

## **Topic: The Keys to an Answered Prayer (Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector)**

### **Passage: Luke 18:9-14**

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

### **Introduction:**

Amongst the four gospel books, Luke includes the most prayers. Luke ch.18 begins with a parable of a persistent widow whose request was granted, and continues with the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector. Both parables (vv.1-9 and vv.9-14) have introductory statements of purpose (vv.1,9) and concluding purposes (vv.6-8; 14) as well.

Luke, the author, began this parable by saying "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector." (v.9).

Nevertheless, this parable is not only meant for the self-righteous during Jesus time; it is also relevant for us today. The focus provided by the introduction of v.9 is the relationship between the prayer and the person praying.

How shall our prayers be as we come before our Lord? How can our requests be granted? How do we pray after God's own heart? This morning we shall look at the keys to an answered prayer.

### **I. PRAYING WITH A SINCERE MOTIVE**

Two people were mentioned in this parable: one is the Pharisee, and the other is the tax-collector. Both individuals were noted people in the Jewish society. The Pharisee was among the religious leaders and well respected in the community; on the other hand, the tax-collector was greatly despised by the public. The Pharisee was a religious person and the tax-collector was a sinner.

The Jews during Jesus time were under the Roman Governor. "The Romans farmed out the task of collecting the taxes in any particular area to the highest bidder. The man did not receive any salary for his work but collected as much money as he could so that he would have a handsome rake-off after paying the government the appointed sum" [The New Bible Commentary: Revised]. Therefore, tax collectors were despised not only by their own people, but also by the Romans.

Now, both the Pharisee and the tax collector came to the temple in Jerusalem to pray, however, they came with different intentions.

v.11 "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself..."

The Pharisee, being a model of piety and religious rectitude, usually dressed in his flowing robe with a prayer shawl, came to the temple to show others how good he was. He walked up to the front and stood before the audience. To him, praying in the temple was just like a public performance. His prayer was not really directed towards God. He prayed to himself. He was there to be seen and to be heard by the other worshippers.

His intention was not to pray to God, but to let others see him and hear him pray. That is the reason why Jesus reminded us in:

Matthew 6:5 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men..."

The tax-collector also stood in the temple, but in a distance. Perhaps he did not want anyone to hear him. He just wanted to talk to God.

Illustration: A little boy who wants to let his grandmother hear his request.

Prayers should be directed to God. The object of our prayers should be God. Our words should be genuine, regardless of how good sentences or words that we may use. The outer performance may be important, but our motives and intentions are far more important. The Lord sees our hearts and our intentions. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because on the outside, they appeared to people as righteous but on the inside they were full of hypocrisy and wickedness (Mt 23:28). The meaning of the word hypocrite (ὑποκριταί) is "drama".

Likewise, when we come to church to worship, our intention should be to meet God. We can never play a "drama" before Him. He sees our hearts, and He knows our intention. "The eyes of the Lord is everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good"(Pr 15:3).

What are your intentions before the Lord?

## II. PRAYING WITH A HUMBLE SPIRIT

This Pharisee claimed to have good conduct. He did not do evil, he was not a robber, and he did not commit adultery. What the Pharisee talked about himself was true, but his prayer was said in a spirit of pride.

Pride is characterized by self-love, egotism, and arrogance. Pride is a sin warned about by the Bible. The prayer of the Pharisee was a model of greed and questionable honesty. He had no sense of humility before God.

If you look at the content of his prayers, you will notice that he was bragging about himself. Pride loves to talk about "I". In v.11, the Pharisee used "I" several times: "I thank you ... I am not... I fast twice a week... give a tenth of all I get."

Praying is good, fasting is good, and tithing is good, but if these things become merits for salvation, then they can be dangerous to our faith.

Ephesians 2:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast."

This Pharisee was over confident of his own righteousness. Pharisees usually thought too well of themselves, as they had even exceeded what the Law (Torah) required of them (Mt 18:11-12; Ps 17:3-5). The Law provided for one fast, but the Pharisees would do it twice. The Law prescribed that certain crops be tithed (Dt 14:22), but the Pharisee practice to tithe even the herbs (Mt 11:42). The Pharisee went beyond what the Law's requirements were in tithing.

Pharisees therefore were very self-righteous. They thought by their good works they would be acceptable before God. They had neglected that all people were so completely affected by their sinful nature that they would be unable to contribute anything to their own salvation. No wonder Jesus told His disciples, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 5:20).

As Christian Reformed people, according to Heidelberg Catechism and Canon of Dort, we acknowledged the Total Depravity of man; that we are fallen humankind. Romans 3:23 "For all have sin and fall short of the glory of God". We are completely unable to match the perfect righteousness that God requires of us. We fall short. We miss it. We were dead in our transgressions and sins, but God made us alive through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, as redemption of our sins.

Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord".

God our heavenly Father makes a deliberate choice to adopt us and welcome us as children into His family. We are adopted by God not because of good works or faith, but entirely as a result of God's love and mercy.

The tax collector was right. He came humbly before God. He approached the righteous God in fear and trembling. He stood at the corner of the temple, far from the altar, away from the Pharisee, and away from the people. He stood there like a statue, and his feet were frozen like stone, as if he was bound, punished or immobilized.

(The Greek word for "at a distance" is the distance the disciples safely kept from Jesus when he was arrested (Lk 23:49), is the division between the rich man's hell residence and Lazarus' heavenly presence (Lk 16:23) and the space the merchants wisely made between them and Babylon at her final destruction (Rev 18:10).)

The tax collector was aware of his spiritual condition before God. He knew the many wrongs that he had done. He was ashamed of himself before men and God. He could imagine himself being a filthy rag before the holy God. The scripture says that he would not even look up to heaven. The Jews usually pray with their head facing upwards looking into the heaven with their hands wide open, a symbol of receiving heavenly blessings. However, this tax-collector was most probably too humiliated to even look up.

Nevertheless, his genuine humility was accepted before God. Jesus teaches, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (v.14).

Sometimes, we could be proud at a communal or individual level. A communal level may mean that we are proud of our church's name and reputation; an individual level may mean an unwillingness to recognize one's sin and the need for change.

May the Lord help us to observe humility as we come before the Lord.

### **III. PRAYING WITH A REPENTENT HEART**

The Pharisee did not express any need in his prayer. He thought he was too good to receive any grace or mercy from God. He has no confession, but instead, he practiced profession.

Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector confessed before the righteous God. He was in deep trouble, and he wanted to seek God. He deeply believed that only God could help him. As a result, he focused on God, and God alone. The same with us, when we come to worship, our main focus should also be on God, and God alone.

The tax collector acknowledged with anguish about himself, and he confessed, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He was under great conviction of sin. He knew the many mistakes he made. He knew his own greediness. He knew the way he overcharged his people for their taxes. He was ashamed of himself.

v. 13 "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'

Beating his breast was a continuous action; it was a sign of sorrow. The tax collector carried out the old practice of beating one's breast to express grief. He pounded his chest with his palm, fist and knuckles. The word "beat" in Greek characterized the beating the wicked servant gave his fellow servants in Jesus' parable (Mt 24:49), the force of the staff the soldiers inflicted on Jesus' head (Mt 27:30), the beating Paul suffered at the hands of rioters (Ac 21:32) and, in another instance, the mouth slapping Paul received at the order of Ananias (Ac 23:2). It was really very painful!

It was because the tax collector acknowledged himself as a great sinner. The tax-collector felt helpless, and he entrusted himself to the mercy of God, to have God's anger removed from him. He recognized that he was doomed, and deserved to be punished.

The tax collector clung to God's covenant with Israel that He is a merciful God and that He will not abandon or forget the covenant He made with their forefathers (Dt 4:31).

Of the 12 occurrences of the Hebrew description of God as "merciful,"

- 10 times are immediately followed by the word "gracious," (Ex 34:6, 2 Chron 30:9, Ne 9:17, 33, Ps 86:15, 103:8, 111:4, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jnh 4:2),
- 5 times are followed by the phrase "slow to anger" (Ne 9:17, Ps 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jnh 4:2), and
- 5 times by the word "abundant" - "abounding in goodness and truth," (Ex 34:6) "abounding in kindness," (Ne 9:17, Joel 2:13, Jnh 4:2) "abounding in mercy and truth" (Ps 86:15) and "abounding in mercy" (Ps 103:8, Ps 145:8).

It is very clear that God will not abandon his people if they return to him (2 Chron 30:9), neither will He desert them (Ne 9:17) nor put an end to them (Ne 9:31).

The only other time the word "merciful" or "mercy" is used in the New Testament identical to the sinner's prayer in Luke 18:13 is found in the book of Hebrews that Christ is a merciful and faithful high priest who has come to make atonement for the sins of the people (Heb 2:17).

The Bible promises us that anyone who honestly confesses his sin to God will receive His mercy, forgiveness and grace. In fact, only two people have confessed “I have sinned” in the Gospels - one to men and one to God. Judas confessed in vain to the chief priests and elders that he betrayed innocent blood (Mt 27:4). The prodigal son humbly confessed his wrongdoing to the Father he offended and meekly accepted forgiveness from He who was ready to forgive (Lk 15:21).

There is not a sinner whom God will not forgive, and there is not a sin that the blood of Jesus Christ cannot redeem.

The bible also promises in I John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins; and purifies us from all unrighteousness”.

Is there any sin that hinder your relationship with the Lord? Let us humbly confess it before Him. II Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”.

**Conclusion:**

At the end of the parable, the tax collector was the only one of the two men who went home justified. “Justified” is a great bible word, meaning to be “right with God”. The only way we can be right with God is to receive His mercy and forgiveness.

I believe all of us want our prayers to be answered by our heavenly Father. Therefore, let us make sure that our relationship with God is right. Let us master the keys to answered prayers; come before Him with a sincere motive, a humble spirit, and a repentant heart. May the Lord bless all who hear His words and put them into practice! Blessed be His Holy Name!