

Good and Bad Prayer

Intro. The Lord believes prayer is very important in the lives of his disciples. Today is another lesson about prayer. Last week it was about being persistent and confident in prayer. This week the parable is about two people who came to the temple to pray, but their hearts are very different.

I. The Lord used two kinds of people well-known in the community: the Pharisee, a leader who had power and authority, and the tax collector who, like the widow in last week's parable, lived in the shadows because of his job. Both came to the temple to pray. Both stand in the usual posture of prayer at that time. That is where the similarities end. The Pharisee went to the front of the temple while the tax collector stood by the door. Their

attitudes were different. One *praised himself* for his good deeds, the other *begged forgiveness* for his deeds. One was not open to God's grace; the other poured out his heart asking God to fill it with grace.

The Pharisee used the word "I" again and again. He had no need of God's help; he was doing very well all by himself. He prayed to God from his ego, to feel good about all his good deeds or to make a show for others in the temple.

Prayer is a conversation with God. A good conversation is always two-way. When one person does all the talking, we often lose interest in the conversation and sometimes in the other person. I wonder if God has a similar response to my prayer if I do all the talking or if all I talk about is me. Does

God “look at his watch,” bored by my prayer, wishing I would finish?

Concl. Like the widow in last week’s parable, the tax collector had no power in the community; he was an outcast. His prayer was brief, “O God, be merciful to me a sinner.” He went home “justified” by God, while the Pharisee did not. The word “justified” means God judged the tax collector righteous, honest, ethical and the Pharisee as self-righteous. This is another reversal of power and position in the Lord’s vision of the kingdom of heaven. The Pharisee judged others harshly. God judged *him* harshly. We can be quick to judge other people by their clothes, music, jobs or by thinking we know their hearts. Only One knows the heart: the Lord. When we pray, we don’t tell the Lord what we think he wants to hear. We ask him what we need to

hear from him. A spiritual writer said maybe the most important thing about prayer is to “show up” {estar presente}, not only when we feel hopeful, happy or full of faith. But also when we are tired, doubtful, angry or bored. [In Exile, Fr. Ron Rolheiser, 2003] It is in these moments our prayer is humble, asking for God’s grace in our hearts.

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