

April 2016

Dear neighbours,

I remember from childhood grown-ups singing a music-hall song, which went, "Two lovely black eyes; two lovely black eyes. Only for telling a man he was wrong. Two lovely black eyes." Reminiscent of brawls outside pubs, it was popular because it was near the mark.

We don't like to be told we're wrong, not even as children. It was the reason, humanly speaking, why Jesus was crucified. He repeatedly told the Jewish leaders (scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees) that they were wrong in their understanding of the Bible and were teaching people things which would turn them off from God and which just weren't true. Not two black eyes but death they had in store for Him.

As His death became imminent, He taught about the time when He would come again, this time in glorious majesty, as King of kings. "Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17.30) was the keynote of much of his teaching in Luke 17.

The prospect of His return would fill many with alarm. So He went on to teach that it was a first priority to pray. "He spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray and not to faint" (Luke 18.1). We would all find help by praying and would then find coping much easier. You may read what He said in Luke 18.1-8. Jesus also said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened" (Matthew 7.7-8).

Then he went on in Luke 18 verse 9:- "He spake this parable unto certain (guess who?) which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes (a tenth) of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes to heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18.9-14).

Two lovely black eyes – only for telling a man he was wrong. What Jesus highlights here is the greatest mistake people make in their thoughts about God. It is the one that most needs correcting. How to come to God. And how not to come to Him. His correction is often resented, but the golden rule in approaching God is to come with the attitude, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

It is true that many, when they think about God, think that they are all right in His sight. They are wrong. None of us is all right by nature. Compared with others who lie, steal and swear we may think that we are all right. But it is a "selfie" opinion taken of ourselves; it is self-righteousness. We are then the very ones who trust in themselves that they are righteous. While right in the matter of lying, stealing and swearing, maybe, we may fail to see our sexual aberrations, or our cheating or money grubbing, or power seeking. Our pride, our hatred, our cruelty, our defilement.

A sinner of one sort so often despises the sorts of sins which others commit. And here we see the perfect understanding which the Saviour has, namely that self-righteousness is always linked with despising certain others, whose sins are different. But, says the Bible, "all have sinned" (Romans 3.23).

The only approach which our heavenly Father does not turn away is, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

This man, a Jewish taxgatherer, a traitor in Jewish eyes for taking Jewish money and handing it over to the Romans, may well indeed have been a cheat and extortioner. But he came in a frame of mind which meant business with God. Was God prepared to help Him? Could God forgive him? Would God accept him? Could God change him? Whether he had these things in mind or not he was clearly weighed down by his sins and afraid of God's judgment, else he would not have cried out for mercy.

By implication, he did receive mercy; and all who come like him to God will also find that mercy. He is representative of the right approach to God and we should learn what it is that Jesus is teaching when He says, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other." He went home with a weight off his conscience, a relieved person.

What had happened? God had pardoned Him, lifted him up (exalted him). And sent him home rejoicing. A new man.

We use the word "justifying ourselves" to mean giving our excuses for our behaviour. But the Bible uses the word to explain what God does. He justifies the sinner. It doesn't mean He believes excuses; this man made none. It means He has counted the perfection of the Saviour to him and he is now a new creature in Him, belongs to Him and is pardoned through the fact that the Saviour bore his guilt, and the punishment of that guilt, when He died on the cross. Repentance is expressed by his smiting his breast; a guilty conscience declared by not lifting up his eyes.

We are told that the Pharisee "stood and prayed thus with himself." His prayer went no further than the ceiling. It was an exercise in self-justification to make him feel good, however mistaken he was. It was not regarded by God. Even the giving away of a tenth of his income did not make him right.

"Without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11.6). God's own righteousness is counted to the sinner who cries, "Be merciful to me." "The righteousness of God (comes) by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; (but) being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3.22-24) God accepts and pardons the guilty sinner.

Our church welcomes you to seek the Saviour among us on Sundays at 10.45am and 2pm.

Yours affectionately,