

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The parable of the prayers by the Pharisee and the tax collector is a welcome, straight-forward change from the type that Jesus usually challenges us with. We often struggle to understand the purpose behind many of these parables. But today, we seem to have “X” over here...and “Y” over here. Relatively clear cut stuff...on the surface.

What is Jesus revealing with this parable?

Nowadays, Pharisees generally have a bad rep. But that was not the case in the time of Jesus. They were well respected and honored members of their community, dedicated to studying and diligently following the law. They were the “creme-de-la-creme” of biblical Jewish society.

The one featured today, though...he is **really** different from other people, even people who share his faith. The law requires one to fast one day a year, the Day of Atonement, but this Pharisee fasts two days every week. The requirement is to tithe on certain sources of income, but this Pharisee gives away one tenth of his entire income. He is **the** model of religious zealotry. The most upright of the upright citizenry.

The tax collector, on the other hand, is at the other end of the social scale. In those days, the tax collector was not the relatively-anonymous bureaucrat we might contact today...whose phone calls are monitored to ensure they are courteous. We may not like taxes, but today it does not get personal because the tax person is just doing the job.

Yet, in biblical Judea under the rule of Rome, it was **very** personal with the tax collector. They were themselves Jews who turned their backs on their own people, conspiring with the Romans for nothing more than money. They had to collect a certain pile of money for the Empire, and they were allowed to keep what they could extort beyond that. The tax collector was held in near-universal contempt and lived a life of isolation. Perhaps the best contemporary parallel is a wholesale drug dealer, and I am fond of describing their social standing as “they are lower than pond scum.”

So, now we have the “upright, wholesome, religious zealot” over here....and the below-pond scum over here....typical polar opposites in his parables. But, as he often does by using shock value to emphasize his teaching, Jesus throws these polar opposites on their heads....so that we stop, and hopefully start pondering the message.

This Pharisee is in the temple. And he prays. He is thankful to God...but his thankfulness is not

for the grace of God that enables him to do what he does, but rather that **his** devout behavior makes him unlike other people, sets him apart from them.

Four times in his brief prayer the word "I" appears, all in self-congratulation. Though he nominally addresses his prayer to God, even God ends up being cut off, kept outside. There is nothing for God to do; our Pharisee has it all well in hand. In what is presented as prayer, this Pharisee sounds as though he is talking to himself. Perhaps he is. Absent is any longing for God, any hunger for the holy, any glimpse of glory. His prayer also categorizes the "others"... thieves, rogues, adulterers. In his eyes, they are no more than their sins. They are not made in the image of God, nor are they candidates for redemption.

As for this tax collector, he is a moral, spiritual and political disgrace who dares to show his face in the temple. Instead of fasting, he probably is into conspicuous consumption. He does not give to the temple because he is too busy ripping off his relatives and neighbors. He probably cannot remember the last time he was in the house of God.

But his heart has not entirely frozen over. He stares at his sandals. Does not dare look anybody in the eye, much less lift his head in grateful prayer. With a closed fist he beats his chest more than once, all powerful emotion from someone who sees his life for what it is. His prayer is a cry, brief but piercing: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"

With these words, he throws open the doors of his heart, and begs for God to enter. He hates what he is, what he has done, what he represents. And he is desperate for grace.

Where the prayer of the Pharisee is self-centered, the prayer of the tax collector is God-centered. He wastes no time in assessing other people, comparing himself to them. He makes no reference to what he has done or not done. He knows that God knows him, and this finally breaks him open and makes him want something better than all he is and all he has done.

"OK," we wonder, "So, does the parable teach us that prayer is dangerous, if it is not done the right way? Do we need to learn the right words, and how and when to say them?"

No.

The point is that there are **no** right words.

Our words...to each other, as well as to God...are a verbal self-revelation, as long as they are uttered sincerely.

No matter what we are talking about, or who we are talking with, our words should reflect as expression of what is inside **here (heart)**..., as much, if not more, than what is inside **here (head)**. That

is not to say that we should “dumb down” our communication. Absolutely not. God did not give our species the gift of reasoned intellect to leave out on the highway as road kill.

Instead, our cumulative intellect helps us to understand God’s creation as it continues to unfold, as God self-reveals to each of us, and it is affected by each of us through God’s grace as we live within it. The understanding and experience each one of us has in life, enriched by the discernable blessings from a loving God, all add layers of color, and texture, and music to his creation by our living within it.

That is the relation of prayer in this parable. Being open.

Prayer to God is **NOT** “the show”. It is NOT the selected few words, the mechanical recitation of the right language....uttered on cue, at the right time. Or at the right place, as in here, the modern-day “temple” of the Pharisee and tax collector, this holy of holies. “Present and accounted for”, in attendance before others to be seen.

We cannot fake it. Cannot imagine it. Push it. Mask it. Control it.

The only thing we can do is to... let it go. That is what Mr. Pond Scum, the tax collector, did. His prayer was only seven words long, but it was not the formula. This is not a parable for a recipe.

Instead, prayer to God is...the life we live. The **real** reality of our lives.

It is the conversation that you folks have out here after the service, or on the phone later with friends. We pray to God....by word and action....every moment we are awake.

When we make that initial, earnest, heartfelt decision...as scary as it is...to let ourselves be subject to the transformative power of God in the Holy Spirit, then we can begin to see how Jesus becomes the Christ in this life, at this time, in this place.

After all, even pond scum is a simple, basic form of life. In itself an essential part of the unlimited intricacy and vastness that we gradually come to know in the loving relationship of God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen.