

Luke 18:9-14

The Posture of Prayer

Two people are headed into the line up at the Timmy's drive through and, as usual, there is that person sitting outside on the sidewalk waiting for someone to be generous. The first driver thinks to himself, "Why doesn't that bum pick himself up, clean up, and get a job? What a waste of skin. Here I am getting up to get to work everyday and take care of my family and my taxes go to helping this scum continue using the system and everyone else." A few cars later another driver sees the same person and thinks to himself, "Wow, that is really tough. I wonder what this person has suffered that they have ended up in this situation. I can relate. It could have been so easy for that to be me. A few tough breaks and who knows where I might be right now."

Or two women are out for dinner with their partners. One has on the latest fashion, things are good. Life is good. At another table she sees a woman who she can tell is out with this gentleman as an escort. She thinks what a whore. So glad I have got it good. I am a good person and the fact that I have a husband that loves me and treats me like royalty is because I have done it all right. I got an education, working to pay my way through. I deserve this, I have earned, it. But that woman over there obviously made all the wrong decisions." At the same time the woman who find herself an escort on this evening, knowing where and how the evening will end, just thinks to herself. "God be with me. I know that this is wrong. I know this is not the way to honour my body, my life, or you Lord. Forgive me."

It is so easy to judge. To look at another and say, "Wow, they have really messed up." We like to compare...to separate people based on how we think they should behave or be in the world. Who here has not at some time thought that they were better than another person because of their own achievements, listing off all the ways they have got it right and another got it wrong.

This is in some way what is going on in this parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. It would be so easy to look at this story that Jesus told and, as with most of the parables, just look at it on the surface and think one of two things. You might think that the Pharisee was justified in believing he had done it all right and so was just letting God know that he was deserving of all that had been achieved, after all he was a respected member of the ruling class with privilege in the temple. His very standing in the community, reflected in the place he is standing in the temple to pray, must mean that he had been a faithful and devout man. In fact, in his prayer he lists all the things he

had done correctly, “I fast twice a week and tithe on all my income.”¹ He compares himself to the worst of those in society, saying as part of his prayer, “I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, crooks, adulterers, or, heaven forbid, like this tax man.”

There are people who would agree that this man had it all right. He had done all the right things and so the result was that he had power, prestige, and respect within the community. Others might look at the Pharisee as one who is more than a little full of himself and could benefit from being brought down a notch or two.

Then there is the tax collector. Tax collectors were despised and, if you think about it, really not much has changed. None of us is crazy about paying taxes even though we understand the benefits for our society in doing so. Thing is that there were few benefits to paying taxes in ancient times and often tax collectors gouged those who owed. They were often underhanded and greedy. What ever they could collect over and above what was required of them by their overlords was wealth they could pocket, and pretty much all of them did so. They were cheats, swindlers, and despised.

In this story, the tax collector got that about himself. He knew that he was not worthy. He stood off to the side where he did not draw attention and in his prayers, with head bowed in a posture of humility simply says, “God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.” Nothing big. He never says he will change his ways; we have no idea what impact this will have on his life. All we know for sure is that he realizes just how much his life can use the mercy and grace of God. Again, one might think, it is wonderful that he recognizes his sin, while another determines that he deserves to be treated with contempt and he is not deserving of God’s grace.

You might imagine along with all those gathered, listening to Jesus teach, the things going through people’s minds. All these people bringing their own experiences of these kinds of people to bear upon how they heard the story. Regardless of where one might land on the side of judgement, Jesus ends with, “This tax man, not the other, went home made right with God.”

We are all aware that life is not straight forward. Never is anything black and white, fully good or fully evil. There is always shading. There is always a story. When encountering another person it is always wise to approach with a posture of curiosity and grace. We don’t know each other’s story. We don’t know what harm one has had to deal with or what benefits people have had bestowed upon them. It is not that any of us comes into this world fully able to make our own way. There are always experiences and people that lift us up or bring us down, physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. So to judge is to not give consideration to the whole person.

¹ Unless otherwise noted the references to scripture are taken from [*The Message \(MSG\)*](#) Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

Another piece around this parable that one would be wise to consider is that prayer is complex and multilayered. Prayer is about giving thanks, about asking for help, about persistence as we learned in the parable last week of the judge and the persistent woman. Prayer is about relationship and about trust. It is about learning and growing, experiencing and releasing.

It is good to give thanks for the things in our life that feel like blessing...things that have made our lives rich with relationship and opportunity. But there are also those who have learned to give thanks to God for the challenges, as those challenges have shaped them, molded their lives into something they would not have been without the struggle. And let's be clear. God is not out to make our lives challenging, but when challenge comes, and when we are open to learning and curiosity, growing or becoming more whole as a human being through the struggle, God works in that as well.

There is also the posture of our prayer. What is our intention in our prayers. It is to draw God's attention to all the ways we do life right? Is it about bearing ourselves to God and in so doing being real about who we are? There really is no right way to pray, the content of the prayer is not as weighty as the intent of our prayer. Prayer at its core is about relationship with God. Through pray we learn more and more to trust God with our lives. Trust is at the core of any relationship, divine or human. Without trust there is no strong bond of care, compassion, and grace.

As one writer put it, "If prayer is, at its simplest, a conversation with God, then the desired effect is a relationship - a life-giving, soul-sustaining, direction-giving, comfort-sharing, challenge-offering relationship. If that is the case, then coming to God already filled up, already righteous in our own minds, already trusting in self, provides no room for this relationship to take root and grow. But coming to God empty and needy allows room for the relationship to grow and for transformation to take place."²

In this story of the Pharisee and the tax collector Jesus is trying to tell us that how we come before God...our intention in our prayers...that all makes a difference. It is not about praying in a right manner or about getting it wrong, it is about taking the time for prayer, infusing our lives with prayer and being open to the answers to prayer that God has for us, recognizing it might not be the answer we had desired, yet trusting that God is with us.

As shared by another writer, "We've got to make room for answers to prayer. We've got to begin the act of prayer with humility. That then reveals to us that we walk the journey of faith with humility. It becomes a mark of all of our relationships. It is a mark of our discipleship. We come to be filled up. We come open and empty. We come to listen and learn and grow, even as we help others grow. Together, we invite the one who can bring transformation work in us, through us, and between us."³

² [Discipleship Ministries | Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C -...](#) Accessed October 24, 2025.

³ Ibid.

We would do well to approach God with the same words as the tax collector, “God, give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.” It is not to make us feel badly about ourselves but rather to see ourselves in a way that makes us no better or worse than another, without division, for we all sin and fall short of being the image bearers of God that we are called to be.

As is written in Ephesians chapter 2 verse 8, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”⁴ For this we give thanks for the God of compassion and grace. Amen.

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