

The prayers of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk. 18:9-14)

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THE PARABLE of the Pharisee and the publican is introduced as follows: "And he spake also this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set the rest at nought" (Lk. 18:9, RV mg.). Jesus addressed his parable about prayer, not to those represented by the publican, for they already had the right attitude of approach to God, but to those represented by the Pharisee, including, we presume, not just the Pharisees themselves, but those who still followed Jesus yet retained the lifestyle and attitudes of the Pharisees. Such, according to the literal rendering of the Greek (as given in the RV margin), regarded themselves as superior to everybody else, "the rest", not just some others, as the AV might be taken to indicate.

Jesus said of the Pharisee that he "prayed thus *with himself*" (v. 11). Though this may indicate that he did not pray aloud, there is surely a deeper meaning too. His recital of his good deeds did not reach God, for it was not offered in the sort of spirit that is acceptable to God. In a sense we presume God must have heard the prayer, for our understanding of Him is that He knows all things, but the point is that he does not *hearken* to such prayers. Regarding the Pharisee's claims, the two things he boasted of doing were in fact going beyond the Law, for the Law did not command fasting twice weekly, nor the tithing of everything. For all their vaunted obedience to the Law, the Pharisees were guilty of omitting what Jesus elsewhere describes as "the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Mt. 23:23).

As for the claim not to be guilty of sinful practices "as other men are", including extortion, Jesus said the Pharisees were "full of extortion and excess" and "full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (vv. 25,28). The Pharisees were not righteous men who happened to lack compassion for others, but wicked men who were completely oblivious to what they were really like.

The brief description of the publican portrays in masterly fashion his humility before the all-righteous Creator. He:

- stood afar off
- bowed his head
- smote his breast
- acknowledged himself to be a sinner.

In fact, taking the RV marginal rendering, he spoke of himself as "*the sinner*". All that matters when we stand before God in prayer is that we acknowledge *ourselves* to be sinners; the fact that other individuals are too is not relevant and should have no place in our thinking, though prayers for God to remove evil from the earth and bring judgement upon those who despise His Word do have their place.

The prayer, "God be merciful to me the sinner", receives its fulfilment in the work of Jesus Christ. The word translated "be merciful" occurs elsewhere only in Hebrews 2:17, where it refers to his work of bringing forgiveness of sins for the people: "Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, *to make reconciliation for the sins of the people*". The scene depicted in the parable took place in the temple, but the mercy sought by the publican came through the one who was put to death "without the camp" (13:11), to whom the sacrifices and the priestly work of the temple pointed.

In a sense, if we have been baptized into Christ we have progressed beyond the parable, for at our baptism we acknowledged our sins and sought the mercy of God. However, we still sin after baptism, and continue to need God's mercy, so the attitude of the publican is one we must continue to show, always bearing in mind the lesson with which our Lord concludes the parable: "every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (Lk. 18:14).