

This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



Lesson 11, May 14th, 2016

Humble Faith

Scripture Study - Luke 18:9-14

Key Verse

And the Publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

Luke 18: 13.

INTRODUCTION

The Study Scripture is placed in the section of Luke (17:20-37 through chapter 18 which began to teach the disciples and the people about the coming of the kingdom and the nature of the kingdom.

This then can really be called the section of discipleship. It runs all the way through to 18:30. It shows the reversal from what men think of what the reality of life is. The standards of man are reversed. God looks at things very differently from how man looks at things.

This teaching was very necessary as Jesus had to teach basic lessons to the disciples in view of the difficult days which lay ahead for them as He prepared to leave the earth. They would as normal men, default to the mental position of fainting and losing heart. The only cure for this malady in the face of the many emotional, spiritual, physical, political stresses would be to pray.

They had to learn or internalize the lesson that they had to cast their cares on the Father.

Jesus put it rather bluntly, not mincing any words on this matter. Men had no other choice. They must either pray or faint.

Clearly, if a person of God is not praying, whether or not they think otherwise, they are fainting. If they are praying, then they are not fainting.

So we ask ourselves, as the disciples were being called on to do, Are we fainting? Is life dull, shallow, with no depth, boring, defeated? If so, we are not praying.

There is in fact very little prayer in our life. What is worse is that doing the little we do we might be engaging in praying in the wrong way.

Several parables and stories in this section have therefore to do with prayer. There is the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge, which teaches us to pray persistently. Then the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector teaches us to pray humbly. Pride and humility is contrasted.

Then Jesus showed that God is open to all human beings including little children. Their hearts are generally open and receptive, and they are humble. In contrast the rich young ruler finds it extremely difficult to turn away from his sources of power, position, and hence his pride, and so cannot be humble and turn to God.

God the Father desires simple, humble faith, man putting everything into His care. Those that are disenfranchised, like the Helpless Widow, the Despised Tax Collector, and the Powerless and often abused little children will find themselves pleasing God, in simple, humble faith.

Now, note that though this Parable we study exalts humility and prayer as highly prized virtues and rebukes those that trust in themselves and are proud, it is dangerous for us if we think that when we look at our lives and find it drab and boring, we think that we can solve this problem by simply drawing up a schedule which forces us to devote more time to prayer. But that is not the approach that Jesus urges on His disciples.

He wanted them to discover the true nature of prayer, for prayer is not to be forced, for it should be a natural, instinctive, and easy thing.

God is not like an unjust Judge, and God does not delay in answering prayer, and turning a deaf ear, waiting for pressure to persuade Him, or the believer setting up picket signs to get Him to act on behalf of His people. God's ways are perfect and His love for His children inestimable, having no limit.

But there is such a thing as authentic prayer and so our Study looks at the content of the heart as one prays.

Note also as one writer stated after examining the persons in the bullseye of the Parable, as it is squarely aimed at them. People at the top are in grave danger. The writer states:

“We clergy are further tempted to pride as we are promoted to ever-larger churches and ever more important offices—as we see ourselves on television or rub shoulders with wealthy or influential parishioners. We are tempted to be contemptuous of members of the congregation who refuse to share our vision—or who do foolish things to bring them to grief”.

Our lesson today therefore deals with the very important topic of prayer and the humility of heart to make it effective prayer. It is peculiar that Jesus would even spend time giving two parables on prayer and its importance, especially since He had already taught His disciples how to pray.

For us, and for Jewish men brought up in the Covenant, prayer should be a motherhood issue. But it is important to note that while they, like us, talked about prayer a lot, they had to be

warned of its importance. We too do not always pray as much as we should except when we are in dire straits.

The Jewish people, like us Gentiles who are believers, only seemed to pray from habit because they were told that they should pray ‘three times a day’, or when things are going bad. When things are going well, people congratulate themselves on their great ability to deal with the problems of life, and simply go on to do what they want or desire without any reference to God or to what He wants.

Of course, that is an unfortunate, but a normal kind of behavior for people. It is quite commonplace among the people of God. We often do not pray as much as we should. Many will of course deny this, but we observe this lack of prayer everyday.

Jesus of course knew that even the men of God did not pray as they should. In these parables Jesus taught His disciples about the importance of prayer, urgent, continuous, sustained prayer when things were bad, when there seemed to be no hope.

One well know scholar and writer who states that he has a hobby of listening to Christians pray, including himself tells us plainly with this word of warning:

“It is frequently a very humorous experience and sometimes very sad. Do we not often pray like this? “Lord, won’t you come and help me to do this task?” We mean by this, “I will contribute my ability to organize, my ability to exercise leadership, my talents for singing or speaking, and then, Lord, will you pour on the magic powder of the Spirit-power, and you and I together will enjoy a great success”.

In other words, we follow the philosophy of praying; “I’ll do my best and let God do the rest”. It isn’t that we exclude him, and say, “I can do it all”, but we say, “Lord, I have a part that I can contribute which you desperately need and I am willing to invest my two cents in this enterprise if you will do the rest. You must do something, but I must do something too.

I submit to you that most Christian prayers are prayed from this basis.

Sometimes the virtue that we plan to contribute to the program of God is that of humility. But the simple truth is that we have no virtue of our own, none whatsoever. We have absolutely nothing to contribute to God’s cause. We are praying out of utter bankruptcy if we are honest with ourselves. We forget that these very talents with which we identify ourselves, these abilities that we have for leadership, or speaking, or singing, are in themselves gifts of God”.

The context of this teaching is extremely important, and if we ignore the context, we will trivialize the lessons being taught by Jesus. Please remember that Jesus had been teaching the Pharisees and His disciples about the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Believers would need patience, continual strength, fortitude, and a constant reliance and dependence on the influence and protection of the Almighty God.

Luke tells us that Jesus made His point by using a technique which involved arguing from the lesser, the Judge, to the greater, which is God. There would be vindication for the people of God.

The second, and equally critical point is made by the second parable. Here, it is made abundantly clear that God justifies the ungodly. The ungodly will be saved if they truly repented from the heart. No one therefore need be afraid of the terrible time of trouble to come on the earth in the end time. No matter how bad one is, there will be salvation available, if one calls on God from the heart. There is a right kind of prayer, and only that kind would be acceptable to God.

No wonder then that Jesus, after discussing events that would occur in the time of the end, stressed so much the necessity of fervent, sincere prayer. The importance of prayer for the people of God therefore cannot be stressed too much.

THE TEXT

The AIM of the teaching is clearly stated. Prayer is both a gracious privilege given by God, and it is also a duty. The teaching however was an encouragement to prayer. It was given to remind the disciples, as well as us, that we should persevere in prayer, since it was certain that many trials and afflictions would come on the people of God.

In this next Parable, Jesus again deals with the matter of vindication. Let us focus on the fact that God justifies the ungodly that repent, and will certainly save them, and take them into His Kingdom.

Note carefully that in the introduction to the Parable Jesus did not specifically name the “villains” but spoke of people who were self-righteous and contemptuous of others. This then, has a very wide application and rebukes a wide range of persons.

Verse 9. In contrast to the openly unrighteous judge, we now look at people who were in a similarly great position of authority and trust. Thus, Jesus covered the different bases of evil. These people were, like the unrighteous judge, proud, vain, arrogant, and self-confident. But these were different, because they thought they were righteous, and because of this they openly disdained others, treating them as if they were nothing.

Unlike the judge, they exuded goodness, outward holiness, moral behavior, followed observances like giving alms, observing ceremonies, and engaged in religious exercises. On account of these practices they thought that they were very righteous, indeed more righteous than others, and that God accepted them completely. Their trust and confidence in themselves showed that they were ignorant of God’s law, and did not regard the impurity in their hearts.

Verse 10. This specific man mentioned was a man who thought that he was righteous, was a Pharisee, and he went up to the Temple to pray. Pharisees were the strictest sect among the Jews. They prayed often, and did a great deal of fasting, following the traditions of the elders as much as they possibly could. It was certainly true that this man made a great effort to appear righteous, and was so engrossed in this effort, that he thought he was worthy to stand before God.

Let us be warned though that not all Pharisees were self-righteous and contemptuous of others. We must also be warned that not all the disciples at this stage of their discipleship regarded themselves as humble servants for we remember that John and James, insiders among the disciples, tried to guarantee that they would have exemplary top positions in the kingdom. See Matthew 20:20-26 and Mark 10:35-45.

So let us be careful. The sin of pride is a dangerous type of sin. It even felled Lucifer, son of the Morning, who was in a prominent place at the throne of God.

It is critically important to note now another key matter about this praying issues as stated by one writer: He stresses that temple worship and its prayers in Israel was on a somewhat different standing from private prayers. This then was a very special and critically important occasion being described by Luke. We are told:

“People must literally go up to the Temple to pray. Jerusalem is built on a mountain, and the temple is on a high point in the city. Traditional times for public prayer are 9: a.m. and 3: a.m. (Acts 2:15; 3:1), but a person can engage in private prayers at any time of the day.

We tend to think of these two men as engaged in private prayer, but Kenneth Bailey makes a case for the context being public worship (Kenneth Bailey, 146 ff.)

“In the public worship of the temple, atonement sacrifices are offered twice a day. The idea behind these sacrifices is that people have sinned, and death is required to blot out sin. God permits substitutionary sacrifices, however—animal sacrifices—so that a lamb might die in the place of sinners—might pay the price for sin and remove the burden of sin from the sinner. God imputes the sin to the lamb, cleansing the sinner and making it possible for the cleansed sinner to stand in God’s presence.

The tax collectors prayer is a plea for mercy, which implies atonement (v.13)—atonement being the purpose of public temple worship. Jesus concludes that the tax collector “*went down to his house justified*” (vs.14)- atoned”.

At the same time as he went to pray to God, another man went to the Temple to pray. This man was a tax collector, who collected taxes on behalf of the hated Roman occupiers. He was considered a traitor to Israel, and everybody, not just the Pharisees, held him in contempt.

Tax gatherers were Jews that the pagan and idolatrous Roman occupiers had hired to collect taxes from Jews. They were called publicans or sinners. It would be too much trouble for them to try to directly money, taxes, from these Jews who loved to revolt. The Jewish tax collectors were generally unscrupulous for they would estimate the worth of the goods of the Jewish

merchants coming into Israel, estimating the goods higher than they were really worth and so collected much higher taxes than they should have. They gave the Romans a percentage of the taxes collected and kept a substantial share for themselves, and so they were considered as extortioners. They were wealthy, but they were regarded as the scum of the earth.

They were hated by the Jews and regarded as traitors and sinners. But the Romans hated them too, for they knew what they were doing. The Romans regarded them as a necessary evil for they were prepared to do the dirty job of squeezing money from a rebellious and hostile Jewish population. The only friends the publicans or tax collectors had therefore were people of their own kind. Nobody liked them.

Verse 11. The Pharisee stood to pray, as was the custom among the Jews. The sense of the passage suggests however that he either stood apart from everybody else in a prominent place where others could see him, or he stood in a solemn attention getting manner.

This man, like the judge, focused only on himself. The language literally says that he prayed to himself.

He praised himself openly, without regard to anyone else. Self was at the center of his thoughts. He did not ask for grace or mercy from God, and he did not confess any sins. He used the first person pronoun in quick succession. His prayer was only one of thanksgiving for what he was, namely, better than others.

Note that he compared himself with others for he picked a standard lower than himself, someone the people hated and despised. He did not pick the standard of the person of the Father Himself who lived in unapproachable light.

So be careful that you are comparing yourself to the perfect and faithful Jesus, when you want to assess yourself. When you compare yourself to Jesus then you most likely will not become tainted with the sin of pride. You will realize you are not so hot/

He had status, he thought. He was better than other men. He did not do the sins that other men did. So presumably he did not have the corruption in his heart that other men had. He simply looked at the surface of his being. He forgot that any virtue in him was the gift of God. So he was willing to usurp the prerogative of God, judging when only God should judge, and acted in condescension to others.

He, instead of keeping his eyes closed when praying as was customary, he took time to notice the publican standing nearby, and pointed him out in his prayer, congratulating himself for been vastly superior to that man.

Verse 12. The Pharisee listed the things he did. He fasted more than what was called for in the Law, and he even gave to God more than God had asked for. Jews were only obligated to fast on the Day of Atonement. Going without food and water from sunrise to sunset twice a week,

itself no small feat. This was serious spiritual discipline. If you do not think this Pharisee was really serious in what he did, you should try fasting like this and see how long you can keep it up.

In addition, though Deuteronomy 14:22 only required that a Jew must tithe only the production of his field, he tithed everything, even the smallest thing. We might criticize him, but how often do we put our money where our mouth is, supporting the work of God!

Critically important was the fact that he made no supplication in his prayer. He did not want anything from God. He had everything he needed, and it showed for he was better than other people and he exceeded the standard laid down by God.

He was obviously placing his righteousness in his own works. He had a world he made for himself. His sense of self had separated him from not only sinners but also from God. He thought there was no real need for atonement. He had all it took to stand before God.

Yet we know that, by and large, the Pharisees were oppressors of the poor, devoured widow's houses, and extorted money from them. (Matthew 12:39 and John 8: 8, 9)

Verse 13. The tax collector could not come near, as he was probably considered ritually unclean. He probably stayed in the court of the Gentiles. He stood by himself also.

In a humble posture, he looked downwards (see Ezra 9:6) and kept smiting his breast in anguish and self-reproach. Smiting the breast was a sign of excessive grief, when a penitent deplored the sins that he had committed. His prayer was short. He simply admitted he was a sinner, and asked God for mercy on him. He obviously had read and accepted the words of Psalm 51:1-2:

“Have mercy on me, God, according to your loving kindness. According to the multitude of your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.

Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity. Cleanse me from my sin

For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me”.

He knew that he could do nothing to save himself, and even offering the required sacrifices was not sufficient to atone for his sins. He trusted totally on God for salvation.

Which one of us can say we do not have to pray like this?

One writer tells us the meaning of the word the tax collector used in asking God for mercy:

“The verb used here (*hilastheti*) is found elsewhere in the NBew Testament only in Hebrews 2:17. It means to expiate or propitiate. The publican in his prayers sought God’s mercy in order to have his sins covered and the divine wrath removed from him”.

Note that:

Expiate means “to atone for wrongdoing, to make amends, or to show remorse. Propitiate means “to appease or to conciliate”.

Verse 14. Jesus now pointed out the lessons. The Pharisee’s prayer was not accepted, for he had not asked God for mercy. He thought he was righteous and he needed nothing from God for his salvation.

The man who was *‘poor in spirit’* and who *‘mourned’*, received mercy and grace, and was exalted. The man who did not abase himself, but trusted that he was righteous because of what he did, and who did not seek a change of heart from God, was not accepted.

Anyone who has a haughty spirit will be laid low, while anyone who humbles himself will be blessed and lifted up by God.

Note specifically that Jesus did say that this tax collector like Zacchaeus (19:8) refunded the money he extorted and vowed to become a “good Jewish boy”. He did not bargain with God. The only thing he did was to ask for mercy and the loving Father granted his prayer, blotting out his transgressions and cleansing him. As one writer notes:

“The tax collector is not worthy to stand in God’s presence, but God imputes worthiness to him—grants him worthy status—treats him as worthy”.

Remember though that the tax collector was justified, and that this justification is a gift from God. It is not something we earn by our good deeds. God’s grace was at work here, and the tax collector went home in a new relationship with God.

This does not mean that he would never sin again. But he had been given the opportunity to start a new life. So will you be given a new life with your sins cast away if you with humble faith, ask God for mercy.

Remember also that personal holiness is important. We cannot be rascals all the time counting on the fact that once in our past we had been forgiven. If the tax collector, the disciples, and ourselves, have died to sin because of the work of Christ, we cannot live in sin any longer. Romans 6:2.

CONCLUSION

Jesus had shown the elite of Israel, His disciples, and the people who listened that the grace of God brought salvation. This did not give license to continue doing what was wrong.

We cannot forget that it is God who has saved us, and it is God who continues to shield us, preventing us from falling. Everything we have depends on God. His gifts are what keep us.

We should avoid being impressed with ourselves, like this Pharisees was. It is always possible to find persons who are more immoral than we are, but this should not comfort us. We should take no delight in idle gossiping and sharing as one writer states

“sinking our teeth into someone else’s reputation and slurping up the delicious tidbits of a deteriorating life”

So do you feel superior running down someone else to make yourself feel virtuous? You are simply wrong and sinful in doing so.

The terrible but important point is that when we pray and run down others to feel better about ourselves one writer states

“There is no real prayer, our pious words, our properly phrased sentences, our completely scriptural, orthodox approach is of no value whatsoever. We are praying out of obsession with our own virtues”.

Do not pray as if God owed you something. Be warned that it is not prayer when you ask for God’s help because of your accomplishments, says one scholar.

Make sure the Pharisee is not still with you.

Humility and trusting all to the Father is how you should live.

The first parable showed us the kind of spirit that should dominate all our prayer life. We must pray constantly, without ceasing, and never stop praying. This habit will serve us well in times of trouble. The more the pressure builds up, the more intensely we should pray. The longer the problem remains, the longer we should pray.

Only God is righteous, and only He can help us. We therefore must focus on Him for mercy and for sustenance, and never stop focusing. We should never look to ourselves.

The second parable reminds us how we ought to pray. Let us not regard what we do, and thank God that we are not like the Pharisee. Let us rather remember that God justifies the ungodly who repents.

We should therefore look at ourselves at all times carefully and deeply, and look to God, the kind, loving, compassionate, all wise, merciful, long suffering God, on whom we can trust, because His plan of action is perfect.

He will never allow us to suffer more than we can bear, or more than His perfect plan calls for.

God knows what He is doing, even though we certainly feel like grumbling about how He delays in solving our problems. We must allow *“patience to have her perfect work, so that we may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing”*.

We must simply keep on praying in the correct way, always acting as God instructs us.

Let us note a relatively common danger in our approach to God in prayer. One writer notes:

“There is a kind of reverse brand of Pharisaism among Christians which goes something like this:

“Thank God I am not as proud as this Pharisee is”. And we make ourselves out to be utterly vile. We take the opposite position, we babble continually about our shortcomings and our sins. We say, “Lord, I am an extortioner, I am unjust, I am an adulterer, I commit fornication twice a week, I admit it. I don’t kid myself, I’m honest enough to admit that I am a louse”.

And thereby we hope to impress God with our honesty and our humility. Unfortunately, this pious form of Pharisaism is found among Christian people. Perhaps not to such a degree, but of the same kind” .

Also, let us be careful before we accuse people who tithe a lot and pray a lot of being like the Pharisees. Some of these people are the very ones who do the work of the church and provide for the financial needs of the church, from which we benefit.

Sometimes the fault of these people are that they strive too much for holiness. They are zealous and devoted to God and His righteousness, but unfortunately sometimes their zeal is misguided for they stray from dependence on God, depending on gritting their teeth and doing what they think they should be doing in their own strength.

So let us learn from the disciples and commit ourselves completely to God.