

Sermon preached at OCC, 26 October 2025

*Merciful God, you see us as we truly are, and yet you welcome us with grace. As we hear your Word today, quiet the pride in our hearts, and open us to the truth of your mercy. May your Spirit speak through your Word, that we may go home justified by your love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Living Faith - Luke 18:9–14*

Last week, I attended General Assembly 25 in Christchurch. Throughout the week, the weather was glorious — until the final day, when an emergency was declared across Canterbury, with Christchurch at its centre. My flight to Auckland on Thursday afternoon was cancelled and rescheduled four times afterwards. Finally, I arrived home on Friday morning around half past twelve — tired but grateful.

The theme of GA25 was “*We Believe*,” as shown in its logo. It wasn’t just a statement of doctrine, but an invitation to reflect on what it truly means to live by faith — who we are as people of Christ, and what shapes our identity as the Church today. There were no keynote speakers, but a rich collection of testimonies — stories of humble, faithful journeys that revealed how people encounter God in ordinary life. Their stories reminded me that faith is not just a declaration, but a way of being — a relationship grounded in trust and grace.

Today’s reading from Luke’s Gospel is deeply connected with this theme of *living faith*. It follows immediately after the parable of the persistent widow and the unjust judge. Both parables concern prayer, but they do so in different ways. The widow’s story teaches us to be persistent and trusting in God’s care. The parable we read today — of the Pharisee and the tax collector — teaches us *how* to pray: not with pride or self-assurance, but with humility and honesty before God.

Jesus tells of two men who go up to the temple to pray. One, a Pharisee, thanks God that he is not like others — thieves, rogues, adulterers — and especially not like the tax collector beside him. He lists his achievements and religious observances. The tax collector, on the other hand, stands at a distance. He cannot even lift his eyes to heaven, but beats his chest and prays, “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*” Jesus concludes, “This man went down to his home justified rather than the other.”

It is a striking reversal. God, Jesus says, is not impressed by outward righteousness or confident performance. God looks at the heart — at the honesty and humility of one who knows their need of grace.

In this parable we find two contrasting ideas: *sin* and *righteousness*. In Greek, the word for sin is ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*), which literally means “missing the mark” or “falling short of a goal.” In classical Greek, it described an archer who missed the target. But in the New Testament, it takes on a moral and spiritual meaning — not just an error, but a failure to live up to God’s purpose for us.

Paul echoes this in *Romans 3:23*: “For all have sinned (*hamarton*) and fall short of the glory of God.” Sin, then, is not merely doing wrong; it is missing the purpose for which we were made — to live in right relationship with God and with others.

The opposite word is δικαιοσύνη (*dikaioynē*), meaning “righteousness.” It doesn’t mean perfection or moral superiority, but *being made right* again — being restored to a relationship with God. In Scripture, *hamartia* and *dikaioynē* are not about keeping or breaking rules, but about the state of our relationship with God. *Sin* breaks that relationship; *righteousness* restores it.

And that’s the heart of Jesus’ parable. It is not the Pharisee’s outward obedience that justifies him — it is the tax collector’s honest turning toward God that opens the way to restoration. God alone sees whose relationship with Him is broken and whose is restored.

When we apply this to our life as the Church, the parable invites us to ask hard but faithful questions. We may pray every day, come to church each Sunday, and serve our community in many ways. Yet if our faith becomes self-assured — if we begin to trust in our own goodness more than in God’s mercy — we risk missing the mark ourselves.

At GA25, the Assembly reflected deeply on this kind of question: what it means for the Church to live in humble relationship with God and with the world. We explored this through conversations, not speeches — through listening as much as talking. That in itself was an act of faith: trusting that God speaks not only through leaders or experts, but through the honest sharing of the people of God together.

In that spirit, I want to invite us today to enter a short time of reflection and conversation. Let's continue what began at GA25 — asking together how our faith might grow deeper, more authentic, and more alive in our community.

Here are two questions for us to consider:

1. What does a healthy congregation look like, and how do we hold ourselves — as parish and presbytery — accountable to that?
2. What would need to change — locally, regionally, and nationally — for the Church to better engage and disciple those aged 15–30?

You may wish to take a few moments to reflect quietly, or share your thoughts in small groups.

(A group discussion and sharing time)

To conclude: the Pharisee stood tall, but his prayer never left the walls of his own pride. The tax collector stood at a distance, but his prayer reached the heart of God. Living faith begins when we realise our need of grace and open our lives to God's restoring love.

May our prayers, our worship, and our life together always come from that place — not self-assurance, but humble trust in the God who restores all things.

Amen.