

XI Trinity 2023
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
St. Luke 18.9-14



C. S. Lewis was one of the greatest Anglican lay theologians of the 20th Century. He authored many books of fiction including *The Screwtape Letters* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*. His non-fiction Christian apologetics include *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem with Pain*.

This morning's Gospel deals with the subject of repentance. It's not a popular subject even among orthodox Christians who know it's an essential element of our faith. We tend to relegate thoughts of repentance to Lent and Passiontide.

In *Mere Christianity* Lewis writes...

...“Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again from the ground floor—that is the only way out of a ‘hole.’...This process of surrender—this movement full speed astern—is repentance.”

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican is about two men who went to the Temple to pray. Pharisees belonged to one of the major political and religious groups of the day. They considered themselves experts in the Law. They also had the reputation for being **righteous**. The word righteous comes from the Old English verb “rightwise” and means “to be squared up” or “justified”...like the text in the *Book of Common Prayer*.

Publicans were “public servants”. They collected taxes and performed other tasks for the Roman government. They were often hired from the local population. That made the Publican in today's Gospel an outcast because he was collecting taxes from his own people for a pagan government.

Our Pharisee-Lawyer may have had good reason to dislike the Publican-Tax Collector. Both men went to the Temple to pray. The problem with the Pharisee-Lawyer is his attitude while he is praying. Everything he says about himself is true...he isn't greedy; he

hasn't committed adultery; he hasn't defrauded anyone; he fasts twice a week and gives away ten percent of his income. That's all good. His problem...he thanks God for making him such a good person and shows contempt for the Publican-Tax Collector. His prayer was self-centered...not God-centered. He was...“self-righteous”.

Jesus doesn't give us any background information about the Publican-Tax Collector in the story. It doesn't really matter. Our Publican-Tax Collector friend knows he hasn't done things right. We can imagine he feels badly about collecting taxes from his own people. He may be overwhelmed with guilt. All he can do is strike his breast and ask God to forgive him...a sinner.

Jesus concludes the parable by saying the Publican-Tax Collector and not the Pharisee-Lawyer went home “squared up”...in a right and good relationship with God, Why? The Publican-Tax collector knew he needed to repent and be forgiven. The Pharisee-Tax Collector thought he was perfect and didn't need to repent or be forgiven.

God offers us a way out of the overwhelming sense of guilt that we can experience when we become aware of our own sinfulness and complete dependence upon him. Today's Collect reminds us God reveals himself to us through Jesus as the loving Father who is always ready to show pity. We claim God's pity---his forgiveness---by asking for it. Repentance is a good thing. It's the first step in asking for God's forgiveness.

C. S. Lewis wrote...

...Repentance is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off...it is simply a description of what going back to him is like...if you ask God to take you back without it, you are really asking him to take you back without going back...it cannot happen.”

God is always ready to take us back. Like the Lost Son...we have to admit we have messed up and then get back on the right track. We want to go home today knowing we have been “squared up”---made good---by the Father of all goodness himself!

