

“What’s Missing in Your Prayers?”

Luke 18:9-14

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This morning our attention is drawn to another parable recorded in Luke’s gospel. Luke seems to be as fond of parables as Jesus was because he scatters them all throughout his book. A full third of all Jesus taught was in the form of parables, and more are found in Luke than any gospel.

One reason parables were so effective was because Jesus took slices of everyday life his audience could relate to and turned them into lessons about life and faith. Not only would people remember the stories, but they would ponder them for months and years to come.

The parable in today’s text has two main characters, a Pharisee and a tax collector. Both have gone to the temple to pray, which is an underlying motif in Luke and Acts.

It appears the Pharisee stood in a prominent place in the temple where many worshipers could hear him, and he thanked God for not making him evil and despicable like some of those around him. He concluded by reminding God of his unfailing obedience to tithe on all his income and fast twice each week.

On the other hand, the tax collector, who had just been included among the evil people the Pharisee listed, went to a secluded place in the temple, bowed his head and beat his breast, a symbol of sincere remorse and deep grief. He spoke only one sentence, which echoed the opening words of Psalm 51, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

Jesus concluded the parable by extolling the virtues of the tax collector, not the Pharisee, and the importance of humility as opposed to arrogance.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Some say he was responding to his critics, the Pharisees, who looked upon him with suspicion and often tried to intimidate him. Perhaps this is true.

I think there was another reason, a little more positive. I believe the main purpose Jesus told this parable was to teach his disciples how to pray by using the element of contrast. In this

parable, Jesus described the differences between the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector and the results of those two prayers.

Do you know what is most intriguing to me about today's parable? It is what's missing in the prayers of both men who went to the temple to pray.

There is no humility in the heart of the Pharisee. He begins and ends the prayer by bragging on himself.

You get the feeling he is reminding God how lucky God is to have him. Just in case God had forgotten, he is going to tell Him again.

This is a prime example of an ego run amuck. Pride is a healthy commodity, but this exceeds the boundaries of healthy pride; it is nothing short of unmitigated arrogance.

In addition, there is no concern expressed for the needs of those around this Pharisee. His judgmental attitude and feeling of superiority have isolated him from his neighbors, blinding him to their needs and the many ways he could assist them.

Something else is missing in the prayer of the Pharisee. There is no request. He asks nothing of God because he feels he needs nothing. He expresses no regrets, admits to no errors and takes no responsibility for mistakes he made. He has no flaws, at least when he looks in the mirror. He is the complete package.

God knew better, and so did Jesus. Everybody is a combination of the good, the bad and the ugly, even the most pious among us. This is why our prayers need to emerge from honest, soul-searching, self-reflection.

What was missing in the prayer of the tax collector? There was no bragging. He refused to compare himself with anyone. He doesn't try to convince God how good he is, but how much he needs God's mercy. No wonder Jesus complimented him for his honesty, humility and sincerity.

What's missing in your prayers? What do you think God is waiting to hear from you? Perhaps there was a time when he heard these things from you, but not lately.

Let me share with you some things I believe should not be missing from our prayers: humility, honesty, gratitude, concern for others, a willingness to serve and requests for mercy and guidance.

Let's be honest this morning. Something in both of these men resides in each of us. At times we are as contrite as the tax collector; at other times, we are as self-serving and arrogant

as the Pharisee. All of us are vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness and the prayer of the Pharisee can easily roll off our tongues.

Which voice do we need to let out? Based upon what Jesus said, this is pretty obvious. The humility, honesty and sincerity of the tax collector will impress God, not the arrogance of the Pharisee.

Why is God listening for the voice of the tax collector when we pray? God knows this attitude will bring the best out in us. It will promote growth in us and build loving, tolerant, compassionate communities around us. It will make us peace makers who pursue justice and build bridges of good will and understanding, not tyrants and bullies who erect walls of superiority, suspicion and hate.

If we are not honest with God, we will not be honest with ourselves and those around us. We'll refuse to confront the ugly inside of us which needs to be exposed, confessed and changed. Growth will not occur, much to the chagrin of those who live with us.

Jesus knew this, and so did Luke, which is why he preserved this parable. The Apostle Paul knew it, too. Writing to Timothy, Paul penned these words.

"Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am worst. But for that very reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life" I Timothy 1:15-16.

Let me tell you who else has learned the importance of humility, at least according to his latest book, The One Day Contract. With the aid of Eric Crawford, the University of Louisville basketball coach, Rick Pitino, addresses the topic of humility in the first chapter.

"I was not a picture of humility for much of my career," writes Pitino. "I have learned without humility, no other principle or lesson I teach will hit home. It is the key to everything that follows. Humility instills a sense of gratitude, even in the most difficult of times, and opens a person's heart and mind."

Pitino says humility was the last word he wrote on the blackboard after every victory throughout the Cardinals' entire championship season, right through the final game. According to Pitino, it was humility which kept this team focused and able to turn setbacks into successes.

"The longer I live and the more I experience," Pitino continues, "the more I believe humility is a quality essential to sustained success. My greatest regret is that I was not humble at an earlier age."

According to Pitino, humility compels you to treat the people around you better, to be generous by sharing what you have with them, and to carry them with you through any successes you have. He is convinced humility and gratitude should form the foundation upon which all our endeavors are built.

Today's parable seems to be teaching us the same lesson.

So, let me ask you again. **What's missing in your life and prayers?**

Is there not enough humility, honesty and gratitude? Is there too little concern for the needs of those around you? Do your prayers lack heartfelt confession and genuine repentance? Is there no plea for God's mercy, and the courage needed to make changes in your attitude, values, priorities, beliefs and lifestyle?

Why not do something about this in the week ahead. I am confident God will help you.