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What Our Prayers Say About Us

Luke 18:9-14

Introduction

1. A number of you may recognize the name Leo Tolstoy.
2. Leo Tolstoy was a Russian novelist best known for his two longest works, *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878).
3. What many may not know about this man is that his morality was not God-centered but self-centered.

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4. Tolstoy once wrote,
 "Read a work on the literary characterization of genius today, and this awoke in me the conviction that I am a remarkable man both as regards capacity and eagerness to work. I have not yet met a single man who was morally good as I . . . I do not remember an instance in my life when I was not attracted to what is good and was not ready to sacrifice anything to it."
 (*Intellectuals*, Paul Johnson, p. 107)
5. We might compare Tolstoy's thoughts about himself to some people in Jesus' day "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else" (Luke 18:9, NIV84).
6. In our reading this morning, we find Jesus telling another parable on prayer.
7. Last week, Jesus' focus in the Parable of the Persistent Widow was on the importance of prayer.
8. Today, in another parable, this one about two men going up to the Temple to pray, Jesus' focus is upon what our prayers reveal about our hearts.
9. As we examine this parable it is important that each of us stop to examine ourselves and ask "What do my prayers tell God about me?"

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I. The Parable

A. THE TWO MEN WHO WENT INTO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” (Luke 18:10, NASB95)

1. Jesus’ parable centers around two people — a Pharisee and a tax collector.
 - a. Pharisee
 - 1) Part of an influential group of Jews who stood for religious purity and separation.
 - 2) They prided themselves in their careful adherence to the law of God.
 - 3) They often went beyond the letter of the Old Testament law in their own personal lives.
 - 4) An ancient Jewish historian known as Josephus described the Pharisees as “a class of Jews who consider themselves the godliest of the nation and the most rigorous followers of the law” (*Jewish Wars* 1.111).

3a

- b. Tax collector
 - 1) Tax collectors were considered the scum of Jewish society.
 - 2) During the time of Jesus, the land of Israel was under Roman occupation.
 - 3) Rome was known for collecting taxes from those people it had conquered.
 - 4) To accomplish this, the Romans employed Jews to collect those taxes from their fellow countrymen.
 - a) Matthew, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles had been a tax collector before following Jesus (Matthew 10:3).
 - b) Zaccheus, the chief tax collector in Jericho, was another (Luke 19:2).
 - 5) These tax collectors were considered religious and political traitors, as

- well as extortioners.
- 6) They were not allowed to hold any public office nor were they permitted to give testimony in court.
- c. Both of these men went to the Temple in Jerusalem at the same time to pray — possibly at one of the two times during the day reserved for public prayer, either 9 A.M. or 3 P.M. (Acts 2:15; 3:1).
- d. It is what happens there that Jesus draws our attention to this morning.

Slide 4**B. THE PRAYER OF THE PHARISEE**

“The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’” (Luke 18:11–12, NASB95)

1. There are at least three things which should stand out in our minds as Jesus tells us about this Pharisee and his prayer.
2. The first is that he was “standing by himself” (ESV, NRSV).
 - a. The fact that “the tax collector” was “standing some distance away” (v. 13) suggests that this Pharisee moved to the front of the Court of Israel, near to the altar of burnt offering.
 - b. He stood by himself because he did not want to be defiled by those he considered unclean (i.e., “swindlers, unjust, adulterers, tax collectors”).
 - c. If he were to touch the clothing of someone who was ceremonially unclean, then he would be defiled — so he must stand as far away from “these people” as he can.
 - Are there people we purposely avoid when we come to worship because they don’t measure up to our standards?

4a

3. The second aspect of the Pharisee’s prayer that should stand out in our minds is its content:

- a. Typically prayers included confession of sins, thanksgiving for blessings received, and/or petitions for oneself or others.
- b. This Pharisee's prayer included none of these:
 - 1) He wasn't confessing his sins.
 - 2) He wasn't thanking God for blessings bestowed in his life.
 - 3) He didn't make any request on behalf of someone else.
- c. His prayer was an attack on others while elevating himself.
- d. Rather than comparing himself to God's expectations of him, he compared himself to others.
- e. He announced his piety to God by saying, "I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:12, NASB95).
- f. He wanted God and others to know that he went beyond the requirements of the law.
 - Do we ever tell God how fortunate He is to have us in His church?

4b

- 4. This brings us to the third possible item involved in the Pharisee's prayer that should stand out in our minds — he was saying these things aloud.
 - a. It was customary in Israel to pray silently or in a low voice (i.e. Hannah, 1 Samuel 1:13) — praying loudly was considered rude.
 - b. If he were praying loud enough to be heard by those around him, he was utilizing his prayer as an opportunity to offer some unsolicited advice to the "unrighteous" who were present — "this tax collector".
 - Have we ever prayed or listened to a prayer which is actually a sermon in disguise?

[Without saying anything else, Jesus proceeds to describe . . .]

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C. THE PRAYER OF THE TAX COLLECTOR

"But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift

up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’” (Luke 18:13, NASB95)

1. The actions and words of the tax collector stand in stark contrast to those of the Pharisee.
2. First, his position — he stood “some distance away” (v. 13a).
 - a. While the Pharisee may have been as close to the altar of burnt offering as he could get,
 - b. The tax collector was probably just inside the entrance to the Court of Israel, or even further away in the Court of the Gentiles.
 - c. Here was a man who felt unworthy to even be in the presence of Israel’s almighty God, but knowing that he needed to be there.

5b

3. Second, his actions — he “was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast” (v. 13b).
 - a. The tax collector could not bring himself to lift his head.
 - b. Almost 500 years earlier in this same place a scribe named Ezra prayed, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.” (Ezra 9:6, NASB95)
 - c. While the tax collector may not have lifted his eyes to God that day, he lifted his heart.
 - d. So distressed was he over what he was and what he had done that he beat his breast — a sign of self accusation and inward grief.
 - e. The only other time in the New Testament that we read of people beating their breasts was following the crucifixion of Jesus, when the crowds were so deeply disturbed by what had taken place that they went home beating their breasts (Luke 23:48).

“And all the crowds who came together for this spectacle, when they

observed what had happened, began to return, beating their breasts.”

(Luke 23:48, NASB95)

5c

4. Third, the content of his prayer, “God be merciful to me, the sinner!” (v. 13c).
 - a. This man had no desire to compare himself with the Pharisee, nor to announce his virtues.
 - b. He only sought to declare himself “a sinner” and plead with God to be merciful.
 - c. Over a thousand years before this man entered the temple, King David, following his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah, began Psalm 51 with these words, “Have mercy on me, O God” (Psalm 51:1a, ESV).
 - d. All of our English translations render the publican’s request as “be merciful to me” or “have mercy on me,” but the word translated as mercy is not the common Greek word used for mercy, *eleeō*.
 - e. Blind Bartimaeus will use this word at the end of this chapter as he called out to Jesus, outside of Jericho, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Luke 18:38).
 - f. But the tax collector utilized another word from the Greek, *hilaskomai*, a word which means “to make atonement.”
 - g. It is taken from the Day of Atonement when the High Priest sprinkled the blood from the goat of the sin offering on the mercy seat within the Temple.
 - h. He would then come out and tell the people that atonement had been made for their sins.
 - i. This tax collector is beating his breast and asking God, “Please let atonement be made for me.”

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II. The Lesson

A. ONLY ONE MAN WENT HOME JUSTIFIED

“I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other. . .” (Luke 18:14a, NASB95)

1. The Pharisee went home that day with his wide phylacteries and long tassels confident in his own righteousness.
2. He felt good about who he was and what he had done.
3. However, Jesus said that he left the temple “unaccepted, unjustified, and under God’s wrath”¹
4. The tax collector who was considered a traitor by his fellow Jews, who repented and humbly cast Himself on God’s mercy, went home justified.
5. Just like that his sins were gone, God’s wrath was turned away and he instantly had a new life.

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B. REALIZE THE VALUE OF HUMILITY

1. Jesus closed his parable that day with a principle, one which expressed another fundamental moral law of life.

“... for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14b, NASB95)

2. It is one which He repeated numerous times in His teaching:
 - a. Matthew 18:4, after His disciples asked Him who “is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1).
 - b. Matthew 23:12, after His denunciation of the Pharisees practices.
 - c. Luke 14:11, in the home of one of the leaders of the Pharisees as He

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know The Truth*, Preaching The Word, Vol. 2 (Crossway: Wheaton, IL, 1998) p. 195.

watched the guests pick out the places of honor for themselves.

3. Both Peter and our Lord's brother, James, remembered it and utilized it in their letters (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5).

"God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6b; 1 Peter 5:5b)

4. Peter prefaced it in his letter with these words, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time," (1 Peter 5:6, NASB95)

Conclusion

1. Many of us came here today to worship, but how many of us have truly worshiped.
2. As we have sung our songs, prayed our prayers, partaken of our Lord's Supper, and listened to His Word proclaimed, God has looked into our hearts.
3. What has He seen?
4. Have we in humility pleaded with Him to make us righteous? Will we leave here eternally grateful for the richness of His mercy?
5. If you haven't humbled your heart before God, why not do so today.
6. Let Him cleanse you and give you a new life.