

TALKING WITH MY FATHER

JESUS TEACHES ON PRAYER



Ray Stedman



introduction

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Jesus Teaches on Prayer

For Jesus, prayer was as necessary as breathing. If the Son of God felt such a great need for contact with the Father, how much more do we!

But *why*? Why do we need to pray? Certainly God, who knows everything, knows our needs. Why do we need to tell Him what He already knows?

Herein lies one of our most basic misunderstandings about prayer. We think the purpose of prayer is to give information to God: “Lord, I need this and

I need that”—as if the Lord didn’t already know everything we need!

No, the purpose of prayer is not to inform God about our needs, but to conform us to His will. Prayer doesn’t change God. Prayer changes us. It changes our attitude from complain to praise. It enables us to participate in God’s eternal plan.

The goal of faith is to bring us into direct, personal fellowship with God. You either pray your way into a deeper relationship with God—or you lose heart and ultimately give up on faith.

Ray Stedman

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one

Why Pray?

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'

"For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'"

And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get

justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” **LUKE 18:1-8**

When I was in college, I had a roommate who was six feet, seven inches tall, and weighed two-hundred sixty-five pounds. His nickname, of course, was “Tiny.” Clearly, this nickname was not intended to describe my friend, but to contrast with his true description. This common form of contrast is often used to call attention to an outstanding characteristic—for example, when a bald fellow is kiddingly tagged “Curly” or a portly fellow is called “Slim.”

Though metaphors and comparisons can often give us a vivid word-picture (“as nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs” or “as helpless as a trombone player in a phone booth”), contrast can often be effective in underscoring truth and making it vivid by surprising us. So it is this very form of teaching—the use of surprising contrast—that our Lord employs as He teaches His disciples about prayer in Luke 18:1-8.

Notice the context of Jesus’ teaching in this passage: His discussion of prayer immediately follows His prediction of His second coming (this passage in Luke parallels the Lord’s Olivet discourse in Matthew 24 and 25). He moves immediately from His words about remaining watchful for His coming to these words about prayer, so He directly links watchfulness and prayer.

The Lord’s teaching on prayer in Luke 18 uses three

strong contrasts to focus our thinking on prayer. Let's look at those three contrasts as Jesus presents them.

CONTRAST 1 *A Contrast of Principles*

Luke clearly and carefully shows us the point Jesus intends to make. Luke says, "Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up" (LUKE 18:1)—or, as other translations put it, "not lose heart," or "not faint." By this Jesus means most simply that we are to pray and not quit. He wants us to be persistent in prayer.

Here Jesus boldly confronts us with a vivid contrast and an inescapable choice: We must either pray or give up, move closer to God or "faint." We must do one or the other. Either we learn to cry out to an unseen Father who is ever present with us, or else we will lose heart.

Some would challenge this principle. "What about people," they ask, "who seem happy without knowing God, without being Christian? They don't pray, yet they seem to enjoy life and experience excitement in their lives. Maybe it is possible to find meaning in life apart from God." Who has not seen such people and wondered if perhaps they have found another alternative, another answer?

Yet when we carefully observe those who seem to have found the secret of life apart from God, those who appear to live in an exciting yet godless world of adventure and romance, we are frequently surprised to find a hidden underside to their lives, a private

core of despair that they hide behind a public mask of happiness. Only when they are arrested, check into a drug or alcohol rehab center, or turn up dead of suicide does the public discover the utter emptiness behind the glittering facade.

The list of idols and icons of our society who fit this description is endless: Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, Marilyn Monroe, Mickey Mantle, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison of The Doors, Elvis Presley, comedian John Belushi, Dennis Wilson of The Beach Boys, football player John Matusak, comedian Freddie Prinze, actor River Phoenix, Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, model Margaux Hemingway, billionaireess Christina Onassis, billionaire heir Amschel Rothschild, and on and on. Outwardly rich, successful, and carefree, they were destroyed by their inner emptiness and despair.

One poignant illustration of this principle is the story of movie mogul Louis B. Mayer, who once ruled MGM studios as if it were his own personal empire. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, he possessed untold wealth and the incredible power to make and break careers, to control the entertainment choices of a nation, and even to manipulate the Academy Awards presentations. But at the end of his life, as he lay dying of cancer, his last whispered words were, “Nothing matters, nothing matters.”

So Jesus was right when He said that only two alternatives exist: Either we pray or we give up. We move deeper into the heart of God—or we lose heart and faint. We are to cry out to Him in prayer, for

in Christ His voice has already called to us. We are to answer like a child crying out to his father. For, like children, we do not always know and cannot adequately express what is wrong with us.

Children cannot always express in words what they need or where they hurt, but a loving parent knows. “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (PSALM 103:13). When we cry out to God in prayer, we may not understand or articulate our real need, our real hurt—but the Lord knows us through and through. We can depend on Him to hear us, to act on our behalf, to work in our best interests. Even if we do not receive from Him what we want or what we cry out for, we know that we will receive from Him what we need.

Here we see the contrast of principles—a contrast between praying and fainting, between going on with God or giving up on God. This is the first contrast Jesus draws for us in this passage on prayer.

CONTRAST 2 *A Contrast of Persons*

Next, in Luke 18:1–8, Jesus tells a story that presents a contrast of persons. We see a contrast between the widow and the judge. Who is more weak and defenseless than a widow? And who wields more power over the lives of others than a judge—especially a hard-boiled and unrighteous judge? Here is a tough, self-centered old skinflint, with a heart as cold as the underside of a pillow. In the story, Jesus shows us exactly how harsh he is!

The widow had a persecutor, someone who was harassing her, and she appealed for help. But the judge couldn't care less. He was a godless judge who was utterly unmoved by her pleas, and nothing could reach him. He cared nothing about morality and conscience; he had no regard for persons, so no political pressure could influence him. Clearly, the widow's plight was hopeless.

Nevertheless, explained Jesus, she found a way to get to this unrighteous judge: She made life miserable for him! Day and night, she gave him no rest. She continually made a nuisance of herself before his court, hounding him, harassing him, plaguing him, until finally the judge was forced to act. To get rid of her he granted her request—and she got what she needed!

Here is the point of the story. Jesus says that this widow had found the secret of handling reluctant judges. She had discovered the key to power. She found the one principle on which even a reluctant judge would act, despite his formidable authority. That principle was *persistence*.

So what is Jesus saying? Is He comparing God to an unrighteous judge? No, He is *contrasting* the ungodly, unrighteous judge with the supremely righteous judge over all the universe, God himself! Here, Jesus gives us a contrast of persons to show us the key to the heart of God, our loving Father. The key to the hard heart of the unrighteous judge was persistent, perpetual pressure. The key to the loving heart of God is *persistent, perpetual prayer*.

When we, like the widow, find life to be hopeless and futile, when we fall victim to forces greater than we can manage (and who of us has not been in such a situation?), Jesus says there is still one way out. There is a path to power, there is a solution to our crisis: *prayer*. When we cry out to a God we cannot see but upon whom we may rely, we reach out to a God who possesses a father's heart and a father's compassion. Persistent prayer, says Jesus, always stirs the heart of God. Prayer moves God to action.

Jesus states in no uncertain terms that God is not like the unrighteous judge, that He will not delay in answering our prayers: "And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off?" (LUKE 18:7). We do not need to pester God into acting on our behalf. He acts on our behalf because He loves us.

It is sometimes taught that Jesus is encouraging what is called "prevailing prayer"—that is, belaboring and browbeating God into giving us what we want. It's kind of like picketing God, marching up and down, carrying signs, shouting demands, until we finally wear God down. That is an unbiblical and unchristian approach to prayer.

Many years ago, the newspapers carried the story of a Missouri man who announced that he was going on a hunger strike because of the declining moral standards of the nation. He would fast and pray until God sent a great awakening to restore the nation to moral health. He announced that he would continue his fast until he

died of starvation or until God acted. Day after day, the newspapers covered the man's fast. His strength began to fail, he grew weaker and weaker, and he was finally confined to his bed. Bulletins regarding his condition were issued each day. Most of us would have quit after the third or fourth day—but not this man. He continued his fast until death. The funeral was widely covered and many lauded his persistence.

But was that truly prayer as God intended? No, it was actually an attempt to *blackmail* God. He held his own life as a pistol to the head of God, demanding that God bend His will to the will of one human being. This man insisted that God act according to a human time schedule. That is not prayer.

Jesus says that God is not an unrighteous God like the judge in the story. He is not grudging or hard-hearted, and we don't have to badger or bully God—nor could we if we wanted to. God hears the prayers of His children, as a father hears the cry of a beloved child, lost and frightened in the dark woods. The child may cry out to be led to an open road, or to be home safe in bed, or at least to see in the distance a light that shows the way to safety. But such prayer is not always answered the way a child demands, because God, our loving Father, already knows what we truly need even before we pray. And He will give us what we *need*, even if He does not always give us what we demand.

Paul reminds us in Romans 12 that we often do not know what to pray for, but God knows. He knows because He is a father, and He also knows when to

answer in the particular way we have asked and when that may not be the best thing to do, or even the possible thing to do, under the circumstances.

From our perspective and in terms of what we want, God's answer may seem delayed. But if we could see our lives from a heavenly perspective, we would see that what Jesus tells us in Luke 18 is true: God's answer to our prayers is not delayed at all.

In 1988, a massive earthquake shook Armenia, collapsing hundreds of buildings and trapping thousands of people in the rubble. Many were rescued from beneath the ruined buildings during the first few hours of the disaster, but after the first day, hope quickly faded that any others would be found alive. One man, however, refused to quit. Why? Because this man was a loving father.

Working feverishly at the ruins of a school where his own son and dozens of other children had been buried by the earthquake, he removed bricks and timbers with his bare hands, working all day and all night. Three days he worked without sleep. Then four days. Then five. People told him to stop, to give up hope. Finally, six days after the quake, he removed a fallen section of wallboard and found an air pocket. He called his son's name—and several young voices weakly answered, including a voice that said, "Daddy, you came for me! I thought you had given up!"

We sometimes think that God takes forever to reach us when we call to Him. Perhaps, at times, it is because our lives are cluttered with so much rubble and

debris that He must remove it before we can see the daylight of His love. But He is never slow to respond to our needs. When we cry out in prayer, God answers immediately, instantly, speedily, without delay—and He never gives up. God, our loving Father, never leaves any of His children bereft and alone in a time of need.

God's answer may be the squeeze of His hand on ours, the quiet comfort of a Father's voice, the steady reassurance of a Father's presence even though the woods around us are dark and echoing with fearsome night sounds. If we listen, we will hear an immediate answering reassurance that the Father is with us and—in His own time and way—He will lead us home to a place of light and warmth, and He will put us safely, comfortably in our beds. This is what Jesus means when He says, “And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly” (LUKE 18:7–8).

CONTRAST 3 *A Contrast of Practice*

Jesus ends His story abruptly with a third contrast—the contrast of practice: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (18:8). Notice Jesus does not say, “When the Son of Man comes, He will not find faith on earth,” nor does He say, “When the Son of Man comes, He will find faith on earth.” He leaves it as an open question, hanging in the air.

But there is no doubt at all about the faithfulness of the Son of Man. He will come. He does not say, “If the

Son of Man comes,” but “*When*.” The return of Jesus Christ is an absolute certainty. It does not rest upon humanity, upon human faithfulness or faithlessness. It rests entirely upon the sovereign determination of God. Never doubt that God is ready to do exactly what He says He will do in any circumstances at any time. There is with Him no shadow of turning. The uncertainty is entirely in the latter part of His statement. God is utterly faithful; it is people who are faithful or faltering.

Our Lord’s words imply yet another thought: Is it not possible that human beings actually *prefer* weakness over power? Could it be that we actually prefer anxiety over peace, frenzy over rest, doubt over confidence, fear over faith, malice over love? Is it possible that—because of these human tendencies—when the Son of Man comes, He will not find faith on the earth? If our prayers seem to fail, it is not God’s fault, it is ours.

Notice something further: Jesus does not ask, “When the Son of Man comes, will He find men praying?” He has been speaking of prayer but now His question is, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find *faith*?” (ITALICS ADDED). Doubtless, the reason for this change is that prayer is the expression of faith. True prayer is not begging or cajoling a reluctant God. True prayer is confidence, trust, and faith in God. Prayer is thanking instead of complaining. Prayer is rejoicing, accepting, appropriating, receiving.

Why Bother to Pray?

“Well,” you might say, “if there is a Father out there, and

He really knows what we need—why bother to pray?”

The answer to this frequently raised question is that the purpose of prayer is to bring us to an understanding of the Father's heart. Prayer does not always lead us to an answer that satisfies our wants, desires, and curiosities, nor an answer that solves all our problems. But prayer does lead us to a place where we can accept the fact that such answers are unnecessary to accepting and involving ourselves in the vast and mysterious purposes of the Father.

After all, a relationship with God cannot exist without communication. Everyone knows of couples who have stopped speaking to each other. A marriage in which communication has ceased is a marriage in which intimacy and fellowship have disintegrated. That marriage is headed for destruction. Human desires, needs, and feelings must be expressed. There must be an interchange, a flow of ideas and feelings, in order for a marriage relationship to be vital. The same is true of the relationship between ourselves and God.

Prayer is an absolute necessity in the interchange of a child's heart with the Father. This is why Jesus asked, in effect, “When I return, will I find people exercising this blessed privilege? Will I find people expressing themselves to the Father in a warm, living, trusting faith relationship? Will I find people expressing to God the Father all their hurts, joys, complaints, moods, triumphs, failures, and deepest emotions?” That is what a faith relationship with the Father is all about.

A story is told of a father and teenage son who

lived in a Spanish village some years ago. One day, they had a terrible argument and both the father and the boy, José, said angry, hurtful things to each other. The son said, “I’m leaving this house, and I don’t ever want to speak to you again!” And the father responded, “You won’t have to—because you are no longer welcome in this house!” Young José stomped out of the house and was gone.

Years passed. The father regretted the things he had said in that moment of intense emotion. He longed for his son. Finally, the pain of separation became too much for him to bear. He left home and went searching across the length and breadth of Spain—but his son seemed to have disappeared without a trace.

Finally, arriving in the capital city of Madrid, he went to a newspaper office and took out a personal ad in the classified section. It read, “My son, José—I am sorry for the pain I’ve caused you. Please forgive me. I have forgiven you. I’ve looked everywhere for you and want only to see you again. I will be at the plaza fountain every day this week at noon. Please meet me there. Your father.” It is said that hundreds of young men named José came to the plaza fountain that week, hoping to reestablish a relationship with their fathers.

That is the relationship we all long for, and Jesus has made it possible. That is what prayer is all about—fellowship with the Father. Prayer is the true expression of a living faith relationship. Without prayer, without talking to the Father and listening to Him, what kind of relationship is it? How

can we claim to have faith in God while failing to communicate with Him?

One sign of losing communication is that we become obsessed with talk about God. When people only talk about God instead of talking with God, they demonstrate a deteriorated faith. The purpose of all faith is to bring us into direct, personal touch *with* God. The mark of a decadent religion is that people become deeply engrossed in discussions about God, spending hours in lengthy, theological debate about the nature and character of God. As Martin Luther aptly put it, “You that manifest a concern about religion, why don’t you pray?”

Our goal, as we journey together through the Lord’s teaching on prayer, is not that we gain more theological knowledge, but that we experience a deeper faith relationship with the living, true God. So please join with me and pray with me this prayer from the heart:

Our Father, these words of our Lord Jesus have made us aware of the lack of faith in our lives. We cry out to you now in our weakness and our failure for the burning desire to exercise faith and move deeper into a living relationship with you. Father, teach us to pray. Teach us to be men and women who depend continually upon you, who pour out to you every aspect of our lives without hindrance or reservation, who tell you all things, and who listen to you about all things.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.



two

The Nature of Prayer

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

“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.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” **LUKE 18:9–14**

Louis XIV was king of France during the golden age of French culture, 1643–1715. During his reign, he conducted many foreign

conquests that added to the size and power of the French Empire. In 1704, however, Louis launched an attack on the village of Blenheim, Bavaria, and was soundly defeated by English and Austrian forces. Tens of thousands of French soldiers were killed, maimed, or taken prisoner. It was a turning point in the history of France. After that defeat, French military power in Europe steadily declined. When Louis heard about the crushing losses at Blenheim, he raised his hands to heaven and demanded, “God, how could you do this to me after all I have done for you?”

That is the arrogant prayer of a prideful, self-righteous heart. It is a prayer very much like that of the Pharisee, whom Jesus describes in Luke 18:9–14. But like the Pharisee of the Lord’s parable, you may say, “I *am* praying. I pray thirty minutes every morning and ten minutes every night, and I am even one of those few who faithfully meet with a midweek prayer group—yet there is still much fainting in my experience. Life is not satisfying to me. I feel I’m not really living.”

Or perhaps you are among those who must admit in all honesty that there is very little prayer in your life. For many of us it is hard to pray and easy to find something else to do. But even if you resolve to try harder to put more prayer into your life, it will not be long before you become aware, as perhaps you already are, that a greater quantity of minutes spent in prayer is not necessarily the answer.

Not More Prayer, But True Prayer

Is it possible, then, that Jesus is wrong when He says we must either pray or faint? Is prayer such an important issue? Is it possible to pray and faint at the same time? If it seems so, perhaps we need to discover more about the true nature of prayer. It may be that we need a *new kind* of prayer, not just more of the same kind.

True prayer is not a difficult thing. It is natural, instinctive, and comes easily. This kind of prayer is the key to God's power and glory. True prayer is an open channel to God's fatherly compassion and eagerness to help us.

In this parable of Jesus, which could be called "The Parable of the Two Prayer-ers," Jesus contrasts two very different men praying two very different prayers from two very different hearts. It is not enough that we simply look at the first pray-er, the Pharisee, and say, "What a proud, self-righteous man!" We must also look at the second pray-er and catch a glimpse of his heart and his motivation in prayer, for he is the Lord's illustration of what true prayer is like.

Notice that the structure of this parable (like the parable of the widow and the unrighteous judge that precedes it, as we saw in chapter 1) is one of contrasts. Our Lord teaches truth by setting it alongside error. By understanding the error of the Pharisee, we can more clearly grasp the truth and reality of the tax collector's prayer.

Now, the Pharisee was a man of prayer—no question

about that! He prayed frequently, elaborately, and at great length. His words were loud, lofty, and eloquent. But though he was dedicated to the practice of prayer, the spirit and motivation of his prayer was entirely wrong.

The tax collector, on the other hand, was not accustomed to praying. He was infrequently found in the temple courts. No doubt, his words were halting and lacking in eloquence. This business of praying was all new to him—but his prayer was exactly the right kind of prayer.

In observing the Pharisee, we learn what prayer is not. This kind of praying is not true prayer at all. It's show biz. It's a performance. The Pharisee's focus is not on establishing intimate contact with an infinite God. It is on looking good, on making a good impression. He stood, Jesus said, with his arms spread and his eyes lifted up to heaven. Among the Jews, this was the prescribed posture for prayer.

"The Pharisee stood up," Jesus said, "and prayed about himself" (18:11). Other translations render this last phrase, "and prayed with himself." What a keen thrust that is! The Pharisee was not praying to God—he was praying to himself! No one was at the other end of the line! This prayer was a total waste of time. Many voices in this New-Age-influenced culture of ours falsely claim that the true function of prayer and meditation is to "commune with the inner person." If so, then this Pharisee would fit right into our culture today! When so many people have bought the lie that

we are our own gods, then there is no reason to reach any higher in prayer than our own selves.

This Pharisee may have been gazing toward heaven, but he was not reaching toward God—and he certainly was not touching God. Jesus makes this point very clear in His parable.

Who Is a Pharisee?

What do we learn about prayer from the example of the Pharisee? We learn that it is not truly prayer to approach God while we are impressed with our own virtues. This man stood and prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (18:11–12). He was self-impressed with what he saw as his claims upon God’s attention and good favor. He believed that God deserved thanks for having made such a remarkable specimen of humanity as himself!

We laugh as we listen to his foolish prayer, but don’t we often do the same? We pray, “Lord, come and help me do this task.” In other words, “Lord, I will contribute my ability to exercise leadership, my talents for singing or speaking, and then, Lord, to top it all off, would you give me a little added boost of Spirit-power? Then you and I together will enjoy great success.” Our philosophy is frequently, “I do my best and God does the rest.” We would never exclude Him and say, “I can do it all.” We’re much more subtle than that! We simply relegate Him to a supporting role in

our accomplishments. I suspect that many, if not most, Christian prayers are prayed from this position.

Sometimes the virtue we contribute to God's program is our "humility." Some Christians demonstrate a kind of reverse brand of Pharisaism that goes something like this: "Thank God, I am not as proud as this Pharisee is." We make ourselves out to be utterly vile, babbling continually about our shortcomings and our sins. We say, "Lord, I am a sinner, I am a louse, I'm no good." At some level, we think we can impress God with our show of "humility." In reality, we have invested self-righteous, pharisaic pride in our "humility," which is not humility at all!

The simple truth is that we have no virtues of our own to contribute, none whatsoever. We have absolutely nothing to add to God's cause. We must forget all our talents, abilities, skills, gifts, and accomplishments. Those things all come from God, not from us. They are not our possessions, but merely on loan from Him.

Isn't it strange how easily we identify ourselves with our virtues—and how quickly we excuse our faults? Our failures we blame on everyone else; for our successes we take full credit. How many times have we heard public figures who are caught up in scandal say, "Mistakes were made," or, "I was a victim of poor judgment," instead of, "I have sinned," or, "I have committed a crime," or, "I alone am at fault." Unlike the humble tax collector's confession, "Mistakes were made" is not an admission of wrongdoing, but an

attempt to excuse or cover up wrongdoing, in the proud, self-righteous tradition of the Pharisee. And if we are honest with ourselves and with God, we all have to admit that we are guilty of doing the same, time after time, in our own lives.

We easily forget our own failings and faults when we compare ourselves with others. We forget our clever manipulations, our lusts and evil thoughts, our deliberate deceits, our phony sympathies, our dubious business arrangements. We are careful to remember only our virtues. How do we become so impressed with ourselves? Like this Pharisee, we look downward. When he looked down on the tax collector, he immediately felt prideful regarding his own supposed “virtue.” So he thanked the Lord that he was not like that vile, low-down tax collector.

This is the point Jesus makes in describing the Pharisee. He says in effect that when we approach God on this level, we are praying with ourselves. This is not true prayer. Our pious words, our properly phrased sentences, our completely orthodox approach is of no value whatever. We are praying out of an obsession with our own virtues.

Furthermore, Jesus says it is not prayer when we ask God’s help because of our own accomplishments. This Pharisee said he fasted twice a week—much more than was required by the law, which commanded a fast only once a year. He gave tithes of all he got; again, that was more than the law required. But the Pharisee expected God to act on his

behalf because he felt God could hardly do otherwise in view of his fine record of faithful service.

It's Not Fair!

Many years ago, an elderly missionary couple returned from Africa to retire in New York City. As their ship steamed into New York harbor, they reflected on their bleak situation: They had no pension, for they belonged to no missionary board. Their health was broken. They were defeated, discouraged, and fearful about the future. And they couldn't help comparing their circumstances with those of a fellow passenger who also had boarded the ship in Africa—President Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his big-game hunting expeditions.

As the ship pulled into the harbor, past the great city and the Statue of Liberty, the people on the ship could hear a band playing on the dock. A huge crowd had gathered to welcome the returning president from his hunting trip in Africa. The old missionary turned and said to his wife, "Dear, something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years? This man comes back from a big-game hunting expedition and everybody makes a big fuss over him, but nobody gives two hoots about us."

"Dear," his wife replied, "you shouldn't feel that way. Try not to be bitter about it."

"I just can't help it," he replied. "It's not right. After all, if God is running this world, why does He permit

such injustice?” As the boat neared the dock, as the sound of the band and the cheering of the crowd grew louder, he became more and more depressed.

The mayor of New York City was on hand to greet the returning president, along with many other dignitaries—but no one even noticed the missionary couple. They slipped off the ship and found a cheap flat on the east side, hoping the next day to see what they could do to make a living in the city.

That night the man’s spirit just broke. He said to his wife, “I can’t take this! God is not fair! We don’t even know anyone to help us, or where to go. If God is faithful, why doesn’t He meet our need?”

“Why don’t you ask Him?” said his wife.

“All right,” said the man. “I will.” He went into the bedroom and prayed for a while. Later, when he emerged from the bedroom after talking it over with God, he seemed completely changed.

“Dear, what happened?” asked his wife. “What has come over you?”

“Well,” he said, “the Lord settled it with me. I went in and knelt beside the bed and poured out my feelings to Him. I said, ‘Lord, it’s not fair!’ I told Him how bitter I was that the president should receive this tremendous homecoming, when no one met us as we returned home. And when I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and simply said, ‘But you’re not home yet!’”

That’s a great truth, isn’t it? God does reward believers, but not necessarily down here. The rewards

here have to do with the strengthening of the inner life, not the outer. We have no claim on God by reason of our faithful service. Serving Him is only what we should do. We have no right to come to Him in prayer and demand that He answer because we have done this, that, or another thing.

Jesus says that when we stand and list our accomplishments before God, we are not praying. Is it any wonder then that we have been fainting? Is it possible that after years of praying we must now realize we have never truly prayed?

Upside-Down Is All Right

Now let's examine the tax collector's prayer.

It seems at first that he does it all wrong: He stands at a distance. He doesn't even lift up his eyes—he fails to assume the proper position of prayer. But how totally unimportant are these external issues.

The tax collector understood that what God wanted was not elegant speech or a certain posture. God was interested in the sincerity and earnestness of the tax collector's heart. So the man came into the temple and stood with his eyes cast down. All he could do was beat his breast and say, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Someone has called the tax collector's prayer "a holy telegram." I like that description: A short, pithy, right-to-the-point prayer. Most of all, a true prayer, genuine and from the heart.

What do we learn about prayer from this man? Isn't it obvious that authentic prayer, the most

profound prayer, is the expression to God of our helpless need? The tax collector saw himself as the lowest form of life on earth—a miserable, helpless sinner. The original language makes it clear that he is talking about the very lowest, worst kind of sinner. This man believed he deserved nothing from God, and without God he could do absolutely nothing to help his position: “I’m a sinner, Lord, that’s all I can say; I have nothing else to add.”

The tax collector rests his entire case on the merciful character of God, nothing on his own merit. He says, in effect, “Lord, I haven’t a thing to lean on but you.” Yes, he wanted to change his ways and live a repentant, honest, holy life before God—but not to gain God’s favor. No, he wanted to change his ways as a response of gratitude and thanks to God’s mercy.

He needed God. He had to have God. And so he came in complete humility and cast himself down on God’s altar of mercy.

Judge Upward

How did the tax collector come to this place of repentant prayer? In exactly the opposite direction as the Pharisee. The Pharisee looked down on those around him. The tax collector looked up to God. The Pharisee judged downward, comparing himself with unholy men. The tax collector judged upward, comparing himself with a holy, righteous God. The Pharisee prayed with himself. The tax collector saw no one and prayed to no one but God. He had heard

the words of Scripture, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (MATTHEW 22:37; COMPARE MARK 12:30; LUKE 10:27), and judged himself on that basis: “Lord, I’m a sinner! I need mercy!” And by praying that abject, humble prayer for mercy, without excuses or evasions, everything that God is suddenly became available to the tax collector.

We will never find answers to the awesome problems that afflict us individually and as a society—juvenile delinquency, rampant adultery and immorality, broken families, pornography, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction, gossip and backstabbing, scandal, abuse, and on and on—until each of us casts ourselves wholly upon God and cries out, “Lord, I’m a sinner! I need mercy!”

Unfortunately, we seem to think that such a confession is “for emergency use only.” We cast ourselves upon God’s mercy only when our backs are against the wall and we have nowhere else to turn. Instead, this should be our normal, everyday basis of living—the fact that we are helpless to save ourselves, that there is no righteousness in us, that we are sinners in need of mercy, beggars deserving nothing, without excuse before God. True prayer, then, is an expression of our helplessness, an awareness of need that only God can meet.

But the tax collector’s prayer not only shows us our own inadequacy as sinful human beings—it highlights the reality of God’s complete adequacy as

the righteous Lord of creation. The tax collector said, “God, be merciful to me,” and this is true prayer.

In that word *merciful* is hidden the entire, wonderful story of the coming of Jesus Christ, His lowly birth in Bethlehem, His amazing ministry on earth, the bloody cross, the empty tomb. In this prayer, when the tax collector begs God to be merciful, he uses a special word in the original Greek, a theological word that means “be propitiated to me.” In other words, he is saying to God, “Having had your justice satisfied, Lord, now show me your love.” And he believed that God’s mercy was his, for Jesus said that this man went back to his house justified. He was changed; he was different; he was made whole. He claimed what God had promised—and that, too, is true prayer: Trusting, taking, claiming God’s promises.

Genuine prayer is more than asking; prayer is taking. Genuine prayer is more than pleading; prayer is believing. Genuine prayer is more than words uttered; prayer is an attitude maintained. How many times we ought to be praying! Whenever there is an awareness of need, that is an opportunity to let the heart, the thought, and the voice (whatever form prayer may take) lift immediately to God and say, “God, be merciful. Lord, meet this need. My hope, my help, my everything is in you for this moment.” It doesn’t matter whether it is only tying your shoes or washing the dishes or writing a letter or writing a term paper or making a telephone call. Whenever there’s a need, that is the time for prayer. Prayer is an

expression of dependence that uses God's resources for any need in our lives.

Now, the question I ask of my own heart is this: Have I ever truly prayed? If what Jesus says is true—that prayer is the opposite of fainting—then why do I find my life so often filled with fainting, losing heart, discouragement, and defeat? The obvious answer is that I have not been truly praying, for true prayer and fainting, true prayer and defeat, cannot exist together.

Have you ever prayed? Have you ever truly prayed? Has your prayer life been like that of the Pharisee or like that of the tax collector? Have you ever launched upon a life of prayer where every moment you are counting on God to meet your need? Will you, this day, begin that life?

Holy Father, help us to take these examples of prayer seriously—both the example of the Pharisee and the example of the tax collector. The stories of Jesus are not intended merely to entertain us or even to instruct us, but to change us, to set us free, to enable us to live, to turn us from weakness and emptiness and barrenness, to truth and life and joy. We ask now that we may begin to live a life of authentic prayer, of authentic fellowship with you. We have no other help, no other adequacy. You alone are fully adequate. On this we rest. In Jesus' name, Amen. 🌿



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