

Jesus' Prayer Examples – Luke 18:10-13

What does the scripture say?

Lk 18:10 “Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a dishonest tax collector.

Background: In this one sentence the author sets the stage for an important spiritual lesson. We know that one was a Jewish leader – supposedly the example for the Nation to emulate, the other was probably a disgraced Jew who had compromised their faith in service to a Pagan occupying nation – the epitome of what the religiously minded Jews held in disdain. Both were praying in the same place, at the same time, and to the same God – but with very different emphasis.

Prayer #1:

Lk 18:11 The proud Pharisee stood by himself and prayed this prayer: ‘I thank you, God, that *I am not a sinner like everyone else*, especially like that tax collector over there! For I never cheat, I don’t sin, I don’t commit adultery,
Lk 18:12 I fast twice a week, and I give you a tenth of my income.’

What do you observe in this passage?

1st Development: The author identifies the Pharisee as being proud and isolated. Jews being validated by the Law would disdain any contact with any unclean members of society – and a Jewish tax collector would be at the top of this list. Notice also that he justifies himself in terms of obedience to a narrow portion of the Law, and reinforces his perceived benefit in his own life.

Prayer #2:

Lk 18:13 “But the tax collector stood at a distance and dared not even lift his eyes to heaven as he prayed. Instead, he beat his chest in sorrow, saying, ‘*O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner.*’

What do you observe in this passage?

2nd Development: The author indicates that the Jewish tax collector knew his fallen state – and in humility and regret stood before God begging for mercy. He made no promises that he would do better, he didn’t justify himself at all but freely acknowledged his need for mercy.

What does the passage suggest?

The Pharisee obviously was comfortable with his understanding of what God wanted from him. This is not unlike Jesus’ teaching to the Jewish leaders that they didn’t understand the “meaning of I desire mercy not sacrifice.”

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While the penitent tax collector came to God not unlike the thief on the cross beside Jesus at His crucifixion – he knew his need, he knew God alone could help, and he trusted in God's mercy not in his own competence or righteousness.

Q1 – What does prayer do in a person? What does it reveal about our inner life? What does God want to accomplish in us through prayer?

In the “Prayer Part 1” section we reviewed, what does it say about what prayer reveals in the person praying?

“To say that ‘prayer changes things’ is not as close to the truth as saying, ‘prayer changes me and then God through me changes things.’ God has established things so that prayer, on the basis of redemption, changes the way a person looks at things. Prayer is not a matter of changing things externally, but one of working miracles in a person’s inner nature.”

Oswald Chambers

1. Things that typically happen in prayer include:
 - a. Revelation or insight – truth revealed and understood
 - b. Illumination – seeing new applications of something I thought I knew or understood.
 - c. Conviction – God bringing to light something He wants to change.
 - d. Comforting – God letting me know that He is in charge and things are OK.
 - e. Encouragement, strengthening, etc.
2. When one of these typical things occurs how do we deal with it? If conviction comes, what do we do with it? Do we stand naked before the Spirit and allow His gaze to penetrate our hearts and reveal our innermost secrets... or do we say “I’m not that bad?” The truth is that we all have our own personal flavor of sin...
 - a. If I like to look at the opposite sex more closely than I should, do I comfort myself that I’m not an adulterer or worse, or confess that there is still sin in me?
 - b. If I like to drink more than I should, do I comfort myself that I’m not an alcoholic or an addict living under a bridge?
 - c. If God is asking me to do something I’m not altogether comfortable with, do I present all the things I think I’m doing OK about... like the Pharisee? Or do I confess like the tax collector.
 - d. If I do confess... do I really understand what God really wants of me?
 - i. Does He want something to change in me? In this our Gracious God will want my cooperation with His Spirit.
 - ii. Is He merely opening my heart & mind to something He will be working on in me? In this God wants me to pay attention to things He is doing in the circumstances surrounding me toward the work He desires.
 - iii. Does He want me to act immediately, or wait for further developments? All too often people wait and do nothing, or they rush out and launch into some ill advised project because I misunderstood what God was saying.

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Q2 – Why did God have this particular story included in Scripture? What do we need to hear from it?

1. This is not an 'either-or' question, or a one size fits all correct response. God is Sovereign and fully capable to work different works through different people from the same passage.
2. Instead of solving a puzzle, we should submit to the scrutiny and guidance of the Spirit. In humility and dependence we stand before God and invite Him to complete His work in me... this is what the author is driving home in this passage.

Personal application:

God has called me to ministry in authenticdiscipleship.org:

1. The calling is clear and confirmed and reaffirmed... there is no doubt in my mind.
2. While I am making progress with the website, my first plan was to engage in group "guided tours" to experience or allow God the opportunity to connect with lay-leaders in developing a discipling community much as He has connected with me in seminary.
3. I am not getting much traction with some of the local church leaders who I've been called to serve. They have expressed that they know their own need... they know they are not adequately vesting in lay-leadership cultivation and developing them as disciples. In some cases they know they are deliberately "dumbing down" discipleship, rather than lifting up and encouraging believers to press on with intentional spiritual growth and maturity.
4. So in this environment I have been asking God... "Help me!" – thinking that I need to work harder or do something different. Rather than asking God... "What is going on? What am I supposed to be doing? What am I missing? Please complete the work of Grace in me first."

This week I had an epiphany... I have had a long standing vision of the church of Christ as this beautiful creation robed in dazzling white... a suitable bride for the King. However, I have found that the bride is in fact dirty, wretched, and smeared with filth. It is not unlike the prostitute companion of the John Hurt character in the movie version of Orwell's "1984"... this lady is dirty and her clothing unkempt and has makeup smeared garishly across her face and she looks horrible... yet she acts as if she is beautiful, desirable and alluring. Yikes!

In my study this week, I read an account of Joni Erickson Tada when she was getting married. The story I read is where she being a quadriplegic was motoring down the aisle in her wheelchair draped with her gown when she noticed the chair had placed large a grease smear on her beautiful white dress... the vehicle she relied upon that was transporting her to her most important destination was betraying her at the greatest moment of her life. To make matters worse, her bouquet was starting to slip and she was helpless to do anything about either.

I can just imagine her prayers... oh God no... help me! Make this right! Make this beautiful... this is the most important day of my life. Why aren't you here?

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At the height of her panic she looked up and saw her groom's face... and he was just beaming at her. There was such love in his eyes that he just radiated joy... for her. She saw the love and appreciation in his eyes and smiled back... and forgot all about the rest of these unimportant things. She was beautiful because she was loved... for who she was, not for who she thought she needed to be or something she needed to project. She saw herself through the eyes of her beloved. It changes everything.

I realized that was also me... I am wearing the same smeared dirty off white clothes with my face smeared and unkempt that I often observe in some other leaders. Because of sin I am [we are] profoundly unlovely, yet I'm loved completely without qualification by God... such is Grace. Then I realized that I was as guilty as the Pharisee... thanking God that I am not like other sinners, relying on having a better and clearer vision of the church than some others. Such is the sin nature, and we all have it. Interesting how humility, leads to brokenness, then to mercy, then to healing... always in that order.

Can you relate to this? Can you see yourself in this light? If so... how should we pray? Your heart full of loving gratitude should have an impact in what you pray about... it should change your priorities. Note Jesus' comment in Luke 7:47:

LK 7:47 "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

For me it is less about making the church what I think it should be... and more about realizing that God is perfecting His Bride in a way suitable to Him. My prayer is more about cooperating with what God is doing than realizing some vision-plan of my own.

It doesn't mean that I am necessarily wrong in my assessment of the church, but that is not the point. The Pharisee had a good understanding of the sin of the tax collector, but that wasn't the point... the point was personal between each individual and God. It doesn't mean that God hasn't given me a vision about His priorities for His church or even about things that need to change... but it does mean that my own prayer priorities need to reflect God's mission, not mine. It is not my responsibility to affect change, only to proclaim God's truth... and that in a Spirit of love, Grace, Mercy, etc.

A final point about this kind of prayer... God will usually confirm through others what He is doing in your life. Monday morning I got the following quote from a friend:

The Church, Spotless and Tainted – Henri Nouwen

The Church is holy and sinful, spotless and tainted. The Church is the bride of Christ, who washed her in cleansing water and took her to himself "with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless" (Ephesians 5:26-27). The Church too is a group of sinful, confused, anguished people constantly tempted by the powers of lust and greed and always entangled in rivalry and competition.

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When we say that the Church is a body, we refer not only to the holy and faultless body made Christ-like through baptism and Eucharist but also to the broken bodies of all the people who are its members. Only when we keep both these ways of thinking and speaking together can we live in the Church as true followers of Jesus.

Our faith in God who sent his Son to become God-with-us and who, with his Son, sent his Spirit to become God-within-us cannot be real without our faith in the Church. The Church is that unlikely body of people through whom God chooses to reveal God's love for us. Just as it seems unlikely to us that God chose to become human in a young girl living in a small, not very respected town in the Middle East nearly two thousand years ago, it seems unlikely that God chose to continue his work of salvation in a community of people constantly torn apart by arguments, prejudices, authority conflicts, and power games.

Still, believing in Jesus and believing in the Church are two sides of one faith. It is unlikely but divine!

In conclusion:

Let's practice deliberately praying in such a mood and mindset in the coming weeks. Hold these thoughts in your mind... and let your heart respond in love to God. Allow Him... invite Him to complete His work of grace in me as He sees fit.