

**2018-04-29 TWO MEN PRAYING Luke 18.9-14 Fellowship Church  
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**He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other: for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

Two men went up to the temple.

Have you ever wondered why they went up to the temple?

Have you ever thought about why people go to church?

Have you ever asked yourself why you go to church?

There are so many reasons to go up to the temple.

We go because we want to be in the company of others, need to be in a community of people.

We go because it is a habit we have developed over the years.

We go because of something we want from God or need from others.

We go because we hope that going will quiet some of the fears we have in life and about life.

We go because we are weighed down with unanswered questions or unresolved conflicts and need some relief.

There are so many reasons to go up to the temple.

But the real reason we go to church is to meet God; just as it was the real reason these men went up to the temple.

These two men went up to the temple to meet God.

They went to pray – to meet God – to have an encounter with God.

That is what prayer is about at its deepest level.

We often think and speak of prayer as asking God for something –

Interceding with God for someone

Asking God some question

Challenging God with some anger or despair that eats at us  
Thanking God for some blessing we have received.  
But in the final analysis, when all is said and done, prayer is about meeting  
God – that is why we pray.  
Prayer is standing before God.  
And the most important thing is our posture when we pray.  
Not our physical posture when we pray – kneeling, sitting, standing, lying  
down – with eyes closed or open, with hands folded or lifted up.  
The most important thing is the standing of our soul before God – why are  
we there?

At the end of the prayer we learn why they had gone to pray.  
And their reason for praying is really the reason that all of us pray, it is the  
reason we go to church, the reason for faith itself.  
They went up to pray to be justified – to be right with God – to straighten  
out their relationship with God  
They went up to the temple to pray in the hope that they would come down  
from the temple in peace – at peace with God, at peace with others, at  
peace with themselves.  
That is the way that worship ends.  
It ends in the hope that we can go from worship in peace.

The parable was told to help us see how that is possible.  
It sets before us two possibilities – two ways that we may come to prayer –  
two postures in prayer – two ways of standing before God.  
They both went up to the temple in search of justification.  
One tried to justify himself, stood by himself before God, and presented his  
case: **God, I thank you that I am not like other people – and went on  
to list his spiritual accomplishments.**  
The other stood far away, would not lift his eyes up, beat upon his breast,  
and threw himself on the mercy of God praying. **God be merciful to me,  
a sinner!”**  
The second prayer led to justification; the first did not.

The Pharisee in the parable prayed to God with a list of the things he had  
done and thanked God that he was not like others.  
His life had been an effort “look good” in the eyes of God and to look better  
than others by comparison.  
That is one way to look at our relationship with God.

We can see life as a balancing of the books of life so that we look good, or at least better than others or better than most others.

In the Talmud it is reported that a rabbi used to pray this prayer daily as he left the rabbinical school: **I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, that you have set my portion with those who sit in the house of instruction, and that you have not set my portion with those who sit on street corners, for I rise early, and they rise early, but I rise early for words of Torah and they rise early for frivolous talk; I labor and they labor, but I labor and receive a reward and they labor and do not receive a reward; I run and they run, but I run to the life of the world to come and they run to the pit of destruction.**

Paul had been a Pharisee, and in his letter to the Philippians he listed all his accomplishments:

- A member of the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin

- A Hebrew born of Hebrews – he was not a convert

- A Pharisee – the strictest sect of Judaism

- A persecutor of the church

- He had kept the law blamelessly

But then something happened that made him think that this was all worthless, less than worthless.

He discovered the righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther, the great leader of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation, made the same discovery as Paul.

He had done everything to put himself right with God.

He had done everything that the church of his day offered him to find a merciful God, or to be sure that God was merciful and forgiving.

He had become a monk, prayed, fasted, confessed his sins, done all sorts of penance, and made all sorts of sacrifices.

None of this brought him any peace and, in the end, made him a pain to those around him who were impatient with his efforts.

He then made a wonderful discovery that set him free, changed his life, and finally transformed the church.

He discovered what the Psalmists and Paul had learned and what the tax collector in the parable found out.

He discovered the justifying grace of God.

In spite of this wonderful discovery, the way of the Pharisee is not dead today.

We are still inclined to posture before God, to make efforts to reconcile ourselves with God, to compare ourselves with others, and to offer excuses to God.

All this is done in the hope that we will be acceptable to God.

The tax collector in the parable prayed only one prayer.

He did not list the things he had done or not done.

He did not compare himself with others.

He did not present God with any excuses for his behavior.

He prayed the simplest of prayers, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

He would not even look up to heaven as he prayed.

It is the prayer that is always appropriate, always needed, and always heard by God.

Jesus said that this man went home justified.

What did he mean?

It did not mean that at that time, or even from that time, he was morally perfect.

It did not mean that all at once he was a man of virtue.

It meant that he went home reconciled with God and at peace.

He was justified, but just what does that mean?

Justification was one of the key emphases of the Protestant Reformation that picked up the word from the vocabulary of the apostle Paul.

We all have on our computer a little icon – maybe a seldom used icon – with the letter "j" on it.

It comes from the printer's trade, and referred to the act of "justifying" the lines on a page so that all lines were the same length.

To a printer to "justify means to line everything up.

There is something of that in justification.

The tax collector went home from the temple with his life lined up, made straight – he was "squared away with" God.

A little girl was learning the catechism and was asked to say in her own words what justify meant.

She gave an answer that may be just as good as the one in the catechism.

She said, "It means that everything is 'just as if I'd' never sinned."

That certainly catches the meaning of what Paul understood to have taken place in Christ.

It meant that the slate was wiped clean, reconciliation had been worked out, and all was at peace.

The hymnwriters catch the meaning of justification in what they have written:

Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to thy cross I cling.

Clothed in his (Christ's) righteousness alone,  
Faultless to stand before thy throne.

My home is built on nothing less  
Than Jesus blood and righteousness.

The hope of the tax collector, and of all of us, is in the mercy of God. Only a merciful God can justify us.

It is in that hope of being justified that those two men went up to the temple that day.

It is in this hope of justification that we go to church – whatever other reasons may bring us here.

It is a hope we can be sure of because of Jesus Christ.

We can be sure of it because of the parable he taught us.

We can be sure of it because he went all the way to the cross to make it possible.

We can be sure of it because God raised him from the dead and Luke reported that the risen Christ said that “repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations”.

In a book that I read a few years ago a minister told about a visit he made to an elderly man in the congregation.

When they sat down to eat, the man offered a prayer of thanks for the meal and concluded the prayer with the words “and forgive us our sins, in Jesus’ name”.

The minister was deeply moved by this prayer by an elderly and godly man in which he continued to pray for forgiveness.

It is a timeless and always needed prayer, as the tax collector and all of us know.

It is the only way to go home justified, at peace with God, self, and others.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”