

## HOW SHOULD WE PRAY? WITH TRUE HUMILITY

Luke 18:9–17

The first eight verses of Luke chapter 18 are the parable of the widow and the unjust judge. We saw last week that it had as much to say about Christ's second coming as about prayer. God is just and he will see that we get justice in the end when Jesus returns, but before that we may have to suffer injustice and hardship. We must keep praying and not give up. Prayer is not a slot machine – put in a prayer and get out an answer. Prayer is the forging of a relationship; prayer is a conversation with our loving Father in heaven; prayer is an ongoing expression of trust, of faith, even when things seem very unjust. When Jesus comes again he won't say, 'How many answers to prayer have you had?' He will say, 'Do you still love me – still trust me?'

How should we pray? Never give up. The second parable in this chapter has more to say about prayer. Verse 9 tells us who it was for. 'Jesus told this parable to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.' Notice that Jesus' words are not directed at the Pharisees, those religious people who were often so hypocritical. Not all Pharisees were hypocrites. Some were very sincere.

Jesus' words were addressed to 'some who were confident of their own righteousness'. There are no labels here – Pharisee, Scribe, Priest. This could be anyone – Disciple, Christian, Evangelical. It could be you. It could be me. The parable was for those who were confident in themselves that they were righteous. This is not for bad people: it's for good people. On the whole, confidence is a great thing but confidence can be misplaced.

The parable was for those who were confident of their own righteousness. Secondly, it was for those who 'looked down on everybody else'. These two things often go together, a high opinion of yourself and a low opinion of other people. So do you fit this category this morning? How confident are you in yourself? How frustrated do you get with other people who don't reach your high standards? This might just be getting a little bit uncomfortable.

Verse 10 identifies the main characters in the story. There are just two, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. The word Pharisee means 'separated one'. The Pharisees were a strict, religious sect in Judaism. They weren't priests but ordinary Jews, laymen, but men who had a passion for the Jewish Law. They were so worried that people might break the Law that they built a fence around it.

For example, no work was allowed on the sabbath. What did that mean? If you carried something from one side of the room to the other was that work? If it was cold and you lit a fire was that work? They decided it was. They drew up a long list of interpretations of the Law until it became a straitjacket, a worry, a burden. They didn't always keep every little detail themselves but they were quick to point out if anyone else was missing the mark.

They had cracked this Law-keeping business and they were very proud of it. They could be confident of their own righteousness and they had a good yardstick to measure everyone else.

The second character was a tax collector. Don't be deceived by the older translations which call him a 'publican'. He didn't run a pub. He collected taxes. Taxation is never popular but there was even more reason to look down on tax collectors in Jesus' day. Firstly, they were collaborators. In the time of Jesus Palestine was an enemy-occupied territory, ruled by the Romans. The taxes that were collected went into the pockets of the Romans. They decided how the money should be spent. Anyone who worked with

the Romans was regarded as a traitor.

But the second reason tax collectors were so despised was that they took the opportunity to line their own pockets by fleecing their fellow countrymen. They took a generous percentage for themselves. No one was likely to complain because they were part of the Roman administration. So they got away with it. It wasn't unusual to despise a tax collector but one entering the temple to pray would seem more than a bit hypocritical.

I read something last week which had never occurred to me before. It's quite possible that the Pharisee was one of the people who had actually been fleeced by that particular tax collector. That would have given him even more reason to bristle. This was personal.

Those, then, are the two characters. What were they doing? Ostensibly, the same thing. They had gone up to the temple to pray. That was good, wasn't it? Well, in the case of the Pharisee, yes, but, as we've seen, it was a bit strange for the tax collector.

Verses 11 and 12 record the prayer of the Pharisee. He stood up. There was nothing unusual about that. It was the usual posture for prayer. We usually stand up to sing and sit down to pray but in other countries it's often the other way round. Whether you stand, sit or kneel, whether you raise your hands or keep them by your side – those things don't matter.

He stood up. And then we get a very revealing phrase. In the NIV it says he 'prayed about himself'. It would also be possible to translate 'he prayed with himself' or even 'he prayed to himself'. All these meanings make sense in this context. His prayer was all about himself. There is no sense of the greatness or the grace of God, no real expression of worship. It's a totally selfish and self-centred prayer. I wonder if we fall into that trap. Our prayers are all about us.

Or perhaps the main meaning is that he prayed with himself. He had no sense of the presence of the Almighty. This is a short distance from saying that he prayed *to* himself. Although his words were addressed to God they were really an expression of praise to himself and thanksgiving for his own piety.

'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.' He compared himself favourably with other people who were not as good as he was. The easiest way to make yourself look better is to put other people down. When you put someone else down you haven't moved but it looks as though you have.

It's obvious that the Pharisee didn't have a good opinion of anyone else. He felt he was not like other people; he was superior. They were all at it in some way or other, grabbing what wasn't theirs, cheating, playing away. But as he looked around none had sunk as low as this tax collector.

Then he listed a representative sample of his own righteousness. 'I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' In fairness, the tax collector could probably have said, 'I party twice a week and cream off a tenth of all I get.' By contrast the Pharisee went over the top in his religious fervour. The Jews were required by the Law to fast on only one day of the year, the Day of Atonement. This man didn't just fast once a year but twice a week. There were limits to the items that were subject to the tithing law but this man tithed everything.

Verse 13 records the prayer of the tax collector. It couldn't be more different. Before Jesus gives us the content of his prayer he tells us his attitude. He stood at a distance. He wouldn't even look up to heaven. He beat his breast. He felt miserable and unclean. Do you remember how the ten lepers stood at a distance? He felt like that. He hovered

about at the back of the temple in the shadows. It could never be said that he was confident. He was a wreck.

His prayer has just seven words, six in the original, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' The verdict of Jesus in the next verse would have been totally unexpected when he gave it. 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.' Each man went to his own home. I don't suppose either would have felt comfortable in the home of the other. One went home justified, the other did not. One had God's verdict of 'righteous'. The other did not.

If you had asked anyone outside the temple that day to say which of the two men was righteous in God's sight they would have had no hesitation. The Pharisee, of course. But Jesus says, No. It was the tax collector. Why?

He showed true humility and repentance. His prayer was utterly sincere. He recognised his faults and sins and owned up to God. His prayer was not a religious ritual, going through the motions. It was an honest encounter with God in which he recognised his need of God's mercy and asked for the forgiveness which God alone could give.

These two parables, the widow and the judge, the Pharisee and the tax collector, are both about justice. The parable of the widow and the judge is all about the justice that you will only see at the end of the age when Jesus comes back. But if you trust him you will see it.

The second parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector is about the justice that you can see here and now. It's a strange kind of justice that declares the righteous person guilty and the sinful person acquitted. God's justice is strange justice, hard to understand, but in the end it's the best kind of justice possible, that allows a sinner to be forgiven and to receive eternal salvation.

Jesus' final word is this. 'Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.'

That was the end of this particular teaching session, Jesus' lessons about the kingdom of God, about his second coming, and about prayer, about perseverance and finally about humility. There's a huge irony in what happened next.

Verse 15: 'People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them.' What were these people thinking about, bringing babies for Jesus to touch them? Didn't they realise who he was? Didn't they know that the kingdom of God was more important than doting mums and their squawking infants?

But what did Jesus say? Verses 16: and 17 'Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."'

In other words, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. It's a hard lesson to learn and the disciples spectacularly demonstrated that they had failed to learn it. And before we are too hard on them, we need to take the warning and examine our own hearts, our own attitudes, our own prayers, our own actions.