

When we pray we often begin or end with the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus taught us to pray. In addition, we probably have a list of petitions on our minds, such as our need for better work or a better boss; we might pray for our children's safety, our loved one's success, for peace of mind and happiness, for good health. But how shall we pray when we're empty, when we're all alone, or when we feel ashamed? How shall we pray when we're at our wit's end or when we feel like we've been abandoned by family, friends, and even God? What kind of prayer will lift up our hearts? This morning we're going to talk about this kind of prayer and what it has to do with our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

LUKE 18:9-17

(Jesus) also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹⁵ Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called them to him, saying, "Let the children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."

Jesus said, Luke 18:10-12, "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'"

What was the one thing the Pharisee got right in his prayer? He gave thanks. Indeed, we should always thank God. We should thank him for our daily bread, for protection from the evil one and the world, and for his nourishment of our souls. However, the Pharisee's prayer quickly degenerated. He prayed, "**God, I thank you that I am not like other men**"? Really?

I'm going to guess the first thought of those to whom Jesus spoke was, "I've NEVER prayed like that before in my life!"

And that's probably true. But imagine Jesus looking his listeners in the eye as he told this parable and saying to them in their hearts, but you do think like that, don't you. You look around to see who stands with you in the temple, and you are mortified to see a tax collector and perhaps other undesirables like a homeless man or a prostitute.

And then you recite your prayers, falling into the trap of comparing yourself with other people, and you are filled with a sense of pride for your good fortune, thinking that everything you have is a reward from God because you're so wonderful. And when you put your offering in the plate, you leave the temple with your chest puffed out as if you were God's gift to Israel.

St. James wrote, **James 3:11**, "**Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water?**" He was writing about how what we pray with our lips originates here, in our hearts. And what was coming out of the Pharisee's heart was, "Thank you God for ME!" Nothing but bile.

After the illustration of the prayer of the Pharisee, a prayer that God cannot answer, Jesus illustrated the perfect prayer. He said, **Luke 18:13-14**, "**the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner!**' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other."

It was a simple prayer; it was entirely free of all pretention: "**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**" And we read that the tax collector went away "**justified.**" He relinquished himself to God; he placed his life into his hands, and he was transformed from what he had been – a wretched man despised by his fellow

countrymen – into a child of God. He did not compare himself to the Pharisee, but he simply gave himself up to the Lord as he was, and he received with thankfulness God’s grace for the forgiveness of his sins. That’s what it means to be justified.

After Jesus shared the parable, there was an interruption. We read, **Luke 18:15**, **“Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.”**

And Jesus said, “I’m busy now. Make an appointment.” No! But he said, **Luke 18:16-17**, **“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. ¹⁷ Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.”**

I find it interesting that Jesus taught his disciples about how the Pharisee was wrong for how he treated his neighbor, the tax collector, with **“contempt,”** and then the same disciples immediately started scolding parents who approached him with their children! The disciples were acting just like the Pharisee who drew a boundary between people who were not like himself and God, as if to say, **“There’s us and there’s them. We’re special to God, and they’re not.”**

It would be a sad day if the Christian church should ever become exclusive.

As regards Jesus and his words about children, he said elsewhere, **“Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4).**

It’s the simplicity of faith in the heart of little children which Jesus was pointing to. Young children don’t compare themselves to other people, they don’t bargain with God, they don’t try to be anything besides what they really are, people who need God’s help and ask for it with an open heart. And the Lord provides; he hears their voices and he fulfills their every need. That’s the kind of faith that lies at the heart of the tax collector’s prayer, **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

St. Paul commanded us to **“pray without ceasing”** and to **“pray in the Spirit at all times” (1 Thessalonians 5:17, Ephesians 6:18)**. Perhaps he had something like this

prayer in mind, something we can easily commend to our own hearts, something centered on the forgiveness of sins, something centered on Jesus.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

It’s so simple a child can pray it.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Letting go of everything.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Believing that the Lord has forgiven me and brought me into his kingdom.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Friends in Christ, this prayer takes us to the very heart of Jesus. He wants to hear your voice, to know your pain, to forgive your sins, to receive you as his child.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

For me, when I’m lonely and discouraged, when I’m depressed and sad this is the only prayer I have. And it lifts me up. In the parish and in my home I can’t tell you how many times I’ve prayed this prayer with tears, and the Lord has come to me. He has assured me of his presence, and he’s given me hope, taking me by the hand and revealing his love for me.

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”: Please say it with me. (**“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**)

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this week may you be encouraged to pray with the same raw, soul-searching transparency as the tax collector, believing that the Lord gladly receives your confession of sin.

This week may you be strengthened in your spirit knowing that you are justified, that all of your sins have been forgiven, and that you have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus on the Cross.

This week may you be strengthened in your communion with your neighbors, loving them, treating no one with contempt, growing to love every person in your reach as you love yourself.

And this week may you have the opportunity to share this good news with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.