

Living Right With God

By

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Good morning.

As you're aware, Pastor Matt is on vacation now for 2 weeks and I must say I'm very grateful for the privilege to preach for you this week. Bill Craig will be following next week. We trust and pray that Pastor Matt and his family will be blessed with this vacation.

I was struggling for a time with what to preach about today. Then one day, while I was getting ready for work, this message came to me in its entirety. And the more I thought about it, I realized this really is more of Part 2 to my last sermon.

If you're interested, and for those who weren't here, you can access it on our website and look for it there. I preached it on March 2 this year, entitled "Getting Right with God".

Pastor Matt began a brief survey of the parables in the Gospel of Luke earlier this month. And in the Providence of God, we looked at the Parable of Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18 in my last sermon. In that parable, Jesus declared the repentant Tax Collector to be justified, and the Pharisee was not. And, not surprisingly, his listeners were extremely offended.

In that sermon, we looked together at the topic of getting right with God. That's what the theological term "justification" is all about. That is, how is that sinners can stand before a Holy God and not be sent directly to hell. God cannot just turn His back on our sin and say it's forgiven. Something actually has to be done about our sin, not just dismissed. That's what the cross is all about.

At the cross, our sin is actually transferred to Christ and His righteousness is really transferred to us. So when we believe and trust in Jesus Christ, that one act of faith achieves for us our justification. As believers, we can now stand before a Holy God wearing the righteousness of Jesus Christ like a cloak. Because, in and of myself, my own "righteousness" is nothing more than a filthy rag. God the Father as Judge looks at the sinner cloaked in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and declares "justified".

That's court room language, as you can see. It's technical and theological on one level, but to the Tax Collector in Jesus' parable, it was far more. Far more!

If you recall, the Tax Collector was standing far off, beating his chest and begging God for mercy because he was a sinner – a profound sinner – and he knew it. And he also knew his only hope

was that God would turn aside his wrath on that basis of His promises – on the basis of the Mercy Seat – on the basis of the sprinkled blood on the mercy seat.

The Tax Collector's plea was: "O God, please be merciful to me, the sinner." Literally, he's saying, "O God, please be mercy-seated to me, the sinner, and turn aside your wrath that I truly do deserve."

And God delighted to do so. Jesus declared that it was the Tax Collector who went home justified and not the Pharisee in that parable.

But the Christian life is far more than being saved from the wrath of God that is yet to come – His ultimate judgment. Our justification – our embracing Christ – our getting right with God is just the start of the Christian life. It's just the beginning.

From that moment on until the day we die and are glorified, we are being sanctified. We are to grow in our faith. We need to grow up, don't we?

That's what sanctification is – growing up in our faith. And that's what I want us to look at today: living right with God and living right for God

The text for today is from Luke 7:36-50.

Text read out loud

The Word of God for the people of God: thanks be to God.

Let's pray: Almighty God,
To Whom all hearts are open,
All desires known,
And from Whom no secrets are hid.
Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
By the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit
So that we may perfectly love You
And worthily magnify Your Holy Name
Through Christ our Lord,
Amen.

I actually preached on this text back in 2016, but the focus here is not a repeat of that message.

In this text, we see a woman washing Jesus' feet with her tears and wiping them with her hair, and a Pharisee in utter disgust with the spectacle.

As you read the text, there's little doubt this woman was a prostitute. Different versions of the bible translate verse 37 similarly, but with slight variations, but the conclusion is obvious:

“A woman of the city, who was a sinner” (ESV)

“A woman in the city who was a sinner” (NKJV, NASB, NRSV)

“A woman who had lived a sinful life in that town” (NIV)

And then we have a Pharisee, named Simon ... by the way, this is not Simon Peter, the disciple of Jesus.

To understand the context of this passage, we need to look at the texts prior to it.

At this point in Luke’s Gospel, Luke is addressing the bigger theme of “who is Jesus?” in the understanding of the people of the day.

If you look back into Luke 6 and 7, we see Jesus speaking to the people on the plain in His role as Prophet much like He did in the Sermon on the Mount. He then performs some miracles and so confirms his role as Prophet in the sight of the people.

But then, interestingly, we see John the Baptist, while he was in prison, questioning Jesus about His identity: “are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Luke 7:19).

Jesus replies to John’s disciples: “go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk...the deaf hear...” and so on (Luke 7:21-22). Jesus is telling John that He is fulfilling his role as Messiah as prophesied by Isaiah.

Then Jesus talks to the people about John the Baptist as being the herald to the promised Messiah, and concludes by saying:

“For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine and you say ‘He has a demon’. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners”.’” Luke 7:33-34

In the sight of the Pharisees, Jesus just can’t win, can he?

And in our text for today, Simon **IS** one of those Pharisees. Why on earth would any of them ever invite Jesus to dinner? Probably in an attempt to trap Jesus, which was a common enough theme wasn’t it? Whatever the motive, he invited Jesus for dinner and Jesus accepted.

When Simon saw the woman washing the feet of Jesus and that He wasn’t dismissing her, Simon was appalled and said to himself “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.” (Luke 7:39)

You can see it, can’t you? Just from the language Luke uses. “...what kind of woman she is – that she is a sinner.” The tone being one of total disgust.

Just like the Pharisee who looked down his nose at the tax collector in my last message, Pharisees consider “sinners” to be subhuman, not worthy of respect, time, or acknowledgement ... or, especially, compassion.

And since Pharisees would have no contact with “sinners”, Simon was certain no authentic Prophet of God would ever have contact with them, either.

Ha! Got you, you fake!!

Jesus, knowing Simon’s thoughts, says he has something to tell him and then proceeds with a very short parable, putting Simon on the spot:

“Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him 500 denarii, and the other 50. Neither had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?” (Luke 7:41-42)

A denarius was a coin worth about a day’s wages and here we have one debtor owing 10 times that of the other, neither of whom could repay their debt.

Simon can’t help but admit that great forgiveness produces great love.

Jesus then turns Simon’s attention to the woman as he applies the parable’s truth to the scene at hand.

Common courtesy for guests at that time was for the host to offer a bowl of water for the guest to wash the dirt off his feet, greet the guest with a kiss on the cheek, and place olive oil on the guest’s head.

Simon had failed on every count to offer any of these common courtesies.

The woman instead, took on the part of a maidservant and with her tears washed Jesus’ feet, used her hair to dry His feet and kissed them, then anointed them with expensive perfume.

In our text, Luke tells us that when the woman heard that Jesus was there, she came in search of Him. There must have been plenty of people about for her to weave her way in unseen, otherwise Simon would never have let her in ... she’s a “sinner” after all.

We need to understand that in doing this, the woman was expressing deep sorry for her sin. Her tears would have ruined whatever make-up she had on, and her hair previously done up was now unbound and was being used as a towel.

Plainly, this woman understood that Jesus was the promised Messiah, that Jesus was the One who would solve the problem of her sinfulness. That Jesus, somehow, would take away her sin. That she could be fully and truly forgiven.

And so, in her actions, she also expressed considerable affection for Christ. The tears were tears of joy as well as sorry. Any concern she had for what others thought of her paled into insignificance as she kissed his feet with adoration and affection, finishing off by anointing his feet with the expensive perfume she had hung round her neck in an alabaster jar.

While Simon had looked on this in horror, Jesus obviously took delight in it, accepting her adoration for what it was: profound and deep love. How do we know that? Because Jesus tells us so.

Jesus says: “I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven – **for she loved much**. But he who has been forgiven little, loves little.”

It would be a serious error, though, to conclude that this woman had been forgiven *because* of her love for Jesus. The context of the parable itself clearly shows that love is a fruit of gracious forgiveness: debt is canceled, love follows.

Indeed, the entire bible is clear about that, too.

The Apostle John, for example, says it point blank in his first letter:

*“We love **because** He first loved us” (1 John 4:19)*

This idea, though:

Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little,
but whoever has been forgiven much, loves much.

is the foundation of our sanctification.

God calls every one of us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that love is fundamentally rooted in our personal forgiveness of sin. Sadly, I think we live in a time when far too many professing Christians have forgotten just how much we have been forgiven and live a life showing far too little real love.

To be frank with you, it’s something that troubles me deeply. It did back in 2016 when I first touched on this subject, but as I look out over the cultural landscape and across the globe, the lack of love seems to be growing, not shrinking. Not everywhere and not with every person, to be certain, but it sure looks to me like love is growing cold across the planet.

Instead, real hatred seems to be growing in leaps and bounds. Doesn’t it seem that way to you?

Antisemitism, for example, is exploding across the world and support for terrorism or another intifada grows.

When I look on (anti)-social media, so often I see comments from professing Christians that are atrocious. Filled with contempt and hostility against a particular politician and the dialog that's triggered is just as hostile. There's no room for discussion or healthy debate, just the ever-present "I'm right, you're a ____" attitude. Or framed in such a way that disagreement is proof of bigotry or a phobia of some sort.

I hardly ever bother commenting on social media anymore; I just watch and listen. We'll come back to this a little later.

Back to our text ...

The woman showed her love for Jesus in the only way she could right then. Not caring what anyone thought of her, she expressed remorse for her life of sin, very much like the tax collector in the previous sermon who could only stand far off, beat his breast and begged for God's forgiveness: "have mercy on me, O God, the sinner".

The only hope he and this woman have is the tender-loving, forgiving mercy of God. But it's all they need, too!

And just as He did with the woman caught in adultery in John, chapter 8, Jesus looked down at the woman and extended His compassionate forgiveness. While at the same time, knowing perfectly well, that the forgiveness provided will come at the expense of His own life.

I always marvel at these passages ... while Jesus extends forgiveness and mercy He is consciously aware that it comes at the expense of His own life.

Oh, what manner of love is this! As it says in Romans...

*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)*

And that's the point, isn't it?

The tax collector, the woman caught in adultery, and the woman in today's passage ... they all faced the fact that they were sinners and they came seeking forgiveness without any self-justification whatsoever.

They came with just the root attitude that they were sinners – serious sinners – disgusting sinners – vile sinners, and their only hope is the gracious, loving, tender mercy of God.

And the answer from Christ was the same, wasn't it?

Of course I forgive you, I will pay the penalty for you, now go and sin no more.

And just like this woman, their response to Christ's forgiveness was to love Him.

Is it any different for us? Seriously, we need to make this personal.

It's so easy to trivialize the sin in our lives. To make it into something less serious than it is. Let's be honest with ourselves. Is there anyone here who hasn't done that? Who is doing it today?

I'm not pointing fingers at anyone, and even if I were, there are always 3 fingers pointing back at me. Speck of dust, meet plank in eye!

I'm just saying we need to take a serious look at our inner selves.

I'll be frank with you - there are times when I look inside, I just disgust myself. Are you any different? Honestly – do you ever look inside yourself this way?

But why even bother to bring this up?

Well, first of all, we can't hide it from God. He knows the full extent of our sin better than we do.

But Jesus gives us the second reason in today's text. He plainly says that those who have been forgiven much, love much; and those who have been forgiven little, love little.

Loving is the first fruit of forgiveness. And the more we remember just how much our forgiveness cost Christ – just how much He suffered because of our sin – the more we will appreciate it and the more we will love.

So, what does this love look like?

Well, to nobody's surprise, the bible tells us:

"If you love me, you will obey me" (John 14:15)

And

"Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me" (John 14:21)

And again,

"Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11)

And, of course, we have the great love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13 which we'll come back to in a few minutes.

Authentic love is directed in two directions: first to God, shown outwardly in our obedience to Him, and second to one another, in loving our neighbor. In genuinely loving people.

Let's not forget, though, that each of us is made in the image of God, so that in a certain limited sense, by loving one another, we **are** loving God.

It's also important for us to remember that God sent us His Holy Spirit at Pentecost to reside within every believer. He's here, right now within us.

And what's the primary job of the Holy Spirit? Anyone...?

That's right. To sanctify us:

- to make us more like Christ
- to discipline us when we wander and to tenderly, but firmly bring us back to the right path
- to comfort in our grief
- to give us strength in our trials
- to guide us into all truth (John 16:13)
- to give us the right words when we just don't know what to say
- to testify with our spirit that we are God's children (Romans 8:16)
- to pray for us with groans that words cannot express when we are weak (Romans 8:26)
- to produce in us the Fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)
- to enable our Spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12)
 - take note here – we all have different spiritual gifts and we ought to know what they are
 - but the fruit of the Spirit is singular – the bible does not say the FRUITS of the Spirit ARE; no, it says the FRUIT is the spirit IS...all Christians are to produce the whole complex of the singular Fruit of the Spirit...
 - Love – Joy – Peace – Patience – Kindness – Goodness – Faithfulness – Gentleness – and Self-Control (Gal 5:22)

The Holy Spirit is actively at work in us to produce this Fruit. And when we're keeping in step with the Spirit – when we're living by the Spirit – we will not gratify the desires of our sinful nature.

Unfortunately, when we wander away as our inherent nature wants us to, we do gratify our sinful nature.

It's a real battle. A real struggle. Do you feel that struggle in your life? I know I do. And I lose far too often. It drives me nuts! But the Spirit is patient with me and guides me back.

Seriously, though, how real is that struggle to you?

Do you trivialize it? I have.

How often do you concern yourself with your present, ongoing sin? There are certainly, sadly many times when I don't.

Do you sin in your anger and justify it? I do.

Even the Apostle Paul wrestled with this as a mature Christian. In his Magnum Opus, the book Romans, he was so frustrated with it that he said:

"I do not understand what I do [present tense]. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15)

"What I do is not the good I want to do; no the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. (Romans 7:19)

"[Oh,] what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24-25)

Now, of course, he went on to talk about the ongoing struggle of the sinful nature vs the spiritual nature and rested in knowing that his defense and hope was the Holy Spirit within – Chapter 8 of Romans.

The point being, as Christians, we need to face these things head-on, just as the Apostle Paul did. Sometimes we need a friend to talk to about it and other times, just be on our knees weeping before the Lord.

Not dealing with it is simply not an option for the Christian.

By not dealing with it just invites the stern discipline of the Holy Spirit – or perhaps just indicates the absence of genuine faith and instead just shows that the profession of faith was, in fact, a false one.

James tells us plainly that genuine faith inevitably – not might or perhaps, but inevitably – will produce fruit ... the fruit of the Spirit. Indeed, he says that "faith" that does not produce fruit is a dead faith:

"What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such a faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

The fruit produced is the Fruit of the Spirit. And the first in the list of the singular Fruit is love ... love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and so on.

However, unlike our justification – the beginning of our Christian life when we’re raised from spiritual death to spiritual life – our sanctification is a cooperative venture. We work **with** the Holy Spirit. We walk **with** God.

And, so, we need to be working **with** the Spirit in producing His fruit. In growing in our love for our neighbors.

Fortunately, God has given us the tools for the job: the Word (Bible study), prayer, fellowship, and the sacraments, just to name a few. Commonly referred to as the means of grace.

Again, love will only grow when we recall and remember just how much we have been forgiven, indeed, how much we are still being forgiven!

Which is why it’s so important for Christians to be honest with their sin and not trivialize it.

Last week, we partook of Holy Communion. That’s one way to remember just how much we have been forgiven. What did Jesus say?

“This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me ... this cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” (1 Corinthians 11:24-25)

The cup Jesus gave His disciple is referred to as “the cup of divine blessing”. Jesus did not drink it – remember, He said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He drank it anew in His Father’s kingdom.

Why not?

Because He was about to drink a different cup: the “cup of divine cursing” or the “Cup of Wrath”.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed before God three times: “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me...” (Luke 22:42)

“And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.” (Luke 22:44)

In Jesus’ human nature, He ate, drank, felt physical pain, cried ... and bled. And here we have Jesus – again, in His human nature – experiencing emotional anguish so severe that it caused His body to have a reaction few others have ever experienced. It’s actually a rare medical phenomenon called “hematidrosis” in which capillaries in the sweat glands burst and the sweat becomes bloody. The skin also becomes extremely tender to the touch.

It was just the beginning of Jesus' physical suffering before He was crucified and died.

But why was He in so much anguish? I believe He was experiencing the greatest temptation of His earthly life in His human nature.

Because He knew what the cup was. He knew exactly what was coming. He was staring into the cup of divine wrath and what He was about to endure on the cross and He really didn't want to go through it. He resisted that temptation with all His strength to the point His sweat was bloody.

When was the last time we resisted sin that hard? But Jesus did. He had to if He were to be the spotless Lamb of God destined for sacrifice and remain sinless to give us His righteousness.

The bible speaks several times about the Cup of Wrath, notably in Isaiah 51:17-23 and Revelation, chapter 14.

*"If anyone worships the beast and his image ... he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath."
Revelation 14: 9-10*

Jesus Christ was looking at the full-strength fury of God's wrath, and He knew precisely what that was.

As our divinely appointed Scapegoat, in His sinless human nature, He was about to take on humanity's sin and come face-to-face with the curse of God.

Let's make this personal, shall we?

My personal sin, your personal sin, the sin of the world is handed over – imputed – transferred to Jesus on the cross. And then God the Father looks down from heaven and sees not His Son, but instead the most concentrated mass of sin and evil the universe has ever known.

And at that moment, He unleashed His fury upon it. He poured out His wrath on His Son, treating Him as though He had committed every single one of those sins even though He had committed none of them. That's what it means for Jesus to be our Scapegoat.

Jesus cried out from the pit of hell: "My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?" Because He really was forsaken.

And in the Garden, that's what Jesus knew was coming.

I find it fascinating that Luke tells us that immediately before His sweat was like drops of blood, an angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened him.

When we face trials, don't we find encouragement and strength to endure and get through them when we're reminded of their purpose? I'm certain we can all come up with examples of us getting through some dark time or struggle when we reflect on the "why".

In the book of Hebrews, we're told:

"...for the joy set before him, He endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2)

Isn't this what the angel was doing for Jesus in His human nature? Giving Him a renewed vision of what was coming after the cross at the time when Jesus, in His human nature, was focused so much on the cup of wrath?

The joy set before Him is a redeemed humanity.

You! Me. All who believe – we are His delight! He endured the cross because He knew it would bring you, me, all who believe the forgiveness and redemption we need so that we will be with Him throughout all eternity. That was His joy.

But for those who refuse to believe, sadly, they will have to face the cup of divine wrath on their own two feet. If that's describes you today, it's not too late. Jesus will welcome you with open arms to love and forgive you. Receive His Spirit, repent, and believe. It really is that simple. And it really is that important.

Remembering just how much we have been forgiven should be what goes through our minds every time we partake of Holy Communion.

My personal sin is what put Jesus Christ on that cross. So did yours. And in exchange, He gives us His cloak of righteousness.

And now God calls us to grow up.

As Jesus told the woman caught in adultery: I forgive you, now go and sin no more.

And He says the same to you and me: I forgave you, now work with the Holy Spirit and fight against your sinful nature to resist sin. Here's a hint – start with the one that so easily entangles.

"...let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." (Hebrews 12:1)

What's the sin that so easily entangles you? There's no exception here. No escape clause in that text. We each have a sin that easily entangles, and we really do need to reflect on that in our quiet times with God.

For myself, I'm struggling enormously with anxiety over the future. I'm 61 years old and there's a very real possibility that my job will be replaced by AI within just a few short years and I'll have no income. I'm not in a position where I can retire, so my financial future looks bleak to me and I'm having a really hard time with that.

I know it betrays a lack of trust in God's provision for me, and that's sin, to my shame. But there it is. It's a real struggle for me.

What about you? I encourage you to spend some time with God in your quiet time to ponder this.

Finally, and again, what does love like? Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, for sure. But what about loving our neighbor? Back to 1 Corinthians 13:

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."
(1 Corinthians 13:4-8)*

What would the world be like if Christians everywhere lived that out in ever increasing amount?

I don't have time to elaborate on this any more than merely mentioning it, but since hate is the opposite of love, let's just reflect momentarily on what that looks like:

LOVE

- Patient
- Kind
- No envy; not jealous
- Lack of boasting
- Not rude
- Not selfish
- Not easily angered
- No record of wrongs
- Does not delight in evil
- Rejoices with the truth
- Protects
- Always trusts
- Always hopes
- Always perseveres
- Never fails

HATE

- Impatient
- Unkind / mean-spirited
- Envious / jealous
- Boastful / self-righteous
- Rude / arrogant
- Selfish
- Easily angered / furious
- Nitpicks / remembers wrongs
- Delights in evil / excuses evil
- Rejoices in lies and deception
- Uncaring of others / destroys
- Trust self only; no trust in others
- Hopeless at the core
- Gives up easily
- Successful in sin / fails to do good

Jesus tells us that as end of time draws ever closer, there will be an increase of wickedness and because of that the love of most will grow cold (Matthew 24:12).

And Paul tells Timothy there will be terrible times in the last days – lovers of themselves and money, boastful, proud, abusive, and so on (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

None of us are immune from exhibiting the attributes listed as “hate”. Whether to a small degree or a larger degree.

You know, I’d just about finished writing this sermon yesterday, then got a chicken out of the fridge for dinner. Chicken juice went everywhere – over the floor, the side of kitchen cabinets, dishes, garbage can, you name it.

Immediately, I got on my knees and thanked God for the opportunity to be patient and not easily angered...

...there’s not one of you who believes that, is there?

Good. Me neither. I’m glad I was home alone, that’s all I can say.

But this is just the small stuff. Minor things that get in the way and consume a lot of our lives. I won’t bother revisiting the cesspool of (anti)-social media...

Jesus and then Paul were talking about the bigger things. An increase in cultural and global wickedness – and love grows colder and colder. That’s dead body language – as cold as a corpse. Terrible times in the last days...

We understand this, don’t we? We’re seeing this in real time across the globe and it’s painfully obvious that it’s getting worse.

But that’s the world we live in. A world that is desperately in need to loving Christians. Christians who will love the unlovely. Christians who will not rejoice in lies and deceit but will embrace and lovingly speak the truth in a world that hates the truth.

We will be hated by the world, but we also need to remember Jesus’ words:

“I have told you these things, so that you may have peace. In this world, you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

So, let us not get caught up with minor things, forgetting our own forgiveness and produce little – if any – love.

Instead, let us remember as often as possible just how much we have been personally forgiven. Let us remember it whenever we partake of Holy Communion. And let us remember it in our daily prayers.

Let us remember so the love of God will grow in us, and grow mightily, so that it will be a beacon of hope in this dark and sinful world.

As one Jewish Rabbi correctly says: “a little light casts out lot of darkness”

Let us pray...