

The One About the Praying Contest

I love a good contest. I am the oldest of five kids, so I grew up competing with my siblings. Not only were we constantly racing our bikes and trying to beat each other at monopoly, we competed for the best grades and our parents' time and attention.

I am married to a former coach, and so our very livelihood for years depended on how well teenage boys competed in a weekly football contest. My son is now a coach, and my stress-level for at least 10 Friday nights a year depends upon his team of teenagers being better than another team of teenagers. Competition is part of my life, and it seems to be a huge part of the American way. Don't we love it when we get to cheer on the Omahogs? Weren't we thrilled when the US Women's Soccer team won the World Cup? And then there is the most competitive of all events -- little league sports when our children, grand children and great-grands are playing! We love winning! We love being number 1!

When I took the Clifton Strengths Finders test a while back, one of my top strengths was competition. And here's how it described a person with competition as a strength: "they measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests."

I suppose there is nothing wrong with competition.

However, the closer we come to God, the more we figure out that the kingdom of God is a different kind of place than the world we live in. The kingdom of God is not a contest where one person wins and another loses. Instead in God's kingdom everyone who wants to be in the game wins, and we are even called to humble ourselves to help others win, too.

Today as we continue to look at the stories of Jesus, the pharisee seems to be involved in a contest of his own making -- striving to do all the right things and to do them better than anyone else, looking down on the broken tax collector, and appearing to want praise and recognition for his outstanding holiness.

Today's story seems very simple at first. The point of the parable seems to be a simple reminder to be humble in our lives and in our prayer rather than prideful. But I have to admit to you that at least for me, there was a really subtle lesson in this parable. The Holy Spirit had a personal message for me. Because as I studied this scripture I noticed myself thinking, "I'm so glad I'm not like that Pharisee!" And I realized that rather than judging the tax collector, I had turned my judgmental spirit on the pharisee instead. Being full of pride and being judgmental had snuck up on me in a flash--it is a quality that is hard for us to recognize in ourselves and to keep in check.

In his book *Mere Christianity* C.S Lewis talked about the vice of pride as being the opposite of humility. And he described pride as "the complete anti-God state of mind" arguing that it leads to every other vice. Lewis said that, "As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud [person] is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you're looking down, you can't see something that's above you."

These are some tough words for us to take in. And Jesus's story must have been hard for the Pharisee to hear and understand because if he really listened to Jesus he should have gone away from the temple realizing that a tax collector whom he considered sinful was closer to God than he was.

In this parable, Jesus gives us the contrast of two characters -- the Pharisee and the tax collector. And to really understand the contrast between these two people, it's important for us to know more about who these first century people were. Jesus frequently criticizes Pharisees,

so we tend to think of the Pharisee as the stereotypical bad guys, and we might peg the tax collector as the good guy in this parable. But Pharisees genuinely tried to uphold the Torah in a world where it would have been hard. They would have faced opposition to their faith from Roman power and from Samaritan neighbors who might have tempted the Jewish people to stray and compromise their beliefs. Pharisees genuinely tried to please God in a world that would have been full of competing interests. For example, Jews are officially required to fast only on the Day of Atonement, but this Pharisee fasted twice a week – no small thing – quite an act of dedication to God. Jews are required to tithe the production of their fields, but this Pharisee tithed from everything he had.

On the other hand, the image of the tax collectors was that they collaborated with Romans and stole from the Jews. Tax collectors were the most despised people in Israel and were hated and vilified by all of Jewish society. So the message Jesus presents in his story is quite a reversal that would have surprised Jesus' listeners.

Jesus also reveals something about these two characters by their body language. Jesus begins the parable by telling us that "Two people went up to the temple to pray." But, although both men were in the temple, notice the difference in their postures. The Pharisee stood **by** himself and prayed **about** himself. Perhaps he was praying by himself to call attention to himself or maybe to stay away from people like the tax collector, who might defile him by their unclean touch.

But verse 13 says that "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!'"

The pharisee stood apart from others, too, but for a different reason. One writer said, "the Pharisee felt too good to associate with common people, and the tax collector felt too bad." The tax collector felt he had no good virtues to claim, and he could only hope for God's mercy. I imagine the Pharisee standing in a high position looking down on others, while the tax collector stays far away from all the others- he's bent over, beating his chest---expressing extreme anguish. I imagine the body language of these two reflecting the opposing attitudes of these men – one the body language of pride in oneself and self-sufficiency. And one reflected brokenness and humility before God.

The Pharisee was full of himself and was not surrendered to God. The tax collector recognized the power of God and recognized his need for the mercy and the healing of God in his life.

But not only is the body language of these two characters telling, their words – their prayers – are very telling, too. The scripture says:

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. **12** I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'

The pharisee is pretty proud of himself. He's thinking: I am winning this contest of religiosity. I am number 1!

The Pharisee prayed about himself – the content of the prayer was self-centered. He basically bragged on himself before God. There was no adoration of God in his prayer. There

was no confession in his prayer. There was no supplication in his prayer – no earnest plea to God. He asks nothing of God. Why would he? He believes he has everything he needs. He can handle it all himself. He is better than other people whom he describes as “thieves, rogues and adulterers.” And even the thanksgiving in his prayer was all about the Pharisee himself.

One commentator wrote that “the Pharisee is both standing by himself **and** praying to himself,” not to God. The Pharisee’s prayer was not focused on God, but on himself. He uses the word, “I” – in his prayer – over and over again.

But the prayer of the tax collector was simple and direct. And more than anything, his prayer was humble and honest. He was honest with God, and he was honest with himself. His prayer was simply, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And Jesus tells us this about these two characters in verse 14:

14 I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.

The tax collector went down to his home justified. The tax collector was forgiven and made right with God. And you will notice that he was made right with God not through any acts he could accomplish – not through fasting or tithing – but it was strictly a gift from God. He asked, and God freely gave to him. Our salvation depends on God’s grace, not on our works, or whether we are the best, or how competent we are at saying the right words or doing the right things.

A life lived with God on earth and in heaven is possible for every single person--no strings attached. Faith is not a competition or a comparison. In God’s kingdom every....single.... person matters. ----- There are no losers in God’s kingdom, and in fact the biggest winners in God’s kingdom are often people like the despised tax collector. Although it is awkward for us competitive Americans to think about humility, **humility seems to be a key factor in coming to know the Lord of Lords.**

--Jesus consistently teaches his followers that it is those who show mercy who receive mercy.

--It is those who forgive who are forgiven.

--Jesus teaches that the last will be first.

--And when the disciples argued about who was number 1, he told them that their purpose was not to be lifted up, but to serve -- their duty was to wash one another’s feet.

So, what in the world is Jesus getting at? Should we stop praying and tithing and fasting? Of course not. But we may need to draw near to God in a way that we have not done before in order to see who is truly number one.

You see, once we are saved by faith, then our hearts change through God’s grace, and we **want** to practice personal holiness – we want to fast and we want to tithe and we want to read scripture and we want to worship – we want to do all those things the Pharisee did. But we want to do it because we want to know God more – we want to do it because we want to please God – we want to do it because we want to walk with Christ. We don’t do it for attention or to earn God’s love or to be better than others. We do not have to earn God’s love – it is not a contest! The truth is you are already beloved by God. After all God created you. And above all else, truly drawing near to God leads us to **love** others not to look down on others. We **ought** to engage in the same spiritual disciplines as the Pharisee, but I pray that our attitudes and our hearts are very different because we are acting out of love for God.

True prayer comes from setting our lives beside the life of God. No doubt all that the Pharisee said was true. He did fast and he did tithe – even more than the law required. And may we all do the same!! But the Pharisee’s problem was that he was looking down on men around him and comparing himself to others rather than striving to live the life that God desired him to live. The question for us is not, “Am I better than others?” but “Am I like Christ?”

Scottish Commentator William Barclay told the story of a journey he made by train to England. He says during the journey, he saw a little whitewashed cottage, and it seemed to shine with an almost radiant whiteness. Some days later, he made the journey back to Scotland. But since the outbound trip, snow had fallen and was lying deep all around. And he said, we came again to the little white cottage, but this time its whiteness seemed drab and soiled and almost grey in comparison to the virgin whiteness of the driven snow.” Barclay said, “It all depends what we compare ourselves with. And when we set our lives beside the life of Jesus and beside the holiness of God, all that is left to say is, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” (William Barclay, *The Daily Bible Study Series*).

Friends, I don’t think the lesson of this story is as simple as “be humble.” I think the lesson to be learned here is that we **are** humble creatures, whether we know it or not – whether we admit it or not. We all desperately need God in our lives. We cannot do this life thing without God. We all desperately need to realize we cannot live with joy until we admit that we need God and then open our hands to receive God’s free gift of grace. God is not going to pry our hands open and force his grace into our hands. But God will do almost anything to convince us to say “yes” to him fully and completely. God will do anything to convince us to fall to our knees and beat our chest and cry out, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” May our faith be as great as the tax collector.

Let us pray. Holy God, it is hard for us to imagine that you would love us without putting conditions on our performance. We so often feel that we just don’t measure up. So, mighty God would you pour out your Spirit on us that we might come to know the great depth of your love for us. And may we respond by using our lives as a holy and living sacrifice to bring glory to you and not to ourselves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.