

## Scripture Reading for Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2019

### Psalm 51 (Selected Verses) (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. <sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. <sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. <sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.

<sup>7</sup> Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. <sup>11</sup> Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. <sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

<sup>15</sup> Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. <sup>16</sup> You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

### Luke 18:9-17 (NIV)

<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’

<sup>13</sup> “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’

<sup>14</sup> “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

<sup>15</sup> People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. <sup>16</sup> But Jesus called the children to him and said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. <sup>17</sup> Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

## Sermon: A Humble Heart

Luke has been taking us on a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, telling us the stories of Jesus and introducing us to his teachings and miracles. It is a journey that began with Mary bursting into song and which contains the line: “He has brought down the rulers from their thrones and lifted up the humble.”<sup>1</sup> Luke then presents the adult Jesus as someone who hung out with society’s outcasts, bringing God’s light into their darkness, turning rejection into acceptance, and welcoming them into the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup> “Lifting up the humble” was, then, exemplified in Christ’s own life.<sup>3</sup> What God’s kingdom looks like has also been described in memorable, shocking parables, such as those of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son.<sup>4</sup> Last week you heard about the parable of the tenacious widow’s prayer, which Luke then follows up with today’s short parable of contrasting prayers by two polar-opposite people.<sup>5</sup> The two men involved are *caricatures* and therefore we have to smile at the comical descriptions of them, which we can infer from their prayers and the social context. Imagine, then, that these very different prayers are from the most religious person you might know and from someone you judge to be utterly irreligious! One might be regarded as a thoroughly *decent* person, the other, *despicable*. Once we have that image in our heads, we can engage in the story.

Both, we are told, go to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray. By way of background, we need to know that corporate prayer at the Temple took place at 9am and 3pm each day, along with sacrifices, and at other times the Temple courts would have been full of pilgrims and other worshippers praying individually, probably out loud.<sup>6</sup> Luke also gives a pointed introduction: “Jesus told this parable to some who were *confident of their own righteousness* and looked down on everyone else.”<sup>7</sup> Since many today doubt God even exists, the notion that certain people are not only *sure* God *does* exist but are *also* confident that they are fully *accepted* by God, seems a pretentious thing to claim. But this a *Jewish* story and such assurance was not unexpected for those who diligently kept the commandments, like the pharisees.<sup>8</sup>

By now you will have realised that the pharisees have a bad rap in Luke’s gospel,<sup>9</sup> and you may be forgiven in thinking they were all sanctimonious, strict, and ostentatious. Undoubtedly, many were; even so, we can be sure there were some quiet, humble pharisees in ancient Judaism. Recall that in Jesus’ day, pharisees were a devout group of Jews who stood for religious purity and who prided themselves on their scrupulous adherence to the Old Testament Law; indeed, they went beyond the letter of the law in their personal lives and earnestly wanted other to follow their example. For example,

---

<sup>1</sup> Luke 1:52.

<sup>2</sup> See Luke 5:32; 7:34; 15:7.

<sup>3</sup> See also Luke 4:17-21. Luke also portrays Jesus as being increasingly being criticized by the religious leaders of his day for doing just that, and that conflict comes to a head in Jerusalem with the events of Easter.

<sup>4</sup> See Luke 10:25-37; 15:11-32, both unique to Luke’s gospel. These parables describe the *nature* of God’s love and mercy, whereas today’s parable concerns our *response* to God’s grace and generosity.

<sup>5</sup> This combination has been described as “the promise of persistent prayer and the peril of presumptuous prayer.”

<sup>6</sup> And offering personal sacrifices, see Luke 2:22-24.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 18:9.

<sup>8</sup> Luke does not explicitly say Jesus was addressing pharisees, but it hard not to come to that conclusion.

<sup>9</sup> See Luke 15:1–2; 16:14.

Jesus rightly mentions in the parable that the man fasted *twice* a week.<sup>10</sup> That's keen! Jews were only required to fast *once* a year.<sup>11</sup> And while all Jews were to give 10% of their grain, vine and oil to the priests,<sup>12</sup> these pharisees extended that to everything – down to the herbs from their gardens! They were *very* religious; like vocal evangelical “Bible-bashers” today, even if we can't fault their good works, we don't want to be associated with such people!

In those days, at the stereotypical other extreme were the “tax collectors,” and these “sinners” are often mentioned in Luke's gospel too. Such people were very rich and acted as intermediaries between the occupying Roman authorities and the Jewish people. They would pay the required taxes to the government in advance from their own wealth and would then recoup their money from the people in their district with the help of their assistants. They added their commission and interest charges, of course, and consequently were seen as unscrupulous extortioners and collaborators with the Roman government. There were a few checks on a tax collector's powers and, hence, were prone to corruption.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, they were widely regarded as traitors to the Jewish nation because they were raising taxes for the hated Romans who Jews felt had no right to receive them.<sup>14</sup> Tax collectors were, then, widely regarded as untrustworthy and as most irreligious!<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, in the parable, *both* men go to pray. What do they say? Luke writes, “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”<sup>16</sup> We should all burst out laughing at this; it is funny! The prayer is all about himself. Now listen to this prayer from the psalmist: “Pay attention to my prayer, LORD, for it comes from honest lips. You know my heart. You have come to me at night; you have examined me completely and found no evil desire in me. I speak no evil, as others do; I have obeyed your command and have not followed paths of violence. I have always walked in your way and have never strayed from it. . . .”<sup>17</sup> While it uses more virtuous language, it echoes the same sentiments as the pharisee! We must not lose sight of the fact that in Christ's audience, the people anticipated the pharisee would be the hero of the story whose prayer is *expected* to be heard by God, for it is certainly *true* that he was “not like other people.” But the story goes on: “The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’”<sup>18</sup> Notice the difference in the body language, from the typical standing with arms out-stretched toward heaven<sup>19</sup> when praying to that of looking down at the ground.

---

<sup>10</sup> Pharisees were known to fast on Mondays and Thursdays.

<sup>11</sup> On the Day of Atonement.

<sup>12</sup> See Num 18:12,21; Deut 14:22-23.

<sup>13</sup> See Luke 19:1-10.

<sup>14</sup> See also Matt 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-16.

<sup>15</sup> They have been described as “the *moral* equivalent of lepers,” (another group of people Luke frequently mentions).

<sup>16</sup> Luke 18:11-12. This is an *atypical* Jewish prayer! Note, that a pious Jewish man in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE would daily give thanks to God that “he was not a slave, Gentile, or a woman!” (This was adapted from earlier Greek and Zoroastrian saying.)

<sup>17</sup> Adapted from Ps 17:1,3-5 (GNB).

<sup>18</sup> Luke 18:13. Both men's prayers begin with “God” and then diverge. Note, the cry “be merciful to me” could be equally translated “let me be atoned” (in that the Greek word translated ‘mercy’ is unusual and atonement is appropriate for a prayer in the Temple).

<sup>19</sup> See 1 Tim 2:8.

And he was also standing in the background,<sup>20</sup> whereas the pharisee was standing “by himself”<sup>21</sup> so he wouldn’t be tainted by those around him. And the reference to “beating his breast” is most unusual for a man; it was a more common practice amongst women, usually at tragic funerals.<sup>22</sup> Clearly, the tax collector was deeply distraught and had a sense of his unworthiness before God. Indeed, he acknowledges he is a sinner and asks for God’s mercy. His words echo Psalm 51, our Old Testament reading, which begins: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.”<sup>23</sup>

Jesus provides the parable’s jaw-dropping conclusion: “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.”<sup>24</sup> How can the despicable tax collector, whose behaviour was widely regarded as so offensive, be considered right before God? After all, nobody doubted the devout pharisee’s disciplined adherence to the moral and ethical code of his faith. Why, then, was his prayer not accepted? The key difference between the two short prayers is one of *attitude*. The arrogant Pharisee sees himself as *above* his neighbors and is proud of his own “goodness.” His prayer had nothing to do with gratitude to God; it was self-serving. He wanted God to know how good he was! His diligent religious observance made him unable to see his dependence and need of God. How can he love God when he is so full of himself? And how can he love his neighbors when he only sees their shortcomings? For all his scrupulous obedience of the commandments, he has missed the wood for the trees. The tax collector, on the other hand, is *humble* before God and others. He genuinely recognizes his misdeeds, and his brokenness and shame are evident. He knows he needs help; he needs God’s grace.<sup>25</sup> Humility in our relationship with God and with others is key. The pharisee had enough religion to be virtuous but not enough to be humble. Jesus then repeats a punchline that he has used before: “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”<sup>26</sup> This parable, then, continues to tell of that great reversal that typifies the upside-down kingdom of God.<sup>27</sup> And Luke follows this parable with another example: the humility and simplicity of children, saying “the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”<sup>28</sup>

What can we learn about prayer from this parable today?

It’s hard to read this story without thinking, “Which one is me?” Some of us may like to feel righteous in comparison to our neighbors, who are *not* here in church this morning! Others of us know that our lives are messed-up and we are in daily need to God’s grace and forgiveness. This story is addressed to both.

---

<sup>20</sup> Luke 18:13a. We are also reminded of the prodigal son was in a “far-off” land (Luke 15:13,20).

<sup>21</sup> Luke 18:11a.

<sup>22</sup> In Luke 23:48, presumably *both* men and women “beat their breasts” in extreme emotion over the death of Jesus.

<sup>23</sup> Ps 51:1.

<sup>24</sup> Luke 18:14a.

<sup>25</sup> This theme is key in Paul’s theology, e.g., Rom 5:8; Eph 2:8. The Pharisee trusted in himself and the tax collector trusted in God. He did nothing to earn or deserves God’s mercy, yet God’s mercy was freely given to him.

<sup>26</sup> Luke 18:14b; 14:11; Prov 3:34 and <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The-Upside-Down-Kingdom-of-God.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> See also 6:20–26.

<sup>28</sup> Luke 18:16b. Amongst other things, children can also have a sense of wonder, trust, obedience, and forgiveness.

First, if we say to ourselves, “Thank God I am not like that pharisee!” then in simply thinking that thought we confirm that we are *precisely* like the smug pharisee – for he says the very same thing about others! No one who despises others can expect God to respond to their prayer. And no one who is proud before God can pray sincerely, for they have no need of him.<sup>29</sup>

Second, there are those who feel the prayers of a minister will be *more* likely to heard than their own.<sup>30</sup> This parable is good news, for it says that’s *not* the case. In God’s upside-down kingdom, the people we think *must* be right with God, may not be.<sup>31</sup> And, conversely, the person who we are *sure* God *won’t* hear *their* prayers are, nevertheless, still eligible to receive God’s grace. Consequently, I wish people would realize that God will respond to the prayers of those who, for whatever reason, are prone to feel unworthy. Christ’s audience would have understood that *if* a tax collector can find mercy before God, *then no one is excluded!* There will be some here today for whom life has been hard and you may already feel marginalized and humiliated by family, society and, sadly, even by the church. Don’t now go away with the added burden thinking, “I need to be humbler.” God has already heard your prayers. Hold tight in faith to Mary’s words in the Magnificat, “God lifts up the humble.” And actively partner with God in patient, confident hope for that to be realized.

Third, remember there is a difference between public prayers in a church service and personal prayer. Don’t feel intimidated by formal prayers and say, “I could never pray like that!” and imagine God *only* hears such prayers. Private prayer is different, for we can pray anywhere and at any time, silently or out loud, short one-line prayers – like in the parable - or long ones, and with any posture we feel comfortable. Whatever we say to God should come *from the heart* and be as natural as talking to our best friend.

Fourth, this parable stresses that our *attitude* in prayer is key. Jesus challenges us to avoid trusting in our own efforts and good deeds and instead come humbly before a merciful and loving God. That means being honest with ourselves over our strengths and weaknesses, and knowing that there is nothing we can *do* to make God love us less *or* make God love us more. This is liberating! Of course, our actions have a place in the Christian life, but they are *not* the basis for our relationship with God. That comes from grace alone.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, as we leave, let us not forget these profound, prayerful words of the psalmist: “Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”<sup>33</sup> Amen. Let us pray.

---

<sup>29</sup> Luke 18:14 makes it clear that *anyone* who exalts themselves will be humbled, not just the Pharisees.

<sup>30</sup> Churches can be a scary place for those who don’t frequent it, fearing it to contain “holier-than-thou” people – a fear that is, alas, sometimes justified.

<sup>31</sup> See also Matt 7:21-23. We must not vilify the pharisees, they can be recipients of God’s grace too!

<sup>32</sup> One of the hallmarks of the Protestant Reformation is the concept of *sola gratia*, by grace alone.

<sup>33</sup> Ps 51:15-17.