

Thank God I'm not like *them*!

Hespeler, 23 October 2022 © Scott McAndless

Joel 2:23-32, Psalm 65, 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18, [Luke 18:9-14](#)

Jesus once told a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. And anyone who has ever heard that parable has adopted an automatic dislike for the Pharisee. The thing about the prayer of the Pharisee that really gets to us is that at least half of it is not really a prayer. It is simply a man who is talking himself up. **“I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.”**

We all know that anyone who, half the time, can only talk about themselves and what wonderful things they do is absolutely insufferable. That's the kind of person you avoid at a cocktail party. So I'm pretty sure that, when he included this in the man's prayer, Jesus was indicating that we are not supposed to like this guy. And, of course, he also lets us know that God is really not all that much interested in listening to him either because the end of the parable implies that God was not impressed with his prayer.

The Actual Prayer

But all of that part where he's talking about himself, is not really what you would call a prayer, not any more than a situation where someone is just talking about themselves is what you would call a conversation. No, the actual prayerful content comes before that. It is a prayer of thanksgiving, which is normally seen as a really good thing, right? But here is that actual prayer of thanksgiving: **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people.”** And then he goes on to list all of the objectionable kinds of people that he is not like.

And that is the prayer I would like to focus on today. In telling this parable, Jesus gives us all the signs and indications that we are not supposed to like this guy or what he prays. Most of us wouldn't really think of that as an appropriate prayer. But I'll tell you something – it is a prayer that I hear all the time.

The Fundamental Prayer of our Time

Oh, people don't pray it in so many words, but if you listen to what they are saying, you can often find that prayer in the background of it. In fact, when I think of it, I would say that that Pharisee's prayer is the fundamental prayer of our time and perhaps of any time. When you know what you are listening for, you hear it everywhere. And, as Jesus strongly suggested in this parable, it is not a very helpful prayer.

For example, one of the major crises we are seeing in our society right at this moment is a housing crisis. More people do not have adequate shelter in our society today than we have seen in a very long time. And it is especially disturbing because it has become so visible. Major cities all across this country, including our own, of course,



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have large homeless encampments, many right out where everyone can see them.

Talking about People without Shelter

As a result, the subject of this crisis tends to come up a lot. People are talking about it over coffee or beer. And you know what I hear people saying? I hear people saying, “Oh, that’s just people who don’t want to work.” I hear people saying, “People live in encampments like that because they choose to.”

And do you know what people who talk like that are really saying? It is a prayer. They are saying, “God, I thank you that I am not like *those* other people.” Because, when people look at those who do not have adequate shelter, that is all they see because that is all they are looking for. They only see how such people are unlike them. And so long as that is all they see, that makes them feel very safe because it makes them feel like they will not find themselves in the same situation. So, a person looks at themselves and says, “Well, I’ve always been willing to work, and I don’t *want* to end up homeless, so obviously such an outcome will never befall me.” Or, in other words, “God, I thank you that I am not like *them*.”

The Overdose Crisis

Of course, the housing crisis is only one of the areas where we react like that. There is an overdose crisis that has been plaguing our cities for about ten years now. This has led to thousands of deaths and near deaths from fentanyl and carfentanyl, pain medications of extraordinary potency. So that is also a topic that often comes up for discussion and I can also tell you what kind of comments you will hear when it comes up. Folks talk about how some people just don’t have any control these days, how people of a certain ethnic group or age group are only interested in indulging themselves and that’s why they get hooked on these drugs.

And people will especially talk about how they never got hooked on tobacco or alcohol or any illicit substance. Or, if they ever were, they’ll talk about how they got off them through their own sheer willpower. And do you know what they are saying when they say such things? That’s right, they are praying, “God, I thank you that I am not like *those* other people.” They are only interested in how such people are unlike them and cannot see any similarities because they do not look for them.

It’s Just Not True

Here’s what I find particularly objectionable about that prayer. (I suspect that Jesus may have had the same problem with it.) When we pray like that, we are being thankful for something that is simply not true. The people who struggle, whether it be with drug addiction or lack of shelter, whether it be of unemployment or broken relationships or any number of other issues that are plaguing our society today, they are always much more like us than we want to see and so we don’t see it. We don’t see it because we don’t look for it.

Now, looking at the crisis in shelter, I would not say that it is never true that people end up in such a situation because they have a problem with employment. Nor would I suggest that there aren’t some people in shelters or encampments because they have, in some sense, chosen to be there. But I will push us all to consider that the problem is definitely much more complex than that.

More Complicated

Just ask, for example, somebody who is complaining that unhoused people just don't want to work whether they would hire somebody who had no fixed address and no reliable transportation to get to work. I suspect the answer to that question would be no. So it's got to be more complex than just a simple desire not to work.

And if some people choose to be unhoused, which some may do, do we ask what other option they might have had? What if the only other option is to be in a relationship where they are abused? What if they know that they are susceptible to addiction and the only living situation available to them means that they will be constantly exposed to drugs? Can you not see where it might be a better choice to be unhoused when those kinds of things are your only other options?

But most of all, any of us who observe the housing crisis from afar likely got into the housing market at a very different time than what people are dealing with today. The prices we were able to pay and the equity that we were able to build up have made us feel much more secure, but do we really think that if we did not have those advantages or if we were just starting out today with housing prices as they are that we would end up all that differently?

Who Gets Addicted?

And when it comes to addiction, you would absolutely be amazed to see the statistics about who got caught up in the latest overdose crisis. They are not marginalized people in the majority. The statistics indicate that that crisis cut across every demographic of society equally – wealth, race, age and gender. They are just like you, and they are just like me. And, in many cases, the addiction crisis is also how many people who are just like you ended up without shelter because the two crises are connected.

No, when we look at it all openly and honestly, we do have to come to terms with the simple truth that we may not be as unlike the people who struggle with these things as we thought. But of course, we cling to the idea that they aren't like us because the alternative, frankly, is terrifying. But that makes the prayer, **“God, I thank you that I am not like other people,”** not just a bad prayer but a delusional one.

What Should we Pray?

But that leaves us with the question: what should we then pray? The realities of this life being what they are, the hard truth is that any one of us could find ourselves dealing with the same kinds of disasters that happen to others. Any one of us could lose our shelter or our wealth or our health as a result of some random conglomerate of disasters or unforeseen events. We can't exempt ourselves by saying that such things only happen to people who aren't like us. That is why the Pharisee's prayer is so unwise. But we need a prayer, for otherwise where can we find hope and comfort?

The Tax Collector's Prayer

So let us turn instead to the prayer of the tax collector. Jesus tells us that he went up to pray that day too. And we should not forget that the people in the audience listening to Jesus were very much predisposed to hate the tax collector. He was exactly the kind of person that everyone else was happy not to be like. He was a collaborator who worked with the foreign occupying government. Think, for

example, of a Ukrainian working with the Russians in the territory they occupy today. That's how people saw him.

And yet Jesus tells us that he prayed and not only that he prayed but that God was disposed to listen to him. Perhaps it helped that his prayer was simple: **"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"**

But let me tell you something about that prayer. It was brief and humble, but that was not what made it so acceptable to God. I believe that God appreciated its honesty. But its honesty was not found in the notion that this man was somehow worse than everyone else because of who he was. It was honest because it is true of all of us.

Where to Find Comfort

I know that we like to insulate ourselves from all of the bad things that could potentially happen to us in this world by thinking that we are somehow better than everyone else to whom such things befall. That is why we pray like the Pharisee. But since we are all much more alike than we dare to think, we cannot take comfort in our own righteousness. Where do we find comfort then? Only in God's mercy and in God's grace. Finding comfort in how we are unlike those who suffer is a fool's errand. Finding comfort in God's grace is the source of true and lasting peace.

The End of the Parable

Jesus famously ended his parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector by saying this about the tax collector, **"I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other."** And I know how people often read that. We seem to have learned to read all of God's promises exclusively in terms of what happens to us after we die. And so I know that many hear Jesus saying that the tax collector got to go to heaven and the Pharisee didn't.

But I actually think that Jesus was saying something much more important than that. You see, what happens to us after we die, that doesn't depend on us just following certain formulas or even on us praying certain prayers. That depends entirely on God's grace. And when the Bible says that we are saved by grace through faith, what it is actually saying is that we need to trust in God's grace. That is always a wise thing to do. In the gracious hands of God is the safest place you will ever be.

Getting Through the Trials of Life

So, Jesus wasn't making a pronouncement about who would get into heaven and who wouldn't. He was talking about the kind of prayer that you can pray that will actually assist you to make your way through the various trials of this life. The prayer of the Pharisee might make you feel safe by fooling you into thinking that bad things only happen to people who aren't like you. But the prayer of the tax collector helps you to face up to the very real and dark side of life in this world, and it lets you know that you need not face it alone – you have a God of grace who loves you as you are and who will be with you.