**Sermon: *(Don Schultz, Lakeside Lutheran High School)***

Luke 18:9-14 “WHAT IS LENT?” (Ash Wednesday sermon)  
  
“There’s nothing wrong with me,” the man says.  
“But sir, you’ve just been in a terrible car accident. You’re bleeding and have some deep bruises. There may be internal damage!”  
“There’s nothing wrong with me!”  
“At least have a doctor check you out, sir. We have an ambulance right here – it wouldn’t take very long..”  
“I told you, there’s nothing wrong with me!”  
“But sir.”  
Then the man walks away from the car accident. His wife picks him up and drives him home. Later he dies from internal bleeding.  
  
“There’s nothing wrong with me” can be a dangerous thing to say. Spiritually, it is probably the worst thing a person could possibly say. For a person to stand before God and say, “There’s nothing wrong with me” – that’s incompatible with Christianity, and unacceptable to God. What is the opposite of “there’s nothing wrong with me”? Wouldn’t it be “there’s everything wrong with me”? According to the Bible, a Christian is someone who stands before God and says “there’s everything wrong with me.” A Christian is also someone who says, “But Jesus Christ has overcome my sin. He has taken away all the things that are wrong with me.”  
  
Today is Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent. What exactly is Lent? What’s it all about? We find the answer as we focus on a story Jesus tells about two opposite people – one who said “there’s nothing wrong with me” and one who said “there’s everything wrong with me.” One of them represents what Lent isn’t, and one of them represents what Lent is. Tonight, we focus on these two people as we seek to learn better what Lent really is, and what it means to us today.

**Luke 18:9-14**Jesus told this story to people who were confident in their own righteousness, and looked down on everybody else. “Two men” Jesus said “went up to the temple to pray – a Pharisee and a tax collector.” Remember, the Pharisees were the people who lived good, clean lives. The tax collectors were people who swindled and intimidated others out of their money. Both of them came to church – went to the temple to pray. “The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.” Maybe you can sum up his prayer this way: “I thank you, God, that there’s nothing wrong with me.”  
  
Maybe he was right! He was a good citizen. He obeyed the law, lived a moral and upright life. He even did the religious things you were supposed to do – he gave ten percent of his income to church, and he even fasted twice a week. Really, there’s wasn’t much wrong with him.  
  
Then Jesus focuses on the tax collector in his story – the opposite of the Pharisee. He had been stealing money from people his whole life – ruining the lives of others so that he could live it up. He knew that his whole life had been a disaster, and that he deserved to go to hell when he died. Jesus says that “the tax collector stood at a distance” – he wouldn’t even walk up to the front of the temple – “He would not even look up to heaven” – he was so ashamed of his sin – “but beat his breast and said, ‘God have mercy on me, a sinner.’” His prayer was the opposite of the Pharisee’s, wasn’t it – maybe you can sum it up this way, “God, there’s everything wrong with me. Help me.”  
  
Jesus goes on to say that the sinful tax collector was the one that was forgiven by God, and not the perfect Pharisee. Why? Jesus tells us: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” The Pharisee was proud, looking down on others, exalting himself. The tax collector was humble, sorry for his sins. What is Jesus saying there? Is Jesus saying that you earn the forgiveness of sins by being humble? “Look at how humble that tax collector is,” says God. “That tax collector deserves to be forgiven, because he is so humble!” Is that how it works?   
  
That’s what a lot of people think, but that’s not how it works. If that’s why God forgives you, then your salvation would be completely dependent on you, and your level of humility. Then, you could never be sure if you’re forgiven by God or not, because you will never know if you have been humble enough for God to forgive you.  
  
The truth of the matter is, neither the Pharisee nor the tax collector deserved God’s forgiveness. The Pharisee didn’t because he was conceited and self-righteous – thought he was better than everybody else, thought he was perfect. The tax collector didn’t deserve God’s forgiveness because of the terrible life he had led. Neither one deserved to be forgiven by God.  
  
God forgives people purely out of his mercy. As a result of his undeserved love, God forgives people. God forgives people because Jesus Christ has taken away the sins of the world. Because of that sacrifice Jesus made on the cross – cleansing the world of all of its sin, he offers forgiveness to all. In this story, God offered forgiveness to both the Pharisee and the tax collector. But only the tax collector received God’s forgiveness. Why? Because, in his mercy, God chooses to forgive only those who humble themselves before him. Those who stand before God and say, “There’s everything wrong with me. Lord have mercy on me. I am a sinner” – those humble people who recognize their sin, recognize their need for God’s help – those are the people that receive God’s forgiveness. Not because they’re earning it by grovelling, but because God shows undeserved love to all who are humble and sorry for their sins.  
  
This humble tax collector is a picture of Lent. This proud Pharisee is the opposite of Lent. Which one are you? How will you observe Lent this year? Do you plan to act extra religious? Many people observe Lent that way: “Maybe I will give up something for Lent – I will no longer watch my favourite TV show for Lent. I will no longer eat chocolate for Lent. I will no longer listen to my favourite CD for Lent. Look at how religious I am. God must be extra happy with me as I refrain from eating chocolate and listening to that favourite CD.”  
  
Is Lent a time of self-denial? This evening, Jesus speaks to us through his Word, and he tells us that Lent *is* a time of self-denial, a time to give up something. But Jesus isn’t concerned with chocolate and CD’s – he’s concerned with what’s going on in our hearts. Lent is a time to give up those sins in our lives. It’s a time to give up the sin of hypocrisy – acting like a Christian on the outside, but being proud and self-centred on the inside. Lent is a time to give up the sin of duplicity – being a Christian on Sundays, but being an unbeliever on Fridays. It’s a time to give up the sin of being lethargic – “someday I’ll get my act together spiritually. Right now, though, I’m just too busy focusing on everything except God.” What is Lent? Lent is that man who stood in the back of the temple, and looked down at the ground, and prayed to God, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Lent is a time for us to be like that man, to give up our sinful habits, our sinful attitudes, to stand before God and to ask him to forgive us, to wash our sins away, and to empower us to turn away from our sinful past and to live new lives that are dedicated to God.  
  
And after we lay our sins before Christ, Lent is also a time to give up our guilty feelings. Just as that tax collector walked home justified before God, so can we walk away, knowing that we have been forgiven. “I no longer have to feel guilty about my sins. I no longer have to beat myself up about the way I’ve been living. I have been forgiven. My sins have been washed away by the blood of Jesus Christ. I can start over. I can work hard to be someone who obeys God, who worships God every day with the way I live my life.”  
  
Lent is an attitude, isn’t it. It’s an attitude of honesty and humility, as we confess our sins to God. But Lent is also an attitude of relief and joy, knowing that our sins have been forgiven, that our slate has been wiped clean as we seek to serve our God with our lives.   
  
The next seven weeks are a time for us to look deep into our hearts, to think about our life and how you’ve been living it. What sin are you going to give up for Lent, and for the rest of your life? Jesus will forgive that sin, wash that sin away at the cross. And Jesus promises to empower you to live a new life that glorifies you.   
  
If people want to temporarily give up certain things for Lent as a sign of love for their Saviour, that’s fine. But what Christ is really concerned about is what’s in your heart. Tonight, we begin that long walk to the cross, where we see just how serious and terrible our sins are. But there we also see how wonderful and deep our Saviour’s love is for us. The road doesn’t end there, but at the empty tomb, where Jesus rises from the dead to prove that all of your sins have been forgiven.

God bless you as you begin your Lenten journey. Amen.