

Luke 18:9-14

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Gospel of the Lord

Reflection Questions

- 1) ***The Context:*** In Chapter 17, Jesus teaches His disciples about the kingdom; now in chapter 18, Jesus begins to illustrate what kingdom life is like. Chapter 18 is comprised of a set of two parables and a set of two stories. Both of the parables teach us about prayer; the first teaches us to pray boldly and persistently (even to the point of being annoying) and the second parable (Lk 18:9-14) reminds us to pray humbly. The effective prayer is both persistent (bold) and humble. Both of the stories that complete the chapter teach the disciple about humility (coming to Jesus like a humble child) and the humility to give all your worldly goods to the poor.

- 2) “He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.” (vs. 9) The word ‘also’ used here reminds the reader that this parable is linked to the one that precedes it (the widow and the unjust judge). Luke describes the people to whom Jesus is addressing His message as those who were ‘self-righteous’ and therefore needed to hear this message. Another way to translate this is; “having convinced themselves that they were righteous”, in other words they have entrusted themselves with the task of making themselves righteous. There is great irony in this because those who present themselves as honoring the Lord the most (more than others) have missed a key theme in their relationship with God; which is the no one is worthy to be close to God and only God can perfect and sanctify us (as we assent to His sanctification process). Next, comes one of the fruits of self-righteousness; having convinced themselves that they had successfully made themselves righteous, they felt justified in looking down upon others. Why is self-righteousness a potential danger for any person who has taken on specific religious disciplines for their sanctification process and getting closer to God? At what point can we start to embrace the delusion that we have made ourselves ‘holy’? What is the connection between ‘self-righteousness’ and looking down on others? How can these two attitudes feed on each other and subsequently undermine the mission (i.e. evangelization, spreading the Good News of the Kingdom)?

- 3) Verse 10 tells us that two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The text does not specify, but it seems that they were in the temple during a time that was not public prayer (9am or 3pm). They were most likely engaged in private prayer; both bringing their personal joys and/or concerns to the Lord. When (why) and in what way have you found it helpful to go to a consecrated space to pray in front of the Eucharist during a time outside of mass?

- 4) “The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus; God I thank You that I am not like other people: Thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” (vs. 11). The phrase “standing by himself” (Greek: *Pros heauton statheis*) could be translated as “standing by himself” or “praying to himself”. Both phrases could describe the ‘prayer’ that the Pharisee was engaging in. He may have stood off by himself so as not to become ‘ritually unclean’ by rubbing elbows with sinners. But his prayers also seem to be directed more towards himself (e.g. praying to himself--- self-congratulating and narcissistic) than towards God. He starts his prayer by congratulating himself that he is not like the others (thieves, rogues, adulterers and the tax collector). He is talking to himself as he congratulates himself also for his ‘religious resume’ (e.g. fasting 2x’s a week and tithing). It seems that he could have stayed home and offered the prayer to the mirror and it would have had the same effect. Why is this kind of prayer essentially meaningless to God? Where is the relationship between God and the person in this type of prayer? We are all familiar with the phrase: ‘There but for the grace of God go I’. How might the Pharisee’s prayer change if he were to meditate with that saying? The Pharisee’s prayer includes no adoration of God, no direct thanksgiving to God, no contrition, no supplication, no intercession (e.g. all the basic elements/categories of real prayer). In what ways are we all at risk of being seriously spiritually impoverished if our prayers do not include any of these elements?

- 5) The tax collector is at the back (not even daring to look up to heaven) head bowed down, beating his breast and crying out “God be merciful to me a sinner.” His posture and words say everything about his earnest contrition (e.g. head bowed, beating his breast, crying out for mercy because he acknowledges that he is a sinner). How do our various postures and words at mass say something about our

relationship with God? How can a humble posture/ honest words about our state be freeing? (i.e. there is no way we can “make ourselves ‘worthy’” in order to relate to our Loving God).

- 6) The tax collector is not presuming to be in God’s favor. He openly acknowledges the fact that he has sinned and that God is a righteous and just God Who has a right to condemn his actions. He humbly seeks God’s grace. God’s grace, forgiveness and mercy is freely offered but it is far from cheap. How can we hold those two concepts together with integrity? Why is it necessary for our spiritual maturity to keep these two concepts together? (i.e. All of God’s gifts of grace are freely offered but also have infinite value). Simply because God offers something freely does not mean that it is cheap or can be taken for granted. When have we been tempted to take God’s goodness and graces for granted? How are we each called to approach God with humility? How does that humble approach both free us and empower us in His grace?
- 7) “One went home justified the other did not.” This is another one of Jesus’ reversals that he sets up for dramatic effect. How is our humility inextricably connected to our disposition/capacity to receive grace and forgiveness?
- 8) “All who exalt themselves will be humbled, all who humble themselves will be exalted.” How have you seen God operate this way in your life-time? How does God end up glorifying Himself through this M.O.?
- 9) One of our temptations in reading such a familiar parable is to say to ourselves; ‘thank goodness **I** am not like the Pharisee’, when the truth is, that at some point in our lives we have **all** have been guilty of some of these ‘Pharisaical’ attitudes (self-righteousness and looking down on others). How can we invite the Holy Spirit into our minds and our hearts regularly so that we will not be tempted to succumb to either attitude?
- 10) Taking these two parables: Luke 18:1-8 (the widow and the unjust judge) and Luke 18:9-14 (the Pharisee and the Publican) together, Jesus teaches us about the quality of prayers we should offer to His Father. Our prayers should be both persistent, (even to point of

being annoying), bold and humble. When we think of the combination of 'bold and humble', and the combination of 'persistent and humble' most of us associate the two terms in each pair as being mutual exclusive categories. The opposite is true: humility and boldness and humility and persistence are necessary compliments in prayer. Jesus often seems to offer us complex seemingly contradictory ideas but as we pray with and contemplate the dispositions He requires of us, we come to understand the wisdom of His perspective.