

Following Jesus: Humility in Prayer (Luke 18:9-14)

Background

After Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus resolutely heads towards Jerusalem. During this journey, he prepares his disciples for his departure.

After encouraging his disciples to pray persistently for justice, Jesus addresses the issue of self-righteousness using another parable about prayer.

Points to ponder

This parable is not addressed directly to the disciples; it is spoken to those who are self-righteous or condescending. Since we all have a natural tendency to compare ourselves favourably with others, this parable is aimed at us.

In verse 10, Jesus introduces two characters who were thought to be at opposite ends of the religious spectrum: Pharisees were believed to be pious and tax collectors were regarded as thieves. The expectation therefore is that God will be pleased with the Pharisee's prayer and will reject the tax collector's.

How do the two prayers differ in terms of their content, orientation and underlying assumption? Whose prayer was God pleased with and why?

In verse 14, Jesus concludes the parable with his own evaluation, which is based on a basic biblical principle (Prov 3:34; James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5). Jesus had already set down this principle in Luke chapter 14 verses 7 to 11.

This parable contains both a warning and an encouragement. The warning is that God will humble those who exalt themselves. The encouragement is that God will exalt those who humble themselves. In particular, God will answer the prayers of the humble.

When we are tempted to be proud, we must remember that we are entirely dependent on the grace of God and the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. No matter how mature we become as Christians, we will never have a better plea than 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'

Luke 18:9-14 The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

⁹Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

¹⁰Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself¹,

'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

¹³And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying,

'God, be merciful² to me a sinner!'

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

¹ Or "stood by himself and prayed thus".

² The Greek word translated "be merciful" is the same word that is translated "make propitiation for" in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 17.