

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, October 27, 2013

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on the Gospel Reading for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

THE PERFECT PARISHIONER?

"Father, I go to Mass every Sunday and at least one other day during the week. I donate 10% of my salary to the Church; I even tithe the interest and dividends that I receive. I don't eat meat on Fridays and fast each day of Lent. I do my best to keep the commandments and faithfully follow the guidance of the Church." Any pastor who heard a prospective member describe him/herself that way would be impressed. He might also wonder how he could get that new person involved in the parish.

In this Sunday's Gospel (Luke 18:9-14), Jesus tells a parable that might describe the Jewish version of the perfect parishioner. A Pharisee goes to the Temple and there in his prayer before God he recounts all the good and pious things he is doing. He prays regularly. He fasts twice a week and not just once a year as required. He pays tithes on every bit of his income. He is generous, honest and faithful in his marriage. All that the Pharisee says about himself is true. The Pharisee certainly was a better "parishioner" than the tax collector who was also in the Temple.

Yet Jesus says that the Pharisee did not leave the Temple justified. The problem was not with the good things the Pharisee was doing. The problem was with his attitude. The Pharisee felt he had set himself right with God, justified himself by his pious deeds and his faithful observance of Jewish ritual and law. He was self-saved and self-righteous.

The tax collector, who was also in the Temple, did not try to make himself look good. What could he say? He knew he was a mess – collaborating with the hated Romans, extorting money from his own people. "The tax collector . . . would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" He knew that God's mercy was all that could save him from his sins.

In that parable Jesus teaches us that those who recognize their need for mercy and forgiveness are in a better position before God than those who think their good deeds give them status in the eyes of God. As Jesus puts it, "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." It is God who saves us. We do not save ourselves no matter how perfect a parishioner we think we may be!

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