

A Tale of Two Prayers

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

God, source of all light,
by your Word, you give light to the soul.
Pour out on us the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
that our hearts and minds may be opened
to know your truth and your way.
Amen.

Scripture: Luke 18:9-14 (NRSVue)

⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'

¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted."

The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.

SERMON – "A Tale of Two Prayers"



The triumphant (and eighteen-year-old) Benjamin Franklin returned to Boston after he ran away from the city seven months previously. Donning his new suit and fancy watch, young Franklin was more than happy to show off his pocket full of coins to anyone interested.

He was able to arrange for a meeting with one of Boston's most respected individuals at the time, Cotton Mather. As the two were chatting away while walking down a corridor, Mather suddenly warned Franklin, "**Stoop! Stoop!**" Franklin was too caught up in his words and performance to hear the words of warning—and he bonked his noggin on a low ceiling beam. Mather's advice to the future founder of our country was fitting:

"Let this be a caution to you not always to hold your head so high. Stoop, young man, stoop, as you go through this world, and you will miss many hard thumps."

The moral of Jesus' story is similar, and he front-ends the advice for us before we spiritually and relationally bonk our heads:

- Number one, don't trust in yourself for righteousness. In other words, don't be so certain of your own goodness.
- Number two, don't look at others with contempt. If you look down on others, you won't be able to look up to God.

Like Cotton Mather, Jesus gives us a helpful warning: *Stoop! Stoop!* Pride cometh before the *what?...* fall. Those who exalt themselves will be *what?...* Humbled. Those who humble themselves will be *what?...* Exalted. Jesus tells us the proper posture to take to be in "good standing" with God: *get on your knees*.

Righteousness without compassion and humility is *not* righteousness. We've got it all wrong if our righteousness is infected with the "disease of me."

This is a vital message for us today. Martin Luther preached on this passage no less than *seventeen* times.

So Jesus does what he loves to do— he tells a story to make his message come alive. It's a story of contrasts. A tale of two prayers. And two pray-ers.

Jesus has already shared a tale of two brothers— three chapters earlier in Luke, probably Jesus' most famous parable— The Elder Brother and the Prodigal *what?...* Son. The resentful one who did everything right. And the wild one who realized how much he messed up. Same idea, just different characters.

Two men went up to the temple to pray. First, a Pharisee. We've got to remember, Pharisees were highly respected. They were the models of righteousness to follow in that day. This Pharisee was doing good and important things—practicing spiritual disciplines, and he was incredibly generous and giving. And let me say, giving was vital in Jesus' day, and giving to the church is vital today. We couldn't be here without your giving. Prayer and fasting are good, good for all of us, but the problem here is the Pharisee's *posture*. He's standing *by himself*, set apart from all others. Above it all, special. And so he's distant. Alienated. Alone.

"Thank you God that I'm NOT like other people: You know, the greedy, dishonest, immoral... or for that matter, *this* tax collector right here praying." I'm different. I fast twice a week and tithe all my income.

Did you notice how many times "I" appears? God is basically just a footnote. It seems as if he's praying *with himself*. Almost like he's giving an introduction or a tribute... to *himself*. Isaiah puts it bluntly—all our self-righteousness is like filthy rags in God's sight. But true prayer is a prayer to God, not a listing of our accomplishments. God already knows our resume anyway.

Prayer is a conversation, not a monologue. The Spirit moves in us to pray. It's a time of communion and conversing, about relationship. Prayer keeps us persevering.

MC Hammer got it right: *You've got to pray just to make it today*. Just be sure to pray like the tax collector. So we focus on the One to whom our allegiance is due, the One from whom all blessings flow. We pray for the poor who receive our gifts. Jesus is calling us to refocus, to repent. Don't succumb to the Disease of Me. It's a reminder:

We can't be blameless based upon our own efforts. **Christ** is our righteousness, not ourselves. And we can't be derogatory and disdainful of others. John Gottman is the leading marriage guru in America. When I came across his **Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse** in marriage relationships, it got my attention. From his research, he says that the four most toxic things for marriages (or really any relationship) are these four things:

- **CRITICISM**
- **DEFENSIVENESS**
- **CONTEMPT**
- **STONEWALLING**

Any idea what is the most deadly of the four? **Contempt**. And that's exactly what the Pharisee was falling into: Contempt. Disdain. Scorn. It's the opposite of respect. The antidote to contempt Gottman tells us is to build a culture of gratitude and appreciation for the other. And as praying people, we lift up others in prayer, by words of encouragement.

Jesus is saying we can't be devout and praying people if we're not practicing love. You can follow all the regulations and stipulations of Scripture, but if you're not following the *intention* of Scripture and faith—loving your neighbor—you've missed the boat.

And so a little self-doubt is healthy. Let's not be too certain that we're in with God or better than others. Let's look at the tax collector for what we *should* do. Let's not forget how surprising this is. If you remember, tax collectors were considered traitors, the worst of the worst. They exploited their fellow people for personal gain. Tax collectors were in the same class with murderers and robbers. You didn't have to tell the truth to tax collectors. They weren't even allowed in the temple. They weren't allowed to be judges or witnesses in court.

So our second pray-er, a tax collector, is standing *far off*. He was far off because he wasn't allowed access into the temple. He wouldn't even lift his eyes up to heaven. He beat his breast in humility and lament saying only, "God, be merciful to me a sinner." In fact, in the original languages he said, "God be merciful to me **THE** sinner." He wasn't just "**a**" sinner, but the prime example, number one sinner—in a class of his own. Set apart. But this was a different kind of set apart than the set apartness of the Pharisee. The tax collector was totally in tune with his desperate need of God's grace. The **perfect** prayer posture.

The message is simple: pride and prayer are incompatible. One person put it this way, "The gate of heaven is so low that we can only get in on our knees." Contempt is incompatible with prayer. Prayer isn't about us lifting ourselves above others. It's lifting others up. Prayer helps us to be honest to God, where we see our humanity and our frailty right along with everyone else, desperately in need of God's grace and forgiveness. That's the sweet spot of prayer.

So when we pray, we place ourselves not before others in comparison, but before God. And we see that we fall short. That we need help in a big way. And it's in that place of humility, that God is poised to lift us up. When you're down to nothing, God is up to something. So prayer reminds us: **STOOP! STOOP!** It's time to get down Immanuel!

And so it's the tax collector, *not* the Pharisee, who went home justified. *What does justified mean?* Basically, "shown to be right" or "acquitted" by God. In good standing. On good terms. We're right when we realize we've got it all wrong. *Do you see the irony?* The Pharisee thought he was all good when he wasn't. The tax collector thought he was in a bad place, but he was the one in God's good graces. Once again, we see the counter-intuitive wisdom of Jesus: All who exalt themselves will be humbled. All who humble themselves will be exalted.

Be involved in the humbling of yourself, not the exalting. Leave the exalting to others, and most importantly God. Trust in God, not in yourself. Don't "write off" those who are "written in" by God. Excluding others puts us in danger of excluding ourselves from God.

What God **LOVES** is when we're honest with ourselves and honest to God about our needs. No more pretending. Avoid the pitfalls of pride and the low hanging ceiling beams of smugness. Stay humble, **STOOP! STOOP!** Immanuel. Jesus' story is more about our attitude, our attitude towards ourselves and others, than it is about prayer. **Prayer** helps us have a prayerful attitude and outlook. Honest, humble prayer helps us to line up our assessment of others with God's assessment of others. Honest, humble prayer helps us be honest with ourselves, too. It's there we see the truth that we're dearly beloved sinners, in need of God's grace. And the good news is, God's grace to us in Christ is abundant, generous, and more than enough for us all.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*The Pharisee and the Tax Collector*" from a Picture Bible
French (St. Omer), c.1190-1200, The Hague, Koninklijk Bibliotheek

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition Bible, copyright © 2021 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.