hearts for all he's done for us. And that's also why we come to worship on a regular basis. It's why we plan to make time in our busy schedules each week to be with our Lord and each other, gathering around his word and sacraments. There's no better place to be when you think about it!

You know, I wish I could say that my reasons for coming to God's house were always right. Granted, I'm a pastor and it's kind of 'my job' to be here. The real test for me, though, is when I *don't* have to be here. There are those times when you have allowed me to get away for the weekend. Or when I'm on vacation, do I really *have* to be here or any other church for that matter? Don't I have the freedom to take a break and maybe sleep in once in a while? Besides, I could do my own devotions with my family in the privacy of our own home. That would be okay, wouldn't it?

Some of you might stop me and say, "*Now just wait a minute there, Pastor. On your vacation time, you are free to go to worship whenever and wherever you choose. And if you happen to miss once in a while, well, it wouldn't be the end of world, now would it? Just don't make it a habit – missing church, that is.*"

To be honest, I really don't want anyone to think that I would skip church on my time off. It just wouldn't look right! I would much prefer that people saw me as a faithful pastor, husband and father who places the utmost importance on the spiritual care of his flock and family. And that means setting the right example and doing the right thing, even when no one's keeping tabs. More importantly, that means going to worship, because I *want* to, not because I *have* to.

But who always *wants to*? Do you? I'll point to our gospel lesson before us, where Jesus tells this story about a man who apparently always wanted to be in church. Everything he did, in fact, was done with the utmost eagerness and dedication to God. At least that's what he wanted people to see and think about him. Jesus said, <sup>10</sup> **"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"**

That prayer does sound pretty self-righteous when you hear it out loud. Instead of picturing a Pharisee praying that prayer, someone whom we automatically think of as self-righteous, try to picture a man named 'Pastor Jones.' Pastor Jones is a kind and caring man, well-respected in his church and community. People look up to him, because he doesn't just talk the talk; he walks the walk. And even though the congregation has told him he can take some time away, he says, "*Thank you, but I feel that God wants me to be here with you all, even when...well, when you don't need me here.*"

*"Oh, Pastor Jones, but we DO need you here, and we DO want you here!"*

*"Yes, I know you do. And I thank God..."* He prays this prayer of thanks to God, because he is happy; he is overjoyed. Why? Because, he says, he is *not* like most other people who drink too much and cuss and fight, who easily lose their temper and hurt others. He always speaks kindly to his wife and children. He doesn't skip church; he tithes off the top of his income; he spends countless hours in preparation for his sermons and Bible classes. And he truly enjoys being with people who obviously need him as an example, someone to look up to. "*I may not be perfect, Lord, but at least I'm not like some of that trash out there: "...robbers, evildoers, adulterers."* And he knows, no one can disagree with that.

No one, that is, from a human standpoint. On the outside, on the surface, Pastor Jones is the ideal Christian doing what the Lord expects. He goes to church with a smile every single time, because he knows how good he is compared to others. Just look at the jerk who abuses his wife or to the lying thief who steals money from her register and gets away with it – compared to the likes of them, Pastor Jones is a veritable saint. So how is it, then, that God would still see him as a filthy heap of stinking trash ready to be tossed into the incinerator?

We know why. His pride and confidence are misplaced. Instead of seeing his own shortcomings and failures, he thinks he's done everything that God expects of him...and more! *"I love the Lord with all my heart and soul and strength! See how well I've kept his commands?!"*

The problem is, none of us keep his commands that well. Most of our sins are probably quite well hidden and unnoticeable to the human eye, even to those closest to us. **"Man looks at the outward appearance,"** right, **"but God looks at the heart,"** (1 Sam. 16:7). And what God sees in your heart is not so different from the heart of Pastor Jones or that Pharisee in Jesus' parable. It's filled with pride and self-directed trust, with a haughty, condescending attitude against those who don't stop for yellow or red lights the way you do; who don't discipline their children the way you do yours; or who don't commit their time and resources to serving God the way you do. **"God, I thank you..."**

Have you always finished that prayer the way God wants you to? Or let me ask it this way: Have you always seen the need for God's mercy? Our pride leads us to think of our lives and the things we do on three levels. There have been those times when you've gone to God confessing your sins, because you know you did something wrong and definitely needed God's mercy. That's one level. Then there are those times when you've felt that your decisions had no moral bearing whatsoever, like choosing to eat at Arby's instead of Carl's Jr., or painting your walls brown instead of beige, or drinking tea instead of coffee. Why would God care about those things anyway? A third level would be those times when you do what is right and good: turning the other cheek, going to church whenever you can, or giving offerings and helping others out. Certainly these acts of love and kindness don't require God's mercy or forgiveness, do they?

God says that even our righteous acts are stained with imperfection and sin. In fact, every decision that we make, no matter how morally neutral or inconsequential it may seem to others, is tainted. That's why he sent his Son to come into this world, to live the perfect life of obedience that we could not; to willingly lay down his perfect life on the cross as the sacrifice God demanded for our sins; and to rise from the grave to guarantee that we would live with him forever in heaven.

If we fail to see the need for God's mercy in every moment and decision of our lives; if we ignore the need for God's forgiveness in every one of our thoughts, words and actions, we push away that sacrifice of Christ. We tell him, *"No thanks, I'm good. I don't need it now, but I'll let you know when I do. God, I thank you..."* But we're not thanking him. We're spitting in his face! And for that we deserve to suffer under the weight of our guilt throughout this life and an eternity in hell.

There was another man in Jesus' story, too, who knew what horror he deserved from God. He knew what pressure and guilt were all about. He lived with it every day of his life. Jesus said that this tax collector also went up to the temple to pray, and that he <sup>13</sup> **...stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'** In our modern terms, he was that child molester who, 12 years ago, molested his 7-year-old cousin and raped his 10-year-old neighbor. What would you think if I told he's here – out in the narthex listening over the speakers? He doesn't come in the sanctuary, because he thinks, *"I am so disgusting. For what I am and all I've done, I don't deserve to live. I deserve to go to hell. I can't get too close to anyone here, and I wouldn't blame them for wanting to get away from me."* As the tears stream down his face, he is praying, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** Does God hear his prayer?

Jesus said this 'sinner' went home justified before God, declared innocent and righteous in his sight. Unlike Pastor Jones, this man told God the honest, unpolished truth, *"I have nothing to be proud of in myself. Not only am I not better than anyone else, I am worse than everyone. I don't deserve to set foot in God's house to hear about Jesus. But I come because I heard that Jesus has mercy on sinners as bad as me and can wash away my perverted, despicable guilt. I just need to hear that again and again and tell him, 'God, I thank you.'"*

When you hear that story Jesus told, I pray that you know who you are: an undeserving sinner who, through faith in Jesus, has received the greatest pardon and promise of a life with him that lasts forever. Brothers and sisters, let go of every ounce of pride and self-worth, recognizing and reflecting on the depth of your guilt and sin. See how Jesus has suffered and died because of your offenses. Then listen with a smile on your face to what Jesus says to you, *"Dear lambs, go home in peace. My blood has cleansed you of every stain. Every last one! My perfect life is a flowing, royal robe that covers you completely. You are pure and holy in my sight, because I have conquered death and the grave. You are mine forever."* That's what Jesus' story says about you. Amen.