

## Jesus and Prayer 1: A PHARISEE AND A TAX COLLECTOR

Luke

18:9-14

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton, Sunday morning, 27 October 2013  
[M13-23]

A tourist came too close to the edge of the Grand Canyon, lost his footing and plunged over the side, clawing and scratching to save himself. After he went out of sight and just before he fell into space, he encountered a scrubby bush which he desperately grabbed with both hands. Filled with terror, he prayed desperately, shouting toward heaven, "Is there anyone up there?" A calm, powerful voice came out of the sky, "Yes, there is." The tourist prayed, pleadingly, "Can you help me? Can you help me?" The calm voice replied, "Yes, I certainly can. What is your problem?" "I fell over the cliff and am dangling in space holding to a bush that is about to let go. Please help me." The voice from above said, "Certainly. I will answer your prayer." "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you," said the tourist. The calm voice said, "Simply let go of the bush and everything will turn out fine." There was a tense pause, then the tourist yelled, "Is there anyone else up there?"

Just a reminder that as a parish we are having a particular focus on "prayer"

- we have had some Newsletter articles, a seminar, people sharing their thoughts and now today we begin having a look at what the Bible has to say
- our Bible reading was a parable, a story told by Jesus about two people praying
- whenever Jesus told this kind of story, a "parable" he had something in particular he wished to impart and hoped it would 'get under the skin', itch, be remembered and keep working

Let me just sketch a couple of details

- traditionally the 'Pharisee' was the bad guy in Jesus' parables, the one not to copy Pharisees were a religious group who followed a strict set of rules and were really keen on being good people who obeyed God trouble was they tended to be a bit stuck up, smug and self righteous with it
- in this instance however, although people may not have liked the Pharisees they respected them for attempting to live holy lives
- one writer, J. Elsworth Kalas says:

[The Pharisee] wasn't dishonest, he wasn't unjust. You wouldn't be afraid to buy a used car from him. If he were your next-door neighbour he might not be a barrel of laughs, but neither would he be a reason for worry. If everyone in the world were like the Pharisee you could leave your doors unlocked at night and you wouldn't need a burglar alarm on your car. Moreover he was admirably religious. He tithed his income and he fasted twice a week.

Tax collectors on the other hand, well let's just say nothing has changed

- the way most of us feel about the IRD is how people felt back in Jesus' day tax collectors were hated, feared and despised because they took money they extorted and ripped people off
- besides that were mates with the enemy occupying army, the Romans they did however have one appealing virtue: everyone else could look down on

them

- often though, as Jesus told it, this unlikely, unappealing, underdog would turn out to be the one who acted rightly!

Just to help us in our thinking, can I please enlist your assistance?

- can you think of modern day, right here, right now people that if Jesus was speaking today would be the Pharisee or Tax collector???
- who is law-abiding and straight up but not liked ("goody-goodies" at school)? who does everyone look down on because there is nothing good about them or their life, who interfere with ordinary people just getting on?

[space for thinking and sharing]

Pharisee ...

Tax collector ...

I have been mulling over this parable during the past week

- and I suggest that when you look at it through the lens or window of prayer interesting things surface
- and I wonder if I could ask for your help again  
I am suggesting the Pharisee, the ..... has some helpful pointers on prayer can you see any???

[space for thinking, then ...]

[PowerPoint slide of Luke 18:9-14]

Thoughts on the Pharisee

- he was regular in prayer  
he knew he had a standing before God, that God would listen to his prayer  
he prayed a prayer of 'thanksgiving'  
he had responsibilities and he carried them out

So what helpful lessons can we learn from our Pharisee, our ... ?

- first, note he had a regular ordered prayer life  
he knew prayer was necessary and important and he did it
- secondly he was genuinely grateful for the blessings in his life  
he prayed a prayer of thanksgiving
- and if he had stopped there he might have been ok, but of course he didn't, couldn't

Our Pharisee went on in a sense to tell God

- that God should be thankful to have the Pharisee on his team!  
and he goes on to list the reasons why God should hear and grant his prayer
- note too that it was Jewish custom to pray standing and out loud  
so this Pharisee tells God, and all the others in the temple, just how good he is
- and he also does something which can be a bit of a trap  
he turns his prayer into a 'sermon'

Plus the Pharisee does something else which has no place in prayer

- he looks down on other people and judges them harshly  
and he makes a pointed comparison with the tax collector
- in one sense he could be seen to be following a traditional Jewish prayer  
in which a man prays, "Praise the Lord that He did not make me a heathen, a woman, or uneducated man ..."
- however we are to praise God and be thankful that God accepts us as we are  
we do not need to tell God to accept us and our prayer  
because we are not someone else or because we are better than someone else

Now, for sure this Pharisee gets some marks because he is trying – very!

- but his way of praying looks at things like an ATM  
living a good life, right actions and good deeds are deposits  
coming before God in prayer is making a withdrawal
- it just does not work like that  
prayer is about a genuine relationship, about getting real with God

Speaking of getting real with God, that Tax collector is at the raw edge of life

- so can you help me one more time as I reverse the order  
we know that he is in a sense the “hero” of the parable  
the one to take note of positively
- yet can you see anything negative  
anything unhelpful in the way this tax collector prays, any traps to watch out for

[space for thinking, then ...]

Thoughts on the Tax Collector

- there is some question of whether it is all just words  
some ask what sign of repentance has he shown?  
what reparation has he made – like that other famous tax collector Zacchaeus?
- however the main thing seems to me is he stood off 'at a distance'  
he did not think he was good enough, he was just a 'wretched sinner'
- sometimes, especially in my role as Chaplain, someone will say to me  
'say a prayer for me, He'll listen to you'  
implying that God would not listen to them

This parable highlights that God listens to everyone

- the Tax collector does not have to stand in the shadows and avert his eyes  
God is pleased that he is there
- God may even be smiling

So what can we learn from this Tax Collector, our ...?

- first, he shows amazing faith and hope  
although everything tells him he should not even be there  
and he is such a terrible person God will not listen to him  
still he comes and speaks, he comes to pray
- then there is the tax collector's attitude of humility  
he does not think God owes him anything, not even to listen
- he acknowledges he has done wrong  
he asks for mercy and receives an overflowing of God's grace

The Tax collector comes before God

- recognising that he can only throw himself on God's mercy  
and the reality is it is the same for all of us  
that Pharisee could not and would not do this
- we may not like to agree, but we are all in the same state as the Tax collector  
none of us is good enough on our own merit  
as Paul wrote in Romans 3:23  
*All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory*

This is not a cause for despair, rather is our reason for hope

- because this is where we are restored in Jesus Christ  
Jesus is the sign of God's overwhelming grace and love
- so we may come before God and openly bare our souls

Interestingly, this Pharisee and Tax Collector do share one thing in common!

- they both fall into the trap of thinking it is about them  
that who they are, what they do, how they speak  
has a bearing on whether they are accepted or rejected by God
- it does not: because it is not about them, it is about God  
God who loves them and accepts them as they are  
and is only too willing to listen to their prayer

Hey thanks for your help with all this, and the Tax Collector and the Pharisee

- or the ..... and the ..... , and their good and bad points  
let me offer a few concluding thoughts
- this parable highlights that it is mostly about our attitude  
when we come before God in prayer
- the Pharisee expects to be noticed by God and everyone else  
the Tax collector hopes to avoid being seen by anyone  
and is not sure God will even listen to him
- the Pharisee reminds God why God needs him  
while the Tax collector says in effect 'O God, you see how badly I need you ...'

And how about this

- many of Jesus' original hearers would have expected that it was the Pharisee  
who would be rightly regarded by God and have his prayer heard
- there would have been huge surprise, some jaw-dropping even, when Jesus said:  
*When the two men went home, it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee  
who was pleasing to God*
- may be this should surprise us too?!  
that the Lord God, Creator of all that is, was and will be  
wishes to have a relationship with each and every one of us  
and that we can develop this relationship through prayer

Often it is my practice to offer you a 'take home task', kind of like "home work"

- so how about this:  
see if you can take away with you this parable, then during the week  
if you are in the habit of praying at least now and then  
consider how you may be like the Pharisee and the Tax collector  
and what you might do differently, and try it out
- if you are not in the habit of praying  
how about having a crack at it  
it does not need to be long or have special words  
just note how the tax collector did it

Prayer, it seems to me this parable tells us

- is real, genuine, down to earth, tin tacks talking to God  
sharing from the heart how things really are  
knowing that God welcomes you into his presence  
being assured God's ear is especially tuned to the prayers of a wounded spirit
- so be encouraged: pray, be honest, be realistic  
remember it is not about you but about God who loves you  
God who is just waiting to hear, in your own words, from you

