

=CONVERSIONS=

Lesson 3

The Conversion of the Publican

INTRODUCTION: In the story of the conversion of the publican, as recorded in Luke 18:9-13, we have two men coming to the temple, or shall we say the church, to pray. One man is a good man. He is faithful to the church. He is clean morally. He tithes. He is a strict adherent to his religion. The other man has done no good and is none of these. He is a bad man. However, the Lord Jesus said that the bad man went to Heaven and implied that the good man went to Hell. What could be the difference between the two? There is only one difference between the two. The difference is in the statement that the bad man made in Luke 18:13 when he said, "God be merciful to me a sinner." This lesson will deal with that statement, for it is the only thing that he did that the Pharisee had not done. Let us notice the importance of the statement, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

In order to understand the teaching of this statement, one must understand the word "merciful." The word "merciful" is taken from the word which means "mercy seat." What the publican was saying is, "God be mercy-seat merciful to me a sinner." The mercy seat was in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. It was the place where the blood was sprinkled when it was taken from the brazen altar. Only the high priest could see the mercy seat, and he could see it only once a year. Let us notice what the implications were when the publican said, "God be mercy-seat merciful to me a sinner."

- I. WHERE? The mercy seat was located in the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. It was the top of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark of the Covenant was a little piece of furniture which contained Aaron's rod that budded, a golden pot of manna, and the tablets of stone. It was placed inside the Holy of Holies, a little room 15 feet wide, 15 feet long, and 15 feet high. It was the most sacred place of all to the Jews, so sacred that the average Jew could not enter there. Only the high priest could enter, and he could enter only once a year. The top of this Ark was the mercy seat. On either end and over the Ark were beaten cherubims. Immediately between the cherubims and over the Ark itself dwelt the Shekinah Glory, which represented God's presence with His people. When the publican beat his breast and prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner," he was saying, "God, have the same mercy on me a sinner, as You had on the people of God at the mercy seat."
- II. WHO? Who went in there, into the Holy of Holies? Only the high priest could enter. He had to be dressed a certain way. He came with the blood of a sacrifice, and he sprinkled that blood on the mercy seat. The high priest represents the Lord Jesus Christ, Who shed His own blood on Calvary which was typified by the lamb dying on the brazen altar. He then took that blood to Heaven's mercy seat and sprinkled His own blood on the mercy seat in Heaven. Hence, the blood of Christ today is visible in Heaven on the real mercy seat. When Jesus was resurrected, He saw Mary Magdalene. In John 20:17, He said, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." A few days later He came back and said to Thomas, "Reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side." Why is it that Mary Magdalene could not touch Jesus and Thomas could? It was that Jesus was our High Priest. He as the Lamb had died on the cross. He went through the process of being the High Priest and taking His own blood to Heaven's mercy seat. The high priest of Israel could not be touched by the hands of men between the time that he took the blood from the innocent lamb and sprinkled that blood on the mercy seat. Jesus as our High Priest could not be touched by the hands of Mary Magdalene between the time that He died on the cross and the time that He ascended into Heaven to sprinkle His own blood on Heaven's mercy seat. Consequently, when Jesus was resurrected, He went to Heaven to sprinkle the blood and then came back to earth and appeared to His own and allowed them to touch Him. Thank God that we have a High Priest Who ever liveth to make intercession for us. He was our Lamb; He is our Priest. The blood has been sprinkled, and God has been mercy-seat merciful to those who have come to Him in believing faith.
- III. WHEN? The high priest could come to the Holy of Holies only once a year. This was on the seventh month and the tenth day, corresponding with our October, so on October 10 of each year the high priest came on the Day of Atonement. This is very interesting. The Jew had to bring daily sacrifices to God.

The high priest, however, came on the Day of Atonement, just once a year. Our High Priest once and for all atoned for our sins, which means we do not have to have a sacrifice every day or mass every week or a Day of Atonement every year. Our High Priest has once and for all become our Atonement and has become mercy-seat merciful to us.

- IV. HOW? On the Day of Atonement, the high priest took two goats. He cast lots over these two goats. One was called the “goat of Jehovah” and the other was called the “scapegoat.” The goat of Jehovah was killed, and his blood was put in a basin. The goat that was appointed the scapegoat was allowed to live. The blood of the goat of Jehovah was sprinkled on the scapegoat and the sins of Israel were confessed over the head of the scapegoat. Then the scapegoat was allowed to go into the wilderness, never to return. In these two goats we have a beautiful picture of salvation. Jesus is the goat of Jehovah. He bore our sins. He shed His blood for us. He also is the scapegoat, for in Him our sins are carried away, never to return again. Our sins are separated from us as far as the east is from the west, as deep as the deepest sea, as high as the highest sky. They are behind the back of God. They are completely forgotten, and so the scapegoat represents our sins being carried away. It was the blood of the goat of Jehovah that the high priest brought for the sins of the people. He sprinkled this blood on the mercy seat. Hence, the poor publican was saying, “Dear God, be blood merciful to me. Be High Priest merciful to me. Be merciful to the extent that You carry my sins away.”
- V. WHY? The Jews had sinned. For that matter, the high priest was also a sinner. He had to kill a bullock for himself and sprinkle the bullock’s blood on the altar for his own sins and then the blood of the goat for the sins of his people. You and I have sinned. We have a sacrifice in Jesus Christ. He is our Lamb. He is our High Priest. His blood is our atonement. He is the One Who carries our sins away.

It is interesting that the types of sacrifice picture Jesus so beautifully. There were five different sacrifices accepted by God. The lamb was a sacrifice. This represents Jesus, the meek one. The bullock was a sacrifice. This represents Jesus, the burden-bearing one, Who carries our burden. The goat was a sacrifice. This represents Jesus, Who became sin for us. The turtledove was a sacrifice. This represents Jesus, the loving one. (The Palestinian dove of mourning mated only once. When his mate would die, he would go off and sing himself to death for sorrow.) Jesus is our dove, our peace-giver. The fifth sacrifice was a pigeon. The pigeon was offered by those who could not afford a lamb. Jesus came to save the poor as well as the rich. On the Day of Atonement, however, it was the goat that was offered, for in the complete final analysis, Jesus bearing our sins and becoming sin for us is the great picture of salvation.

So in the story, the publican was saying first, “I am a sinner.” Hence, “Dear God, be mercy-seat merciful to me.” He was then saying, “I am lost and cannot save myself.” Hence, “Dear God, be mercy-seat merciful to me and be my sacrifice.” He then was admitting that he believed in the atonement, that an innocent one had to die for him. I think he knew that Jesus was to be that innocent one. He was realizing his need of a substitute. Then he realized that he could do nothing. He did not plead his own merit as the Pharisee did. He simply pleaded the mercy-seat mercy of God.

This is the first of three publicans about whom we will study. We will study the conversions of Matthew and Zacchaeus. The publicans were very hated. They were very rich. They were also very dishonest. Yet God wanted to save them, and He gives us the salvation of three of them.