

There are only two types of people in this world. Those who like tattoos and those who do not. And what I mean by this is, there are people who would never, ever, ever get a tattoo. The mere notion is abhorrent. And they compare themselves to the people who get tattoos and feel superior for never having received one. And then there are those who love to get tattoos. And they can never have enough tattoos. It is not enough for them to have one tattoo or two. They go regularly to the tattoo artist in supplication that their skin be transformed into a work of art. But so, this is in our Gospel lesson for today. First, we should not compare ourselves disdainfully to others; and second, we should compare ourselves only to what the Tattoo Artist can make of us, and furthermore, according to the Book of Revelation, there are only three tattoos that we should desire to have. And I promise you, by the end of this discussion today, you will want to possess these three tattoos. And so, remember this, there is only one person we compare ourselves to and three tattoos that we wish to attain.

Because today in our Gospel, we see two people comparing themselves. The first is the Pharisee. The religious person who is looked up to in the community. And he is at the temple praying, and he prays, in so many words, "Dear God, thank you that I am not like that tattooed tax-collector." But you will note, that the measure with which he is comparing himself are outward signs of quote-unquote "living righteously," and with performing "good works." The Pharisee is trying to justify himself before God by the gross sins he is not committing and the good deeds he is performing. He is not a thief, or a rogue, or an adulterer, or a tax collector. The tax collectors were known for collecting more than they should and pocketing the difference. And so, they were disdained for ripping off their neighbors whom they lived amongst. And so, the Pharisee is standing before God and comparing himself to someone overtly sinful and is feeling quite good about himself before God. In addition, he reminds God that he fasts twice a week and gives tithes. And so, on top of not being overtly bad, the Pharisee is openly doing good works. He probably, during his fasting, was doing what Jesus warns against in Mathew 6:16 when he tells us: "When you fast, do not be somber like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting." This Pharisee was one of those making open display of good deeds before God in order to be seen by others and to feel superior to others.

But then we see another person today. One whom we are told goes home justified before God. And it is the tax collector, and he is also presenting himself before God, because this was what the temple location was for. God was present in the Holy of Holies, and this tax collector is coming before God and is standing, we are told, far off. He is standing far off because he does not feel worthy to approach God. And we are told he is also beating his breast. The breast or heart is regarded as the seat of sin, and hence the act of beating one's breast is one of grief or contrition. We hear this terminology in Isaiah 32:12-13 where it says: "Beat your breasts for the pleasant fields, for the fruitful vines, and for the land of my people, a land overgrown with thorns and briars—yes, mourn for all houses of merriment and for this city of revelry." In Isaiah, beating one's breast was to mourn over impending judgement. This tax collector knows he must one day stand before God's judgment. He is aware of this. And we need to be aware of this. But so what he does next, is nothing to justify or excuse himself, but rather he says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" He makes no excuses. He knows he cannot justify himself. This is the key to the Kingdom. We recognize that in and of ourselves we can do nothing to be justified by God other than to ask for and receive God's mercy. And God can be merciful when we stand on what Christ has done for us and not our own righteousness. And the literal translation from the Greek is, "God, be merciful to me, *the* sinner!" The man does not say, "a" sinner, but "the" sinner. Meaning he is not comparing himself to anyone else. He is not listing himself amongst other sinners whom he has identified, he is not comparing himself with another human being, he is identifying himself as *the* sinner in comparison to his Holy God. This is a mono y mono comparison. One on one. We should only be comparing ourselves to one person, and that is Christ Jesus. And when we do this, our continual response will be, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" This should be our daily walk. We walk with our eyes on Christ alone as the bar of comparison, and this will keep us both humble and walking straight. And we will not condemn another, for each of us to our own maker will stand or fall. Paul says this to us in Romans 14:4: "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand." Lord Jesus alone makes us stand. And so, we thank God that God is able to make others stand, and we stand before God comparing ourselves *only* to Christ Jesus.

And some may say to me, “But Heather, we can never live up to Christ Jesus and so we will always feel completely abased in comparing ourselves to Christ.” And yes, that is true. But, in so doing, we will also perhaps even unawares, grow more and more up into Christ. Ask for the moon and you may get the outer atmosphere. Ask for the Sun and you may get to Mars. It is okay to ask God to grow us up into perfection though we never fully arrive. This is what God wants for us – to reach for the Son, “S-O-N.” Not for self-righteousness, but for God’s righteousness. And we need to assess ourselves in relation to Christ in order to do this. This is why the Psalmist prayed: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my concerns. See if there is any offensive way in me; lead me in the way everlasting.” We present ourselves before God’s scrutiny each day, asking him to show us what needs to be corrected, and this is how we are led in Christ’s everlasting way. It is a mono y mono walk, a one-on-one walk, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2).

This is how Paul was able to honestly assess himself before God. Given today, at first glance, it might seem Paul is being self-righteous, because he says: “I have fought the good fight, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day.” This at first glance could sound overconfident. But there is a confidence that comes from comparing ourselves falsely to false standards of worldly gods and values and there is confidence that is grown up in us by fixing our eyes on the one true God, and Paul has such confidence. Paul did not live for himself or for this life. Paul was “poured out as a libation,” we are told today. Imitating our Lord who was first poured out for us. If we live our lives poured out as a libation for God, we will have confidence before God because our hearts will not condemn us (1 John 3:21). That same heart that the tax collector was beating into submission is the same heart that God speaks to and guides us through. Because the Holy Spirit is within us. Paul walked a walk whereby he daily picked up his cross and he has confidence before God. This is the place that we want to be. This is how we as believers need to be walking. Keeping in mind we are reading a letter from Paul who knows he is about to die. And we know this because Paul says, “the time of my departure has come.” And may we have the same confidence to face our own deaths. Knowing we

have fought the good fight and finished the race Lord Jesus set before us. *And* knowing we will receive three tattoos.

“But what tattoos *are* these?” you may ask. And I’m so glad you asked. The three tattoos are those that accompany the crown of righteousness Paul speaks of which is the same crown Jesus speaks of to the Church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3 verses 11 and 12. This is where Jesus says to us, “I am coming soon, hold fast to what you have so that no one will take your crown. The one who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he will never again leave it.” And so we see Jesus, encouraging us to overcome, so that when he comes again, we will not only come to the temple to stand before God, but we will be honored within it. As a pillar in the temple of God. And Jesus is telling us this will happen to us when we overcome. This is a growing into the crown – into Jesus’ crown of righteousness. It is the only adorning honor we should persevere to receive. It is the condition of comparing ourselves to Jesus so that when we see him, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2). As a result of coming to him daily in supplication to be re-created into his image, for when we live like this, we shall be exalted as Jesus says today because we will have walked through life as humbled before our God. *And* we will receive three tattoos.

Jesus says to us in Revelation 3:12 of those who have held fast to receive the crown and overcome, Jesus says: “Upon him I will write the name of My God, and the name of the city of my God (the new Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven from My God), and My new name.” These are the three tattoos. Jesus will write upon us the name of the Father, the New Jerusalem, and his own New Name. And as such, we live as tattoo lovers for Jesus.

Because I don’t know about you, but I struggle continually to this day with the sin of comparing myself to others. I try to compare my spiritual walk to that of others when I should be looking only at Christ. And furthermore, I used to be even more vain in that I would compare not only my spiritual walk but my physical attributes to that of others. Which is one of the back-handed blessings of aging. When you are young you care how you look and as you age you become wise enough to care not. But when I was younger, I hated my forehead because it was large. And I envied my friends that had nice little widow peak

hairlines on their regular sized foreheads. But when I heard Jesus say to me in Revelation 22:4 that when he comes again, I would “see His face, and His name will be on [my] forehead,” then I knew, that I could have hope about my defective forehead ... and every other *defect* that made me feel less than, because *Jesus has written His name across my defects. And yours.*

And herein lies our hope. To receive three tattoos from Jesus. Because there are only two types of people in the world. Those who despise tattoos and those who live receive them. *Amen.*