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The Heart of True Prayer

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

“And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ‘Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 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.’ 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!’ I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, ‘Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all!’” (Luke 18:9-17).

When I was a boy, I loved the Olympics. It didn't matter whether it was the Winter or Summer games, I ate it all up. I think one of the reasons I liked the Olympics so much was that I had a clear sense of who the bad guys and good guys were. I grew up during the Cold War so the good guys were the Americans and our allies, and the bad guys were from the Soviet Union and their friends in the Eastern block countries. The good guys wore red, white and blue and the bad guys just wore red. The good guys had names like mine; the bad guys had names like Nabatov and Chekowski.

As I grew older, though, things changed in the world. The Soviet Union and the Eastern block collapsed. Some of their athletes actually came over here. I even had a couple of opportunities to go to Russia and get to know some of those people for myself. I found my assumptions about them didn't deal with real people living in a real world. Instead, they dealt with caricatures rather than real characters. I still love the Olympics, but I find it much more difficult to separate the good guys from the bad guys.

Sometimes I think we do the same thing with the Bible. We think, for example, that had we been there for the match in Egypt between Pharaoh and Moses, Pharaoh would have been dressed in red and Moses in red, white and blue. We can do the same things with some of the stories Jesus told. We've heard them too many times. As a result, like the I did with the Olympics, we've concluded that Jesus dealt with caricatures rather than real characters.

I. WE MUST CONFRONT OUR BASIC ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THIS STORY

Take this story in Luke 18. As soon as we get a line on the cast of characters, we've made up our minds. We see the Pharisees as the bad guys and the tax-collectors as the good guys. We imagine that this pompous Pharisee always runs on and on about his own superior spirituality. He's really rotten to the core. All of his religious activity is just an act; he doesn't really care about God. His whole life is a sham. So we dismiss him.

At the same time, we're probably in the habit of viewing the tax collector as kind of the humble, downtrodden type. He is generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the goodhearted hooker. His questionable behavior being the result of a corrupt system. We imagine that deep down he really wants to know God, he just doesn't know how.

With these assumptions in place it's no wonder that we hardly lift an eyebrow at Jesus' verdict in v.14. Of course the Pharisee is rejected and the tax collector is the righteous one! But this isn't how Jesus' hearers would have reacted to this story. If we read it this way we miss the point. With these stereotypes we can inoculate ourselves from the impact of this passage. It's too easy for us to identify ourselves with the tax collector and dismiss the Pharisee.

We're more like the Pharisees than we think. They were a respected, sincere group of laymen who truly desired to serve God. They took the Bible seriously. They felt that morality was being compromised and wanted a return to traditional values. The tax collectors were the opposite. They were Jewish citizens who joined hands with the Romans in their oppressive taxation policies. They were usually very wealthy and had come upon their money by ripping off the most helpless members of Jewish society. Robert Capon describes this tax collector

as "a fat cat who drives a stretch limo, drinks nothing but Chivas Regal, and never shows up at a party without at least two \$500 a night call girls in tow." I hope you can see here that why Jesus' verdict really is shocking.

You see, even for us, as believers, the line between the good guys and the bad guys isn't always as clear as we think. We may ask, "Where then IS the line drawn? What is the real difference between these two men?" Let's look closer at this story and see if we can find out.

II. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE TWO WAS HUMILITY AND PRIDE

In v.10 we see that both went up to the temple to pray. This was a way of saying that they went to church. They were most likely engaging in the worship that took place each morning and afternoon in the temple. It was during these times that Jews gathered and sacrifices were made for their sins. It was also during this service that incense was burned and time was given for personal prayer.

A. The Pharisee's prayer reveals pride:

First, we're given the prayer of the Pharisee. Notice first his actions. He stood. Most likely he had his eyes lifted up as this was the proper way to pray back then. He knew how to pray properly. Notice also that he stood off by himself. My Bible says that he prayed "to himself" and the NIV says that he prayed "about himself." I believe that the text should read that he prayed "by himself." A Pharisee would want to stay away from the others who might be "unclean" because if he even touched their clothes or accidentally brushed against one of them he would become unclean. So from his body language we can see that this man wanted to do things right.

His words reflect that too. He starts with thanksgiving. When you pray, that's a good place to start. We're called to express our gratitude to God. His thanks to God is rooted in the fact that he's not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers. And then he finds someone near him there in the temple who fits that description perfectly. He knew tax collectors were scoundrels. How thankful he was that God had allowed him to be different. It's not that different from when we see a bum on the street and say, "There but for the grace of God go I."

He goes on to describe his good works. He fasts twice a week and pays tithes of all he gets. In doing this, he goes above and beyond the law. The law said that a man only had to fast once a year. But, like most Pharisees, he fasted twice a week. This man took his relationship with God very seriously! He was willing to be inconvenienced by it. This was also true

with regard to his checkbook. He didn't just tithe from his wine, oil, and grain like the law required, he tithed from everything, even the herbs he grew in his garden. Unlike the tax collector who ripped people off, the Pharisee was generous with what he had. His wasn't a religion of convenience; he put his money where his mouth was. He was disciplined in both his prayer life and his tithing.

B. The tax-collector's prayer reveals humility:

Look next at the prayer of the tax collector. It says that he "stood some distance away..." He doesn't feel worthy to stand at the altar with God's people. And then he beats his breast. This was a gesture that was used back then in times of extreme anguish. The remarkable thing about this is that it was characteristic of women and not men. This wasn't the proper way for a man to pray! But he is so desperate that he doesn't seem to care.

Then notice his words. He says, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." His prayer is quite a bit shorter than the Pharisee's. He doesn't offer thanks. Instead, he issues a desperate request. He asks for mercy based on the fact that he's such a sinner. It appears that he saw himself in a class by himself in this. He calls himself, "THE sinner." He feels that no one else could have done as much wrong as he. He doesn't go on and on about it. He doesn't wallow in it, but he asks for mercy. In asking for mercy, he uses a word here that assumes he can't earn forgiveness; all he can do is beg God for compassion.

C. Jesus says the tax-collector went home

justified: The two men walk out and that's the end of the story. But then Jesus delivers his shocking verdict. He says, "This man (the tax collector) went down to house justified (made righteous). This man is now in right relation to God, rather than the other! The Pharisee, though he thought he was righteous, was unrighteous, while the tax collector, though he thought he was unrighteous, was righteous." The line between the good guys and the bad guys wasn't drawn where he thought.

So where was this line drawn? Why is one right with God and the other not? Whatever it was that separated these two men, it wasn't a desire to be in touch with God. They both went up to the temple to pray. Nor is it an issue of praying correctly. From what we can tell, the Pharisee did everything right; he even gave thanks, yet he still walked away unrighteous. Nor is it drawn between those who are religiously disciplined and those who aren't. The Pharisee was very disciplined, but he still walked away unrighteous.

D. The line is drawn between the humble and the

proud: So where is it drawn? Most of us have a pretty good idea. We read this story and what upsets us is that this Pharisee is conceited. If you and I were going to give him a bit of spiritual counsel, we would tell him to be more modest. We'd say to him, "Look, what you pray is true, but you shouldn't pray it in public. It sounds kind of conceited."

We don't like conceited people. We like our heroes

modest, and conceit has a way of putting us off. When the back runs 70 yards, scores a touchdown, and then is interviewed on television, we like him to say he made the long run because of the good blocking in front of him. We don't like him to say, "I'm the best runner in college football."

Or, let's say you and I play ping pong, and you beat me in three straight games and then say, "Look, Mitchell, I don't know what you play, but it isn't ping pong." I'm willing to admit you're a better ping pong player than me. What I don't like is to have YOU admit it. Conceit rubs me wrong.

But, conceit isn't the problem with this Pharisee. Conceit is a minor matter. It's often just bad judgment. Like the young woman who went to her pastor and said, "Pastor, I have a sin I can't seem to shake, and I want your help. I come to church on Sunday and can't help thinking I'm the prettiest girl in the church. I know I ought not think that, but I can't help it. I want you to help me with it." The pastor replied, "Mary, don't worry about it. In your case it's not a sin. It's just a horrible mistake."

That's often true of conceit. There are people who talk big because inside they feel small. It's a way of covering up feelings of inadequacy. As far as God is concerned, conceit is a lot like acne: disturbing but not fatal. The trouble with this Pharisee wasn't conceit. It was deeper. It was in his blood. The problem with the Pharisee was pride. His problem wasn't the way he lived his life; it was his pride.

Luke says Jesus told this parable to those who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. One of the symptoms of pride is a critical spirit, because one of the ways we feed our pride is by comparing ourselves with others. We usually look at their vices and think of our virtues, and that, we assume, gives us special standing with God. We have a way of cutting other people off at the knees and putting ourselves up on stilts. In comparison, we seem to stand tall. Whenever you hear somebody always criticizing others, it's a manifestation of a spirit of pride.

We can hear the echo of the Pharisee's prayer in many places. In Congress we might hear someone pray, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like Democrats who compromise traditional values in a vain attempt to be relevant and popular." At the university we might hear someone pray, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like conservatives who hold to mindless ideas that intelligent people don't believe any more." And in a local church we might hear someone pray, "I thank you, Lord, that I am not like liberal Christians who don't believe much of anything these days."

Then a long litany of credentials follows. The politician says, "I oppose abortion and want to abolish the ACLU and support tax vouchers for private education." The university professor says, "I strive to have an open mind and celebrate diversity wherever I see it." The evangelical

Christian says, "I believe in the virgin birth, the resurrection of Christ, and the absolute authority of the Bible."

This Pharisee thought that the distinctions that mattered among men mattered with God. But the tax collector wasn't thinking about others. In desperation, he just cried out for mercy. The heart of true prayer is this humble cry of desperation. There is a time and place in the Christian faith to develop the discipline of prayer, and to become comfortable and confident when we pray. But what's most fundamental is the cry of the heart to get help from the only one who can meet our deepest need. Desperation is the primary condition for true prayer. The reason why we don't pray more is not because we don't know how to pray but because we don't really need to pray. We're not humble enough to know how desperate we really are.

It's interesting that Luke places the story about the babies following this parable. Why is it that you have to become like a baby to enter the kingdom? Babies are desperately dependent. You don't get into the Kingdom the way you get into a country club; you don't get in by showing your credentials; you get in because you know your need, and in your need you cry out to God.

We have to be careful with this. Humility is a very slippery thing! I can't tell you how many times I've come to God out of desperation, began pouring my heart out to him, and then all of a sudden become very conscious of how humble I was, and how God must really be impressed with this prayer! As soon as we THINK we're humble, as soon as we become conscious of it, our humility becomes pride.

It's also possible to fall into the very same trap of the Pharisee, only in a reverse sort of way. This is the pride which comes before God and says, "Lord, I thank you that I'm not proud like this Pharisee! Thank you that I know how great a sinner I am. Thank you that I'm not a hypocrite." But this tax collector wasn't boasting about his humility. He simply stood in the presence of God, and in the presence of God he realized how desperate he was for mercy.

E. The way we become humble is by looking up to God: You see, the key to his humility was where he looked. The Pharisee looked "down" while the tax collector looked "up." The Pharisee measured himself by a standard lower than himself—the tax collector. And when he measured himself by that standard he came out pretty well. We can always find someone worse than ourselves and use that as a means of justifying ourselves. "I'm not that bad, look at so and so." There are always people who are worse than we are, and what a comfort they are to our hearts!

On the other hand, the tax collector looked up. He looked at God and measured himself by that perfect

standard, seeing how far removed he was. The same thing would have happened if the Pharisee had looked up. His religious discipline and obedient lifestyle would have seemed a small thing to him compared to the corruption in his heart. He would have been aware of desires and jealousies that infected all he did.

The line dividing the righteous and the unrighteous is drawn between the truly humble and the proud. And the key to this is our point of reference when we approach God. If we look down and compare ourselves with men we'll surely end up proud, but if we keep looking up at God, measuring ourselves by his standard of righteousness, we'll stay desperately humble—and we won't even know it!

One of the benefits of living in God's presence is this: when you really see God, you see yourself; when you see yourself, you see your sin; when you see your sin, you cry out to God for mercy. The saint is always more aware of his need of God than his successes in God, always more aware of how far he has to go than how far he has come. If you live in the presence of God and live in the light of his holiness, you will see your sin. When you see your sin, you see your need of forgiveness, and you cry out to God for mercy, and you will receive it. That's the good news of this story! There IS mercy for the desperate!

You never outgrow your need for mercy. The most respected pastor, who has lived with God for scores of years, needs God's grace just as much as the pimp or prostitute on skid row who is coming to Jesus Christ for the first time. The more you know of God's light, the more you see your own darkness. And the more you become aware of your need of God's grace, the more you realize how much God gives you.

CONCLUSION

Years ago in the *New Yorker*, H.G. Wells told a story about a minister. He was the kind of man who always said pious things to people. When troubled folks came to him, he found that a particularly helpful thing to say, if said in a right tone of voice, was, "Have you prayed about it?" If said in just the right way, it seemed to settle things.

The minister himself didn't pray much; he had life wrapped up in a neat package. But one day his life collapsed, and it occurred to him that he should take some of his own advice. So, one Saturday afternoon he entered the church, went to the front, and knelt on the crimson rug. Then he folded his hands before the altar and he began to pray. He said, "O God," and suddenly there was a voice. It was crisp, businesslike. The voice said, "Well, what is it?"

The next day when the worshipers came to church, they found the minister sprawled face down on the carpet. When they turned him over, they discovered he was dead. Lines of horror were etched upon his face. People have wondered what H.G. Wells was trying to say. What he was saying is simply this: *there are folks who talk a lot about God who would be scared to death if they saw him face to face.*

Yet that is where we're called to live. That's the secret of humility—not looking inward at your deficiencies or weaknesses, not looking outward at other people, comparing yourself with them, their vices against your virtues, their virtues against your vices. Humility comes from looking up into the face of God—who is both holy and loving—to see ourselves and our need of forgiveness, to cry out for mercy for daily life. Seeing God is to see ourselves. And to see ourselves is to understand what humility is.