

Proper 25C
Luke 18:9-14
October 26, 2025

“Sola Gratia”
The Rev. Dr. Brandon Perrine

⁹*[Jesus] also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”*

~o~

Five hundred and seven years ago, on the eve of All-Saints, a young, brazen German priest named Martin Luther nailed his now-famous Ninety-Five Theses—perhaps better named *Ninety-Five Protests*—to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany, or so the popular story goes. Luther didn’t set out to start a revolution—he meant only to spark debate about abuses in the Western Church. But as you know, his words lit a fire that reshaped Europe, splitting the Western Church and fueling more than a century of social, religious, and political upheaval.

The once-unified Western Church split into distinctly Protestant and Roman Catholic factions, a division that has continued to fuel conflict in the world since. Like so many divisions—political, ethnic, even trivial

ones like Cubs versus White Sox—it turned neighbors into enemies and communities into battlefields. At its core, though, these battles are usually fought less over the actual differences in identity and more over our perceptions of the people who hold them.

I think that’s really what Jesus was getting at in the parable we heard from Luke’s gospel: the Pharisee and the tax collector. “God,” the Pharisee prays, “I thank you that I am not like other people . . . not like this tax collector. My record speaks for itself. I fast twice a week and I give away 10% of all my wealth . . . thank you that I am not him.” The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable wants to be clear that he is the opposite of this tax collector who colludes with the Romans and overcharges his own people to fill his pockets. And yet, the tax collector in the parable doesn’t seem like an inherently bad person, does he? He stands away from the crowd, looks down at his feet and prays simply, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Jesus was a master storyteller, and what he did here was nothing short of brilliant. It’s an elaborate trap for the hearer—and most hearers get caught. You see, the Pharisee judges the tax collector and justifies himself, but we, the hearers, come to judge the Pharisee and justify the tax collector. And just like that—we become the very one Jesus’ tale cautions us against. The Pharisee judges the tax collector. We judge the Pharisee. And just like that, we’ve become him.

A good person is good until they start to judge others against themselves as the standard. This story has a very important, but often missed message: don’t judge.

With this simple story, Jesus illustrated just how easily we can fall into the trap of judging others. When we do, we find ourselves defined by what or who we aren’t rather than by what or who we are. The world is quickly divided into two: those who look, speak, pray, or live like us—those who meet our expectations—and those who do not. The world becomes a compilation of opposites: me and you, us and them, my view and the wrong view, my religion and the wrong religion, my politics and the wrong politics, my relationships and the wrong relationships. The thing

is, when we live like this, in a perpetual state of judging others, we can't be happy. We can't appreciate diversity or see beauty. We can't grow because we can't imagine that we could be wrong.

That kind of judgment stunts our growth, stifles our joy, and clouds our perspective on the beauty the world holds and the beauty our neighbors can share with us. Author Paulo Coelho tells a powerful story that I've likely shared before, but it bears repeating:

*A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. The next morning while they were eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging the washing outside. "That laundry is not very clean; she doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap." Her husband looked on, remaining silent. Every time her neighbor hung her washing out to dry, the young woman made the same comments. A month later, the woman was surprised to see a nice clean wash on the line and said to her husband, "Look, she's finally learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this?" The husband replied, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows."*¹

And so it is with life. What we see when watching others depends on the clarity of the windows through which we look—the clarity of our windows, the eyes through which we see and evaluate the world around us and the others we share it with.

I think Martin Luther understood this. As the Reformation continued to unfold, Luther coined a phrase that echoes with power through the centuries: "Sola Gratia"—by grace alone. What Luther meant by this simple phrase is that it's not through works, or categories, or judgments that we experience ultimate love and acceptance. It's through grace—unmerited, undeserved, even unwanted. Grace finds us—Protestant and Catholic, Republican and Democrat, white and brown, native-born and immigrant, Cubs fan and White Sox fan, Pharisee and tax collector. Luther

¹ Paulo Coelho. "The Dirty Laundry," Paulocoelhoblog.com, September 25, 2019: <https://paulocoelhoblog.com/2019/09/25/the-dirty-laundry/>.

saw that the real danger wasn't just corruption—it was believing we could earn or prove our worth. Grace alone dismantles that illusion.

If we're relying on anything else to "earn" divine love, we, like the Pharisee in Jesus' story, will end up going home without being justified—without being right with God or with our fellow human beings.

In churches like ours, we can tend to emphasize the need for "works"—for right actions and right identities—to put us in right relationship with God and others. But the truth is, sometimes we need to hear that grace is enough—unmerited, undeserved, even unwanted grace. Somehow, the tax collector in this story got that, and he went home justified. Grace is enough.

Instead of judging others or measuring ourselves against them; instead of splitting the human family into factions—into categories of winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, sinners and saints; instead of relying on the hope that the goodness of our deeds will outweigh the bad; instead of all that, consider for a moment that *Sola Gratia*—grace—is enough—for you, for me, for us all.

May we live into and out of divine grace—bringing healing and wholeness to a world marked by deep division. Today, as we remember a Reformation that once split the church apart, may we begin a new one—born not of division, but of grace. Grace that heals. Grace that unites. Grace that is enough. Amen.