

Throughout his ministry Jesus consistently taught his disciples to pray both, by his own example of regular fervent prayer, and through parables and in his teaching.

In Jesus' teaching there are some recurrent themes that occur again and again and seem to me to be those things that Jesus thought were indispensable in our relationship with God; The foundation stones on which our faith is built. Prayer is certainly one of those and is one of the most important.

Our gospel reading is the second of two parables about prayer. The first is the story of a defenceless widow whose continuous pleading with an irreligious, uncaring judge persuaded him to respond to her petition and give her the justice she was asking for. The point of this parable is to encourage us to persist in prayer, even when the answer seems slow in coming, as God is not unholy or uncaring and is our loving, gracious heavenly father who knows all our needs and longs to give us the very best.

I suspect that there were amongst Jesus' audience some disciples who were feeling smug about their prayer life. When they heard this parable they probably thought "This doesn't apply to me. I pray regularly and don't need instruction on how to pray like the other disciples do." St Luke certainly seems to think there were because he tells us that the next parable Jesus told was specifically directed to those disciples who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. These people thought that they were O.K. - more than that, compared to most of the other disciples they were pretty good, in fact there was little that Jesus could teach them about prayer as they had it pretty well sewn up.

I think there are times when we all respond in that way. I guess if we're honest most of us think that in general we are reasonably O.K. Maybe some of us would like to have more time to spend with God and are aware of small short comings but otherwise we believe that things are mostly all right. When

we hear sermons about our relationship with God, or with other members of our church family, about our own personal holiness and our prayer life we can be tempted to think "This doesn't apply to me. I'm all right in this area - but I hope that Bloggs is listening because this is something they really need to learn!" Beware if you ever catch yourself thinking that way because if you are it is highly likely that you not only need to listen but to take careful note.

**Luke 18:9-14**

Often the areas we think we are doing well in are the very areas in which we are failing to live up to Christ's calling. Whenever we start to feel smug or complacent the alarm bells should start to ring because we are failing grossly in one attribute that Jesus considered vital in our relationship with God and that is humility.

After I'd been a Christian about a year I thought I knew most of what I needed to know about my faith and about what God wanted of me in my lifestyle and worship. After I had been a Christian ten years I knew I still had a lot to learn but felt I didn't compare too badly in the scale of things. These days, some 40 years on, I find that the closer I get to God and the more I want to honour him and please him in the way I live, the more I see my failures and imperfections. The theologian George Caird said "No man can genuinely place himself in the presence of the Holy God and still congratulate himself on his own piety ~ and this means that piety can become a barrier between man and God".

So the parable of the importunate widow teaches us the value of persevering in our prayer. The parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector teaches us the spirit in which our prayer should be made and that is one of humble dependency on God.

If we are honest we will admit that we are all naturally self-righteous. We secretly flatter ourselves that we are not as bad as some people and that we have something to recommend us to God's favour. The only real cure for this attitude of self-

righteousness is self-knowledge. When we allow the Holy Spirit to open the eyes of our understanding we begin to see ourselves as God sees us and find that we cannot any longer talk or think of our own goodness.

In this parable two men went into the Temple to pray, but only one of them actually prayed. Prayer, by its very nature, must be addressed to God. We see the contrast between prayer as the expression of smug contentment, which cannot really be called prayer, and prayer as the humble casting of oneself on God's loving mercy, knowing that he understands our needs and longs to bring us the forgiveness and wholeness that we need. In order to do that we have to be aware of our own need and have the humility to turn to God allowing him, in his sovereignty, to decide how he is going to respond.

The Pharisee, in this parable, is not really interested in God at all, but only in himself. All the verbs he uses are in the first person. "I", "I", "I". His prayer is a catalogue of negative virtues, things he has avoided doing, and a list of minor pieties, religious observances, that are relatively easy to observe. He is praying from a position of strength. He cannot, for

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example, be said to be really tempted to steal. Having been brought up in an atmosphere where stealing is simply not done, should the idea of stealing occur to him he would easily dismiss it from his mind. But every time the idea of stealing occurs to the Tax Collector it requires a moral effort to resist, for which he may not have the strength. The Tax Collector, by definition a swindler, prays from a position of real weakness and he shows this by the way he prays. He is justified because his is a real prayer.

The Pharisee in this story shows no understanding of his own sin and need. His prayer contains no confession and no petition, no acknowledgement of guilt and emptiness, no supplication for mercy and grace. It is merely a boasting recital of fancied merits accompanied by an uncharitable judgement about a fellow worshipper. Whilst a humble person is content

to put their trust in God this man's trust, or reliance, is in his own righteousness and religious achievement. The inevitable result is that he despises those who fail to reach his own standards. It is easy when we read a parable like this for us to in turn despise the Pharisee and think, "How could he be so arrogant!" - not realising that such an attitude immediately puts us in the same position as him.

The Pharisee's emphasis on good works and observance of religious laws and rules must always have carried with it the danger of spiritual pride, a pride which was almost in-built. An old Jewish prayer goes, "Blessed art thou King of the Universe who has not made me a Gentile, Blessed art thou King of the Universe who has not made me a slave, Blessed art thou King of the Universe who has not made me a woman, Blessed art thou King of the Universe who has not made me a dog.

We may not pray like that but all of us, are guilty of spiritual pride and of comparing ourselves with others, rather than judging ourselves by God's standards, shown supremely in the person of Jesus.

There are four important things about the way that the Tax Collector prayed which can teach us a great deal about the sort of prayer that pleases God.

**1. His prayer was a real petition.**

A prayer which only contains thanksgiving and profession of faith is missing part of its content. It might be suitable for an angel - but not for ordinary, sinful human beings. This isn't to say that we shouldn't thank and praise God in our prayers, nor that we should avoid voicing our belief in God. What it does mean though is that at some point in each of our prayers, and especially as we focus on the power and holiness of God we

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should become aware of our own weakness and need. Even if we are simply asking God for the ability to praise him more fully, or to appreciate his love more deeply we need to

recognise our total dependence on God and our need for his presence and power in our lives.

So often people say to me, "When I pray I never ask anything for myself, it would feel selfish." On the surface that is a humble attitude to take and we may even think a Christian attitude. But if we do feel that and if we do have trouble asking God for our own needs and concerns we must ask ourselves why. Again and again Jesus encourages us to bring all our needs to God, he encourages us to expect God to hear and answer every prayer we make. So why might we be uncomfortable asking for ourselves?

- Is it because we feel that we are too insignificant or unworthy to expect God to want to give us good things? We are told again and again in the Bible that God loves each and every one of us, however unworthy. He delights to give us good things and longs to hear us turning to him for help. God considers you are important enough for Jesus to die so that you can be close to him. Surely then you are important enough for him to want to help you with your needs.
- Is it perhaps because deep down we aren't sure that God is interested in us and couldn't help even if he was? If we never ask for anything we will never be disappointed but our knowledge and experience of God's supreme power and generosity will never be stretched or allowed to grow. In his pattern prayer that Jesus taught the disciples he tells them to ask "Give us this day our daily bread" - and that means we are not only free, but actually told to bring all of our material needs to God for him to supply.
- It may be that like the Pharisee in the story we simply don't believe that we need God's help and that we are doing quite well on our own. If that is the case then we are in big trouble because we are not giving God the opportunity to bring us the wholeness, healing and forgiveness that we all need.

**2. It was a direct personal prayer.**

The tax collector didn't speak of his neighbours but of himself. That doesn't mean that we shouldn't pray for others, of course we should. Jesus tells us we should. But what we can all too easily do is to concentrate on others' needs and failures and keep the spot light off our own needs and failures. We can take refuge in vague and general prayers

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that are unthreatening because they are impersonal but are equally hard to see the answers to.

**3. It was a humble prayer:**

a prayer that put self in the right place. The tax collector didn't have an inflated idea about himself and his achievements. He had no doubts at all that he was a sinner and as such he needed God's merciful forgiveness. Bishop James Ryle, an evangelical theologian writing last century, said "We never begin to be good until we can feel and say that we are bad" This is not describing that false humility that pretends we are unworthy, whilst feeling pretty good about ourselves; A sort of smug modesty. Neither does it mean that we have to continually beat ourselves about past and forgiven sins. It means that we will never receive God's forgiveness until we acknowledge our need and bring our sinfulness to him to be cleansed and restored.

It was a prayer in which mercy was the chief thing asked for and faith in God's covenant mercy, however weak, was the chief thing shown.

And finally, **4. It was a prayer that came from the heart.**

The man was deeply moved as he talked to God. He was fearful to come too far into God's presence and stood far off, he was aware of his sin and need, but he was totally earnest and straightforward. He meant that prayer with every pore of his being. He struck his breast, expressing emotions that he didn't have the words for. He simply threw himself on God's mercy leaving it to him to answer as he saw fit.

God delights in prayers like this. David, in Psalm 51, knew what this felt like and he said "A broken and contrite heart, O God you won't despise." Jesus praised humility highly and humility was a leading attribute of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Job, Isaiah and Daniel. It is this dependant, trusting self-aware attitude that he wants to see us display in our relationship with him and it is this humble trust that will enable us to grow in faith and holiness.

Our prayers don't need to be polished to please God. They simply need to be honest, to be wanting God's mercy and presence in our lives. So as day by day we come to God for the guidance and help we need let's learn from this man who thought he was unworthy to speak to God – yet delighted him in doing so