

WORTHY? Luke 18:9-17

Have you ever known anyone who seemed to be almost apologetic for just being alive? Their kids are struggling in school. They drive a simple car. They would not even think of belonging to a social club, and would defer their opinions to anyone else. Then, there are others you meet who seem to think that he or she was the greatest, most talented, smartest person who ever lived? You know the type: Her children are geniuses and their teachers just don't understand them. His car has the most horsepower or the best leather seats, or something special. She belongs to all the right social clubs. He's an expert on any subject that you might name and some that you don't name. So many times, these folks aren't any better off than the average person, it is just that they seem to think they are. These are somewhat extreme examples of the various personalities that we encounter as we deal with people in our daily walk.

Most of us react to these two types the same way. The arrogant and proud person, we try to tone down or resist; while we want to try to encourage the humble person and get him to see himself in a better light. If we are honest with ourselves, then we can probably find elements of these two personality types residing in each of us. We have the potential to be either of these two types. Which of these two types will we encourage and which will we resist within ourselves?

Jesus told a story that shows how these two extremes would tend to practice their religion when they would pray.

Religious Pride – 18:9-12

⁹ And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: ¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ “The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’ Luke 18:9–12 (NASB95)

This parable is the second of two parables about prayer that Jesus told those who gathered around Him when He was in Jerusalem some weeks before His arrest, trial and crucifixion. According to Luke, He had been questioned by the Pharisees regarding when the Kingdom of God would come. Jesus then warned the people that the coming of the Kingdom was not what they thought it would be and that it would be like the days of Noah when people were oblivious to what was happening and similar to what Lot had experienced when Sodom was destroyed. Following this discourse, Jesus then told them they should be watchful and prayerful so they would not be surprised and unprepared when things happened that would confirm that He was the promised Messiah. As Luke stated it, “the Son of man would be revealed.”

The preparation for being aware and ready for the events related to this confirmation involved properly praying. The first parable about the persistent widow and the unjust judge emphasized the need to not be discouraged when our prayers are not immediately answered but to hold fast to trusting that God will always do what is right. The second parable was about humility and pride and how it affects our prayer life. Jesus was also warning those religious leaders who were so self-satisfied that their approach to God was not going to have a positive influence on Him.

These two men (in the second parable) represented the extremes of the socio-religious order of that day. The Pharisee was the religious one who was respected by the community and was held up as a “good example.” The publican (tax collector) was probably not into going to

religious gatherings. He was not likely to have any real friends except fellow tax collectors and was despised rather than respected in the community. We learn a little more about the Pharisee in the introduction that Luke used: trusted in himself for his righteousness and he looked down on others.

The practices of the Pharisees grew out of reform movements that followed the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity. The lesson that was learned by that experience was that when people neglected their "religion," the judgement of God would come down on them and they were determined that such neglect would not happen again. Consequently, they emphasized rituals and studied the laws, set high ethical standards, expanded the laws with detailed rules that they insisted on obeying, and resisted all forms of overt paganism. There is not anything wrong with these things. The problem with most people who are into such a lifestyle is that it comes with an arrogance and pride and even a dependence of such practices as the means of trying to earn God's pleasure. This attitude comes out in the prayer of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable.

A lot can be read into the description of how the Pharisee prayed even apart from the words he used. The KJV says that he "stood and prayed thus with himself." In other words, he likely stood apart from the rest of the people. In his arrogant self-pride, he was not likely to rub shoulders with lesser beings if he could help it. We might even be able to conclude that he prayed with (or to) himself rather than praying to God. He might as well have been praying to himself, for it is doubtful that God was giving any heed to his prayers. He was more interested in impressing himself (and maybe others) with how great he was rather than trying to draw near to God. The NIV translates this part of the verse as "he prayed about himself."

I had thought that perhaps the Pharisee was praying aloud so that others could hear his recitation of all the great religious things he did. Most of us would be unlikely to actually say such things aloud, even though we might think such thoughts if we are not careful.

Three times a day the devout Jews stopped whatever they were doing and entered a time of prayer. What a great opportunity for a person to draw closer to God and to seek His help in daily life. This man wasted the opportunity by concentrating on his exalted opinion of himself rather than realizing that he had great needs. Instead, he chose to compare himself to those he considered to be the dregs of society and this made him seem to be outstandingly better. There is nothing wrong with being thankful for having been delivered from a life of crime and uncontrolled passions; however, it is wrong for us to take the credit for it. When we see people whose lives have been ruined, then we should not feel pride that our lives have not been ruined, but rather should experience humility, knowing that, but for the grace of God, we could be in such a condition ourselves.

The Pharisee was not only proud of not being involved in evil things; he was also proud of not being employed in a despised occupation. He also took pride in his religious activities of fasting and tithing more than the law commanded. The law of Moses required only one fast per year and that was associated with the Day of Atonement. During the time of captivity in Babylon, the Jews fasted four times a year. To fast weekly was a lot and to fast twice per week was going far beyond the requirements of the law. Tithing was required on the increase one received from the land such as the produce of the ground (and even the herbs), wages received, etc. But this man tithed of everything he possessed. Again, this was going far in excess of the requirements of the law.

Why was he going above and beyond the requirements of the law? While we cannot judge him and his motives, his own words bring their own judgment. People will make great sacrifices in order to build up themselves and to be viewed as "great" in the eyes of men. This is pure and simple PRIDE. He may have convinced himself that he was doing all these extras to

please God; however, it was not working since God knew his heart. Trying to convince ourselves that we are doing things for pure motives while the actual motivation is purely selfish and an effort to make ourselves look great or super spiritual is a constant danger for every person.

In 1 Corinthians 11:28, Paul wrote that part of the preparation for the Lord's Supper was as follows: "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup." It is important that we examine our motives and the only way I know of to do this is to get in the Word and let it be used by the Holy Spirit to divide asunder the "thoughts and intents of the heart." (See Hebrews 4:12)

A sure danger sign for all of us to be vigilant for is when we count our blessing and that process turns into a "how great I am" session. We are all very blessed people. Good advice is to remember that all human advantages are only hindrances, they nourish the old Adam.

Anytime we find ourselves being critical of other people for what they do or the way they approach God or their lack of spiritual depth or spiritual commitment or whatever the topic, then we need to be looking around for the sin of pride that is lurking at our door and its desire is to overcome us.

Godly Humility – 18:13-14

¹³ "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'" ¹⁴ "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." Luke 18:13-14 (NASB95)

The other extreme that Jesus presented in this story is the tax collector. The publican got even farther away from the majority of the people, and for a completely different reason than that of the Pharisee. Here was a person who did not feel worthy of coming up close to the altar area. Additionally, he didn't want anyone else to hear what he had to say to God and he would not even look up as he prayed. His prayer was simple and it was genuine. He simply asked God for mercy. He knew that he was not perfect, he knew that he needed help, he knew that there was nothing that he could do to earn the favor of a righteous and holy God. Knowing these things, he had no other recourse except to appeal to the mercy and grace of God. He knew more about the nature of God than the religious Pharisee would ever know.

We look at this scene and we are "turned off" by the person who was so proud of all that he did and especially by his attitude that showed he thought that he was better than someone else. We'd like to reach out and help the publican find a way to a better life. If we react in this way to these two (and we aren't perfect), how do you think God reacts? God resists the proud and He exalts the humble. The words of Jesus in verse fourteen summed up the outcome and results of these two approaches to prayer.

Jesus used the term justified to describe the reaction of God toward the humble man. He received a favorable judgement from God. We use that same term in describing the salvation experience. In fact, the action of the publican is very much like what is done when a person turns to God for salvation. First of all, he turned to God for help (he went to the temple to pray), he was a person that was not proud (he was hesitant to join the rest of the people near the altar), he recognized that he had done wrong (he called himself a sinner), he realized that he could do nothing to help himself (simply asked for mercy). If we follow this path, then God still justifies.

Childlike Faith – 18:15-17

¹⁵ And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. ¹⁶ But Jesus called for them, saying, "Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder

them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.¹⁷ “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.” Luke 18:15–17 (NASB95)

Why would a parent bring their small child so that Jesus would touch the child? Was there an element of superstition involved in this? Was that practice any different from politicians kissing babies in that the parent thought that having their child touched by a great person would bring good fortune to them? Is there some “reality” to the idea that a spiritual transaction occurs when we touch another person? We certainly have a lot more questions on this subject than we have answers. There could be more happening here than we can see. Consider, the woman who just touched the hem of Jesus’ garment and was healed (Luke 8:40-48). Think about Paul’s encounter with Ananias who laid his hand on Paul and Paul was able to see again (Acts 9). Another well-known incident was Paul’s encounter with a group of believers at Ephesus who had not received the Holy Spirit until Paul laid his hands on them (Acts 19).

Why do you suppose that Jesus’ disciples tried to interfere with what the parents were doing? It may have been that the disciples thought that the parents weren’t showing proper respect to this great teacher Who was their leader. After all, Jesus was debating with the religious leaders of their nation and should not be interrupted from such important work to hold some babies. Someone observed that the followers of a great person are always more careful of his dignity than he is, for it increases their own importance. But notice that the parents were not dissuaded from bringing their child to Jesus even when the disciples rebuked them. This might remind us of the persistence of the widow in the first parable Jesus told about the importance of prayer.

Jesus was the consummate teacher and recognized this was a great opportunity to give an affirmation to the parents of the importance of the responsibility of parenting and providing every benefit to their children. It was also an opportunity to reinforce the message He had just taught the people regarding pride and humility.

What are the “qualities” or attributes of a baby that are suitable for kingdom living? The first characteristic that most of us associate with a very young child is “innocence.” However, Alexander MacLaren pointed out that if “innocence” was the answer, then that would be contrary to Jesus’ teachings and would shut out the prodigals and publicans. Besides that, these scarcely conscious infants were not ‘innocent,’ for they had not come to the age of which either innocence or guilt can be assigned. He further stated that “The infant’s lowliness is not yet humility; for it is instinct rather than virtue. It makes no claims, thinks no lofty thoughts of self; in fact, has scarcely begun to know that there is a self at all. On the other hand, clinging trust is the infant’s life.” This kind of instinctive trust is the kind of faith that adults need to come to in our relationship to God.

A small child lives a life that is practically totally dependent upon others. In essence, a child trusts his or her parents (or other adults) for everything. Also, children will believe almost anything. We also know that children have a different sense of values than adults. We say that kids don't know the value of a dollar. A child might trade an expensive toy for a cardboard box and be perfectly happy with the swap. Many times, children value relationships more than money or material things. They tend to be forgiving and open and they don’t worry about tomorrow.

The object lesson for adults is that this instinctive openness, acceptance, and trust of children are the qualities and characteristics of faith that anyone has to have to receive the Kingdom of God (the rule of God in our lives, His absolute authority) and to enter into the Kingdom and be a part of what God is doing through Jesus Christ.