

Posture in prayer

How long O Lord?

Luke 18

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness (trusted in themselves) and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 10 ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed (took his stand ostentatiously and began to pray thus before and with himself):

“God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.”

13 ‘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.”

14 ‘I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before (forgiven and made upright and in right standing with) God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.’ (NIV, Amplified)

Introduction

The previous parable in this chapter (Luke 18:1-8) reminds us to “always pray and never give up”. Jesus teaches us that our confidence in prayer comes from understanding the goodness and justice of God. Despite the presence of an adversary we can find strength to persevere through the power of praying with others.

This second parable warns about the danger of focussing on our own goodness and religious performance rather than on God’s goodness and mercy.

1. The problem of pride

- **Isolation**

Praying like the Pharisee separates us from the rest of humanity and from God. He prayed, “before and with himself”. His prayer was self-focussed rather than focussed on God or the needs of others. E.g. Places of worship don’t have mirrors.

- **Arrogance**

Comparison is rooted in pride and blinds us to the strengths of others and to our own weaknesses. As long as we perceive that we are somehow “better” than another we can be self-satisfied about our performance and obedience. This then defines our identity and acceptability to God and others.

2. The power of humility

- **Identification**

We share a common humanity with all people. Each of us is made in the image of God and needs God's grace and mercy in our lives. When we realise this we are more able to pray with honesty and compassion.

- **Awareness**

Humility makes us aware of our need of God's forgiveness and grace. Prideful comparison suggests that we are "better than others" or "good enough". It encourages us to "trust in ourselves" rather than to trust in God.

Conclusion

"Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, / 3 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment." (James 2:12-13 NIV)

"... in order to be of service to others we have to die to them; that is, we have to give up measuring our meaning and value with the yardstick of others. To die to our neighbours means to stop judging them, to stop evaluating them, and thus to become free to be compassionate. Compassion can never co-exist with judgement because judgement creates the distance, the distinction, which prevents us from really being with the other."
They Way of the Heart – Henri Nouwen

Questions

- What do you like about this parable?
- What does it teach you about the character of God?
- What does it teach you about the nature of humanity?
- How might this parable change the way that you pray?
- In what moments have you prayed like the Pharisee?
- In what moments have you prayed like the tax collector?