

# Homily for the 30<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

October 26, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

*First Reading: Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 (The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 34 (The Lord hears the cry of the poor.)*

*Second Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 (The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.)*

*Gospel: Luke 18:9-14 (The Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple.)*

Today's first reading and psalm pick up where last Sunday's gospel left off. Sirach proclaims confidently: "The Lord is a *God of justice*," who hears the cry of the oppressed, the wail of the orphan, and the complaint poured out by the widow. God not only *hears* their pleas for justice, but he will *respond* without delay. Sirach employs one of the most beautiful and hopeful images found anywhere in Scripture as he describes what happens to the prayers offered up by those who are powerless to uphold their own rights against their oppressors. He says, "The prayer of the lowly *pierces the clouds*; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right..."

The Psalmist shares Sirach's confidence that God will grant justice to those who are lowly, broken and afflicted. He says, "When the just cry out, the Lord hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves." That's essentially the same message that we heard last week, at the conclusion of the parable of the widow and the dishonest judge. The Lord will be quick to answer those who call out to him day and night, and he will secure the rights of his chosen ones without delay.

These biblical images of widows and orphans clamoring for justice generally make us think of people very different from ourselves. They're weak and helpless, not like us, who feel relatively strong and secure. However, Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple reminds us that there are other forms of poverty and powerlessness. While it's certainly praiseworthy to feel compassion toward those who are poor and vulnerable and easily oppressed in an uncaring society, we should not overlook the *spiritual* poverty that afflicts us all, leaving us weak and vulnerable *to sin*.

In the parable, we see different types of spiritual poverty in *both* characters. The tax collector stands with his eyes downcast and pathetically cries out, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He seems almost too ashamed to beg for the Lord's help. Yet, *he* is the one who returns home justified in the sight of God, for he is willing to acknowledge his sinfulness and ask for mercy. The Pharisee, by contrast, does *not* recognize his sinfulness, especially his contempt for other people, which is so obvious to us. Therefore, he simply recites a litany of his exemplary conduct and thanks God for making him so perfect that he has no further need of divine assistance. Since he fails to ask *anything* of God, he returns home the same way that he came to the Temple: unrepentant, self-righteous, and blind to his own faults. That's a man who *really* needs help.

It's easy to be disgusted by this Pharisee. Our first instinct may be to judge him, as if he's a real person, rather than a fictional character. But, we're not supposed to *judge* him; we're supposed to *learn from him* and his mistakes. He shows us the inherent danger in trying to assess our own righteousness, or lack thereof. It's actually much harder than we might think to get a good read on how we're doing spiritually. So, when we examine our conscience, we shouldn't attempt to grade our current level of holiness, much less compare ourselves to other people. There are two main reasons why any such effort is bound to fail. First, we don't have the necessary *objectivity* to evaluate ourselves accurately. We all have far too many blind spots. Other people can probably assess our spiritual strengths and weaknesses better than we can. Second, there is no objective standard by which to judge how we're doing. If we give ourselves an A+, we're kidding ourselves. But, if we give ourselves a failing grade, then we're not seeing ourselves as God sees us, namely, with the eyes of love and mercy. So, rather than trying in vain to determine how far we have advanced on our spiritual journey, it's better to focus on *what direction we are headed*. Do we see signs of growth and maturity? Have we grown in virtue over the past month or slid backwards?

We also need to disabuse ourselves of the false notion that we can *achieve* righteousness by our good deeds or by our scrupulous observance of God's commandments. As St. Paul said so eloquently, and so insistently, it is *God alone* who justifies us. In other words, he alone has the power to *make* us just, declaring us to be righteous in his sight. Since none of us is perfectly holy, that declaration by God is an act of *mercy*, not an act of judgment. The Lord does not see that we are perfect and declare that to be the case; rather, he sees our *sin* and our *repentance*, and chooses to pardon us. This is what happens when we confess our sins and receive absolution. God declares, through the priest, that he has *removed* our guilt and has *cleansed* us of our sins. He has justified us *in spite of our sins*, just like the tax collector in the parable. The Pharisee, by contrast, goes home *without* being justified, because he does *not* call upon God's mercy. Believing his own efforts to be sufficient, he simply praises his own righteousness and assumes that God has the same exalted opinion of him that he has of himself.

Obviously, none of us wants to be like the Pharisee in this parable. However, we need to be careful not to model ourselves too closely after the tax collector, either. His honesty and repentance are certainly commendable. But, Jesus has not fleshed out the character enough for us to know how he *responds* to God's grace and what he thinks of himself *after* being justified by God's mercy. Does he remain the same pathetic creature that we see in the Temple, too ashamed even to lift his eyes to heaven, or does he feel rescued, redeemed and uplifted by God's love? Repentance is important, but *acceptance* of God's mercy is equally important. There is no virtue in denying the goodness that lies within us, nor in denying God's ability to heal our brokenness. If we wish to become and *remain* justified in the sight of God, then we must humbly acknowledge our sinfulness, while also being *grateful* for the divine grace that our loving God has poured out on us.

God, who judges justly, will surely humble the one who exalts himself. And he will just as surely exalt the one who both *humbles himself* and *trusts in God's mercy*.