

How Should We Pray? And For How Long?

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Good morning. I'm Sebastian Juan. I am part of the Alameda Group. A reading from the Gospel according to Luke. Luke chapter 18 verse 1. Then God told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

He said, In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, Grant me justice against my adversary.

For some time he refused, but finally he said to himself, Even though I do not fear God or care what people think, Yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me.

[1 : 21] And the Lord said, Listen to what the injustice says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones who cry out to him day and night?

Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice and quickly, however. When the Son of Man comes, he will find faith on the earth.

To some who were confident of their very own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray.

One a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, God, I thank you that I am not like other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get, 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.

[2 : 29] I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God, for all those who exalt himself will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is the gospel of the Lord. This is the gospel of Christ. Fantastic reading.

Thank you, Sebastian. Good stuff, man. Well, good morning. We have been trying to, over the course of the last few weeks, we've just been looking at the parables in the gospel of Luke and seeking to just introduce you to Jesus, introduce you to the basic teachings of Jesus through those parables, and today you get two parables for the price of one.

It's a good Sunday here at Christ Church. You notice right away that the people in these parables are engaged in a spiritual practice that most people, whether they believe in God or not, have done, and that is to pray.

And we're going to talk about this Pharisee and tax collector that are praying in the temple first and look at the surprising twist and kind of unexpected punch of Jesus' story there.

[3 : 46] And then we're going to talk about this amazing, tenacious, feisty widow whom Jesus holds up for us as this beautiful example of faithful and persevering prayer that refuses to give up.

So, as we dive in, just a quick reminder of who the Pharisees and the tax collectors were. You see there in verse 9, it says, to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable, two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

Now, who were the religious Pharisees and the irreligious tax collectors? The Pharisees, they were these admired and respected leaders in their community.

They had a high view of God, a high view of the authority of the scriptures. They were scrupulous in obeying God's law. They very often went beyond what God's law required.

And these folks were generous with their money. They were charitable toward the poor and the needy. And then what about these tax collectors? These were not like our friendly IRS agents who were gonna receive our taxes on April 15th.

[5 : 05] And aren't we thankful for these government workers, these IRS agents? You gotta remember that in Israel, the people of God, they had been conquered. They were occupied by the Roman Empire.

And the empire was taking these enormous spoils of war that they called taxes. And they transferred them back to Rome. And I'm so, so tempted this morning to just spend a moment outlining for you the difference between taxes and tariffs.

But that would be a massive distraction. And so what I'm doing right now is exercising incredible self-control in resisting that temptation. But basically, the Roman Empire, they would hire these Jewish men and they were to collect the taxes.

And they said, hey, if you want, you can just charge as much as you like. And you can line your own pockets with the money. And so these guys were, they were loathed. They were hated because they were enormously greedy.

They were the dishonest extortioners that became fabulously wealthy by betraying their fellow citizens and collaborating with their imperialist enemies.

[6 : 10] And so when Jesus begins this parable, comparing the most religious people in that society with the most irreligious and corrupt and despised traitors, all the people listening would have assumed that the Pharisee would be the hero of the story and the tax collector would be the villain.

So with that, I want to explore this under three headings. Surprise, surprise. First of all, I want to talk about how not to pray. Secondly, how to pray humbly.

And third, how to pray faithfully. Okay? So how not to pray, how to pray humbly, how to pray faithfully. So how not to pray, look at verse 11.

The Pharisee and the other tax collector, the Pharisee stood by himself and he prayed, God, I thank you that I'm not like other people, robbers, evildoers, and adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. Now what is right and good about that prayer and what is wrong and bad about that prayer? Well, what's right and good is that he starts with God.

[7 : 20] God exists. God is the source of all being and life. God is worthy of prayer. He's worthy of the people that he's made in his image and given them the very breath of life.

He's worthy to hear from them, God, I thank you. Right? He's worthy of our thanks and our praise. And in many ways, this man who's praying, he's a good man.

He's an exemplary man. And he begins by speaking first about all the vices from which he's abstained that are outlined in the Ten Commandments.

So when you look at the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, you go down that list. Number eight on that list is robbery. Right? And that's just taking stuff that's not yours, stuff that belongs to other people.

It's talking about cheating in business and skimming off the top. He says, I've managed to not do that. And then he gets to number seven on that list, adultery, which is having sex with a single person that is someone's potential future spouse or with a married person who's someone's current present spouse.

[8 : 26] And he says, I haven't done that either. I've stuck close to the Ten Commandments. I've tried to preserve and protect the lives, the property, the businesses, the bodies, the families, the relationships of the people around me, including myself.

And then he begins to speak about the pious practices in which he engages. And the Torah talks about these things in all sorts of places.

But for example, if you went to Leviticus 23, it talks about fasting one day a year on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, that you would just not eat and you would observe that day of the atonement.

Or in Deuteronomy 14, it says that you would tithe and you would give 10% of all the income that you get on your crops and on your produce. And so this guy, he conceives rightly that a relationship with God is absolutely all-encompassing.

If it doesn't touch your stomach, if it doesn't touch your wallet, it's really not much of a relationship. And he's living according to God's standards of righteousness. In fact, he goes beyond what God requires.

[9 : 36] Instead of fasting one time a year, he says, I fast two times a week. He says, instead of tithing only on my income, I give 10% of all that I get.

Any of the stuff that I buy, any of the gifts I receive, I tithe on that. And it's hard to argue that society would not be better off if there were more people like this who were honest in their business dealings, who were faithful in their sexuality, who were generous with their money, right?

And maybe you know some people like this. They live a good life. But what's wrong with this guy, according to Jesus, is that the spirit of his prayer and the heart out of which that prayer is uttered is all wrong, right?

Because after the opening word to God, he doesn't refer to God again. But he himself is never out of the picture, right? He glances at God, but he's really kind of fixated on himself.

He's a self-centered, not a God-centered person. And he doesn't ask anything from God. In fact, he doesn't even seem to need God at all. Now, if he had said, God, I thank you for protecting me in such a way that my life hasn't become corrupt, that you protected me from abject hunger, in which I would have been tempted to become a thief in order to feed my family.

[11 : 03] Or God, I thank you that you protected me from poverty, where I wouldn't even have any money and wouldn't be in a position to give. Thank you. But he doesn't say that. He seems to see his not succumbing to stealing and sexual immorality and greed and miserliness and all these things as his own doing, right?

He gives no thanks for what God has done, but rather he gives a list of his own personal achievements. Now, this guy would be an impeccable example to imitate if humility before God and compassion for our neighbors didn't matter.

But they do matter. They matter supremely. This guy is praying without a sense of his need. He's praying without a sense of dependence on the mercy of God.

In many ways, he's like that older son that we met in Luke 15 last week. Remember the parable of the prodigal sons? That guy who was confident in his own righteousness.

He was self-righteous. You see, when we fail to know our own hearts, when we fail to realize our condition before a holy God, how easy it is like this guy to begin to compare ourselves with the people around us to start to feel superior, to start to look down on other people, to hold them in contempt and despise them and begin to even pray.

[12 : 34] If we don't say it out loud, we at least think it in our heart, God, I thank you that I'm not like these other people. God, I thank you that you've made me better than these people. You see, his heart is full of praise and thanksgiving, but his praise and his thanksgiving, it's not for God.

It's for himself. He is exalting someone, but it's not God he's exalting. He's praying to congratulate himself before God.

He's adoring himself, worshiping himself. Oh God, you are so very fortunate to have someone like me on your team. And I can live honorably before you quite apart from your mercy.

You know, as good as this guy seems on the outside, on the inside, he's actually suffering from a horrible spiritual blindness and self-righteousness. And I don't know about you, but when I read this story, I find myself saying, God, I thank you that I'm not like this Pharisee.

But you know, the moment you say that, you realize what's happened. Right? If you look down on this man, Jesus has you in his trap, and he's like, ah, see? You have in your heart what he has in his heart.

[13 : 48] There's this great verse in the Old Testament. It's 1 Samuel 16, 7. It says this. It says, the Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

And what does Jesus teach about what's actually inside of the human heart? He says elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark, he says this in Mark 7. He says it's what comes out of a person, that's the thing that defiles them.

It's from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come. Jesus says it's sexual immorality, it's theft, it's murder, it's adultery, but it's also greed and malice, it's deceit, it's lewdness, it's envy, it's slander, it's arrogance, it's folly.

Jesus says all these evils come from inside, and that's what defiles a person. You see, on the outside, we can be spiritually serious, and we can be morally upright, but on the inside, we can have these evil thoughts that are just pouring out of us like a river in flood.

And we can be trusting in ourselves like this man, that we're good and that we're righteous when in fact, we do not understand our actual condition before God. This Pharisee, he feels no need to humble himself, no need to talk about his sins, no need to ask for mercy.

[15:21] And so, Jesus surprisingly says that it's this religious man, this one who has it all together on the outside, that he's actually the one who goes home unjustified before God.

He goes home unapproved and unaccepted by God. This paragon of virtue, this pillar of the community, he goes home, Jesus says, not in a right relationship and a right standing with God. And that means that he's in an extremely dangerous position because Jesus says those who exalt themselves before God today, they're going to eventually be humbled by God on the day of judgment.

Many people, Jesus says, are going to be shocked like this man on that last day. And so, Jesus says, I would rather get the shock out of the way right now than for you to be shocked then.

So, how should we not pray? Well, definitely not, God, I thank you that I. Right? What we need is a justified heart and a regenerated heart that says, not God, I thank you that I, but God, I thank you that you.

[16:30] We need a heart that enumerates and gives thanks, not for our own goodness and our own righteousness, but a heart that says, God, I thank you that you are merciful.

Amen? So, that's how not to pray. Okay? But then Jesus wants us to know not just how not to pray, he wants us to know how to pray and how to pray humbly, how to pray humbly.

And so, look at verse 13. It says, this tax collector, he stood at a distance and he would not even look up to heaven but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

This despised traitor, this irreligious and completely unethical man, he has a sense of his own personal unworthiness before God.

He knows that he, he's not fit to stand in that temple and even to get close to the Holy of Holies, that place where a holy God dwells in the midst of his people. But rather, he stands at a distance, he barely comes inside of the door and he won't, he won't turn his eyes up toward God's throne in heaven but he just looks down with a sense of his own shame and his own guilt and condemnation.

[17:47] And you know, Jesus, when he said, he began the Sermon on the Mount, he said, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who are aware of how spiritually and morally bankrupt they are before God, that's this guy.

He comes to God empty handed, he says, God, I have nothing to offer you but my need. All you need is need, right? And you know, how we pray with our body actually reveals the state of our heart.

Right? So whether we stand like this guy with our head bowed down and our hands just battering our polluted hearts with a sense of grief and sorrow and contrition or whether we sit and we open our hands empty in a posture of need and desperate dependence or whether we get down and on our knees and we put our face on the ground and clasp our hands in the posture of a beggar, our body language is a form of prayer and this guy is communicating both with his body and with his lips and he's not saying, God, I thank you that I am awesome.

He's saying, God, I thank you that you are merciful and so he says, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And what's incredible here is that in the Greek there's actually a definite article there.

So he doesn't say, God, have mercy on me, a sinner. He actually says, God, have mercy on me, the sinner. Friends, are we willing to call ourselves the sinner?

[19:23] Are we willing to say that we know that we have nothing with which we can boast before God? This guy, he's utterly lacking in the externalism that we find in this Pharisee.

The Pharisee, when he looks at his life, he looks at sins as if it's some sort of discrete individual action that I either do or I don't do in the eyes of other people so that I can compare myself with others and I can know how I'm doing relative to your performance.

But this guy doesn't talk like that at all. He says, God, have mercy on me, the sinner. Not for this sin or for that sin, but for, I'm just the sinner. And I know that my spiritual and my moral record is absolutely saturated with myself and my sin.

And I know that even my most righteous acts are like filthy rags. That even the best things I've ever done, they've actually been tainted with my own self-interest.

And so he says, God, have mercy on me, the sinner. And when he says, have mercy, that word actually means, God, be propitiated. God, let your wrath be removed.

[20 : 44] That's what that word mercy means. And here he is, he's in the temple and where he's praying, it's not very far from the Holy of Holies and inside of the Holy of Holies there's the Ark of the Covenant.

Right? And inside the Ark of the Covenant there's the Ten Commandments. And he knows that he cannot come near God without being scrutinized by the law of God. But who could pass the scrutiny of God's law and be acceptable to God?

Right? No one can claim a righteousness of their own. And so he knows that over that Ark of the Covenant there's this slab of gold and it's called the mercy seat.

Right? And that's the very same word that this tax collector uses, the mercy seat. God, have mercy on me. And on that mercy seat, one time a year on Yom Kippur, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest, he would come in and he would put the blood of a substitutionary sacrifice who died to pay the penalty for the sins of the people.

He would put that blood on the mercy seat. And when he would do that, the scrutiny of God's law would be satisfied for another year. Right? The law's penalty would be fulfilled until the next Yom Kippur.

[22 : 01] And so why does Jesus put this word about the mercy seat into the mouth of this tax collector? Because Jesus is describing what he stepped out of eternity and into time to do.

He's describing why he came all the way from heaven to earth for us. He's describing what the Father sent him to accomplish on his cross. Right?

That Jesus came not to exalt himself but he came to humble himself and he came so that he might be the sinner in our place.

The only other place where this exact word, this exact mercy seat word is used in the New Testament is in Hebrews chapter 2 verse 17 and it says this.

For this reason he, Jesus, had to be made like them fully human in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God and that he might make atonement, that he might make mercy for the sins of the people.

[23 : 12] This tax collector is seeking the merciful atonement from God that God sent Jesus Christ to provide on his cross. He seeks God's mercy in order that he might have his sins covered, in order that the divine wrath and condemnation and judgment of God might be removed from him and when we hear Jesus as we approach Palm Sunday and Good Friday, when we hear Jesus crying out from his cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

It's because he became the sinner. When we hear Jesus crying out on his cross, Father, forgive them for they don't know what they're doing.

He's pleading for the mercy of God on our behalf. And when at the end Jesus cries out, it is finished what he's talking about, the thing that he's accomplished for us is the justification of the ungodly.

What he's accomplished for us is the removal of our guilt, the removal of our shame, the removal of our condemnation and him having robed us in the very righteousness of Christ.

Jesus closes this parable in verse 14. He says, I tell you that this man rather than the other went home justified before God for those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

[24 : 35] What a surprise and shocking ending. Here is this loathed and hated and despised tax collector whom God approves and accepts.

Here is the bad man, the irreligious man, the unethical man, the negative example, the younger son in Luke chapter 15 and he's not just forgiven but he has a new and a right and a justified standing before God, a righteousness that's been given to him by God's sheer grace and on the basis of faith.

And friends, Jesus says to those of us who know ourselves to be poor sinners in need of mercy, he says, hey, I have really good news for you that like this man, however heavy your debts are that you owe God, however poor you are in his sight spiritually and morally, every debt can be canceled, all the ledgers can be cleared, you no longer owe anything, in fact, I've come to make you rich, I've come to make you spiritually rich and morally rich and relationally rich, I've come to put on you my

perfect righteousness so that God, when he relates to you, he relates to you as if you had never sinned or had never even been the sinner.

It's as if you had been as perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient in your place and all you need to do is accept this gift with a believing heart.

So friends, I ask you today, are you confident? Do you have that confidence? Not in your own righteousness that comes from the inside, but on that declared righteousness, that positional righteousness that has come to you from the outside and has been given to you on the basis of God's mercy and the righteousness of Christ.

[26 : 40] You see, those like this tax collector who humble themselves under God's mercy today, they will be justified, they will be exalted on the day of judgment and Jesus even says, you can go home today just like that tax collector went home that day, justified before God.

All you need to say is God, have mercy on me. God, make atonement for me, the sinner, on the basis of what Christ has done for me.

So how not to pray, God, I thank you that I. How to pray humbly, God, I thank you that you are merciful. And last but not least, I want to talk about just for a moment how to pray faithfully.

I love this woman that Jesus presents before us and many people assume assume that the Bible is this patriarchal, misogynistic book and then they open it.

Right? And then they begin to read about Jesus and then they find Jesus holding up women in these stories and in his band of disciples and in the early church, women who are these exemplars of faith for us to imitate.

[27 : 54] He says, if you want to know the posture and the attitude of prayer, look at this despised tax collector but if you want to know how to keep praying, if you want to know how to never give up praying, look at this oppressed widow and he says, it says in verse 1, then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.

And at the end in verse 80 he says, however, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith? Will he find faith like this woman has faith on the earth? Most of us, I think, we know what it's like to pray, Father, may your kingdom come.

You know, it's that simple prayer, Jesus gave it to us in Luke 11, we've been talking about it through the whole of the season of Lent. Father, may your kingdom come. But, a lot of us when we don't get answers to that prayer that we're looking for, when we aren't really seeing the kingdom of God breaking through into our lives and the lives of other people, the life of this world in the way that we want, how easy it is to lose heart, how easy it is to get discouraged, how easy it is to give up.

Is that just me? So, Jesus gives this, the story of this woman who has a feisty faith and a tenacious hope and this is so important as we go to Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter season.

Jesus says this, he says, in a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought and there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, grant me justice against my adversary.

[29 : 30] She represents the vulnerable and the oppressed people that are all the way down at the bottom of that scale of power and privilege and she has an adversary who's done her wrong, likely cheated her financially and what she needs is a just judge who can put the wrong right and give her justice but what she gets is a judge that's the complete opposite of God, right?

He doesn't care about God, he doesn't seem to want to do right by people. You know, I'm tempted to provide more contemporary examples of this judge but I refrain.

But you know this kind of person. In verse four it says, for some time he refused but finally he said to himself, even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice so that she won't eventually come and attack me.

This woman's amazing. She refuses to lie down as a helpless and hopeless victim but she keeps coming to this corrupt judge with her plea.

He leaves his house in the morning, she's there when he gets there at work. He takes a break for coffee after his first case, there's a note that says, hey this woman wants to see you. He goes to lunch, he gets back, there's a voicemail from this lady.

[30 : 50] He retires to his chambers at the end of a long day, she's there banging on the door and Jesus says, friends, do you want to know how to pray? This powerless woman is exercising immense power.

She keeps coming. She's just relentlessly bothering this judge. She's persistently wearing him out. In fact, in the Greek, the judge says, the only reason I gave her what she wanted is because I thought she was going to give me a black eye.

It's the language of a boxing match where this judge is cornered and he's being slugged by the least powerful person in that society and Jesus says, that is how I want my disciples to pray. Not to establish a righteousness of our own, but to express the righteousness that has been conferred to us by a most merciful God. Jesus says, you may not have much power, but any of us can pray, Father, may your kingdom come.

And Jesus says, if a rotten judge like this can be persuaded by someone who pesters him day and night until it happens, and if a wicked man can sometimes do a good and a right thing even from bad motives, then how much more will God?

[32 : 14] how much more will God do right by those who pray that his kingdom of justice, his kingdom of righteousness would come in the midst of all the injustices in the kingdoms of this world?

You know, as Easter approaches, we have many, many opportunities to pray. We have a prayer meeting this Wednesday. We have a good Friday prayer vigil. We have all kind of opportunities to pray.

and I just leave you with the question, what if we prayed more like this woman? Like this tax collector, certainly. God have mercy I'll be a sinner.

But also, like this woman where we don't stop. Hebrews chapter 4 says this, or Hebrews chapter 2, 17, or sorry, 4, 16.

It says, let us approach God's throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Friends, we don't have a God who's difficult.

[33 : 20] We don't have a God who's resistant. We don't have a God who needs us to give him a black eye. We have a good and a loving father.

We have a just and a righteous judge. We have a wealthy and a generous king. And he is there ready to respond eagerly when his chosen people, when his beloved people cry out to him day and night for his kingdom to come breaking through into our lives, for his rule and his reign to come breaking into the lives of others, for his justice and his righteousness to come down on earth as it is in heaven.

He's eager for us to pray with the kind of desperation for God to do what only he can do. And he loves it when we come to him with an unwearied perseverance and a dogged expectation that when we pray for his kingdom to come, it will come.

And so friends, will we cry out to our father day and night until we see his kingdom breaking through in this Easter season? I hope that we will. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.