

The Two Worshippers

The story of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector is the story of two men who went to worship. To that extent it has something in common with all of us who are church-goers, including ourselves gathered here today. Therefore it has some bearing on our Christian lives. It is the second of two parables Jesus told about prayer. The first one was last week's Gospel reading.

There are three things we should note about the two men in this story. First, why they went to worship. Second, what they did when they got there. And third, how they returned afterwards.

So firstly, **why they went to worship**. (Verse 10 READ). Their intention is made clear in the opening words of the parable: 'Two men went up into the Temple to pray'. Their purpose was the same, though they were in fact strangely different from one another. The Pharisee, of course, was a religious man. He was the praying sort. We are not surprised to find him going to the Temple to say his prayers. What more fitting thing to do? And what more fitting place to do it than the Temple?

The tax collector or publican as he is described in some translations, was quite the opposite. He was looked upon as a religious and social outcast. It must have been a long time since he last went to worship. Religion did not mix very easily with his kind of life and his role in society. Yet on this occasion he also went up to the Temple. And like the other, he went – to pray.

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Perhaps this is not so surprising as it might appear. For prayer is a common and universal instinct on the part of man. There is a sense in which prayer is natural to man, because he has been made by God for friendship with God; and prayer is an act of friendship with God. Tim Chester says, Prayer is the conversation of friends. It is not a mere convenience for letting God know what we are thinking or what we want. Prayer is that for which we are made’.

The noblest thing a person can do is pray. Anyone can pray. When we face calamity or disaster, or reach the point of lowest despair, we can pray. Indeed when people say, ‘Oh God’, it is a prayer. The person who never prays misses out on what it means to be a person created by God. When we bow before our Creator in penitence, adoration and prayer we rise to our full moral and spiritual potential.

Secondly, **what did they do when they got to the Temple?** To say they prayed is scarcely the correct answer, for they both did different things. In fact only one of them really prayed.

The Pharisee showed a spirit of pride as he approached God. (Verses 11-12. READ). He was a man who trusted in himself that he was righteous and despised others. He was one of those who Jesus had in mind when he gave this parable. (Verse 9 READ). In his self-righteousness he thought he was good enough. So he expressed no sorrow for his sin, brought no request, offered no adoration to God. It is clear that his so called ‘prayer’, was no prayer at all. It was merely an attempt to parade his good acts before God and men - especially men. Jesus said he ‘prayed about himself’, or it could mean he ‘prayed to himself’. His religion

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was entirely self-centred. Note how many times he says 'I' in his prayer. It is full of himself and what a good person he was. He suffered from the deadly sin of pride. As a result he had a wrong view of God, of himself, and of others. Our standing before God is not by comparison to other people since we often judge ourselves better than them. It is by seeing ourselves compared to the requirements God asks of us. How are we in God's sight?

The tax collector, on the other hand, came to God in a spirit of penitence. This man had no illusions about himself. He knew full well that he had fallen short – not only of his own ideals, but of the glory of God. This here is true prayer. (Verse 13. READ). So, without even presuming to lift his eyes to heaven, he beat upon his breast and prayed, 'God, be merciful to me - a sinner.' This is true prayer – humble and honest, personal and sorrowful, simple and sincere. The tax collector was conscious of two things: first, that he was sinful; second that God was merciful. He did not trust in himself, that he was good enough for God. He knew he was not. He could not plead his merits; he had none. All he could do was to acknowledge his unworthiness and cast himself upon the grace and mercy of God.

The Pharisee's problem is actually a problem for all of us. We are so easily conscious of our status, our moral superiority and our religious works. It is a rare human being who, having done something praiseworthy, does not then congratulate themselves on it. If we manage not to, we then congratulate ourselves for not congratulating ourselves! The human heart is very slippery. It is as though we are forever observing ourselves and patting ourselves smugly on the back. This is not a lovely quality. By contrast, the tax collector is overwhelmed by his own failure

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and can hardly look up to God because of it. Such humility is the gateway to the Kingdom of God. Those who lack it should keep on repenting until they get somewhere.

Thirdly, **how they returned home from worship.** (Verse 14. READ). The Pharisee presumably returned home much the same as he came – still self-righteous, self-confident, self-opinionated. Most likely he was more proud than ever before. Certainly his going to worship had done him no good; it had only served to inflate his ego.

With the tax collector it was quite different. We have the Lord's own word for it. 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.' The other – that is the Pharisee – had sought to justify himself. The tax collector was justified by God. That is he was accounted as righteous before God. As Paul puts it in Romans 3:24, 'we are justified freely by His grace'. He went home a changed man – a new man, a better man. He did not come to worship justified. He came burdened and bound by his sin. But there in the Temple he met with God and found forgiveness and release. The tax collector is a perfect example of what it means to be justified by faith, not by works: by grace, and not by our own deservings. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, he could truly say, 'By the grace of God I am what I am.' (1 Cor. 15:10).

Jesus knew perfectly well that, having heard this parable, half his hearers would be saying to themselves, 'God, I thank you that I am not like that Pharisee!' So this is a parable designed to catch us out, and we might say that it is typical of Jesus' approach. He knows what is in us and with irony and humour he gently shows us to ourselves. Of all our sins, spiritual pride and self-righteousness are the most unworthy because the most

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unwarranted. The tax collector was justified before God by his recognition that he was a sinner with nothing to commend him to God, an unqualified candidate for divine mercy. By so humbling himself, proclaims Jesus, it became certain that in due time God would exalt him. (Verse 14 READ). Paul puts it like this, 'It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.' (Ephesians 2:8,9).