“GOD, BE MERCIFUL TO ME, A SINNER!”

Luke 18:9–14

Key Verse: 18:13

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’”

This summer we’ve been going through a special series on prayer. In our first lesson our Lord Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer that whenever we pray, we should be focusing on God, on knowing him as our Father, always praying to glorify his name, always seeking for his kingdom to come. In our second lesson he taught us to always be asking humbly for our own needs, and especially, for forgiveness, both for ourselves and for others. In our third lesson we learned from Acts 1:14 how important it is, no matter how different we are, to be united under our Lord Jesus Christ, praying with one mind and heart to believe and obey his words. We especially learned that God wants us to be “devoted” to praying together, and how crucial this is for spiritual renewal. In our fourth lesson our Lord Jesus taught us to come to God boldly in prayer, and to ask him for the best gift, the Holy Spirit, to help us. In our fifth lesson, through the parable of the persistent widow he taught us to “always pray and not lose heart.” Jesus wants us to keep up such a spirit of prayer so that we can be ready for his return at any time. He also taught us to keep on believing that God is just, and to cry out for God’s justice to prevail in our lives and in our world.

Now in today’s passage our Lord Jesus teaches us a very different aspect of prayer. It mainly has to do with our view of ourselves when we’re praying. Is it possible for us to be praying like the Pharisee? Maybe not literally, but in spirit? What does it really mean to be praying like the tax collector? May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his word today.

Let’s look at verse 9. In this chapter this is Jesus’ second parable on prayer. In Luke’s Gospel the word “pray,” in some form, is repeated 28 times, way more than the other Gospels. In Luke’s other book, Acts, it’s repeated another 31 times. Prayer was very important to Luke. Jesus’ first parable in chapter 18 taught us to be persistent in prayer. To balance this, he now adds how to have the right attitude in prayer. Persistent people can have a tendency to be self-righteous, and for Luke, this might be worse than not praying at all.

Let’s also pay careful attention to what Luke says here: It says, “…to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt” (9b). Somehow, a life of prayer can lead people to have this tendency. When we’re praying a lot, we may wonder why other people around us aren’t praying like we are. But it’s more than that. Luke has another important concern in this Gospel. He’s concerned about self-righteousness. Of course Luke portrays righteousness as a good thing. He describes Zechariah and Elizabeth as “both righteous before God” (1:6). Luke says Jesus saves us so that we may live “in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (1:75). Luke describes Simeon, who was waiting for the Messiah’s coming, as “righteous and devout” and full of the Holy Spirit (2:25). And at the end, Luke describes Joseph of Arimathea as “a good and righteous man” (23:50).

But Luke also emphasizes our Lord Jesus’ words: “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (5:32). Among the four Gospel writers Luke alone quotes Jesus as saying, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (15:7). Who are these people? Doesn’t *everyone* need to repent? Luke is referring to the *self*-righteous who *think* they don’t need to repent. And as for the sinners, Luke describes how our Lord Jesus was repeatedly criticized for associating with them (5:30; 7:34,39; 15:2; 19:7). Luke mentions how people looked down on others’ suffering as being caused because they were worse sinners (13:2). Clearly self-righteousness is a problem.

Look at verse 10. In his parable Jesus is drawing a contrast between a Pharisee and a tax collector. Pharisees were well-known in those times for being very religious. They strictly kept the Sabbath, memorized lots of Scripture and meticulously performed many religious duties to maintain what they thought was righteousness. Pharisees were the ones constantly critical of Jesus about all kinds of nit-picky things (e.g. 5:21; 6:2,7; 7:39; 11:38,53; 15:2; 16:14). Tax collectors, on the other hand, were just the opposite. They weren’t religious at all. In fact, they were known as people greedy for money. Worse, they were traitors to their own people, willing to sell out anything or anyone for the sake of having more money. Good people didn’t associate with them, so tax collectors could only hang out with other public sinners such as prostitutes. We might call them “bad to the bone,” social deviants or trouble-makers. People didn’t have any hope in tax collectors, and we certainly wouldn’t expect to learn any spiritual lesson from them. But in this Gospel Luke tells us that during Jesus’ ministry, tax collectors were constantly coming for help (3:12; 5:29; 7:29; 15:1; 19:2).

So what does Jesus say about these two very different men? In verse 10 he says they both went up to the temple to pray. A tax collector going to the temple to pray is already way unexpected. But first, how does the Pharisee pray? Read verses 11,12. His prayer is kind of comical. What kind of prayer is this? What’s he asking for? It seems he’s asking God to praise him for how wonderful he is. Well that’s just silly. Since it’s a parable, it’s an exaggerated description of what self-righteousness looks like. First, the man lists all the people he thinks he’s better than: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, and, of course, tax collectors. Then he brags about all he thinks he’s doing for God: fasting twice a week, giving a tenth of all his income. Many pious Pharisees fasted two full days a week, on Mondays and Thursdays, even going without water. Many were so meticulous about tithing that they ended up giving 20 percent instead of ten. It was intense. This Pharisee was doing all these things while most people around him weren’t. It was what the Pharisees had always been known for, showing by their strictness their zeal for God, and keeping themselves pure, never letting their lives be corrupted by the godless culture around them.

The Bible often tells us to keep ourselves pure (e.g. 2Co11:2,3; Php1:10; 1Ti5:22; Tit1:5; 2:5; Jas1:27; 1Jn3:3). But in so many cases, it’s talking not about outward purity but about having a “pure heart” (Ps24:4; 73:1; Pr20:9; Mt5:8; 1Ti1:5; 2Ti2:22; 1Pe1:22; Jas4:8). We may not be doing anything outwardly but be sinning in our hearts all the time. Our Lord Jesus taught that sin begins not outside us or around us but within our own hearts (Mk 7:20–23). He said being angry is the same as murder, and being lustful, the same as adultery (Mt5:21,22, 27,28). So Proverbs 20:9 reads, “Who can say, ‘I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin?’” It makes us wonder about this Pharisee—is he being real? We all like to quickly gloss over our own sins, but really zero in on the sins of others. So Jesus once asked, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your eye?” (Mt7:3).

Why is this Pharisee praying like this, bragging about all the ways he thinks he’s righteous, and making it a point to put down this tax collector nearby? In verse 14 Jesus says it simply: the man is trying to exalt himself. It’s weird but true that when we’re insecure, we’ll try to use anything to exalt ourselves, even prayer. This is why our Lord Jesus taught us: “And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others…But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Mt6:5,6). No audience; no drama; just get real with God, aware that *he’s* watching, *he’s* listening.

Today people are still confident in themselves that they are righteous. Conservatives think their views on finances and the economy are right, and those who have opposing views they treat with contempt. Liberals think their views on societal and world problems are right, and those who don’t agree with them they also treat with contempt. Both kinds of self-righteous extremism are obnoxious and exhausting. But we all can be self-righteous about many things, not just morals but also our educational level (or lack thereof), our financial habits (or lack thereof), our diet and exercise (or lack thereof), our self-discipline and stewardship (or lack thereof), and even about our race and culture. We think others aren’t as good as we think we are, and so they deserve our contempt. Our self-righteousness makes it impossible for us to learn from or get close to anyone, especially those different from ourselves. Worst of all, it keeps us away from God. Why? It’s ironic. Though God is the one who gave us so many laws, he’s not legalistic at all. Though he’s most holy, faithful and righteous, more than anyone else, he’s also most merciful. Though he could, he never treat sinners with contempt; he’s “kind” even “to the ungrateful and the evil” (Lk6:35). That’s really hard to do! The closer we truly get to him, the more merciful we become (Lk6:36). It’s why our Lord Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer to always be praying, “…and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us” (11:4a). It’s also why he taught us that when we pray, we always should be praying for God’s honor and glory, never for our own (11:2).

Now let’s look at the tax collector. Read verse 13. We notice the contrasts here. This man is “standing far off.” He doesn’t think he’s worthy to approach God, who is so holy. It says he “would not even lift up his eyes to heaven.” He doesn’t think he deserves anything from God. Finally, it says he “beat his breast.” In that culture it was their way of expressing great mourning or grief. In this case, it was the man’s godly grief over all his sins (2Co7:10). Finally, what he says is brief and simple, yet earnest: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” In Greek the word for “merciful” is not the usual word; it’s a technical word meaning “propitiate, conciliate or expiate.” So the man is literally asking, “God, make atonement for me, a sinner!” He knows he deserves nothing but God’s wrath for all his sins, but he still asks for God to find some way to forgive him. Some Pharisees would criticize this tax collector, that his repentance isn’t enough; he needs to make restitution for all the wrongs he did if he ever hopes God will forgive him.

So what is Jesus’ point? He’s showing us the right way to come to God in prayer. Instead of talking about all kinds of righteous-sounding or irrelevant things, we need to get real with God, and get right to the point—most of all we need God’s mercy and forgiveness. Without knowing the seriousness of our own sins, we can’t even begin to really talk to God—what we’re saying is as silly as this Pharisee. It’s not about putting on an act before people, pretending like we think we’re a sinner; it’s about being convicted before God himself. And instead of being quick to pray about everybody else’s problems, or the world’s problems, we need to start praying about our own, our own sins against God.

But this tax collector’s prayer doesn’t mean we can sin a lot, then come to God and say, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” then go out and sin some more. We all have a tendency to abuse grace, as Paul wrote about in Romans (3:8; 6:1,15). Likewise, Luke isn’t saying that Jesus’ mercy and grace to sinners are for the sake of condoning sin. In fact, among the Gospel writers Luke uses the word “repent” the most, and he was careful to add that Jesus came to call sinners *to repentance* (3:8a; 5:32; 15:7,10). In this parable as well, Luke is showing that prayer is not only for asking God for mercy, but also the chance to come to God seriously, in true repentance.

Honestly, we get tired when people never admit they’re wrong; it’s so refreshing when somebody actually does. It’s kind of like this tax collector in his prayer—what a simple, beautiful, encouraging prayer! Often we don’t know what to say to God, especially after we’ve sinned. But we don’t have to put on an act; there are no magic words. We can just come to God humbly, tell him we’re sorry for our sins, and cry to him for his help, his mercy and his cleansing. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” David wrote in Psalm 51: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight…The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise…”

Let’s see how Jesus interpreted his own parable. Read verse 14. It’s not about words but about the heart. God, who sees the heart, can tell when we’re genuinely repentant. It’s what he’s really looking for, what really pleases him. So prayer is the chance for us to humble ourselves before God—not to tell him what to do, but only to cry out to him for his mercy, which we really don’t deserve. May God bless each one of us as we reflect on this tax collector’s prayer. May God deepen our awareness of him and of ourselves. May he also deepen our prayer lives as we come to him privately in this kind of sincere repentance.