

**A SERMON BY RICHARD D. CLEWELL**  
**FAIRMOUNT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**OCTOBER 24, 2004**  
**TITLE: PRAYER ATTITUDES**  
**TEXT: Luke 18: 9-14**

Number of years ago a movie was produced and distributed called “The Parable” that depicted a Christ-like figure as a clown. Filmed at the historic circus museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin, this film caused a great deal of controversy in its depiction of Jesus as a simple mime who cared about and for the common folk who performed in the circus and was made to suffer as a result of his actions. Many criticized it because they felt it demeaned Christ. Others saw the essence of the way of God first declared in the Beatitudes. This simple story certainly had the power to share truth in a way that parables are supposed to demonstrate. Parables are as old as humanity and have been utilized across the centuries to declare truth in ways that people can understand and apply to their lives. We have many examples in our own culture like the Brer Rabbit stories and the tales of our Native American brothers and sisters.

Today’s Gospel text is a very short parable with very profound implications. Jesus is teaching his followers about the essence of prayer- this is the second of three parables in the eighteenth chapter of Luke (Read Luke 18; 9-14).

The introduction to the story indicates that the audience intended was far larger than just targeting the Pharisees. Disciples and believers are just as vulnerable to pride and self-righteousness as any Pharisee might be. Followers of Christ in his day and in ours have to confront the attitude of this particular Pharisee in their own heart. I’m sure many of us when hearing this truthful tale sort of adopt the position the famous New York preacher, William Ward Ayer, described when he declared, “of course I’m talking to the person next to you.” The final verse (v.14) disallows the limitation of the parable to any one group.

I believe our day and culture is also spoken to by this story. It is so easy to be so independent and in control that we can become blind to whom we are before God. Blatant self-righteousness and contempt for others that we often observe, in ourselves, others, our church community and our nation, smacks of our arrogance and unacceptance of others whom God loves. To be so sure of proclaimed values and demanding that others bow to our concept of the “right way to live,” denies general understanding of justification and grace before God.

Let’s examine this parable a little more closely. We are told that two men went up to the Temple to pray. No matter which direction you came from in Jerusalem, the Temple was located on the highest point in the city – above the Kidron Valley on the east and the older City of David to the south. It was the place for all practicing Jews to worship and encounter their God. Both men are faithful to their religious instructions and traditions but they come with differing attitudes. One, the Pharisee in this account, feels that God is blessed to have him keeping the commandments and tenets of his training. He emphasizes that he fasts twice a week and tithes his entire income, he obeys the purity laws and does not allow others to infringe on his purity, by curtailing physical contact. He keeps the Law as he understands it with very due vigilance

However, we discover much about his attitude by the way he prays, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” His contempt for others is very apparent. His acts he sees as proof of his piety but his prayer is the essence of his absorption in his own perceived virtue. He asks nothing of God. The basic presumption is that he is not a sinner, and, in fact, is so pleasing that God couldn’t get along without him. He shows no evidence of humility or awareness of need for repentance. Do you know any people like this in your experience? I do. Do you, in fact, ever demonstrate this attitude in your own life? I have and can easily do so again. It is real easy to take justification in Christ for granted and to presume we represent our Lord

appropriately to others and the world. Particularly as Christians in America we need to understand God's grace fully so that we can honestly and humbly do away with contempt for others who are different from us and for a world that desperately needs reconciliation.

In contrast to the pious religious man, the tax collector stands far off for a different reason. He is a low man on the totem pole as far as his culture is concerned. To the Jewish people under Roman domination he is a traitor, an agent of the empire who extracts maximum taxes for the emperor and for his own large commission. He's far worse than any thief, rogue, or adulterer or any other contemptible person who could be mentioned. He is beyond forgiveness humanly speaking and deserves judgment in the eyes of the pious and self-righteous. He is a part of the truly "evil empire." He violates his own Jewish heritage. Yet, he too goes up to the Temple to pray. What is his attitude? First, he boasts nothing before God. He cannot even look up and raise his arms toward heaven, as was the common custom. Instead, he beats his chest in a sign of grief and contrition, echoing the opening words of Psalm 51, "Have mercy on me, O God," and adds the description of himself, "a sinner." Nothing more is reported of his prayer in this parable. It is complete as it stands. He knows himself and reveals his character. This man has contempt for no one but himself, and, from that perspective asks God for transforming mercy.

Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor*, observes, "Concepts like grace and forgiveness, which constitute the core of the gospel, get little play in many theology books. I began to grasp why Jesus relied so strongly on story: The Prodigal Son says most of what we need to know about redemption; the Good Samaritan most of what we need for ethics. Jesus contrasted a Pharisee who had a finely tuned theology with a sinner who could only cry for help – and it was the sinner's cry, of course, that God heard."

What a difference this is in the prayer attitudes of these two individuals. The first man separates himself from others and God as well. The second man aware of his need for grace and forgiveness will not despise other people. I believe that one of the truths contained in this account is that people who trust in their own righteousness will always compare and then regard others with contempt. When they show disdain for others, they cannot bring themselves to rely on God's grace or even begin to experience it.

This is double-edged parable. To hear it only as a warning against pride, self-sufficiency, or a relationship with God based on one's works is to miss the other vital part that connects the pious man's blindness to the implications of his attitude toward the tax collector. The nature of grace is a paradox. Only those who have learned empathy for others can receive it. In that regard, grace shares the nature of mercy and forgiveness. Only the merciful can receive mercy and only those who forgive will be forgiven (Lk.6: 36-38). The Pharisee had enough religious practice to be virtuous, but not enough understanding to be humble. As a result his religious outlook drove him away from the tax collector rather than toward him.

It is important for us to understand that God loves us not because of who we are and what we have done, but because of who God is. Grace flows to all who accept it. Jesus forgave an adulteress, a thief on a cross, a disciple who denied ever knowing him. Grace is absolute, all-encompassing. It extends even to the people who nailed Jesus to the cross. Yancey describes this well, "In a world ruled by law, grace stands as a sign of contradiction. We want fairness; the gospel give us an innocent man nailed to a cross who cries out, "Father, forgive them." We want respectability; the gospel elevates tax collectors, prodigals, and Samaritans. We want success; the gospel reverses the terms, moving the poor and downtrodden to the head of the line and the wealthy and famous to the rear."

Again I would caution us to be too hard on this self-righteous man. We are all capable of being in the same place. Recall Christ's words as the religiously zealous sought to stone the woman taken in adultery as the Law required. "Let him who is without sin, throw the first stone." Let us be conscious of those around us and even those who may give us a hard time, that our God loves them as much as us and shows mercy to them. Let us learn to show mercy that we might also experience it. Let us be

forgiving so we may genuinely be forgiven and thankful. An attitude of prayer that recognizes our place with all God's children will enable us to grow in our relationship with God and others.

The Apostle Paul put it well when he states, "But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (Romans 5:20b) William Sloane Coffin writes, "With self-righteousness the bane of human relations, I believe individuals and nations are at their worst when, persuaded of their superior virtue, they crusade against the vices of others. They are at their best when they claim their God-given kinship with all humanity, offering prayers of thanks that there is more mercy in God than sin in us." (*The Heart is a Little to the Left*) May God speak to us all through the hearing of this parable and its application to our lives.

Amen and Amen