

Today our scripture gives us another in our lessons on “Kingdom Living.” We have learned about our attitude and use of money; that God has given us the faith needed to do the things God asks us to do; and that we should be thankful for God’s blessings. In our scripture Jesus is still journeying toward Jerusalem, and he continues to teach His disciples what they need to know to live faithfully.

Remember those men that Jesus healed at the border of Samaria and Judea. The ones who were lepers, excluded from the Israelite community. They had to wear torn clothes, be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out “Unclean! Unclean!” As long as they had the infection they remained unclean. Today Jesus teaches us about people at the other end of the spectrum in Israelite community, the super religious. The ones that you could spot a mile away and know they were super Jews!

I have a question for you. What were you taught about self-esteem? One of my job assignments over the years at Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit has been to supervise staff who taught people to interview for a job. In that process we teach job seekers to be proud of their assets and to sell themselves by talking about all their good qualities and skills. When the employer considers our candidate with others, there will be no doubt that our person has the best experience, education and certification of all the job seekers. We tell them to point out how they are better qualified for the job than other candidates, so they come out looking good and with the position.

I explain this because Jesus does not want our prayers to be like a job interview. Throughout His public ministry, Jesus exposed the self-righteousness and unbelief of those who boasted of their holiness and religious lives. He pictured them as debtors too bankrupt to pay what they owed God, guests fighting for the best seats, and sons proud of their obedience but unconcerned about the needs of others. The sad thing is that those that thought they were so religious, the Pharisees, were

completely mistaken and thought they were right and Jesus was wrong. This is point of this parable in our scripture.

The Pharisee in our story was mistaken about prayer, because he prayed within himself and told God and anybody else listening, how good he was. He used prayer as a means of getting public recognition and not as a spiritual exercise to glorify God.

To understand the Pharisee's prayer we need to know that the Jews of Jesus' day prayed three (3) times a day: 9:00 in the morning, 12:00 in the midday and 3:00 in the afternoon. Prayer was believed to be especially effective if it was offered in the Temple and so at these hours many went up to the Temple courts to pray. But he did not really go to pray to God. He prayed with himself. True prayer is always offered to God and to God alone. A certain American cynically described a preacher's prayer as "the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience." The Pharisee was really giving himself a testimonial before God.

He was mistaken about himself, because he thought he was accepted by God because of what he did or what he did not do. The Jews were required by Law to fast only once a year, on the Day of Atonement according to Leviticus, but he fasted twice a week. But those who wished to gain special merit fasted also on Mondays and Thursdays. These happen to be the market days when Jerusalem was full of country people. Those who fasted whitened their faces and appeared in disheveled clothes, and those days gave their piety the biggest possible audience.

The Levites were to receive a tithe of all a man's produce. But this man tithed everything that came into his possession, and according to Matthew, he may have even tithed the tiny herbs from his garden, which was not a religious obligation. Can you image him counting out one (1) leaf of mint for God and nine (9) for himself?!

He was mistaken about the tax collector who was also in the temple praying. The Pharisee thought that the tax collector was a great sinner. This Pharisee was not alone. There is a recorded prayer of a certain Rabbi which runs like this,

“I thank, Thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast put my part with those who sit in the Academy, and not with those who sit at the street-corners. For I rise early, and they rise early; I rise early to the words of the law, and they to vain things. I labor, and they labor; I labor and receive a reward, and they labor and receive no reward. I run, and they run; I run to the life of the world to come, and they to the pit of destruction.”

It is on record that Rabbi Simeon ben Jocai once said, “If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he!”

The Pharisee did not really go to pray; he went to inform God how good he was and to tell God how much he deserved God’s blessing and acceptance because of his good works.

Then there was a tax-collector. He stood afar off, repeatedly hit his breast, and would not even lift his eyes to God. The Authorized and Revised Standard Versions do not do justice to his humility because he actually prayed, “O God, be merciful to me—the sinner,” as if he was not merely a sinner, but the sinner par excellence. He knew he had a big problem, and he called upon God for mercy. “And,” said Jesus, “it was that heart-broken, self-despising prayer which won him acceptance before God.”

Jesus said the tax collector went home justified by God while the proud Pharisee went home only self-satisfied. The scripture defines “justified” as being declared righteous by God. The tax collector knew the enormity of his sins, but the Pharisee was blissfully ignorant of his own heart. The Pharisee’s pride condemned

him, but the tax collector's humble faith saved him. It is the prodigal son and elder brother over again. ¹

This parable teaches us a few other things about prayer in general:

1. No person who is proud can pray. It is said that "the gate of heaven is so low that none can enter it save upon their knees.

2. No person who despises others can pray. In prayer we do not lift ourselves above others. We remember that we are one of a great host of sinning, suffering, sorrowing humanity, all praying before the throne of God's mercy.

3. True prayer comes from setting our lives beside the life of God. Most likely everything that the Pharisee said was true. He did fast; he did meticulously give tithes; he was not as other men are; and certainly he was not like that tax-collector, who was seen as a sinner and traitor to his country because he collected taxes from his own people for the hated Romans. But the question is not, "Am I as good as my peers or others?" The question is, "Am I as good as God?" A scholar tells the story of his journey by train to England. As he passed through the Yorkshire moors he saw a little whitewashed cottage and it seemed to him to shine with an almost radiant whiteness. Some days later he made the journey back to Scotland. The snow had fallen and was lying deep all around. He came again to the little white cottage, but this time its whiteness seemed drab and soiled and almost grey in comparison with the virgin whiteness of the driven snow.

It all depends what we compare ourselves with. And when we set our lives beside the life of Jesus and beside the holiness of God, all that is left to say is, "God be merciful to me—the sinner."²

¹Wiersbe, Warren W.: *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Wheaton, Ill. : Victor Books, 1996, c1989, S. Lk 18:9

²Barclay, William, lecturer in the University of Glasgow (Hrsg.): *The Gospel of Luke*. Philadelphia : The Westminster Press, 2000, c1975 (The Daily Study Bible Series, Rev. Ed), S. 223

If we compare ourselves with others, we can always find someone who is “worse.” But we are to compare ourselves with God. In view of His perfection, we all fall short and stand in desperate need of mercy.

The purposes of the Parable of the Prayers of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector were to show that one cannot trust in oneself for righteousness and should not view others with contempt. The Pharisee’s prayer was concerned with telling God what a good man he was, because not only did he keep the Law by fasting and tithing, but he also considered himself better than other people. He was using other people as his standard for measuring righteousness.

On the other hand the tax collector used God as his standard for measuring righteousness. He realized that he had to throw himself on the mercy of God for forgiveness.

It is necessary for people (for us) to humble themselves (ourselves) before God to gain forgiveness, and those who are proud (everyone who exalts himself) will be brought low (humbled) by God.³ The one qualification for salvation is to be a sinner—and know it. The person who thinks himself righteous never gets in line before the gate of “mercy.”⁴ No matter how good a life we think we are living – our good works can never save us – only the mercy of God!

³Walvoord, John F. ; Zuck, Roy B. ; Dallas Theological Seminary: *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, IL : Victor Books, 1983-c1985, S. 2:250

⁴Richards, Lawrence O.: *The Bible Readers Companion*. electronic ed. Wheaton : Victor Books, 1991; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996, S. 669