

STORYTIME:
The One About the Praying Contest

Luke 18:9-14

What's in your heart when you pray?

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Sometimes Jesus told stories just to provoke people. He always had a higher purpose in mind, but you don't have to.

I remember a story that made the rounds back in 1994, when the Duke University Blue Devils and the Arkansas Razorbacks were playing for the NCAA championship in basketball. Does anybody remember who won that game? Anyway, a Duke fan walks into a bar in Charlotte, North Carolina, and announces to the crowd, "I have a great story about Duke basketball."

A man at the bar said, "Wait a minute. Before you tell that story, let me warn you. I'm from Little Rock, Arkansas, and I graduated from the University of Arkansas. Those three big guys at the end of the bar all play football for the Razorbacks, and those three guys sitting at that table are the university wrestling team. I thought I'd better warn you."

"You're right," the Duke man said. "Never mind. I don't have time to explain it seven times."

How you feel about that story, of course, depends on which team you relate to. In fact, how you feel about your pastor right now depends on which team you relate to. It's just an illustration...

Jesus told stories sometimes to get a rise out of people, but also to challenge their presuppositions, in order to make them think. That's what good teachers do. One day he told them a story: "*Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*"¹ It's not clear exactly to whom Jesus is speaking, the crowds or the disciples, but apparently there are some Pharisees and maybe some tax collectors present. Immediately their interest was piqued, because praying in the Temple was a big deal, and everybody knew how different Pharisees and tax collectors were. Something was bound to happen.

Luke telegraphs the meaning of this parable before Jesus even tells it: "*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt.*"² So the parable is intended for the Pharisees and anyone else in the crowd who had a tendency toward self-righteousness. Ellsworth Kalas says about this parable, "It wasn't Jesus' aim to make the tax collectors feel better, but rather to stir the consciences of the Pharisees—all us Pharisees."³

We prefer to identify with the tax collector—or “publican,” as the older translations call him—as bad as they were usually considered. After all, the tax collector is humble, and he is justified in the end.

But if we are honest with ourselves, we know we are more like the Pharisee. And that’s not all bad. The Pharisees were good, righteous, religious people. They were the pillars of the community. They were the leaders of the religious life of the people. This one was apparently a faster and a tither; how many of us can say that? Fred Craddock in his commentary compared the Pharisee to a good, loyal church member: “He is the faithful, dependable, tithing type who pays the salaries of ministers so they can preach on the parable of the Pharisee and the publican!”⁴ He probably even went to church in the summer time! In fact, of all the Jewish factions seeking power in the time of Jesus, the Pharisees’ teaching and stories were as close to Jesus as anyone. You could do much worse than to be a Pharisee.

The problem, ironically, is that practicing your religion can distance you from God. Religion, which is supposed to bring us closer to God, can actually insulate us from the Holy Spirit leading and guiding our lives. Jesus comes saying stuff like “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself,*”⁵ and “*Take up your cross and follow me, and those who lose their lives for my sake and the Gospel’s will save it,*”⁶ and the good church member says, “I’d rather tithe. I think I’ll sign up for a Bible study or donate to the food pantry. I’ll see you in church on Sunday.” All of which are good things—don’t hear me saying you shouldn’t do them. The problem comes when our religion distances us or insulates us from what God really wants to do with our lives.

Knowing the right thing to do and doing it most of the time can give rise to one of the slipperiest sins of all—the sin of pride. Jesus describes it this way: “*The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’*”⁷ The reason he was standing by himself was that he felt like he was better than anyone else—not like the thieves, rogues, adulterers, or—case in point—this tax collector. As evidence in his behalf, he produced his giving statement, and he fasted twice as much as the Law requires. He is quite

proud of himself. But you will notice the response he gets from God—nothing, nada, zilch. God is silent.

Pride is pretty easy when you're pretty good. John Ortberg is an excellent preacher and writer, a Presbyterian pastor in California. He tells about going to a street fair with some friends, and there was a mechanical bull, the kind that tries to buck people off. The operator saw John looking and said, "Watching isn't nearly as fun as riding." So John stepped up. The operator took one look at John's middle-aged physique and said, "Are you sure?" That guaranteed that John would attempt to ride the bull.

The guy explained that there were 12 levels of difficulty, but the key was to stay centered on the bull. Shift your center of gravity as the bull moves. Always follow the bull.

So John got on, and the bull started slowly. Then it started moving faster and changing directions. John was holding on for dear life, then he remembered the advice, and he loosened his death grip on the bull. It kept moving faster and jerking and bucking, and John's arms were flailing in all directions. Finally the bull slowed down, and John was still on the bull. He was imagining the surprise of the operator that he had triumphed after all. John looked at the guy, and the guy shook his head and said, "Nice job. That was level one."⁸

Several times in the New Testament, Paul describes pride with a word that is translated "puffed up," most famously in I Corinthians 8, where he says, "*Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.*"⁹ There is actually an example of this in the animal kingdom. There is a fish called the pufferfish or blowfish. When it feels threatened, it puffs itself up with water or air until it is several times its normal size.

But these little fish-balls are more than cute. Those spines contain a toxic substance that is deadly to fish and humans—1200 times more deadly than cyanide. There is enough toxin in one pufferfish to kill 30 humans. Don't mess with these guys!

Like pufferfish, people can blow themselves up with pride to make themselves look bigger than they are, at least in their own eyes. This pride can become toxic to a marriage, a church, a friendship, or a relationship with

God. For good reason, the late Bible scholar John Stott once said, "Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend."¹⁰

So let's talk about the humble guy, the tax collector, the publican. Tax collectors were despised by the citizens of Galilee and Judea. They worked for the Roman government, demanding burdensome taxes on the people. Anything they could extort from the people on top of the taxes was their income, and most tax collectors were very wealthy. Their vocation was based on dishonesty, and they were hated in their communities. So everyone expected the tax collector to somehow be the bad example, the butt of the joke.

But it turned out to be the tax collector who was humble before God. Jesus said, "*But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*"¹¹ Then Jesus shared the shocking conclusion to the story: "*I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other.*"¹² What? The tax collector justified—put right with God—before the Pharisee? That's as crazy as implying that Razorback fans are not the most intelligent on the planet! But then Jesus gives a principle that is fundamental to the understanding of the Christian life: "*all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*"¹³ This principle is repeated two other times in the Gospels, just in case you didn't get it the first time. This is crucial stuff. All who inflate themselves with pride will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be lifted up by God. It's not that humble people think less of themselves; it's that humble people think of themselves less. Fred Craddock says that these verses "present in parabolic form the central doctrine of God's justification of sinners and the ultimate failure of self-righteousness."¹⁴

Even humility can be a slippery slope sometimes. If you are humble before God, and God exalts you and blesses you, you might begin to celebrate your humility, because it got you where you are. Then you become proud of your humility, and you're right back there in the Temple with the Pharisee all over again.

There was an article in *The Wall Street Journal* recently that talked about the new emphasis on humility in the corporate sector. All of a sudden it

seems that business leaders see the value in humble executives. They listen more; they admit their mistakes; they are better team players. Humble executives are so valuable that people are faking their humility, even putting humility on their resumes. If you put humility on your resume, it's a pretty good bet that you're not humble. One business leader said, "If you have to act humble, it won't work. Either you are, or you're not."¹⁵

I remember the story from early in my ministry about a senior pastor of a large church who was walking through the sanctuary one day, and he heard a voice crying out to God: "O God, I am such a worm!" He looked, and it was his associate pastor at the prayer rail of the church. Not to be outdone, the senior pastor knelt beside his associate and began to cry out to God, "O God, I am such a worm!" In a minute the custodian walked through the sanctuary and saw the two pastors kneeling and praying out loud. So he went down to join them, crying out just like they did, "O God, I am such a worm!" The associate pastor stopped praying, looked at the custodian, nudged the senior pastor and said, "Hey, look who thinks he's a worm."

Humility can be as false as pride. But if you want to get in touch with God beyond merely religious practice, if you want to go down to your house justified today, if you want to be exalted by God for the right reasons, then develop a humble heart, cultivate the heart of a servant, and practice humility.

Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of our country, was a man of many accomplishments, yet he always somehow seemed to maintain a wise and humble spirit. He attributed that attitude in part to a visit he made as a young man to see the Puritan preacher Cotton Mather. Franklin remembered, "He was showing me out of the house, and there was a very low beam near the doorway. I was still talking when Mather began shouting, 'Stoop! Stoop!' I didn't understand what he meant and banged my head on the beam. 'You're young,' he said, 'and have the world before you. Stoop as you go through it, and you will avoid many hard bumps.' That advice has been very useful to me. I avoided many misfortunes by not carrying my head too high in pride."¹⁶

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a tricky little story. We are mostly like the Pharisee, though we don't want to be. We are not

like the tax collector, but we need to be. But if we are proud of our humility, then we are like the Pharisee all over again.

With the parables, I try to look for the one main point. And with this parable, I believe it is this, as Fred Craddock said: Our God justifies sinners, and self-righteousness is doomed to fail. The first step toward true humility is to admit that we don't deserve God's grace. We are the sinners in need of justification. Whatever we have done, it has fallen short of what God intended for our lives. That makes the love and grace and forgiveness and peace and joy of God that much sweeter, because we know it is a gift.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a British journalist in the 20th century. He made enough money to be quite comfortable, and he was famous enough that people would recognize him on the street. An agnostic early in life, after World War II, Muggeridge converted to Christianity. His greatest work as a Christian was to write and produce films about Mother Teresa of Calcutta which brought her work to the attention of the Western world.

Yet with all his accomplishments—the writing, the fame, the world travel, the audiences—Malcolm Muggeridge looked somewhere else for the meaning of his life, the joy in his spirit. He wrote, “Yet I say to you—and I beg you to believe me—multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together, and they are nothing—less than nothing, a positive impediment—measured against one draft of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are.”¹⁷

Whoever you are, the same principle of Jesus applies: “*all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*”¹⁸ This is the key to happiness. This is the key to life. This is the key to the Kingdom.

¹ Luke 18:10.

² Luke 18:9.

³ Ellsworth Kalas, *Parables From The Backside* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 62.

⁴ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation Series* (Louisville: John Know Press, 1990), 211.

⁵ Matthew 22:37-40.

⁶ Mark 8:34-35.

⁷ Luke 18:11-12.

⁸ John Ortberg, *Soul Keeping* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 98-99.

⁹ I Corinthians 8:1.

¹⁰ Matt Woodley, "Pufferfish," National Geographic Kids, *PreachingToday.com*.

¹¹ Luke 18:13.

¹² Luke 18:14a.

¹³ Luke 18:14b.

¹⁴ Craddock, 210.

¹⁵ Joann S. Lublin, "The Case for Humble Executives," *The Wall Street Journal* (10-20-15).

¹⁶ "Benjamin Franklin," PBS, November 2002. *PreachingToday.com*.

¹⁷ Malcolm Muggeridge, *Preaching Today*.

¹⁸ Luke 18:14.