

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14 {RSV})

Our study, found in the eighteenth chapter of Luke, follows the passage on the parable of the importunate widow.

In that parable our Lord minces no words about the need of prayer. He puts it very bluntly: Men must either pray or faint; there is no other choice. If we are praying, then we are not fainting. If we are fainting, then no matter how much we may think otherwise, we are not praying, for the Lord puts it on an either/or basis.

The question to each of our hearts is: Am I fainting? Am I losing hearing? Is life to me dull, lustreless and shallow, all surface and no depth? Am I bored, unchallenged, defeated? If so, we are not praying. But, you say, I am praying. I pray thirty minutes every morning and ten minutes every night and I am even one of the few who faithfully come out on Wednesday evening to prayer meeting, but still life is not satisfying to me. I am not really living. Or perhaps you are among those of us who must hang our heads when the subject of prayer is brought up. In honesty we must say there is very little prayer in our life. We find it hard going to prayer and it is easy to forget or find something else to do.

At this point it would be very easy for me to thunder away at you with a campaign designed to put more prayer into your life. I could, I suppose, bring out some of the big guns of Scripture and mow you down unmercifully from my vantage point, six feet above successful criticism, and leave you agonizing in a wallow of bloody conviction. Perhaps then some of you might go away resolved to try harder to put more prayer into your life. And if you did, I am sure it would not be long before you would be aware, as perhaps you already are, that this is not the answer, that there is really nothing changed. Scheduling more time for prayer is not necessarily the answer.

Is it possible that our Lord is wrong here (as some of us may unconsciously be thinking) when he says, either pray or faint! Is it really that much of an issue? Are we not praying, and yet we faint? The problem is not that we need more of the same kind of prayer that we have been used to. If our life is one of dullness and drabness it is not that we need to schedule into our busy moments more time for prayer. When we need desperately to do is to discover the true nature of prayer. For true prayer is not a difficult thing. It is natural, instinctive, and comes easily. This kind of prayer, Jesus says, is the key to God's power and glory.

He is at great pains to point out in the preceding parable that God is not like the unjust judge of whom he speaks. God does not delay in answering prayer. He does not drag his heels and turn a deaf ear. He does not need to be persuaded by pressure, some form of picketing the throne of God. But true prayer is, nevertheless, the only channel man has to the eagerness of God to help and bless us. Therefore Jesus moves right on from this discussion of the need for prayer, in the parable of the importunate widow, to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, where he teaches the nature of authentic prayer. These two parables must be taken together.

We could call this parable, *The Parable of the Two Prayers* for it begins with these words, "Two men went up into the temple to pray." The object of our Lord in telling this parable is not to illustrate what

self-righteousness is, though that is certainly involved, but he is still on the subject of prayer and he is telling us what real prayer is. Furthermore, the structure of this parable, like the other, is one of contrast. Our Lord is teaching truth by setting it alongside error, and as we see the error we can by contrast understand and grasp the truth.

The Pharisee, in this little parable, was a man of prayer. He prays frequently, and punctiliously, without ever a miss. He was faithful in prayer, but his prayer was entirely wrong.

The publican, on the other hand, is not accustomed to praying. He is infrequently found in the temple courts. This is all new to him but his prayer is exactly right.

As we watch these two portrayals let us grasp the lessons Jesus intends.

In watching the Pharisee we learn what prayer is not. We learn there is a form of praying which is not prayer. This man assumed the correct posture for prayer. He stood, Jesus said, with his arms spread and his eyes uplifted unto heaven. Among the Jews, this was the prescribed posture for prayer. But, says Jesus, he prayed thus with himself! What a keen thrust that is! He was not praying to God, he was praying to himself! There was no one at the other end of the line. In other words, this prayer was a total waste of time. He was, perhaps, doing what some modern writers encourage, saying this is the true nature of prayer, that is, communing with the inner man. He certainly was not reaching any higher! He was not touching God; our Lord makes that point clear.

Now what is this negative teaching about prayer?

First, it is clear that it is not prayer when we approach God impressed with our own virtues. This man stood and prayed,

"God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector..." {Luke 18:11 RSV}

He was obviously well impressed with what he felt were his claims upon God's attention. This man felt that God ought to be thanked for having made such a remarkable specimen of humanity, and if no one else will do it he will take on the task himself; that such an unusual man should not be left unacknowledged on the face of the earth. We laugh as we listen to his prayer, but do we not unconsciously reflect the same position?

For a number of years I have made it almost a hobby to listen to Christians pray, including myself. It is frequently a very humorous experience and sometimes very sad. Do we not often pray like this? "Lord, won't you come and help me to do this task?" We mean by this, "I will contribute my ability to organize, my ability to exercise leadership, my talents for singing or speaking, and then, Lord, will you pour on the magic powder of Spirit-power, and you and I together will enjoy a great success." In other words, we follow the philosophy in praying: "I'll do my best and let God do the rest." It isn't that we exclude him, and say, "I can do it all," but we say, "Lord, I have a part that I can contribute which you desperately need and I am willing to invest my two cents in this enterprise if you will do the rest. You must do something, but I must do something too."

I submit to you that most Christian prayers are prayed from this basis. Sometimes the virtue that we plan to contribute to the program of God is that of humility. There is a kind of reverse brand of Pharisaism among Christians which goes something like this: "Thank God I am not as proud as this Pharisee is." And we make ourselves out to be utterly vile. We take the opposite position, we babble continually about our shortcomings and our sins. We say, "Lord, I am an extortioner, I am unjust, I am an adulterer, I commit fornication twice a week, I admit it. I don't kid myself, I'm honest enough to admit that I am a louse." And thereby we hope to impress God with our honesty and our humility. Unfortunately, this pious form of Pharisaism is found often among Christian people. Perhaps not to such a degree, but of the same kind.

But the simple truth is that we have no virtues of our own, none whatsoever. We have absolutely nothing to contribute to God's cause. We are praying out of utter bankruptcy, if we are honest with ourselves. We forget that these very talents with which we identify ourselves, these abilities that we have for leadership, or

speaking, or singing, are in themselves gifts of God.

Is it not strange how easily we identify ourselves with our virtues and disclaim identity with our faults? Our failures we blame on everyone else; our successes we take full credit for.

But there is so much that we forget. We forget God's shielding grace that has saved us from some of the terrible things others have fallen into for which we look down our nose at them. We forget that the only reason we are not standing in that poor wretch's shoes, who has been guilty of these vile and repulsive things, is simply because we have never been exposed to them. Are we sure we would not have fallen too, had we been there? We forget some of the things that are actually present in our lives. We forget our clever manipulations, our deliberate deceits, our phoney sympathies, our dubious business arrangements. We are so careful to remember our values, our virtues, our good points.

How do we get so well impressed with ourselves? Like this Pharisee we look downward from ourselves. He stood and saw, out of the corner of his eye, this tax collector standing over yonder, and immediately it made him virtuous. "Lord, I thank you I am not like that. I don't do any of those things." He had taken a vantage point which permitted him to look down on someone else. It is always possible to find someone who is lower down on the scale of human morals than we are, and what a comfort they are to our hearts! This is why we love to gossip. What else explains this peculiar delight we take in sinking our teeth into someone else's reputation and slurping up the delicious tidbits of a deteriorating life? It is simply because it makes us feel superior. We delight in running someone else down because it makes us feel more virtuous.

This is the terrible point Jesus is making in describing the Pharisee. He says when we pray from this basis, when we approach God on this level, as we do so frequently, we are praying with ourselves. There is no real prayer, our pious words, our properly phrased sentences, our completely scriptural, orthodox approach is of no value whatsoever. We are praying out of 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. That was twice more than was required by the Law. He gave tithes of all he got, and that again was more than the Law required. But this Pharisee expected God to act because he felt God could hardly do otherwise in view of the fine record of faithful service he lay before him.

And do we not continually pray as though God owes us something? Listen to yourself pray:

- "Lord, I have been faithfully teaching this Sunday School class for ten years. Surely now, Lord, you can do something for me."
- "Lord, I have been trying to be a good Christian parent and have done my best, now please keep my children from going astray now that they have come into these difficult teen years."
- "Lord, I have given up so much for you, now give me this one little thing that I ask of you."

Obviously the Pharisee is still very much with us, isn't he? "But," someone says, "does not Hebrews 6 say that God is not unrighteous to forget our labor of love?" Yes, it does, but, if we approach God on that basis, we have misunderstood the nature of prayer and we have missed the key to God's power.

How revealing is that story of the old missionary couple who had been working in Africa for years in the days when Teddy Roosevelt was President of the United States. They were returning from Africa to New York City to retire. They had no pension for they belonged to no missionary board. Their health was broken, they were defeated, discouraged, and afraid. When they went down to the wharf to board the ship they discovered to their amazement that they were booked on the same ship with Teddy Roosevelt, who was returning from one of his big game hunting expeditions. They went aboard the ship and no one paid any attention to them. They watched all the tremendous fanfare that accompanied the President's arrival, how the band played as he came aboard, and everyone was agog over the thought of traveling on the same ship with the President of the United States. Passengers were stationing themselves at vantage points throughout the ship to see if they might catch a glimpse of the great man.

As the ship moved across the ocean this couple became more and more discouraged, especially the man. He

said to his wife, "Dear, something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these many years and no one cares a thing about us. Here is a man who has been on a big-game hunting expedition and when he comes back everybody makes over him but nobody gives two hoots about us." His wife said, "Dear, you shouldn't feel that way. Try not to be bitter about it." But he said, "I can't help it, I just can't help it, it doesn't look right. After all, if God is running this world, why does he permit such injustice?"

As the boat neared the American shore, his spirit became more and more depressed. He said to his wife, "I'll wager that when we get to New York there will be another band there and more fanfare over his arrival, but there will be no one to meet us." Sure enough, when they got in, the ship docked and a band was waiting to greet the President. The mayor of New York City was there and other leaders of the nation, and the papers were full of the President's arrival, but no one said a word to this 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.

But that first night the man's spirit just broke. He said to his wife, "I can't take this, it's not fair, God is not treating us fairly. Why should we give ourselves like this and have no one to meet us, no one to help us, no one to care. We don't even know where to go. If God is a faithful God, why doesn't he meet our need and send someone along?" And his wife said, "Dear, you mustn't feel this way, you simply must not, it isn't right. Why don't you go in the bedroom and tell the Lord the whole thing?"

So he went in, and about a half hour later he came out again and his face was different, his wife could see it. She said, "Dear, what happened? Everything is different I can see. You feel better, don't you?" "Yes," he said, "the Lord settled it with me." "Well," she said, "what did he say?" He said, "I went in and knelt beside the bed and I poured out the whole thing to him. I said, 'Lord, it's not fair. We have given our lives, we've given our blood and sweat and tears in Africa, our health is broken, we have no place to go.' And I told him all -- how bitter I was that the President should receive this tremendous welcome over nothing! Especially I felt bitter about the homecoming he received when no one met us when we returned home." He said, "You know, when I finished it seemed as though the Lord put his hand on my shoulder and simply said, 'But you're not home yet!'"

It is a great truth, isn't it?

There are rewards for believers, but not necessarily down here. The rewards here have to do with the strengthening of the inner life, not the outer. We must always consider ourselves unprofitable servants having done only that which is our duty to do. We have no claim on God by faithful service, it is only what we should have done. We have no right to come to him in prayer and demand that he answer because we have done this or that or another thing.

Jesus says when a man stands and lists his accomplishments before God he is not praying. Is it any wonder, then, that we have been fainting? Is it not possible that, after years of praying, we must now realize we have never prayed at all?

Let us take a look at the publican now, to see what prayer is. Jesus said the tax collector stands afar off, he doesn't even lift up his eyes, he fails to assume the proper position of prayer, he does it all wrong. How totally unimportant are these externals of prayer!

Years ago Sam Walter Foss wrote a poem expressing the unimportance of the posture of prayer. He called it, *The Prayer of Cyrus Brown* :

"The proper way for a man to pray,"
Said Deacon Lemuel Keyes
"And the only proper attitude
Is down upon his knees."

"No, I should say the way to pray,"

Said Reverend Doctor Wise,
"Is standing straight with outstretched arms
And rapt and upturned eyes."

"Oh, no, no, no,"
said Elder Slow,
Such posture is too proud.
"A man should pray with eyes fast-closed
And head contritely bowed."

"It seems to me his hands should be
Austerely clasped in front
With both thumbs pointing toward the ground."
Said Reverend Doctor Blunt.

"Last year I fell in Hidgekin's well
Headfirst," said Cyrus Brown,
"With both my heels a-stickin' up
And my head a-pointin' down.

And I made a prayer right then and there,
The best prayer I ever said,
The prayingest prayer I ever prayed,
A-standin' on my head."

How fully that captures the thought our Lord leaves with us concerning the true character of prayer. This man came into the temple and stood with his eyes cast down. He did not assume the posture of prayer, he was not even in the right place. All he could do was beat his breast and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Someone has called that "a holy telegram." I like that: pithy, brief, right to the point -- but it is true prayer.

What do we learn about prayer from this man? Is it not obvious that real prayer, authentic prayer is an awareness of our helpless need? This man saw himself on the lowest possible level, a sinner. In fact, the original language is even stronger. He says, "God, be merciful to me the sinner." The sinner, the very lowest kind, the worst kind. He believed that 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 to it.

Is it not remarkable that he does not try to add anything by way of merit? He does not say, God be merciful to me a penitent sinner. He was penitent, but he does not urge that as any basis for God's blessing. He does not say, "God be merciful to me a reformed sinner. I'm going to be different from now on." I am sure he did do differently. I am sure he stopped his extortion and cheating and his improper reporting, but he does not say "a reformed sinner," he does not urge this. He does not even say, "God be merciful to me an honest sinner. Here I am, Lord, willing to tell you the whole thing. Surely you can't pass by honesty like that." In fact, he does not even say, "God be merciful to me a praying sinner." He casts it all away. He says, "Lord, I haven't a thing to lean on but you."

This man recognized there were things he could do, there were activities that he could perform, he had been living on that basis all his life. But he also had come to a realization that the doing of them again would be nothing more than the perpetuating of sin, that to do anything at all right, even the normal activities of his life, he needed God, he simply had to have God!

How did he come to this place? Exactly the reverse of the Pharisee. He did not look down on someone else below him, he looked up to God. He judged upward, to God. He saw no one but God, he heard nothing but the high standard of God, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy strength and all thy mind," {Matt 22:37, Luke 10:37 KJV}. "Lord, I'm the sinner. I'll never be any better in myself, I'm simply a sinner. I must have God, And in taking that place all that God had was available to him."

Some of us recently heard a former girl gang leader tell, in an artless, simple way, the story of her life. How dramatically she illustrated this truth. There is no answer to the terrible problems of juvenile delinquency,

immorality, drug-addiction, homosexuality and all these terrible gripping forces that lay hold of human lives, except to cast oneself wholly upon God, and say, "I'm the sinner." Our trouble is, we think such commitment is for emergency use only. We think this is available only when we get up against it and there is nothing else to turn to. It seems to take us so long to learn that this is God's normal basis of living. We are always to realize that we have no abilities in ourselves. We were never intended to feel adequate to meet any situation, apart from Jesus Christ. Prayer, therefore, is an expression of an awareness of helpless need that can only be met by God.

In this publican we learn a second thing about true prayer. Authentic prayer is always an acknowledgment of divine adequacy. This man said, "God be merciful to me:" and this is true prayer whether it be prayer for ourselves in our own need, or prayer for another who in vision is standing with us. Our help must be in God. This man looked for help nowhere else. He did not say, "Lord, perhaps this Pharisee standing here can help me." No, he said, "God be merciful to me." In that word *be merciful* is hidden all the wonderful story of the coming of Jesus Christ, the bloody cross, and the resurrection. This man used a theological word which means "be propitiated to me," that is, "having had your justice satisfied, Lord, now show me thy love." And he believed that God's mercy was available, for, Jesus said, he "went down to his house justified." He was changed, he was different, he was made whole. He laid hold of what God said, and believed him. And that too is what prayer is.

- Prayer is more than asking, prayer is taking.
- Prayer is more than pleading, prayer is believing.
- Prayer is more than words uttered, it is an attitude maintained.

How many times each day do you have a need? How many times do you lack? That is the number of times you ought to be praying! Whenever there is an awareness of need, that is an opportunity to let the heart, the thought, 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 does not matter whether it is only tying your shoes or washing the dishes, or writing a letter, or turning out a paper, or making a telephone call, whatever the need, that is the season for prayer.

Now the question I close with is this, and I ask it of my own heart: Have I ever prayed?

If it is true, what Jesus says, that prayer is the opposite of fainting, why do I find my life filled with fainting? ...with losing heart? ...with discouragement, defeat? The obvious answer is, I have not been really praying, for the two are incompatible, they cannot exist together, it is one or the other.

Have you ever prayed? Have you ever really prayed?

Have you ever launched upon a life of prayer where every moment you are counting on God to meet your need?

Will you this morning begin that life?

This is where Jesus leaves us. Perhaps for the first time we can say, "Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner." Even after years of Christian life we can start again, and say, "Lord, this morning as I go out from this place, let me reckon upon your faithfulness to me, let me count upon your willingness to be in me and work through me to make my life all that it ought to be."

Prayer

Holy Father, help us to take these words seriously this morning. They are not intended merely to entertain us, or even to instruct us, but to change us, to set us free, to make us live, to turn us from weakness and emptiness and barrenness and fruitlessness, unto truth and life and joy and warmth and power. We ask now that each one of us may, in this quiet moment, begin to live a life of prayer. We have no other help, but thou art fully adequate. On this we rest. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: The Nature of Prayer
Series: Studies in Prayer from the New Testament
Scripture: Luke 18:9-14
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 57
Date: February 16, 1964

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