

**Two Prayers, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 22071028**  
**Joel 2:23-32 and Luke 18:9-14**  
**Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 28 October, 2007**

Prayer: Almighty God in heaven, I thank you that you have made me into a minister, righteous, blameless, industrious, studious, trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous and kind. I thank you because you did not make me like any of these others, insecure, greedy, and narrow-minded. I thank you that you gave me such a good education. I keep all your commandments, I tithe to the church, and pray every day. I am so thankful that you have blessed me in this way. Amen.

You were probably as uncomfortable to hear that prayer as I was to say it. It was not really a prayer, because God knows I was using it to get your attention, not as an address to God. We've been talking lately about thanksgiving and having an attitude of gratitude, but this is not the kind of thanks that God desires. A prayer like mine is a statement of arrogance and pride. It is the exalting of oneself over others. It is an engagement in the sin of self-righteousness.

A self-righteous person is dangerous. There is little that they can do wrong in their own eyes. Because of a self-perceived superior intelligence, he or she can take charge of the lives of others. There is no room for God in this person's life. They have taken God's place.

Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector who each prayed a prayer. Jesus' listeners knew Pharisees to be good strict leaders of the faith. They were the upholders of religious and moral values. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were unclean scoundrels. Everyone knew a tax collector was a traitor to Israel, working for the Roman government. A Tax collector lied and cheated to get what he could from people. Generally, tax collectors were rich.

As Jesus tells this parable, he turns the world upside down yet one more time. In the way they pray their prayers, Jesus says that it is the tax collector, the scoundrel, who goes home justified and not the Pharisee. The Pharisee in Jesus' parable was not a bad man. He was more religious and good than any of us will ever be. He lived a righteous life. He followed the standards of the church of his day. How many of us pray as often as he did? How many of us give as generously to the church as he did? But, the Pharisee was self-righteous. There was room for God in his life, but not much. Yet, it was a God who blessed him! There wasn't room for much beside his ego.

There is probably a bit of the pharisee in both you and me. Perhaps there was an occasion when you thought, "God, thank you that my children were not as unruly as these children are."

"Thank you that my car does not look like that person's car over there."

"Thank God that my moral character is better than that person's" This is judgmentally engaging in self-righteousness. We exalt ourselves at the expense of others. We judge others as inferior in one way or another. We talk about the ways in which others raise their children. They're either too permissive or too strict. How can a parent win? We make cracks about the ways in which others dress: too dirty, too out of style, or too overly-dressed. How can a person win? The judging begins at an early age. Listen to the ways in which elementary and middle school children put others down.

I judge others on their grammar. If a person says "nuculer" instead of "nuclear", I'll think, "boy that person is ignorant. There's no such word as "nuculer," or "flustrated." If one says "myself" when the pronoun "me" should be used, I'll look down my nose at her or him. "Myself" is a reflexive pronoun and should not be used when an objective personal pronoun should be used. Such judging is sinful. I'm failing to accept persons for who they are. As I'm judging them, I'm secretly thanking God that I am better than they are. I get to thinking that I am more

righteous than they are.

The tax collector, on the other hand, wouldn't even look up to heaven, up to the source of unconditional love. He simply beat himself on the chest, chastising himself. His only words were, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"<sup>1</sup> He was aware that he fell short of what God wanted him to be.

Luke says Jesus told this parable to people "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt."<sup>2</sup> To trust in oneself is to be blind to one's position before God. There is only one God, and that God is neither you nor I. We are creatures, not the creator. To confuse the two is a grievous error. We are not justified by God according to the number of prayers we pray per day or by the amount of our pledge to the church. We are justified only through God's grace. We cannot judge ourselves in relation to others. "Those who trust in their own righteousness" will regard others with contempt. They are dangerous to the Body of Christ. They begin to decide who can come to the table and who cannot. Those who are aware of their own need for grace and forgiveness will not be able to despise other people. Jesus said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."<sup>3</sup>

We are talking here about God's economy. Two men went up to pray, one a proud Pharisee and the other a lowly sinner. In God's economy, both had equal right to say their prayers. As Tom Ehrlich wrote, "A life of fastidious observance didn't earn the Pharisee special access to God."<sup>4</sup> A life of compromise with imperial oppressors did not deny the tax collector access to God. That democratic leveling applied to Jesus' circles of friends, too, where all were welcome, even those considered unworthy by the righteous. Ehrlich writes, "Unlike the churches that would later claim his name, Jesus set no barriers to inclusion, even to the most intimate moments such as eating. On a hillside, he fed everyone who admitted hunger, men, women and children alike. Even beggars and harlots were welcome wherever he stopped to dine."<sup>5</sup>

This inclusiveness infuriated the self-righteous. What purpose did piety serve, if not to gain special access to God? If anyone could be "saved," what was the benefit of doing good? Surely, the prayers of the righteous counted for more than those of outcasts. Even now, despite all that Jesus taught and lived, Christians delight in claims of superiority, privilege, narrow gates, preference in the eyes of a judgmental God. We should return again and again to the simple scene: two people praying, and God welcoming both.

We are about to make a commitment to God about the support of this church in the coming year. Are we grateful to God for all we have in this life? Do we believe in God's extravagant welcome? Do we proclaim equal access to God for all? Then, I invite you to commit yourself and your resources to insure that this message of God's love will be proclaimed from this church and by this congregation. I invite you to support the handbells, the organ, the choir, the teachers, the Allied Shelter homeless meals, the women's groups, the family abuse services shelter, the visitation of the sick and hurting, and the building in which we gather to worship, the place where people can go up to pray. God, be merciful to us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>Luke 18:13

<sup>2</sup>Luke 18:9

<sup>3</sup>Luke 6:37

<sup>4</sup>Tom Ehrlich, "On A Journey," October 23, 2007

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.