***IN ALL HUMILITY***

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October 27, 2019

Texts: Luke 18:9-14 and 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Two men went up to the church to pray – one an honest businessman and Sunday School teacher, the other a local drug dealer. Two women went up to the church to pray – one a respected college professor and elder, the other a chain-smoking prostitute. Two youth went up to the church to pray – one a leader of the church youth group, the other a vaping juvenile delinquent. Two men went up to the temple to pray – one a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. The stories are one and the same – two people praying in one house of worship: one an upstanding member of the community, the other an outcast of society. One commentator has suggested that the contrast is even more extreme, that it is the equivalent of saying, *the pope and a pimp went up to pray*. You get the idea. A saint and a sinner enter the sanctuary together. They came to the same place at the same time to pray to the same God. They were members of the same faith community, but how different were their lives and their prayers!

In the religion section of the Green Valley Book Fair the Pharisee found three books he had been looking for:

*How to be Very Religious in Ten Easy Steps*

*God’s On My Side, Who’s on Yours?*

*I’m Right and Righteous and You’re Not: A Biography*. The Pharisee was a devout man, a fervent believer, a stickler for the law of God. He obeyed the “*shall*s” and avoided the “*shall not*s*”* and he expected everyone else to do likewise. He knew that if you just live right, then God will reward you. You can see him slip into his favorite pew a few minutes before the Prelude begins with a holier-than-God look on his face. You can hear him praying softly under his breath as he casts a skeptical eye around the church:

*Lord, I thank you for the blessings with which you have filled my life – a fine home, a thriving business, the respect of my neighbors, a respectable church. I’ve heard it said that you help those who help themselves; well, I’ve done my part, Lord – I’ve worked hard and long, I’ve been fair in all my dealings, I’ve even tithed to the church, net of taxes of course. Thanks for doing your part in making it all worthwhile. You are indeed a great God to reward me so well, when I could be like one of those poor losers without a dime to their name or without a name worth having. Thanks for not making me like one of those social misfits or pompous politicians or tax cheats – or like that deadbeat drug dealer over there.*

Now perhaps you don’t want to slide into the pew next to the Pharisee, but would you really rather sit beside the drug dealer? Before you condemn the pray-er, think for a moment about the prayer. Are we not to give thanks for our blessings, be fair in our dealings, and tithe to the church? Are we not to be grateful when our kids are healthy and the roof isn’t leaking and business is good? Isn’t that what God wants us to do – to count our blessings and pray in good times as well as in bad times? How many times have you said to yourself upon seeing someone down and out, “There but for the grace of God go I”? It is not that you look down on those less fortunate, but aren’t you grateful that you are not one of them – that you have a roof over your head and a warm bed in which to sleep and the respect of your friends and neighbors? Or would you really rather trade places with those who have none of those blessings?

The prayer of the Pharisee is faithful to his tradition, a tradition that required a rabbi leaving the house of study to pray:

*I give thanks to Thee, O Lord my God, that Thou has set my portion with those who sit in the house of study and Thou has not set my portion with those who sit in street corners for I rise early and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early to frivolous talk*…[[1]](#endnote-1)

His prayer is not unlike the prayer of the psalmist (Ps.17:3-5):

Lord, i*f you try my heart, if you visit me by night,*

*If you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;*

*my mouth does not transgress.*

*As for what others do, by the word of your lips*

*I have avoided the ways of the violent.*

*My steps have held fast to your paths; my feet have not slipped*.

If all that makes some sense to you, then know that Jesus is talking to you as surely as he is talking to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. But if there is something in the prayer of that Pharisee that doesn’t sit right with you, then perhaps it is the same thing that did not sit right with Jesus either.

The problem with the Pharisee and his prayer is that he – not God – is at the center of the prayer. The Pharisee believed himself to be more righteous than most everyone else and defined himself in relation to all the others: “Thank you God that I am not like them.” Ignoring the prophet Micah’s call to walk humbly with your God, the Pharisee struts into his prayer with head held high. He makes himself the judge and declares himself righteous in comparison to his unrighteousness neighbors. He is a saint among sinners, in his own mind.

Meanwhile, the tax collector is sliding into a back pew in the shadows of the balcony, burying his face in his hands, and declaring himself a sinner among the saints. The drug dealer, the prostitute, the delinquent youth, the pimp who enters with the pope – the very ones who are less righteous by all outward appearances and all estimations including our own – cry out in unison, “Lord, have mercy upon me, a sinner!” They do so with heads bowed in humble acknowledgement that they have failed God. They make no distinctions between themselves and others. They offer no excuses for their actions. They make no claim to righteousness. They acknowledge their sin and, knowing they cannot save themselves, they beg for mercy and forgiveness from God. With tears in their eyes and the weight of heavy hearts bowing their heads, they plead, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

“I tell you, they went down to their homes justified rather than the others,” says Jesus. The sinner – the wretch who acknowledged his wretchedness – received God’s amazing grace and went home restored to right relationship with God, while the self-righteous Pharisee went home un-justified. We sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me…” because God’s amazing grace is for the “wretches”. Most of us want to claim that amazing grace, without admitting that we are wretches. We prefer to sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a slightly disappointing person like me.” It is hard enough to acknowledge that we are sinners in need of God’s mercy without stooping to call ourselves wretched. Yet, anything less makes the grace a little less amazing and places us back in the pew with the self-righteous Pharisee. “How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of [Christ’s] comfort?” asks the second question of the Heidelberg Catechism. The answer is this:

*A: Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second,*

*how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.*

The starting point for gratitude is acknowledging that we are wretched sinners. The sweet sound of amazing grace follows the confession of those wretched sins; it is the response to our confession, the assurance of God’s forgiveness and grace poured out for us – how sweet the sound!

Now maybe you haven’t murdered anyone this week. Maybe you haven’t taken the Lord’s name in vain, committed adultery, cheated on a test, or coveted your neighbor’s Tesla. But do not thank the Lord that you are less wretched than those who have committed those sins; do not think that you are unlike them, for you are more like them than unlike them. We all are. We all are sinners in need of the gracious mercy of God. It is God alone who saves us – not our faithfulness, not our good works, not our impeccable credentials. If you think that somehow you are better than that, then you do so at your peril, for “those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted,” says Jesus.

In the sports section of yesterday’s *Washington Post* which I read religiously, so to speak, there was an article about LSU’s head coach Ed Orgeron. The article is entitled: *LSU flourishing on offense under coach who knows defense – and humility*. The article describes how Orgeron and other top notch veteran college coaches have humbled themselves to seek the advice of some very young coaches in order to improve their teams. Among those quoted is Alabama coach Nick Saban:

*I think… humility is a really important part of continuing to grow and be successful. What’s the saying…there’s, ‘He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.’ I think that’s probably a pretty good way to live. I don’t think you’ve ever really arrived. There’s always room for improvement.[[2]](#endnote-2)*

Even legendary Ohio State coach Woody Hayes, not exactly a paragon of humility, could admit: “*I am not very smart, but I recognize that I am not very smart.”* If that message of humility can make its way into the locker rooms of college football teams, surely it can make its way into your play and your work and your prayers and your life!

Humility is a virtue, not a weakness, despite what the trash-talkers seem to suggest. We all know politicians, preachers, and presidents who are quick to suggest, “Of my many great qualities, humility is my best!” But actions speak louder than words; humility is not what you claim, it is how you live; it is what you practice not just what you preach; it is how you treat others, and how you pray – not just in the pew for all to see, but also in your home at your bedside on your knees.

For what then will you pray this day, my brothers and sisters – for gratitude that you are unlike other sinners down the pew or down the street? Or might you bow your head and ask for mercy, forgiveness, and a clean heart because you desperately need God’s grace? Before you can be justified and restored to right relationship with God,

before you can serve faithfully,

before you can thank God for all your blessings,

before you can be a disciple of Jesus,

you must humble yourself and ask for God’s cleansing mercy. That is what Jesus made possible for us on the cross, dying for us not because we had earned that sacrifice, but because God’s grace was great enough to embrace us one and all - sinners all.

A hymn in *Sing the Faith* puts to music that prayer. So I invite you to pray this day with the tax collector and the drug dealer and the prostitute and the juvenile delinquent and your obnoxious neighbor and me, to pray not with exultant voices but with humble hearts, to pray in these words:

*Give me a clean heart so I may serve thee.*

*Lord, fix my heart so that I may be used by thee.*

*For I’m not worthy of all those blessings.*

*Give me a clean heart, and I’ll follow thee.[[3]](#endnote-3)* AMEN

1. Bernard Brandon Scott, Hear Then the Parable (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 95 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Chuck Culpepper, “LSU flourishing on offense under coach who knows defense – and humility”, *The Washington Post*, October 26, 2019, p.D1 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Margaret Douroux, “Give Me a Clean Heart”, *Sing the Faith*, No.2133 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)