

Today we hear St. Paul tell us, “*The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.*” It’s a striking image — God not simply looking down from heaven, but standing beside Paul as a companion, defender, and source of strength. The Greek verb Paul uses, *παρίστημι (paristēmi)*, literally means “to stand beside.” It was often used in courtrooms to describe an advocate who stands next to the accused to defend him. Paul wants us to understand that, in his hour of trial, he was not alone. Christ Himself took His stand beside him. There’s something deeply consoling about that. When everyone else had abandoned Paul, when human support failed him, the Lord’s presence was not distant or abstract — it was immediate and personal. God stood beside him, defended him and strengthened him. And then something amazing happened – Paul was able to use that experience to proclaim the Gospel, to share the mercy and love of Jesus Christ with others.

That same divine solidarity runs through all of Scripture. When the three young men were thrown into the fiery furnace in Babylon, the king saw “a fourth figure standing with them, one like a son of God.” (Dn 3:24-25) When Paul was imprisoned in Jerusalem, “*The Lord stood by him and said, ‘Take courage.’*” (Acts 23:11). And when Jesus told His disciples before His Ascension, “*I am with you always,*” (Mt 28:20) He was promising precisely this kind of nearness — not an occasional visit, but a continual standing-with His people. The Lord always stands by us. But the question is: do we stand by Him?

That is the question Jesus asks of us today through the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Both men go up to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee stands “up front,” confident in his righteousness. The tax collector stands “far off,” aware of his

sin and need for mercy. One is impressed with himself; the other depends entirely on God.

Cardinal Christoph Schönborn poses the key question: “*How do I stand before God?*” Not, “What do others think of me?” Not even, “What do I think of myself?” Because those things can be illusions. Those are the things that concern the Pharisee. The truth is found only in how I stand before God, who sees me as I really am. The Pharisee stands before God, but he sees only himself. His prayer is a litany of self-congratulation: “I thank you, Lord, that I am not like the rest of men.” Remember that Jesus addressed today’s parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. Such piety, mixed with contempt for others whom I judge as less than me, is one of the most repulsive forms of religion. It deceives the soul into thinking it is close to God while in reality it remains far from Him.[1]

The tax collector, on the other hand, stands far off — but in that humility, God draws near to him. He has no defense, no merit to offer, only a plea: “*God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*” And Jesus tells us: “*This man went home justified.*” Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that justification — being made right before God — belongs to the one who allows God’s perfection to take effect in his emptiness. Not passively, but by cooperating with grace.[2] To cooperate with grace means to let God’s initiative move us into action: to receive His mercy and then respond with faith, obedience, and love. Grace is not something that replaces our effort; it transforms it. Just as Paul’s suffering was transformed into proclamation of the Gospel, God’s grace makes our human response capable of bearing divine fruit. We cooperate with grace when we align our will with God’s, when

we let His Spirit shape our choices, words, and relationships. The justified person is the one who offers himself as Paul urges in Romans: “*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice.*” (Rm 12:1) That’s the same verb — *παρίστημι* — but now in its sacrificial sense: to stand before God, to offer oneself entirely to His will. So the word *παρίστημι* holds together both meanings: God stands by us, and we stand by God. When we are weak, He is our defender. When we pray humbly, we become His servants. Divine companionship calls for human fidelity. The Lord who stands by us in mercy invites us to stand by Him in faith. Each of us knows what it is to feel abandoned, misunderstood, or afraid. Perhaps you are facing an illness, a loss, or a struggle that isolates you. The Lord stands by you *there*. He is not a spectator to your pain but a companion within it. His nearness transforms the furnace into a place of grace. But He also asks something of us: to stand by Him — to be faithful in prayer, humble in service, steadfast in love. To offer Him not our perfection but our poverty. When we bring that before Him — our weakness, our failures, our need — that’s when His strength takes stronger root in us. Paul could say, “*The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.*” May we also be able to say: “I stood by the Lord, and He gave me life.” For when we stand before God in truth and humility, He never fails to stand beside us with mercy and strength.

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[1] See Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, *Jesus the Divine Physician: Encountering Christ in the Gospel of Luke*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 145–147.

[2] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Light of the Word: Brief Reflections on the Sunday Readings*, trans. Dennis D. Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 359.