

“Proper Perspective, Proper Prayer”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 18:9-14

We think of Pharisees as rotten people – uptight, self-righteous, know-it-all nitpickers – but they served an important role in their communities. Meticulously schooled in the intricacies of the Law, true experts, they gave interpretations designed to guide people on how to apply complex religious laws to their everyday lives. People respected them and appreciated their wisdom on how to be in right relationship with God. As with any group, some Pharisees abused their authority in an attempt to control people, but we need to look at the Pharisees realistically if we want to understand why Jesus tangled with them so often.

Pharisees criticized Jesus for not observing the Law, or enforcing it among his disciples, with sufficient strictness. In their view, Jesus occasionally lapsed in his observance of the Sabbath and his pursuit of purity, especially when he dined with people considered unclean because of their questionable morals. Some probably meant to correct Jesus’ flaws with the best of intentions, to bring him back to the path of righteousness, as they understood it. Some saw his teaching as suspect if not dangerous. They felt he set a bad example, leading people astray, and they wanted to protect those people. Others motivated by jealousy or a sense of superiority, tried to impede his ministry and expose him as a fraud.

Naturally, each time the Pharisees and Jesus clashed, mutual bitterness and enmity grew between them. Nobody likes being attacked, including Jesus. Nobody likes being embarrassed, and Jesus always got the best of the Pharisees. So please remember that Jesus and the Pharisees differed, but most of the Pharisees were highly knowledgeable, well-intentioned, and not intrinsically evil. If we fail to understand this, then we miss Jesus’ point. When we think Jesus

directed his criticism specifically to them, we automatically exempt ourselves, but Jesus reaches well beyond the Pharisees. Through his critique of them, Jesus seeks to correct our thoughts and behaviors, too.

Take the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying at the Temple. The tax collector felt miserable, and rightly so. He collaborated with the hated Romans by collecting taxes to support their power over the people, and to augment his pay, he extorted a little extra, resorting to force when necessary. So the tax collector poured out his heart to God, knowing how awful he acted, hoping that despite it all, he might receive the grace he needed, perhaps the courage to find a new line of work.

The Pharisee prayed with an appalling arrogance that would have been deeply offensive to most of his fellow Pharisees. He started out well by thanking God, but then things went downhill. “Look at me God, how awesome I am!” He bragged about his tithing and fasting, bragged about all he sacrificed to honor God, but he took all the credit for himself, not thinking for an instant that his ability to do these holy deeds came solely from the power of God’s grace. The Pharisees’ attitude invalidated his thanks to God, showing its insincerity. Both a braggart and a liar, he judged others, compared himself to them and deemed himself superior, apparently unaware of his own sinfulness. Better he stayed at home than come to the Temple and pray like that.

Now I seriously doubt anybody here prays like that Pharisee. I certainly hope not, though if you do, we need to talk, and no doubt some, probably most of us, possess adequate awareness of our sin to beg, like the tax collector, with intense humility for God’s forgiveness and mercy, but Jesus paints a picture of extremes in the parable, the two poles of a continuum, and most of

us fall somewhere in between. Make it a high priority to figure out where you stand on that continuum, and to help you do that, consider this.

Jesus addressed more than just prayer in this parable. He pointed out how prayer reveals our perspective. Prayer reflects our attitude toward God, others, and ourselves. Not praying regularly might mean that we see it as unimportant, or that we see God as ineffective or intrusive, or that our accomplishments belong to us alone, because we earned it and deserve it, and God played no role. If you see yourself in this description, get humble fast. Take a deep breath, and realize that the air, your lungs, everything that makes it breathing happen comes from a single source, God.

However, sometimes, we avoid prayer because we judge ourselves unworthy to approach God. We usurp the judgment that God alone can wield and inflict it on ourselves. We underestimate his immense mercy, which uncovers a lack of faith and a fundamental misunderstanding about who He is. We fear God, thinking He will judge and smite us, forgetting the love of Jesus shed on the cross to make reconciliation with God possible.

If you fall into this camp, please stop whipping your soul. It's not easy, I know, from personal experience, but take a risk and allow God to transform your self-hatred into true humility. Go home to an empty room and confess to God, "I don't deserve to judge and punish myself." See what's happening here. I'm taking your sense of unworthiness, your tendency to judge and punish yourself, and turning it to better purposes. "I don't deserve to judge and punish myself. Say it aloud, and watch what happens. Even a moment of humility, of rejecting the premise that you possess the right to judge and punish yourself, gives that moment of clarity that brings just enough liberty from our inner demons to reach the peace that comes through prayer.

Make a choice to let God swing you from the Pharisee side of the spectrum toward the tax collector, but not beyond it. Look at your life differently, with neither pride nor shame. Resist the forces in our world that strive to pull us toward the self-serving prayer of the Pharisee, or push us beyond the true humility of the tax collector into the paralyzing state of self-blame, shame, judgment, and punishment. Resist a world that twists the truth, calling arrogance a virtue and humility a vice, a world that will gladly tear you apart. Reject the message that weakness is a crime.

Paul wrote, “[God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness,’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell within me.” [II Corinthians 12:9] God’s power activates within us when we admit our weakness, confess our sin, rely on God for what we need, and allow God to define what we need. As the Psalmist said, “Our sins are stronger than we are, but you will blot them out.” [Psalm 65:3] None of that makes any sense to a world that worships pride, greed, deception; a world that delights in manipulation, threats, force; a world that rejoices in control, cruelty, and the lie of self-sufficiency.

Turn away from the world’s nonsense, and embrace God. Be free from the tight grasp of the Pharisee that lurks inside each of us, beg like a tax collector for mercy, and know peace.

Amen.