



The Jesus Prayer

Luke 18:9-14

TRINITY PULPIT

She came into the back of the church after the worship had started. Unnoticed by most she slipped quietly into a pew at the rear of the church. She hoped no one would notice her arrival and that no one would look her way. She had been through a disastrous marriage, not to mention many empty relationships since. She was struggling with life and life seemed to be at a standstill. Her reputation in town was much like the woman at the well whom Jesus had encountered in Samaria. She had been thinking for months about coming back to church; and today, she had gathered the courage to attend.

He slipped into a side pew and sat about halfway down the aisle by himself. Everyone knew his story. His story had been a public story. News outlets had covered his story and sensationalized it to sell their product. Along with his guilt was shame. Yet, he was still standing. He was still working. He was still hoping to put his life back together. He wondered to himself sometimes if he could be forgiven. He wondered even more if he could ever forgive himself. He had a longing to be in church and re-discover a sacred community. What would his welcome be like? Would anyone speak to him or would they simply pass him in silence. What courage it took to just come in the door and slip into that pew.

Jesus tells a parable, in Luke 18, about a tax collector who comes to the Temple to pray. Luke writes that Jesus told this parable in response to Pharisees who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.

Jesus says there were two men who went to the Temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee. A Pharisee belonged to the largest of the Jewish religious sects. He was not part of the aristocratic Sadducees.

Normally, he would have been a middle class businessman. He would have been a hard worker and successful. He would have been a person who was respected in the community. He believed in the Jewish law, and he took pride in his knowledge of the Jewish law and its application. He knew the oral tradition, the scriptures, and their commentary, and he was well versed in all of it. He was unapproachable in regard to his religious practice.

Jesus says he had gone to the Temple to pray. The time for public prayer was 9:00 a.m. or 3:00 p.m. So, this was the time he had made his way to the Temple to pray. When he walks in the Temple, he does so with confidence. He has been here before. This was his normal process. He comes in the Temple, and with great confidence, he makes his way to the front of the Temple, as close as he can get to the Holy of Holies, without being the High Priest or one who was serving that day.

This is an interesting comment about the Pharisee. There is a sense of belonging in the action of the Pharisee. "This is where I belong." And there is a great self-confidence being exemplified.

The Pharisee began to pray. Notice Jesus says the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. One translation says he prayed to himself. Prayer is the dialogue with God and us, but not in this Pharisee's mind. The Pharisee's prayer had become a monologue of sharing with God why he was such a fine and religious person. His prayer is about himself and to himself, because the reality is, our prayers reflect our view of God; and although the Pharisee addresses God, he does so in a way that indicates that he really is not in need of God. This is the heart of a man who does not believe he stands in need of mercy or forgiveness.

In fact, he begins to pray by telling God just how great he is. Look at his so-called prayer.

God, I am glad I am better than others. I am not like other people. You know those other people, God. Those who are robbers or evildoers and adulterers. The Ten Commandments forbade the first and third sin in his list. The middle reference is very interesting. It is essentially an all-encompassing word. It can mean simply the “unrighteous” or the sinner. Interestingly, in Jesus’ day, there were really three groups of people. There was the small class of wealthy aristocrats to which the Sadducees belonged. There was the little larger middle-class of shopkeepers, builders, merchants, etc. These were Pharisees and Rabbi, and Jesus would have belonged to this class growing up, as would many of his disciples who were fishermen and had businesses. Then there was a very large social class of people that could be called the poor, outcasts, or sinners. These individuals were people like widows, orphans, sick, lame, blind, outcasts, and even the tax collector, who may have been wealthy but would have been considered unclean or a sinner.

When the Pharisee stands and tells God, “I am so glad I am not like ‘them’”, he is not simply referring to those who have committed certain sins, but to a group of people that he has already identified and labeled.

In fact, when I read this parable, I think Jesus is telling us that the Pharisee prayed that he was glad he was not like others; but for emphasis, points out in particular the tax collector that had gathered for prayer.

Here is this man’s true self-righteousness. He has not simply labeled and dismissed a group of people; he even has dismissed this individual. I think Jesus is telling us that the Pharisee in the story says I am glad that I am not like these others, and then, for emphasis, I can imagine the Pharisee turning and pointing at the tax collector in the back. God, I am sure glad I am not like this tax collector.

It is one kind of self-righteousness to label certain groups of people as unworthy of God’s love. It is a whole other type of self-righteousness to actually look another individual in the face and say, “You are unworthy of God.” What kind of person actually looks another person in the eye and says, “God loves

me and does not love you. I am worthy of God’s love and you are not?” Yet, that is exactly what the Pharisee does.

To be justified means to be at peace with God, or reconciled with God, or forgiven by God.

In contrast, Jesus offers us the tax collector. Jesus says that 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.”

The tax collector was low in social standing. He was viewed as a traitor for collecting Rome’s taxes. He was included in such social standing as the sinner, harlot, and unrighteous. In Jewish thought, the tax collector was the villain. Jesus says he did not march to the front of the Temple. Instead, he stayed at the back. The Pharisee was confident that he belonged there and he belonged near God. Not the tax collector. He has just found a place at the back near the door. Maybe in the shadows. He does not stand upright like the Pharisee, but he keeps his head bowed toward heaven. He does not even feel worthy to look toward heaven as he prays.

He beats his chest as he prays. As he thinks more and more about his sin, he is physically overwhelmed at the thought, and in a moment of contrition and grief, he beats his chest. Notice something about the tax collector. He is in the back, his head is hung low, he does not look to heaven, meaning, he also cannot see the others there praying. Unlike the Pharisee he is not comparing his life to another. His moment of prayer is between him and God.

Then comes his utterance. It is short and to the point: “God have mercy on me a sinner.” No list of what he had done right. No comparison to others. Just a cry to a holy God.

When Jesus finishes the story, he surprises everyone with his statement. I tell you, Jesus says, that this man, the tax collector, went home justified before God and not the other. To be justified means to be at peace with God, or reconciled with God, or forgiven by God. Jesus said it was the tax collector — the one praying in the corner — that went home at peace with God.

Jesus is telling us that the man who it seemed had not prayed had his prayer heard.

The utterance “God have mercy on me a sinner” is what is well known as the Jesus prayer. Over the centuries, Christians have uttered this prayer as

a way of disciplining one's life in daily prayer. The words have been changed slightly to "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me a sinner."

As we come to the end of our series on prayer, I thought this was a good way to end it, which was to speak about praying the Jesus prayer as a way of prayer. Now the practice of the Jesus prayer is something that many do as a way of praying continuously. Many use this short prayer as a repetitive prayer to keep one's life in focus throughout the day. Whether you want to use the prayer in such a manner is up to you, but I think, for our consideration today, this short prayer offers us an attitude of prayer and living.

This prayer begins with putting Jesus first. The tax collector prayed, God, have mercy on me. Prayer begins and ends with God. Prayer ultimately is a dialogue with our God. When we call upon the name of the Lord, we place our self in the proper place.

Just the utterance of God or of Jesus is the confession of faith. To utter the name of God in prayer is to confess that we stand in the presence of one greater than our self. To express the name of God is to admit that we are not happenstance, we are not a mistake, and we are more than how we are defined in this world. The utterance of the name of God confesses that we are of the created order.

It is God who has created us and not we ourselves. We begin our prayer with the confession of God. We stand before God. We stand as God's creation. We stand accountable to God.

God have mercy. Mercy indicates our need and God's character.

The Lord is full of compassion and mercy
(James 5:11, NIV).

God is the master of mercy. His very nature desires to relieve you of the self-imposed misery and distress you experience because of your sin.

All humanity benefits from God's mercy to some degree. Jesus stated, "He gives His sunlight to both the evil and the good, and He sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). But God also has a sovereign mercy He shows to those who are His. God shows you mercy because He compassionately cares about you. So, the writer of Hebrews writes:

*To utter the name of God
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greater than our self.*

Let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it (Hebrews 4:16).

The concept of God as merciful tells us something about the character of God. Here are four characteristics of God because of God's mercy:

1. God is patient – because God, is merciful God is patient with us.
2. God is kind – God's mercy reminds us of God's kindness.
3. God is just – That is, God is not fair but just. God's mercy indicates that there is right and wrong, good and evil, righteous and unrighteous.
4. God is forgiving – To say God is merciful is to indicate God's forgiveness.

Yet, to say "God have mercy" also indicates that we need mercy. We need forgiveness. The tax collector's prayer is an admittance of sin. When the tax collector prays have mercy on me, a sinner, he uses interesting language. He does not simply say sinner but he says *the* sinner. Have mercy on me, O God, I am the sinner.

The tax collector does not even include himself with other sinners as a way of rationalizing his sin. He is not saying, God, have mercy on me a sinner. You know we all sin. The sin realization of the Tax Collector is so great that he is simply saying, Lord, have mercy on me if no one else. For I am the sinner.

It is reminiscent of the Apostle Paul who, reflecting on his sin, says he is the chief sinner.

"Whatever became of sin?" The famed psychiatrist, Karl Menninger, posed this inquiry forty-two years ago as he witnessed the disappearance of the word "sin" from social conversations. He wrote:

The word 'sin,' which seems to have disappeared, was a proud word. It was once a strong word, an ominous and serious word. It described a central point in every civilized human being's life plan and life style. But the word went away. It has almost dis-

appeared—the word, along with the notion. Why? Doesn't anyone sin anymore? Doesn't anyone believe in sin?

In his book *Learning to Speak God from Scratch*, Jonathan Merritt writes about theologian Scott McKnight's class on who he called "Jesus of Nazareth." As part of this class, he would have his students recite the Lord's Prayer everyday. First, because he thought it represented the ministry of Jesus, but also because it had the line "forgive us of our sin." McKnight goes on to say that he thought his students needed to hear the word sin more often. In many cases, writes Merritt, sin has become a foreign word to many young adults who have either never heard the word much or have been in churches where it was used like a club. Merritt goes on to write, "Sin has fallen on hard times."

John McArthur writes in *Vanishing Conscience*:

Words like *sin*, *repentance*, *contrition*, *atonement*, *restitution*, and *redemption* are out of public discourse. If no one is supposed to feel guilty, how could anyone be a sinner? Modern culture has the answer: people are victims. Victims are not responsible for what they do; they are casualties of what happens to them. So every human failing must be described in terms of how the perpetrator has been victimized. We are all supposed to be "sensitive" and "compassionate" enough to see that the very behaviors we used to label "sin" are actually evidence of victimization.

Victimization has gained so much influence that, as far as society is concerned, there is practically no such thing as sin anymore. Anyone can escape responsibility for his or her wrongdoing simply by claiming the status of a victim. It has radically changed the way our society looks at human behavior.

We have a sin problem and our problem is that we don't think we sin. The term Biblically means to miss the mark or to transgress God's laws. The Bible says we have all sinned. The biggest problem with sin is the Bible teaches us that our sin is what separates us from God, and if we do not seek forgiveness of our sin, and place our faith in Christ, that sin will separate us from God for eternity.

Thus, the Jesus prayer is the most basic of all prayers. It reminds us of who God is and it reminds us of who we are. God is God and we are sinners, but we are sinners in the hands of a loving God.

How did Jesus finish this parable? This one, the one who recognized his need for mercy, who understood God was merciful, who admitted his sinfulness, who offered nothing but his need to God, this one went home right with God.

How will you go home today? We have a choice. We can come to church and think to ourselves, *I am not as bad as all those others who are not in church today*. We can think looking around the room: *I know I am not as bad as her or him*. *In fact, I am looking pretty good*. And in that frame of mind, we can think about our self, and pray to our self, and go home feeling good about self.

Or

We can pray the Jesus prayer. We can recognize that in comparison to Jesus our goodness is like filthy rags. We can realize that our comparison is not with any other. Instead of looking side to side, we can look up and cry for mercy. Knowing that we are a sinner in the hand of a loving God. Our God is merciful. Our God saves.

And we can go home justified, at peace with God. ▲



Trinity Baptist Church
4815 Six Forks Rd • Raleigh, NC 27609 • (919) 787-3740
