

Prayer and God's view of Pride and Humility

Luke 18:9-14

We're in the midst of a sermon series on prayer. We are examining various prayers found in the Bible and noticing that when people prayed well, they prayed in light of the character of God. Because God is faithful, we plead with Him to fulfill His promises (Daniel 9:19, Psalm 70:5). Because God is compassionate, we can pour out our laments/complaints to Him (Psalm 42 & 43). Because God is forgiving, we can confess our sins to Him (Psalm 32). Today we are going to examine a parable in Luke 18 in which Jesus puts prayers on the lips of two people – a Pharisee and a tax collector. One prayed in light of the character of God and one didn't.

As we consider this parable, allow yourself to be drawn into the plot of the story. As we've mentioned in the past, when Jesus told parables He was inviting us to audition for parts. There is typically someone who is oblivious to life in the kingdom and doesn't know God, and there is typically someone who does. Jesus is telling us as hearers and readers that we can live one of two ways. In Luke 18 Jesus tells us that in this world some people pray like the Pharisee and some like the tax-collector. Ironically He is inviting us to audition for the part of the tax collector. Everybody who wants that "part" gets it.

Jesus' Parable (Luke 18:9-14) In verse 9 we are told Jesus' target audience for the parable He's about to tell:

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

Luke tells us that Jesus aimed his teaching at people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. In other words, when they looked at themselves, they were very confident that they were rightly related to God. They believed that their lives accurately reflected what God wanted. Luke also tells us that these people also "viewed others with contempt." They couldn't help comparing themselves to others, and since they thought so much of themselves, they thought very little of others. They despised or viewed others as inferior, not worth their time.

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

When people heard that Jesus was about to tell a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector, everybody knew who was going to be the bad guy. In Jesus' day the Pharisees were the most righteous and the most respected people in Jewish society. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were viewed as traitors because they collected taxes for the Romans who occupied their land; of course they collected additional taxes for their own income. Everybody expected the Pharisee to be the hero and the tax collector to be the villain. But when Jesus told a story, you could never assume what He was going to say.

Notice how the Pharisee prayed. According to the custom of his day, he stood and prayed:

11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

Notice an intriguing detail: Jesus says that he was “praying this *to himself*.” The NIV translates that he was praying “about himself” (the preposition used can mean either). Whatever the meaning – whether he is praying to himself or about himself – Jesus makes clear that his prayer was fundamentally self-centered. It was all about himself.

The Pharisee had two lists. The first was a list of people he was glad he wasn't like – those whom he considered spiritually and morally inferior. On his list were swindlers, unjust (dishonest), adulterers, and tax collectors. The Pharisee actually thanked God that he wasn't like the people on his list, including the tax collector standing in the distance. At least this Pharisee was honest.

The second list contained the things he really liked about himself – those things about himself that he considered virtuous. On this second list were fasting and tithing. He fasted twice a week even though once a week was the norm. And he paid tithes of *all* that he earned/received. These were things that Jesus had noticed about Pharisees. Fasting and tithing are good habits, but Jesus pointed out that you can do those things in the flesh (without the help of God). In Matthew 23 He pointed out these are really lightweight habits compared to the weightier matters of justice, mercy, and faithfulness – things that can only be done in the power of the Spirit.

The tax collector couldn't be more different than the Pharisee in his approach to God.

13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

Everything about the tax collector suggested humility before God. He was “standing some distance away”; he was “even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven”; and he was beating his breast (as an expression of contrition) saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.” He didn't have any lists. He didn't have a list of people he was glad he wasn't “like.” And he didn't have a list of virtues that set him apart from other people. He simply admitted that he was a sinner. He just wanted mercy. In other words, his main petition was, “God, please, please, please don't give me what I deserve. Show mercy.”

In verse 14 Jesus evaluates the praying of these two men. His main criteria involves the character of God – specifically God's aversion to pride and His love of humility.

14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

This is not the pronouncement that Jesus' hearers expected. Everybody expected the Pharisee to be commended for his praying. That's one of the things that Pharisees did best – pray. But Jesus said that the tax collector went home justified/righteous; he was rightly related to God. The Pharisee went home unrighteous; even though he had two fine lists he wasn't rightly related to

God. What was the difference? The Pharisee had exalted himself, so God was committed to humbling him. The tax collector had humbled himself, so God was committed to exalting him. This principle had already been established in Old Testament passages such as Proverbs 29:23:

23 A man's pride will bring him low,
But a humble spirit will obtain honor.

This principle was reiterated after Jesus' day in passages such as James 4:10:

6 But He gives a greater grace. Therefore it says, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

This steady emphasis makes us ask the question, "What is it about proud people that brings such opposition from God Himself? And why is God compelled to exalt and honor and shower grace upon those who exhibit humility?" One reason is because God has a radical commitment to reality – what is really true. The prideful person lives in a world of his/her own making, not the real world over which God rules. Listen to William Law's description of humility (written in 1729):

Humility does not consist in having a worse opinion of ourselves than we deserve, nor in abasing ourselves lower than we really are. Rather, as all virtue is founded in truth, so humility is founded in a true and just sense of our weakness, misery, and sin. He who rightly feels and lives in this sense of his condition lives in humility.

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Since God has a radical commitment to reality, He is amazingly generous those who accept the reality of their own weakness and sin. The humble receive all sorts of gifts from God. Remember that God doesn't only listen to our *words*, He listens to our *lives*. If the two don't match up, God isn't fooled. In other words, we should not only pray humble prayers; we also have to live humble lives. We should live as if God is sovereign and we're not.

Will we pray as the Pharisee or as the tax collector? As I mentioned earlier, when Jesus told parables he was inviting us to audition for parts. Jesus draws us into this parable and then surprises with His conclusion. He tells the story so that we'll evaluate our lives to see if we're more like the Pharisee or the tax collector. The invitation is to become like the tax collector and adopt a humble stance before God in prayer.

Avoiding the mentality of the Pharisee in prayer. If we're honest, we have to admit that (like the Pharisee) we all have two lists. First, even though you probably wouldn't say so out loud, you have a list of people that you are *so* glad you're not like. Complete this sentence: "I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not _____." At least I'm not lazy . . . not a liar . . . not judgmental . . . not superficial . . . not liberal/right-wing . . .

Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, we all find certain sins to be more offensive than all the rest. Perhaps you've been personally wounded by the sin in another person; if so, that sin will seem to you as worse than all the rest. In your mind those who commit that sin *can't* be serious about a

relationship with God. Or perhaps it's not so much that you abhor certain sins, but that you were simply raised to look down on certain people because of their behavior or their appearance or even their nationality. Can you identify those things that are on your first list? I'd tell you what's on my list, but I'm too embarrassed.

Well, we all have a second list also. The second list consists of those qualities that you really like about yourself, things that set you apart from other people. Maybe you can think of qualities in yourself that you like to mention to others: "I'm the kind of person who _____." I'm the kind of person who calls it like I see it . . . who does everything at full speed . . . who reads the Bible every day (even when I'm busy) . . . who never complains . . . is discerning (I see through circumstances and motives) . . . Like fasting and tithing, those are good things. Can you identify things on your second list – those qualities about yourself that set you apart from others?

Listen to what William Law wrote this about pride "growing upon our virtues":

No people have more occasion to be afraid of the approaches of pride than those who have made some advances in a pious life. For pride can grow upon our virtues as well as upon our vices, and steals upon us on all occasions. Every good thought that we have, every good action that we do, lays us open to pride and exposes us to the assaults of vanity and self-satisfaction.

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Virtues are good (that's why they're virtues). But when we begin to differentiate between ourselves and others because of the virtues we see in our lives, we're just like the Pharisee. Like fungus growing on the bottom of a rock, pride is growing on our virtues. Jesus wants us to know in no uncertain terms that "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled." God is opposed to the proud. Therefore, we should avoid the mentality of the Pharisee.

Adopting the mentality of the tax-collector in prayer. Jesus invites us to adopt the mentality of the tax-collector – to clothe ourselves in humility before God in prayer. If we would be like the tax-collector at prayer, we first simply need to quit making lists and quit comparing ourselves to other people. We don't need shorter lists; we need to get rid of our lists altogether. This will be harder for some than for others. I've known people whose whole identity is wrapped up in their lists. If you took away the sins they're against and the people to whom they're superior, there's not much left. But that's what Jesus demands.

To be clear, I'm not saying that we merely need to pretend that we're not superior to other people. We actually need to believe that we're not superior to other people – because that is the truth. I need just as much mercy as the people on my first list. They may sin in ways that I don't, but I sin in other ways that they probably don't. As far as I know God doesn't have a list of all 6.8 billion people on earth, ranking them from best to worst. It is true that some have made more progress than others on the path of discipleship, but we all stand before God just like the tax-collector. We all sin and therefore we all need God's mercy.

This past week I've been trying out the tax-collector's prayer: "God, be merciful to me a sinner." The more I pray it, the more appropriate it seems. I pray it in light of the new covenant in Jesus' blood. In other words, I understand that I have been justified – declared righteous – because of what Jesus has done for me on the cross. Nevertheless, I still sin and therefore I still need fresh experiences of God's mercy.

Spiritual writers throughout the history of the church have pointed out that the closer you get to God, the more clearly you see your sins. In the light of God's holiness, you begin to see sins that you never realized you had. Just the other week I realized that I am selfish in ways I had never suspected before; I may or may not be any more selfish than I was 30 years ago, but I see more selfishness than ever before.

An analogy from my woodshop might be helpful. When I'm finishing up a project – a chair or a stool or whatever – I do the bulk of the sanding in my shop. There have been times when I've thought, "I'm pretty much done with the sanding; I'm about ready to apply the finish." But years ago an experienced woodworker told me that you see things in natural light (sunlight) that you don't see in your shop with artificial lights. Sure enough, when I take the stool out into the sunlight I see all sorts of scratches and blemishes that were invisible indoors.

In the same way, Jesus invites us to come into the natural light of God's holiness. In this analogy the Pharisee is the person who never leaves the workshop. He's too busy comparing himself to others to step outside into the natural light of God's holiness. Consequently he never sees his judgmental thoughts, his prejudices, his anger, his jealousies, and his pettiness. But the tax collector steps out into the bright light of God's holiness and sees that he is a man in need of mercy. And he prays, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Because of what Jesus has done for us, we don't need to hide from God's scrutiny. We can step out into the light of God's holiness and have everything exposed. When we see our sins and weaknesses and misery, we can humble ourselves and cry out, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." The good news is that God is opposed to the proud, but He gives grace to the humble.