

Series: Battle Plan for Prayer - Sermon: “Prayer Conditioning” Luke 18:9-14
Pastor Jon Haakana

Last week we began a series on prayer. We looked at some basics for making prayer a part of our everyday Christian walk. Today, we look at what condition our heart should be when we pray. We look at Jesus’ teaching regarding prayer in Luke 18. In verses 1-8 Jesus teaches his disciples about the necessity of persistence and faith in prayer. He tells the parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge. In our gospel lesson today Jesus tells another parable contrasting two men who went to the temple to pray.

In the temple of Jesus’ day, a lamb was sacrificed at dawn for the sins of the people. A second similar sacrifice was offered at three in the afternoon. When the time came for the burning of incense, this was thought to be an appropriate time for private prayer. By this time in the service the sacrifice of the lamb had covered the sins of Israel and thus the “way to God was open for prayer”. The faithful could now approach God. It is likely that the two men in the parable were present for either the dawn or mid-afternoon ritual.

The Pharisee was very strict. He lived an obedient life. He wanted to be faithful to God. He wanted to please God. The Pharisee stood and thanked God that he was not like other men; extortioners, the unjust, or adulterers. Then he counted his virtues.... He fasted and gave 10 percent of his wealth to the poor. He had kept the Jewish dietary laws. He was probably a very good guy. Honest. Truthful. He may have even belonged to several service clubs in his community. He may have served on the local school board. There is no doubt that he was admired in the community.

The other man was a tax collector. He worked for the Roman government. It was his job to collect taxes for the Romans. If people didn’t pay he could turn them into the authorities. Chief tax collectors would bid on contracts for collecting taxes in certain districts. They were hated by the Jewish population as turncoats. They were considered cheaters. They often assessed the property more than the true value... that was their commission.

Both men stand before God. Granted, the Pharisee wants to stand before God by being better than thieves and rogues and adulterers, or even like that tax collector in the back of the temple. Luke says: He thanked God. But he should have stopped. He went on to list a litany of the things he does. He wants to stand before God on the basis of who he is and what he is doing.

The tax collector also stood before God. We only know that he is a tax collector, despised by his fellow Jews. He was a sinner. He prays for only one thing, God’s mercy. “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The Pharisee drew these conclusions about himself by comparing himself to other people. Did you notice that? “Lord, I thank you that I am not like other people.” When any of us compare ourselves with other people, it’s pretty easy to pick out those people who make us look good.

The problem is that God doesn't judge that way. The tax collector didn't measure himself that way. He must have measured himself by the standard of God, because he concluded that he was a sinner. He realized he did not have a leg to stand on. Only God can justify.

I often tell our confirmation classes that the word "Justify" means that God looks at us through the blood stained cross of Jesus and looks at us "just as if we had never sinned." But we must admit, we, like the Pharisee get pretty good at justifying ourselves. We learn how to defend ourselves against all of our shortcomings and failings. And if our failures are exposed so that everyone can see them, we may convince ourselves that perhaps there are a few good things we have done to balance out the bad things. Surely they count for something. Surely they can tip the scales of justice in our favor. I would guess that everyone is familiar with that moment in the courtroom when the judge pounds on his desk with his gavel and says: "Silence in the Court". He may have to do that many times because it's difficult to get silence in a courtroom. There's always an undercurrent of conversation going on. Spectators are buzzing about what's being said, lawyers are conferring with their clients or with other legal assistants, and witnesses are being examined. Everybody wants a chance to speak, to accuse, to explain, to interpret, and to justify evidence one way or another.

Everyone is trying to look good. Or at least a little better than others. But there comes a time when the talking ceases, when the attempts to spin the evidence and create a favorable impression are over. When the jury returns from their deliberations, everybody becomes quiet. The judge invites the defendant to rise with his attorney. The judge speaks to the jury foreman: "Have you reached a verdict?" The foreman will deliver the verdict: Either "Guilty" or "Not Guilty". The verdict will change the lives of people in a flash. The defendant will be sent to jail or fined, or released.

In Romans chapter 3 St. Paul is inviting us to envision a cosmic courtroom. In this courtroom the entire world is on trial and the charges are based on the perfect Law of God. That law presents an unrelenting stream of accusations that expose all of our faults. There are no loopholes for us to squeeze through because the accusations come from God's perfect law.

Even if you can claim ignorance of the Law. Even if you claim to be an Atheist, an Agnostic, it makes no difference. In Romans chapter 2 Paul writes: "all who sin apart from the Law will also perish apart from the Law...those who said they did not know the Law...showed by their lives that they had laws of behavior written in their hearts and their conscience accused them. There is nothing more to say.

I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase in The Message here. He writes: "this makes it clear, doesn't it, that whatever is written in these scriptures is not what God says about others but to us to whom these Scriptures were addressed in the first place! And it's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else."

Every year on the first Saturday in December, twenty-five hundred of the most brilliant college students in North America take what may be the hardest math test in the world... the Putman Competition which began in 1938. How tough is it? Although there are only 12 questions, the test last six hours. And although these are the best and brightest young minds our country has to offer, the median score on a recent test was one point. Out of a possible 120. (Time Magazine December 23, 2002)

But God's Law presents an even more rigorous and imposing demand.... Perfection. There are many in our culture who would like to do away with the "laws" of God. We see them removed from court house walls; no longer referenced in our schools..... They are tied to "religion"...."we can't have one religion's rules overshadow the rules of behavior or another religionbesides ...people in our culture want to make up their own rules for behavior... so they can justify their behavior.

Here's the reality.... Every religion, every culture, every family, every community has rules to follow, for the purpose of keeping order, to keep society civil, or to please the "god" of their chosen religion. We have all seen families with rules for children that allow them to be disruptive, disrespectful in public, at school and in the home. Even "gangs" have rules. If disobeyed... the offender is found dead.

The point....When the Law is finished making accusations, when every mouth is silenced, when there is no more defense, when all of our attempts to justify ourselves dissolve, then judgment is pronounced. We are all guilty. We all have "fallen short". The ultimate question... how do I find peace, how do I find justification before "God", for my eternal destiny?

Let's take a look at how every human being is in this situation of finding "justification." It began in the Garden of Eden. God set Adam and Eve up in a place of perfection. He said, "Here, this is for you. Enjoy it. Live in it. Reflect the love I've given to you in all that you do. In return, all I ask is this one little thing; don't eat from this tree. Show your appreciation by not eating from this tree. Eat anything else you want, but don't eat from this tree." And then God added, "If you do eat from this tree, there are going to be some serious consequences. The perfect place I've given you won't be perfect anymore. The limitless life of freedom I've given you will end and there will be an eternal punishment for you and all who come after you.

They chose to break the one commandment God had asked them to keep; the one rule He had asked them to follow. They chose to listen to the lies of Satan. When the devil slithered up to them he simply suggested that God was not being honest. They took the bait; hook, line and sinker. They sinned and found out that God, even if they didn't like it, had been telling them the truth.

Now they had a new experience...Fear of judgment. They tried to hide. God found

them. God reached out to them and told them: "I'm going to send my Son into the world to take your place. He will be born of a virgin so he can be one of you; He will be conceived by the Holy Spirit, so He can be perfect. He will carry your sins on His shoulders. He will lead a perfect, holy life...keeping all of my Laws. He will resist temptation. He will die the death your disobedience deserves. Then my Son will rise from the dead so you and the entire world can be set free from your fear of judgment, your fear of death by faith in Him.

God told the truth. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He fulfilled all of God's Laws. He never sinned. He died the sinners' death, and rose victorious. And when any human being places their trust, their faith in Jesus, they will stand in the courtroom of Heaven, justified.

God knew that in the centuries to come other voices would proclaim: "You're no sinner; you're OK just the way you are." God knew that someday some smooth voice would say: "Every religion is the same...." "All religions have different pathways to the same heaven." God knew that some would say: "A God of love would never send someone to hell." God knew that some voices would have great ethical behavior but deny the existence of a final judgment and Hell. God knows that the tendency of every human being is to first act like the Pharisee.... Seeking to justify one's self....hoping the good deeds outweigh our broken promises, overcome our ethical failures.

God has offered the world His Son, Jesus to be your savior. His word is truth. A truth that can calm your conscience, erase your sins, and guarantee eternal life. God will never force Jesus upon you. God offers each person the opportunity to say "yes" or "No" to the sacrifice that Jesus gave on the cross.

Years ago I heard of a minister who saw a bunch of boys standing around a small, stray dog. "Boys, what are you doing?" He asked. "Telling lies." Said one of the boys. "The one who tells the biggest lie gets the dog." The minister drew himself up to his full height and began to deliver an impromptu sermon which began: "Why, boys, I'm shocked. When I was your age I never ever thought of telling a lie." There was no argument when one of the boys said: "here, Preacher, you win the dog." None of us could ever come up with a lie that big." (story from Rev. Ken Klaas The Lutheran Hour) By God's grace may you look into your own heart, and cry out: "Lord, be merciful to me a sinner."

When to Pray

When are some good times to especially pray? As you engage with life, let these things prompt you to pray.

1. **Newness.** Take time to pray whenever you begin something new. Pray at the start of each day, for example. (Joshua 3; 2 Sam. 6:17; 1 Kings 8)
2. **Needs.** We serve a God who is in the need-meeting business. Whenever you discover a physical, emotional, or spiritual need, you should allow that need to prompt you to pray. (Matt. 6:8-11)
3. **Blessings.** As God provides, protects, forgives, and guides you...thank Him! "In everything, give thanks" (Eph. 5:18). Take time to say *Thank You!*
4. **Burdens.** They come in many forms, but all should be taken to the Lord. You may be carrying one yourself, or praying on behalf of someone else (Gal. 6:2). Let any burden prompt you to pray to the One who loves you and can make it lighter.
5. **Crisis.** Every one of us will eventually face times of crisis. These are not just small burdens but life-changing events. They should also be times when we immediately turn to prayer. "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I shall rescue you, and you will honor Me" (Psalm 50:15).
6. **Worries.** When worry washes over you, turn it into prayer (Phil. 4:6-7; 1 Pet. 5:7). So when panic or fear try to invade your thoughts, respond by turning each one into a prayer to the God who sees and knows what you're facing, and who also has the solution.
7. **Sin.** Anything related to sin should prompt us to pray. Whether we're being tempted or have already crossed the line, we should immediately turn to the Lord. If you humble yourself and confess your sin, God will forgive and cleanse you.