

The Prayer God Wants

Luke 18:9-14

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Jesus also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 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." (NRSV)

I

I continue to be a Christian partly because Jesus is such a keen observer of the human heart. Even after more than 40 years of trying to follow Jesus, I continue to learn from Jesus insights into myself and others that I probably wouldn't get anywhere else. He and the Bible offer a vast storehouse of wisdom, if we want to receive it.

For instance, in this parable Jesus deftly shows us that when we're righteous—and we know we're righteous—we skirt dangerously close to a grievous sin.

One of the good guys walks into the temple in Jerusalem to pray. Everyone knows he's a good guy because he's a Pharisee. For the most part, Jews in the first century admired Pharisees for their meticulous and methodical passion for righteousness. Pharisees, maybe more than anyone else in Jewish society, wanted to conform themselves to the will of God. They wanted to be God's friends. In the rhythms and patterns of daily work, they bent their life toward God. This was their purpose and preoccupation.

With a spring in his step, this good guy strides into the temple to thank God. Over on the edge he launches into his prayer of gratitude. God, thank you for helping me to act as a good person should. Thank you for giving me the ability to fast from eating twice a week. Thank you for given me the desire and wherewithal

to offer you a tithe on everything I receive from your generosity to me. Thank you that I do not extort bribes or favors from other people. Thank you that justice shapes the trajectory of my life. Thank you for helping me to be faithful to my wife, and not commit adultery. And thank you that I'm not like that tax collector who slunk here into the temple the same time I did and who's now standing there on the other side confessing his miserable sins!

II

You and I know what Jesus says about all this at the end of the parable—he says the good Pharisee went back to his house unjustified, not right in the eyes of God, without divine approval and blessing.

We can imagine the people who first heard this parable were shocked. We should be shocked too because the good Pharisee lives inside of us. At least if you're like me, then we know the Pharisee well.

I was standing in the checkout lane at Kroger a while back and glanced over at the line beside me. The appearance and behavior of a certain man in that line caught my eye, and several moments later I started comparing myself to him. Thank goodness I'm not like him, I thought to myself.

I was sitting in a classroom some years ago listening to a fellow student defending a point that I thought was perfectly outrageous. Over the next 5-6 minutes I was heartily thankful I wasn't as deluded as that student.

Last week I was reading the national news. A particular article set me off. Fools! Idiots! I ranted. How could people be so wrong-headed as to hold that view? Thank God I'm not so stupid and selfish as to think that!

Prayers of thanks, whether uttered at church, Kroger, the classroom, or the privacy of your home, easily slip into comparisons and contrasts. Thank you, God, that I was able to give \$10,000 last year to BAMF—unlike that person 5 chairs away

who probably only gave \$1,000, if that. Thank you, God, that I have health insurance, unlike that poor sucker on the other side of town. Thank you, God, that you have helped me cultivate an impeccable sexual morality, unlike that person I know who had an affair and for all I know watches pornography late at night. Thank you, thank you, God, that I'm not like _____ (you fill in the blank).

Contrasting ourselves with other people is something of a sport among us. We sometimes do this discreetly in our private prayers where only God hears us. All the illustrations I've given so far are these private prayers of contrast that we mutter under our breath or think silently in our minds. However, the scornful contrasts can also sneak into our public prayers. Praise be to you, God of heaven and earth, that we Mennonites believe in peacemaking! And whether it's spoken aloud or not, at least some of us good Mennonites within earshot of this prayer will be thinking too ourselves: yeah, God, unlike those sinful, bloodthirsty militarists at the Pentagon.

Or this: Praise be to you, God, for all the blessings you have poured out on us, especially homes and health and jobs. Then perhaps someone in the group will silently think: yeah, God, especially in comparison to those chronically lazy people who don't deserve these things because they don't work as hard and as diligently as I do. These are examples of prayers of gratitude which shift into subtle contrasts that make us look pretty good.

And Jesus says: watch out! God isn't pleased with these prayers.

III

So what exactly is the problem here? What did the good Pharisee do to make God reject him?

For insight on answering this question, let us turn to a man named Dorotheos of Gaza. We know almost nothing about Dorotheos of Gaza except for

this. He lived in the 500s and was a monk in a monastery near Gaza, in the Middle East. The monastery Dorotheos lived in may have had a few dozen monks. In a sense it was a congregation, except the members of this congregation were all men and lived together all the time, day and night, in an intentional community. Maybe you can guess what happens when a small group of people live together constantly. You get to know each other really well, maybe too well. The way John clears his throat every time we try to pray. The way George slurps his soup when we eat lunch. The way Harold lollygags and fails to finish his work the way the rest of us think he should. After a while these small irritations of behavior become blanket criticisms of the person. We pass judgment on other people. We conclude that John is irreverent in prayer, that George is a sloppy and uncouth eater, that Harold is lazy. I think you understand how this works.

Anyhow, one day when his fellow monks were gathered in worship, Dorotheos of Gaza decided to talk about this frankly. In his homily that day, Dorotheos used the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to help his friends understand precisely what the problem was. Dorotheos clarifies that it was proper for the Pharisee to thank God. The Pharisee knew that without God's help, he never would have been able to fast twice a week, pay a tithe on all his earnings, avoid adultery, turn away from extortion, and all the moral behavior. Dorotheos says it was right of the Pharisee to express his thanks to God. In being grateful, the Pharisee was merely telling the truth: you, God, have been helping me along the path of morality, and I'm grateful for your help.

The problem, continues Dorotheos, happens when the Pharisee falls into one-upmanship and starts passing judgment on other people. It's fine for us to observe that someone in the community "got mad," says Dorotheos, but it's something else entirely to say that this same person is "bad-tempered." It's fine to

recognize and name a specific action, but it's not fine to pass judgment on whole disposition of a person's life.

Only God has the right to make blanket judgments on someone's life, argues Dorotheos. That's a divine prerogative, not a human one.¹

IV

I think you can see where this is going. Dorotheos is trying to help his fellow monks develop patterns of speech and thought that will strengthen communal relationships instead of tearing them down. Dorotheos doesn't want his community to implode from sanctimonious criticism. When we pass judgment on someone, we easily come to despise her or him, which in turn harms the relationship.

If Dorotheos is right, then the Pharisee's prayer in the temple was just fine—until he passed judgment on the tax collector. The moment he passed judgment on the tax collector was the moment his prayer slid into problematic territory.

Contrasting ourselves favorably to others and pronouncing judgment on them is an easy pattern to slip into. Many of us have done this.

V

What is the more excellent way that Jesus suggests? How can we leave behind the contrasts and judgments and self-righteous justifications?

Jesus shows us a better way in the person of the tax collector. It's humility. The tax collector models humility in prayer. His prayer happens to a prayer of petition, but that's not the essential point. The essential feature of his prayer is the genuine humility he expresses. He compares himself to no one. Sometimes we erroneously think humility is comparing ourselves to other people, then putting ourselves below them and feeling inferior to them.

No. Humility makes no comparisons, unless the comparison is to God. Humility says: With your help, God, I've been able to do good things a, b, and c. Thank you! Or humility says: I have sinned and I'm ever so sorry. Forgive me, God. In neither case does humility make comparisons and contrasts to other human beings—only to God.

Humility is the prayer that justifies us. To it, God says: Well done, good and faithful servant!

¹ See *Dorotheos of Gaza: Discourses and Sayings*, trans. Eric P. Wheeler (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 131-139.