

Prayer Is Attitude

sermon digest

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Luke 18:9-14

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With all of the New Testament stress on moral, saintly behavior, the Pharisees should have been held as models of Christian virtue; but the word *Pharisee* has gone down in history as an epithet for hypocrisy. If you are searching for the worst possible insult for religious people, call us “Pharisees.” Because of the Gospels, we have come to know Pharisees, not as the righteous people they were striving to be, but as self-righteous, self-absorbed, heartless, pretentious, and arrogant. According to the Gospel picture of Pharisees, these were people with an attitude repugnant to Jesus. The denigration of Pharisees in the Gospels is probably a prime reason for the anti-Semitism of later Christianity. They were demonized by early Christians in spite of the facts of history: this community of pious Jewish laymen was most responsible for saving Judaism after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE, and their theology was closer to the teaching of Jesus than either the priestly class of Sadducees or the revolutionary Zealots. Unlike the monastic desert community, the Essenes, Pharisees engaged with ordinary Jews striving to live in the Roman culture.

The parable is found only in Luke. It is coupled with the parable of the persistent woman and the unjust judge as a second illustration of the meaning of prayer. The target audience is clearly identified as *pharisaical persons*, “some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” Typical of Luke, the parable is a picture of radical extremes. The tax collector (publican in King James) is the worst of the worst of sinners. Lower than ordinary thieves, publicans defrauded and stole from their own people to support the occupying armies and the wealth of Rome and to line their own pockets. Without a doubt, the publican was anything but an example of virtue. If we knew the rest of the story, the publican could not leave his prayer in the Temple, “God be merciful to me, a sinner,” and return to his life of extortion without being a worse hypocrite than the Pharisee.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Pharisee represented the best of the best. His whole life was devoted not only to keeping the Law of God, the Torah, but to exceeding the demands of the Law. He fasted twice each week; the Law only called for one fast. He gave tithes of all of his income without regard to the provision that excludes products previously tithed by the producer. We have damned them as legalists, but Pharisee rules for living attempted to deal in detail with the daily issues confronted by ordinary people. In later Christianity, works of *supererogation*, beyond the call of duty, would eventually become the sign of true sainthood. So, what was the problem?

The purpose of religion attributed to Jesus in the Gospels is the law of Love (Mt 22:37-38): “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” This is also the centerpiece of our Grace Covenant.

Prayer, including the larger practice of worship, is *koinonia*, communion with God in community with neighbors. The problem may have been the private possession of the Judaic party of Pharisees, but I doubt it. By the time of Luke’s Gospel, the problem of hypocrisy, of self-righteous arrogance, was well established in the church. Christians did not need the Pharisees as a whipping boy; they had their own sins to confess, their own failings to discover. I love the story about the children’s Sunday school teacher who ended the parable we read today with a prayer of thanksgiving: “God, I thank you, that we are not like that nasty Pharisee.” The pharisaism of bashing Pharisees is no better than the pharisaism of the Pharisees.

Pharisees come in all sizes, ages, religions, and denominations. Whom do you want to bash today? Racism, sexism, homophobia, ethnic bigotry, all thrive on a the myth of superiority, that there is a righteous exclusion based on the divine nature that approves of one person or group over the other. We should not forget Hitler’s philosophy of Aryan superiority that fueled and justified the Jewish persecution and a world war. But the distorted vision of humanity dates back to biblical times. The wealthy view economic success as a sign of divine favor, while people who depend on public welfare are victims of their own sloth. The patriot makes citizenship a heavenly documentation of God’s chosen, while they insist on an iron curtain to prevent immigration of new citizens. The educated measure virtue by degrees issued by accredited institutions of learning and devalue people who have failed to access education, or who have failed to meet the grade. We play the game every Saturday.

Tennessee is better than Kentucky, Texas is superior to Oklahoma, and the South is always preferred to Yankees.

Every ism tends to stand on the head of some group that must be excluded. The most sickening experience of my professional life came with the Southern Baptist wars of the 1990's. I encountered an attitude that we mistakenly attributed to theological differences. The battle cry of Fundamentalism was biblical inerrancy. The theology was neither new nor unfamiliar. What changed was the litmus test. In order to teach or to be accepted as a true Christian, you had to submit to the test, say "uncle" to the claim that the Bible is verbally inspired and completely without error. Some of us, especially students of biblical text and history, could not maintain integrity of faith and submit to the demands of Fundamentalists. But at bottom the issue was not biblical inerrancy; it was institutional authority. The whole movement was fueled by maintaining a clear and certain enemy. Without "liberals" to bash, the movement loses its energy. The only exclusion comparable to the Fundamentalists was the angry exclusion that developed among us moderates. Somewhere along the way, I woke up one morning to discover that the most loving people I knew were theological conservatives, fundamentalists, if you will. Did I need create an enemy in order to justify my own existence?

The Pharisee prays "by himself." His ego does not allow for corporate prayer. The only place he has for his fellow worshiper is to play the heavy for his self-adulation. The Pharisees cannot pray with closed eyes; they always have to keep one eye on the publican on the other side of the room. Without the enemy to stand on, they cannot rise to such a high and lofty view of self. If the Pharisee were as good as he claims and if God is truly the Lord of the universe, elaborate descriptions of our own righteousness is badly misplaced.

What is wrong with this picture? We do not pray to inform God about our latest achievements or the greatest needs in the world. The Pharisee's prayer is offered not only "by himself" but *to* himself. The KJV may be closer to the truth that he prayed "thus, within himself." We do not inform God at all. We pray to grow our own understanding of the need of the world. Prayer reaches beyond self to communion with the God of love and compassion who, as the psalmist wrote, knows our words before they are formed in our minds or spoken by our mouths.

The attitude of prayer is humility. The tax collector entered the Temple but maintained a safe distance from the good people, like the Pharisee. He would not lift up his head toward heaven but beat his chest as he prayed the prayer of David in Psalm 51, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Keep in mind, that the parable is an exaggeration. Most of us would not identify ourselves with either man, the Pharisee or the publican. But at the end, Jesus declares that the sinner's prayer is more likely to connect with the God of grace than the pompous pioucity of the Pharisee.

I have these moments of protest when reading the Bible. I want to pray, "Lord, why would you set up a groveling, miserable slime like this tax collector as a model for the attitude of prayer? Do you like to see people grovel?" I still get my tongue in a knot when singing the old Isaac Watts hymn "At the Cross." I learned the hymn in childhood when the old *Broadman Hymnal* was in the racks of my church. We sang, "would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I." The 1956 *Baptist Hymnal* changed the wording to "sinners such as I." The Calvinism of Watts comes through in the self-deprecation of identity with a "worm." Actually the word has a biblical base in Psalm 22, which is also the source of the prayer of Jesus from the cross, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" The Psalmist writes, "I am a worm, not a human."

Deeply rooted in the old Calvinist theology of the total depravity of humanity, one approach to worship is the call to grovel. I recall the early days of my ministry in West Point, Kentucky. Mr. Culver would come out of worship to shake my hand and offer the best compliment he could imagine for the sermon: "Look at my shoes. You sure stepped on my toes today!" I would immediately apologize for my insensitivity. Then I learned that he was being nice. I also recall the deacons meeting when Forest demanded that we invite a "real evangelist" to preach the annual revival meeting. He insisted, "We have heard enough about love. We need someone to preach on sin." I shared this conversation the next day with my friend John, who suggested an appropriate pastoral response: "Just what sin is bothering you, Forest?"

In Steinbach's novel *Travels with Charlie*, the author tells of attending a worship service in a New

England Congregational church committed to Jonathan Edwards' style of threatening sinners in the hands of an angry God. The point of worship was to make sinners as miserable as possible. After the service, Steinbach wrote that he considered kicking Charlie his dog so that he could enjoy feeling miserable like the rest of the congregation.

Certainly there are times in our lives when confrontation with our own failures, the reality of sin in our lives, is the best we can offer to God. Without regard for individual acts of vice or virtue, the moral failure of the publican or the moral purity of the Pharisee, the parable calls for an attitude of humility in prayer. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6) addresses the attitude of prayer. Jesus calls for disciples to find a closet of privacy rather a street corner for prayer. This is not an attack on congregational prayer so much as a challenge to prayers offered for applause, prayers that address the audience of our peers rather than the God who listens to the needs and longings of our hearts. In Matthew, Jesus presents the "Lord's Prayer" as a model, followed by commentary on one passage, "forgive us our debts (trespasses) as we have forgiven our debtors." Jesus admonishes his disciples, "if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

Jesus acknowledged that prayer is *koinonia*. We seek communion with God, while we live in community with friends, family, neighbors, and enemies. Every prayer reflects the attitude that grows out of the interaction with God, self and others. A medieval monk once suggested that everyone who goes to heaven will be surprised—surprised at the folks who are there, surprised at the folks who are missing, and surprised to find him/herself there.