

210328 Two Prayers - One Answered and One Not March 28, 2021 Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Two Prayers—One Answered and One Not

Dear Friends,

When we revisit those old familiar lessons in Scripture, we learn anew why they are such favorites. Be careful in studying those familiar favorites not to gloss over their teaching or take them for granted. God packs His Book full of rich truth for His people. Our wise charge from Him is to work--a lifetime "Vocation"--at unpacking His teachings and forming the habit of practicing them.

In this week's lesson, the Pharisee didn't learn anything from the Lord. He thought he already had all the answers. When we choose to frame our lives, even our daily choices, around ideas outside Scripture ("Surely the Lord will understand"), we pridefully imitate this Pharisee who literally "prayed thus with himself." Should that be a believer's goal? I think not.

The publican's words, "God be merciful to me a sinner," stir much rich Bible thought. It is no accident that God named the lid that covered the Ark of the Covenant in the Old Testament tabernacle the "Mercy Seat." In the name, He reminded His people then, as now, that His provision for the sins of His people grows out of His mercy, not our merit. Given this truth, it is right that we ask the Lord for His mercy when we pray and confess our sins to Him. As God's rich symbolism in the tabernacle rituals assured His people that His mercy would provide for their needs, so the publican's prayer reminds New Testament believers of the Lord's rich supply for our present sins and our need for His merciful forgiveness.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Two Prayers—One Answered and One Not

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. (Lu 18:9-14 KJV 1900)

The gospels typically make Jesus' actions and words crystal clear. Luke tells us in the beginning that Jesus spoke this parable to some people who trusted in themselves and despised others. Given that the self-righteous man in the parable was a Pharisee, it is likely that these people themselves were Pharisees. That would make Jesus' lesson all the more pointed to them.

Two men in first century Israel could hardly be named who were more different. The Pharisees were passionately devoted to Moses and the law, though with their own interpretation laced into their view of that law. Of all the leading subgroups within the Jewish religious culture in first century Judah, the Pharisees were stricter than any of the others about keeping Moses' law. They were also self-righteous, so much so that they often despised others who were not Pharisees, just as the Pharisee named in the parable. On the opposite end of the spectrum were the despised publicans, tax collectors. They were

regarded as traitors to their own people, “Sell-outs” to the Romans; they often collected more than they needed to satisfy the Romans, lining their pockets with tidy sums of money at the expense of the Jewish people. Thus, a publican would be least concerned with the fine details of Moses and the law than any group of the day.

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. Both men appeared in the temple to pray at the same time. Both men went to the temple for the same reason, to pray. We must presume that both men chose to go to the temple for personal prayer. But this is the end of comparison. From this point forward, Jesus’ parable exposes more contrast between the two men than similarity. Their attitude toward prayer—and toward God—was mirror opposite.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. The first point in Jesus’ own words is so enlightening to the Pharisee’s state of mind and motive. He “...**stood and prayed thus with himself.**” Was this man praying to God or to himself? When you pray, do you pray to God or to yourself? And to the men who occasionally speak the public prayers at church, when you pray, do you truly talk to the Lord, or do you speak more to and for the people present at church than to the Lord? I’ve heard many public prayers over the years that sounded distinctly like they were addressed more to the people present than to the Lord.

We gloss over so much rich truth in our typical study of “The Prodigal Son” in [Lu 15](#). Jesus taught against the moral sins of the flesh, freely indulged for a season by the younger son who left home with his share of the father’s estate. But He also taught just as emphatically against sins of pride that were commonplace in the temple, the sin exhibited by the praying Pharisee in our study passage. If we read the parable thoroughly, Jesus taught against the conduct of both sons, not just the younger. At different times in their lives, both sons refused to abide with their father. The younger son refused to remain with his father and labor on the farm. The older son was no less contrary to his father when he heard the party noise and learned that the celebration was for his despised younger brother who returned home and was now being honored by the party. In a rage, he refused to go into his father’s house and join the celebration. The father went outside to plead with him, but his anger was too intense. I have come to think of this parable, not as “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but as “The Parable of Two Prodigal Sons.”

As I recall people in church over my lifetime, I fear that I’ve seen those angry, self-righteous sons who were mad at God for being so forgiving. Both sons become a serious spiritual detriment to the Lord’s righteous word and Kingdom. We can readily agree, at least, that most of the moral sins named in the Bible are just that, sins. We should regard them all as sins, as God declares in Scripture. But do we understand that we may fall as deeply into sin when we become angry toward our brothers or sisters in the church? In that moment of anger toward them, we imitate the angry son in [Lu 15](#). We are mad at God more than at our brothers or sisters. That is a different kind of sin, but never doubt that it is a grievous sin. Godly believers should strive to avoid both kinds of sin, sins of the flesh and sins of pride.

The Pharisee named his major good deeds of the moment, as if the Lord wouldn’t know about them otherwise. A wise reminder from Jesus; don’t pray as if you are telling the Lord something He doesn’t already know. Talk to Him about what is on your heart. On more than one occasion, I’ve had to hold back a wide smile during public prayers at church. One example will make the point. Many years ago I called on a dear brother to lead the public prayer before I spoke. He almost shouted for nearly ten minutes. Then he started to end his prayer with, “And Lord, we know we are not heard for our long speaking and loud crying....” The man told the Lord he was not heard for what he had been doing in that prayer!

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon

his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. In contrast with the Pharisee, the publican stood back at a distance. Instead of looking around and seeing someone he despised and regarded as his inferior, he apparently looked down, and smote his breast. His words in the prayer were not boasting to God about all the good things he'd done or about thinking himself superior spiritually to others. His prayer quietly focused on himself, a heart-broken plea to the Lord to show mercy, not reward him for all his good deeds.

How many lessons might we learn from Jesus' teaching in this short parable? The high point of acceptable prayer has nothing to do with body posture, though one man stood erect in pride, and the other man bowed. The powerful point that Jesus teaches stands out. God regards the posture of the soul far, far more than He cares about the posture of the body. The Lord will not hear the prayer of pride. In fact, Jesus framed this parable to indicate that He regards prayers of pride as no more effectual than a man praying to himself. In effect, Jesus' words in this parable charge the Pharisee as worshipping himself. Self is his god, but he goes into God's house and pretends to pray to God. The man who confesses his sins to the Lord gains far more attention and response from God in his prayers than the man who prays to self in pride.

The Pharisee's prayer didn't ask the Lord for anything. He became so occupied telling God all about how good he was that he didn't bother to ask. The publican confessed, not with the idea of personal gain in the process, but because of deep conviction for his sins. Instead of asking the Lord for anything material, the publican asked the Lord for one thing, that the Lord would be merciful to him because of his sins.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Jesus taught us by means of a simple parable, and then He explained His intended lesson that we need to learn from it. The Bible uses "Justified" in ways other than dealing with eternal and legal ("Justified" was translated from a first century legal term that would be a near equivalent to our legal verdict, "Not guilty"). I suggest that Jesus intended no reference whatever to eternal justification. The publican was righteous—not guilty of prideful sin—in the attitude and content of his prayer. And the Pharisee was not so "Justified" in his prayer.

...for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted. Jesus simply explains the reason for his "Justified" and not for the two men. Being "Justified" in this context has to do with the two men's conduct in their prayers; one was right, "Justified," and the other was not. Why was this the case? Jesus explained. The Pharisee exalted himself, not God, in his "Prayer." He more prayed to himself than to God. He felt so self-satisfied that he felt no need to ask God for anything.

In edifying contrast, the publican acknowledged his sins and begged the Lord for forgiveness. He sought mercy and help from the Lord, his greatest need. He humbled himself and asked the Lord to do for him what he could not do for himself. In Jesus' words, the Pharisee was abased. Mounce (Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words) defines the Greek word translated "abased" as "...to humble with respect to hopes and expectations, to depress with disappointment." Nicely and simply stated, despite the Pharisee's self-absorbed ego, the Lord disappointed him. He ignored the man's pretense of a prayer. The publican lived with angry rejection by his fellow-Jews. Perhaps, as he prayed, he wondered, "Does God also despise and reject me?" But necessity imposed herself onto the man, and he prayed from his heart, a prayer of sincere confession and need. He went before the Lord in sincere contrition. He offered nothing to the Lord as deserving special favors. He rather went pleading for mercy, not merit. And the Lord "Justified" him in his prayer.

Jesus' lesson for us is clear. Do we want to "Justify" ourselves in our prayers, imitating the Pharisee?

Or do we seek to humble ourselves and plead for the Lord to show us mercy? That the publican was “Justified” as he returned to his home after his prayer tells us that the Lord answered his prayer. He did not at all answer the Pharisee’s prayer. How do you approach the Lord in your prayers? You can pray and receive a gracious, “Merciful” answer, or you can “Pray” to yourself and receive nothing.

Elder Joe Holder