

## STANDING WITH THE RIGHT PRAY-ER

Luke 18:9-14

When we are reading Jesus' parables, we should always look for the hook, the catch that surprises his hearers, and often us as well. This one is no different.

When Jesus begins the story, he is speaking about an obviously very faithful Jewish man. In the first century devout Jews observed three prayer times daily—9:00 a.m., noon, and 3 p.m. Prayer was thought to be especially effective if it was offered in the Temple and so at these hours many who were in Jerusalem went up to the Temple courts to pray. Those listening to Jesus' parable would have immediately recognized someone they knew and respected who fit this description. —from William Barclay. The Daily Study Bible Series: The Gospel of Luke. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press. 1975. p. 223

The Pharisee is not even making a public show of his prayer, he is standing off to one side, by himself and he is praying in a way that people would recognize from Scripture. The Book of Deuteronomy gives instructions on how someone should bring their offering of the first fruits and the prayer they should offer. It is a series of "I have" and "I have not" statements, affirming that they have kept the covenant with God and have not broken any of its requirements.

This Pharisee makes a very respectable and very upright prayer thanking God that he is not like some very bad people: thieves, scoundrels, adulterers, or even politicians (!). OK, I had to throw that one in, but even tax collectors today don't get the bad press they did in the first century; but publicans, as they were called, were looked down on about as bad as some politicians are today—you know crooks, thieves, liars – think of the worst names for your most unloved politician and it might come close to how faithful Jews thought about these sinners.

This religious man goes on to innumerate his faithfulness to his religious practice. He fasts twice a week, something that was not even commanded by Scripture, where only a few public fasts were required; those who sought to be especially faithful had taken on the practice of regular fasts. He tithes on all of his income, taking on himself a requirement that originally only applied to farmers and ranchers but which merchants and others rightfully saw as something that they needed to do to support the Temple and show their gratitude for all that God had given to them.

In other words, as Jesus is describing his prayer, his listeners are nodding their heads along with him, seeing the pray-er as a very devout man, an example of faithfulness to be followed.

Then Jesus moves on to the tax collector, a man universally despised because he betrayed his own people to collect taxes for the oppressive Roman government, and got his pay by extorting more than was owed. While the faithful pray-er was standing in the sanctuary, the publican was standing far off, probably not even trying to enter the courts of the Temple for fear of the rejection he would receive.

While the proper stance for prayer in the first century was standing with raised arms, looking toward God, this sinner won't even raise his head, he is so ashamed of himself. "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner." *Yeah, right.*

Jesus' listeners would have shaken their heads and laughed, thinking they knew where this story was going. A sinner, a thief, asking for forgiveness? Sure. Don't we do the same today? Since I've mentioned the similarity of the tax collector to modern day politicians ... it is not uncommon for a candidate to go on an "apology tour" to admit past wrongdoing, promise that they have changed, and will do much better going forward. And we believe them, don't we! Well, we believe the ones we want to believe, maybe. *Yeah, right.* That would have been the response to the tax collector's prayer.

Then Jesus throws the hook. "This man went down to his home justified rather than the other." *Wait, what?* A man in private prayer, an obviously faithful man pushed aside for the sake of a very public sinner who has done what? Offered a simple prayer and nothing more?

And here in lies the key. Looking at this story from a belief system that values humility, we recognize that the Pharisee is not only praying by himself but to himself. All of his "I statements" are about how good he is, how religious he is, how faithful he is and how God should be happy with him for that! His very piety has become a barrier between himself and God who demands only true humility and compassion.

The sinner also uses "I statements" but they are very different, "I am nothing but a sinner."

Sometimes I am questioned about why we insist on having a public prayer of confession in most of our worship services. After all, we are not very great sinners – no murderers, thieves, adulterers here (well, at least as far as we know!). I had a good friend, an elder in a Presbyterian Church I previously served, who would often preach for me when I was on vacation, who wrote a prayer of confession that said in part,

WE SCOFF WHEN WE SHOULD SEEK WISDOM, WE LISTEN BUT WE DO NOT HEAR.  
WE SUCCUMB TO GREED AND COVET THAT WHICH WE CANNOT AFFORD AND  
WHICH IS NOT OURS. WE LEARN DISCIPLINE, BUT WE BACKSLIDE.  
THESE ARE ALL LITTLE SINS, FATHER,  
FOR WE ARE NOT MURDERERS OR FELONS. Well, as far as he knew.

But that is not the point, as soon as we begin to compare sins we find ourselves standing with the wrong pray-er; because let's face it, we are very good at seeing our sins as small and insignificant when compared to the sins of others. In the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the sins that get the most attention are sexual sins. But Jesus hardly ever mentions them, and when he is forcefully confronted with an adulteress, whom the law commanded be stoned to death, his response is to tell her to go and sin no more. No condemnation--that was saved for her accusers--no punishment, only forgiveness and the opportunity to change her life.

Unfortunately for the Pharisee, and for us, Jesus saves his darts for the sins we good, religious people are most likely to enjoy: self-righteousness, condescension, pride, failure to protect and serve the weakest and poorest and most unloved in our communities. This Pharisee, as faithful and religious as he appears to his community, and to *himself*, has failed; not because of his fasting or his tithing, nothing wrong there; no, he has failed in thinking that doing these things made him righteous before God. No more than our attending worship on Sundays, and giving to the church, or loving each other here, makes us better than our neighbors and friends who do not. No more than our own self-righteousness that we are better than those conservative White evangelicals who don't support the people we support, who vote for the very wrong candidates, and who say the wrong things at public meetings (those of you who were at the library board meeting yesterday know what I mean!) If we do not do those things we do out of a genuine sense of gratitude to God for what God has done for us, and with a sense of humility that we can never do enough to repay God's love and grace, then we are standing with the wrong pray-er.

If we can sing, honestly, in the words of the old spiritual, "It's me, it's me oh Lord, standing in the need of prayer. Not my brother, or my sister, or my mother or my father, or those people who are watching the game instead of worshipping – but me, in need of prayer". If we can genuinely pray with the sinner, at his side and in his words, "God, be merciful to me, a prideful, self-righteous, unloving religious sinner" then we just might find ourselves standing with the right pray-er, and going home justified, forgiven, whole and ready to change.

Of course we might want to be careful about what we say after church. Let's not stroll out of church saying "I thank you Lord, that I'm not like that Pharisee"; because as soon as we say that, we are right back there with that wrong pray-er, *again*. Amen.

## PRAYER

Loving God, inspire us to be humble servants. Guide us to care for the sick and the lonely, even when we know they won't be able to return the favor. Lead us to give to the poor and the needy, even when we know they won't be able to repay us. Direct us to care for the hurting people of this world who are far removed from the spotlight, even when we know we won't be recognized for our efforts. Fill us with a spirit of humility, so that we may truly serve others in the manner that Jesus, Himself, served, even as we pray in the words that he taught us to pray... Amen.