

## THE PRIORITY OF PRAYER – Luke 18:9-14

### Practicing the Presence of God #8

Jim and Beverly Fine decided to take a trip to a Maryland beach on a beautiful summer afternoon. This was not an unusual decision in itself, for the Fines often enjoyed visiting the Atlantic Ocean together in their retirement years. There was something about the power of the waves rolling in and the fresh, salty air that invigorated them. But this specific afternoon, they decided to take the road less traveled. Instead of making the hour long trip cruising down the interstate, they decided to take a smaller highway from their home that wound through several smaller towns. This decision would change not only their lives, but also the life of Margaret Murphy.

As they came through one of the small towns, the single light was red. Jim and Beverly didn't mind a bit for it gave them some time to sit and admire the small community. As Beverly looked over at a large house to the right, she saw a frail-looking older woman waving from the front porch. As the light turned green, Beverly made a snap decision. *Jim, why don't we pull the car over and walk through town a bit?* Jim wasn't opposed because the quaint town attracted him as well.

Beverly lead Jim back to that nursing home where she had seen the woman sitting on the porch. She boldly walked up the walk and greeted the woman. *I'm so glad you stopped*, the lady said. *I've been sitting here praying, and I just prayed that you would stop and chat for a while when I saw your car stopped at the light.* Jim and Beverly knew immediately that they had a deeper

bond with this woman because they were both Christians as well. So they pulled up chairs and sat down to chat for a while.

Their conversation brought out the irony that this older lady named Margaret Murphy had lived in Baltimore on Gorusch Avenue just around the block from where Beverly had grown up as a child on Homestead Street. In fact, Margaret's youngest sister, Marie, had been Beverly's best girl-friend in school. Margaret, Beverly and Jim had a wonderful time sharing memories from their childhood years. The Fines had a little less time on the Atlantic seaboard that summer afternoon, but their encounter with Margaret started a wonderful relationship. Now, every time they traveled to the beach, they would take the scenic route, stopping to chat for a while with Margaret. They gained much wisdom from the older Christian who lived her life in an almost continual state of prayer. And Margaret was able to have some good company that eased her burden of loneliness.

Surprising, wonderful events happen in the lives of Christians who practice the presence of God through prayer. Now there are some skeptics who would claim that meetings like the Fines had with Margaret are just chance, happenstance encounters. But the Christian who practices the presence of God in prayer knows that this isn't so. The Christian who practices the presence of God in prayer knows the joy of having God lead and direct even through the everyday details of life.

This morning, I would invite you to turn to Luke 18 as we look at the contrasting prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple that the Lord Jesus spoke about in a parable that He gave.

In this passage, 2 prayers are contrasted. One of these prayers was not acceptable to God and was, therefore, rejected by Him. But the other prayer was pleasing to the Lord and honored by Him. Why was one prayer unacceptable to God while the other prayer was pleasing to Him? It certainly wasn't the length of the prayer or the eloquence of the prayer for it was the longer and more eloquent prayer that was rejected. This morning, we want to compare and contrast these 2 prayers that were offered. But before we address the specifics of the prayers, let's first look briefly at this method of teaching that Jesus used.

A parable is an illustration – a story told to clarify some spiritual truth. Our English word *parable* is really a transliteration of the Greek word *parabolos*. This compound Greek word is made up of the verb meaning *to throw* and the prefix meaning *alongside*. So a parable is literally something thrown alongside something else, a story thrown alongside some spiritual truth to illustrate or clarify it. Someone has defined a parable as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

Now Jesus almost always told parables that involved common, everyday occurrences of life. He often used farming or business settings for parables – settings that almost everyone could relate to in one way or another. In this specific parable, Jesus used a temple setting, again a setting that would be familiar to almost every Jew. Even though this scene never actually occurred for it is clearly said to be a parable, it was one that easily could have happened, and the hearers could easily picture this scene that Jesus portrayed for them.

2 men are presented by Christ in his parable. Verse 11 gives us 3 details about the first man – his social status, his physical position in prayer and the focus of his prayer.

\*His social status was that of being a Pharisee. This was very impressive because Pharisees were among the most respected in society during the time when Jesus lived. Of the three prominent parties of Judaism at the time of Christ--Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes--the Pharisees were by far the most influential. The name "Pharisee" meant "separated ones". They were also known as *chasidim*, meaning "loved of God" or "loyal to God." According to Josephus, their number at the height of their popularity was more than 6,000. Pharisees emerged after the Babylonian captivity. All of the evidence that we have indicates that the first Pharisees were very dedicated to the Lord and concerned for the purity and righteousness of God's people. But as the several hundred years of the intertestament period passed, the religiosity of the Pharisees became very external. By the time Jesus was born, the Pharisees' approach to religion had become almost totally legalistic. It was what they did rather than who they were that made them pleasing to God. This is what Jesus attacked when confronting them. But Pharisees still were very respected citizens of Israel. They were generally the wealthiest, most influential, most respected people around.

There are many people who surprisingly feel that prayer is reserved for only certain classes of people. Such is not the case. God invites all of His children to the privilege of prayer. It is not just a coincidence that Jesus chose a Pharisee to offer the prayer that was not pleasing to God.

\*the physical position of the Pharisee praying is also noted. Jesus said that the Pharisee stood up and prayed. Now the fact that he was standing is not the significant feature here for standing in prayer was a common position in Biblical times. The tax collector was also standing as he prayed later in this parable. But the interesting feature is that the Pharisee stood up from a seated position to gain attention. It is obvious that this man wanted to be the center of attention when he prayed.

There has always been a great deal of discussion among Christians about the best position for prayer. Some adamantly advocate kneeling, or folding one's hands and bowing the head, or lying prostrate on the ground. One of the points that Jesus is making in this parable is that the physical position of prayer is not the important thing – the attitude of the heart is what God is most concerned about.

I read a humorous poem in the Daily Bread several years ago that illustrates how heart sincerity is so much more important than posture in prayer.

*The proper way for men to pray, said deacon Lemuel Keyes: The only proper way to pray is down upon one's knees.*

*No, I should say the way to pray, said Reverend Doctor Wise. Is standing straight with outstretched arms with rapt and upturned eyes.*

*Oh, no, no, no, said Elder Snow, such posture is too proud. A man should pray with eyes fast closed and head contritely bowed.*

*It seems to me his hands should be austerely clasped in front. With both thumbs pointed to the sky, said Reverend Doctor Blunt.*

*Last year I fell in Hodgkin's well headfirst, said Cyril Brown. With both my heels a stickin' up, my head a pointin' down. And I done prayed right then and there; best prayer I ever said. The prayin'est prayer I ever prayed, was standin' on my head.*

It's amazing how we can become so diverted with periphery matters that we miss the heart of what prayer is all about, isn't it? Some of the most effective prayers in the Bible were prayed from the most unusual places – from a cave or the belly of a whale or while sinking in the middle of the Sea of Galilee. Now it is proper and right to assume a position of humility in prayer as we will see in a moment and to be in a position where we can concentrate without outside distractions. Certainly kneeling or lying prostrate or standing in prayer are all positions that are found in Biblical examples. But we must never forget that while man is very concerned with the outward appearance, God is only concerned about the heart. The attitude of the heart is infinitely more important to God than a position of the body.

\*The 3<sup>rd</sup> detail given about the Pharisee was the basic content of his prayer. Verse 11 says that *the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself*. He used his prayer to brag about himself to those around him. He used his prayer to boast about his good standing in society – that he wasn't like robbers, evil doers or adulterers. He used his prayer to extol his religious virtues reminding God and everyone else around him that he fasted twice a week and tithed all that he earned. He even used his prayer to publicly berate the tax collector thanking God that he wasn't a no good menace to society like him. But Jesus

summed up the whole content of his prayer in 2 words – about himself, his whole prayer was about himself.

It's an insult to God to tell him about ourselves in prayer as if He doesn't already know. Many prayers practically deny the omniscience of God. We often tell him of situations and people like He isn't aware of what is going on. No, there are times when we need to unburden our hearts in prayer to God as we share our life situations with Him – God certainly understands that need and invites us to share our hearts with Him. But we must never forget who we're talking to – the Almighty, Omniscient, Creator of the Universe. The major purpose of prayer is not to tell God and others around us about ourselves. Jesus made this point very clear in this parable, didn't he?

Jesus then moves to picture another man in this temple scene and likewise gives the social status, the physical position and the focus of his prayer as well. \*This 2<sup>nd</sup> man that Jesus presents is a tax collector. Now there couldn't have been anyone more despised in Jewish society that Jesus could have picked more than this man. It wasn't just the fact that tax collectors gathered revenue that made them unpopular. Tax collectors have never been the most popular class in any society. Today, you will never find the head of the IRS among the 10 most popular figures in the nation. People know they must pay taxes to live, but paying taxes is not something that citizens naturally like to do. We don't look forward to April 15 in the same way that we look forward to December 25.

But there was an added wrinkle that had been developed by the Romans that made this occupation even more hated in Christ's day. The Roman Empire

included many different distinct nations- all of those in what we now call Europe, the middle east and northern Africa. The Romans knew that it would be unwise for them to personally be involved in the collecting of taxes. After all, a conquering nation is naturally unpopular. If you add to that the unpopularity of collecting taxes, well, you can see that you have the potential for nationalistic insurrection. So the Romans came up with this ingenious plan. They would appeal to human greed and would appoint national tax collectors from every nation in the empire, giving them the authority to collect taxes. Then they would set up a minimum quota, and whatever the tax collector could raise over and above, that would be his to keep. It was a kind of commission set up in which the tax collector could become very wealthy for taking the heat off of the Roman empire.

Now the ones who ultimately paid the price for this ingenious plan were the common tax payers. Ultimately, they had to pay a higher percentage of taxes because they were also paying a middle man. But Rome's goal was achieved. The average citizen ended up venting his anger and frustration against that middle man, that tax collector, that low down Jewish citizen who would help the oppressing Roman by collecting taxes from his own countryman just so he could get rich in the process.

It is not chance that Jesus chose a tax collector to compare to the Pharisee – a person of lowest esteem in society to compare with the highest.

\*But notice with me also the prayer position of the tax collector. This man was standing off at a distance from the crowds. His head is bowed so that he wouldn't even look towards heaven. And he is beating his chest in self-

degradation and shame. His posture stands in stark contrast to the Pharisee's doesn't it? Whereas the Pharisee sought out a place of prominence and audience by standing up in the midst of the crowd, the tax collector seeks out a place of isolation away from people. Whereas the Pharisee was motivated to pray out of a sense of pride and a desire to promote himself, it is obvious that the tax collector is moved to pray out of a sense of inner spiritual need. He realizes his sinful condition. He realizes the greed that has motivated him to prey upon his fellow man. He realizes the lack of love for his neighbor that he has displayed in his profession choice. His body language reveals the contrite condition of his heart.

\*That inner heart attitude is revealed in the prayer that he offers. Like the Pharisee, he also is concerned for his own well-being, but it is from a far different vantage point. There is nothing wrong with being concerned for our own spiritual condition. That is why God provided the vehicle of prayer for us in the first place. God allows us the privilege of prayer as a means to attain the cleansing that He so freely offers to each of us. The tax collector's prayer is not centered primarily on himself. It is rather focused on God, on His mercy, on His forgiveness, on His cleansing. The tax collector is not trying to publicly improve his image like the Pharisee had. Rather he freely admits that he is a sinner and that he is in desperate need to obtain divine mercy. It is the humility of the tax collector in contrast to the pride of the Pharisee that is pin-pointed by the Lord Jesus Christ. Because of his humility, the tax collector went home justified by God. God accepted his repentant attitude and forgave him from his sins that were many declaring him to be righteous in His sight. But the

Pharisee had just gone through some religious gymnastics for God didn't respond to his prayer at all. Jesus concludes by saying, *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

God desires that His children practice His presence on a daily basis. We do this in part as we live our lives in a prayerful attitude. This is the only way to understand some of the important commands in the Bible. The Apostle Paul commanded the members of the church at Thessalonica to pray continually, pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). To the members of the church at Philippi he wrote, *In everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God* (Phil. 4:6). Was the Apostle advocating a monastic life where every Christian was required to spend all of his or her time in a prayer closet? Didn't Paul think it proper to eat or sleep or work? Of course not. Just a few verses before his command to pray continually, Paul warned those who had been idle to get back to work for the glory of God (1 Thess. 5:14).

Paul realized the importance of practicing the presence of God in our lives. One of the most important aspects of such a life is living with a prayerful attitude. If we are humble before the Lord with sins confessed, then we can live our lives in a continuous state of fellowship with our Creator. It can be our regular practice to just talk with Him throughout the day or night. He's always with us. If we practice His presence, we can communicate with Him anytime. That's what He wants for us to do. But if our prayer life is like the Pharisees, only for show, then we are not going to pray without ceasing. For one thing, we all spend most of our day alone – there's nobody with us to impress. But also the prideful attitude of our heart and the sin that remains unconfessed

forms a barrier to hinder fellowship with our Creator. We can only know the joy of practicing the presence of God in prayer as we follow the example of the lowly tax collector rather than the Pharisee.

Let me conclude with just one example from the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. Mark 4 introduces us to a dramatic scene in our Savior's life. He is in a boat crossing the Sea of Galilee with his disciples after a hard day's work. He is so tired that he could literally sleep through a storm. While Jesus is sleeping in the boat a furious storm arose over the lake. It was so terrifying that even the experienced fishermen who were born and raised on these waters were frightened that they were going to drown. So in their desperation, they awake Jesus. Waking out of a deep sleep to the terrifying experience of being in a sinking ship in the midst of a storm, Christ's first response was to turn to His father in prayer, rebuking the wind and the waves. Prayer was such a natural part of our Savior's life that he instinctively turned to it. That is praying continually. That is praying without ceasing. This is the kind of life that God desires for each of us to live as we practice His presence in our lives.

A. C. Dixon, one of the former pastors of the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago, once said in a sermon, "When we rely on organization, we get what organization can do; when we rely on education, we get what education can do; when we rely on medicine, we get what medicine can do. Now all of these things have great value in their place. But we must never forget that when we rely on prayer, we get what only God can do."