

Competitive Prayer

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[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Laura Reed]

All right, so now I'm going to be doing our Gospel reading for today, which is Luke 18 verses 9 through 14, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector:

"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.'"

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thank you, Laura. So how good are you at prayer? Are you an amateur or a pro? Like if there was to be a prayer competition, how would you do? Where would you come in on the leaderboard? Let's say, like, don't look directly, but maybe out of the side of your eye, look at the person next to you...would you defeat the person next to you or lose to them when it comes to the prayer competition? [Laughter] Obviously, it's a silly, absurd question, right? But what if prayer were a competitive sport — how do you think we would score it? How would you determine who would win the prayer competition? I was thinking about that this week, mainly because I titled the sermon like a month and a half ago or so and I don't remember what I had in mind. So I'm thinking about a prayer competition. How would you score this? Would it be like soccer where you score goals by getting your prayers answered? Hopefully more often than the goals are actually scored in soccer, but. [Laughter] That's a soccer joke. Or maybe it would be more like figure skating, where you're graded by an impartial judge on your skill and finesse at the task at hand. In today's Gospel reading that we just heard, Jesus tells a story of two people sort of next to each other in a place of worship, both praying in very different ways. And

hearing the story and imagining that we're observing these two people praying gives us a chance to reflect on each one of them, and maybe to think of them as examples of what to do when we pray. Or maybe as an example of what *not* to do when we pray, or maybe we get a little bit of both.

And the story starts out as Jesus tells that, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector." And I love that opening. It sounds like the setup of a joke, doesn't it? "A priest and a police officer walk into a bar." And I actually think that's exactly what Jesus wants it to sound like. I think he's using that introduction for the purpose of setting up the story with certain expectations. Isn't that the reason why we're drawn into those jokes that start out, "So-and-so and so-and-so went into a bar"? Those jokes work for us, and we're drawn to them because we have certain expectations about people based on their jobs, or their ethnicity, or their age, or all kinds of other things. And in the same way, the First Century Jewish listeners would be drawn into Jesus' story about the Pharisee and the tax collector by their own expectations of what those two types of people were like. Jesus does this all the time.

The classic example is the parable of the Good Samaritan. When Jesus tells this story about a person who's waylaid by robbers, he's on the road and a priest goes by and passes on to the other side. And a Levite goes by and passes over to the other side. And then a third character walks by and everybody in the audience thinks, the third person is going to be a Jew. None of us think that because we don't have those three categories set up in our minds. But First Century Jewish people would have thought, "Okay, priest (a certain class of Jewish person), Levite (a certain class of Jewish person), and regular old Jew. Hey, that's me! I get to be the hero in the story. Go ahead, Jesus, keep going!" And the third person is a Samaritan, which is like a member of Hamas as I indicated a couple weeks ago. That's why that setup works, because people have a certain expectation about what's coming and then it gets twisted up. And that's exactly what Jesus does more often than not; he uses people's expectations to say something provocative, often, to flip the script and upset them.

And so remember, if Jesus isn't ever upsetting us when we read the parables, we are probably missing the point. We could be forgiven for that because there's a vast cultural divide between the ancient Near East and modern 21st Century America. But I'll remind you of what A.J. Levine said. I read this quote to you the first week of this series, "On the Road with Jesus." Here it is again: "Our reaction to a parable should be one of resistance rather than acceptance. If we hear a parable and think, 'I really like that,' or worse, fail to take any challenge, we are not listening well enough." And so the first thing that I think we should want to do in order to understand today's parable, or any parable, is to examine what people's expectations about these groups of people would have been. Because those expectations will be applied to the characters in the

story, and those expectations are going to be the source of any surprise or twist. And while we're at it, while we're considering what an Ancient Near Eastern listener might have expected a Pharisee and a tax collector to be like, we might want to take a moment and examine our own expectations of what a Pharisee and a tax collector might be like. Because we might have a very different understanding of that, and that might prevent us from experiencing the surprise that is contained in the parable. Does that make sense? Okay, so let's start with the tax collector. Raise your hand if you love paying taxes. April 15 is your happiest day of the year, right? [laughter] We have one good citizen over there; "My taxes do good things in the country!" Regardless of whether you think taxation is a good idea, or whatever your politics might be around that, no one, I think, really like loves the act of writing the check, right? We can all agree about that. So it's easy for us to imagine, even from 21st century America, that Jesus' audience would immediately have had a negative view of that particular character, like we might have if it was an IRS agent who walked into the bar. We're like, "Oh, he's going to get his come-uppance! I can't wait." But it's actually much, much worse than that.

You see, it's not just the tax collector who would have been tasked with the job of going out and collecting the taxes from the people. You have to remember that the Jews were under Roman occupation and taxes were really oppressive. So a Jewish tax collector would have been seen as being in league with the oppressors — would have been seen as acting on behalf of this evil regime, to separate good faithful Jewish people from their money. To do things like build an aqueduct, which Pontius Pilot used the temple treasury to do, according to the historian Josephus. Also, these tax collectors were notoriously corrupt and often skimmed more off the top than the Roman Empire wanted them to so that they could get rich on their own. So whatever our assumption might be, whatever our expectation might be about a tax collector being a bad actor, somebody we don't want to see succeed, those feelings in assumptions and expectations would have been much stronger for the original audience. This tax collector would not have been expected to be in the temple. Certainly not praying in such an admirably humble way.

Okay, so how about the Pharisee; what would that audience have expected from the Pharisee? Now, here's where you might be surprised by the cultural gap that exists here. You might be surprised to learn that in the time of Jesus, the Pharisees would have been regarded quite highly for the most part. They would have been regarded as very highly knowledgeable of the Mosaic Law and, very importantly for our story, they would have been regarded as devoted believers. In other words, people who really acted on their faith, not just talking a good game. How many people would have had kind of an opposite expectation of the Pharisee from your perspective today? I certainly would have. If I asked you before I told you just that, to make a list of the characteristics of a Pharisee, you probably would have started with "hypocrisy" or

“self-righteousness,” or something along those lines. So Jesus’ original audience would have had probably the exact opposite expectations on the Pharisee character in this story than the ones that we have, if we have them at all. I mean, lots of us don’t spend our time thinking about Pharisees in the first place. By the way, there’s only one character in the Bible who identifies himself as a Pharisee. Do you know who it is? It’s the Apostle Paul, hero of the Christian faith. In Philippians chapter three he describes himself as a Pharisee. And here’s the other interesting thing, our expectations on the tax collector are probably likely also to be the opposite of the expectations of the original audience. All of our, you know, reluctance or reticence to pay taxes aside, we have been conditioned as people (those of us who are) familiar with the Bible, we’ve been conditioned to think of the tax collector as somebody who’s going to show us virtue in the end. We already know that’s where the story is going, right? Particularly if you are reading the Gospel of Luke as a whole piece, which I do recommend we do sometimes. You know, reading six or eight verses is well and good, but if you can read the whole thing, you get a bigger sense of where this particular author is going. And if you were to do that with this book, the Gospel of Luke, you would find tax collectors showing us virtue and righteousness left and right. In fact, one of Jesus’ original 12 apostles, Levi, was a tax collector, right? So if you don’t have any experience with the Bible, you might not have that particular baggage. But for those of us who are more familiar with perhaps the scriptural story, we’re coming to this disliking the Pharisee and waiting for the tax collector to show us the way. Jesus’ original hearers would have had the exact opposite expectation.

And so when the script gets flipped on them, we already kind of know that’s what’s going to happen. Because for us, the script has been flipped so many times that it’s actually our new set of expectations. And given that reality, I was thinking if we wanted to get some meaning for ourselves out of this parable, if we wanted to imagine ourselves as on the road with Jesus, traveling with the teacher, if we wanted to think of ourselves as Jesus’ disciples and to learn from his teaching, then we probably ought to find, if we can, a different way to be surprised by his teaching alongside his original audience.

So, let me see if I can use my word nerd powers here for just a minute, and help us find a way to be surprised by this parable. In the last verse of the text for today—it’s verse 14; if you happen to have it still open, you can look at it—Luke records Jesus explaining the parable, or concluding the parable, by saying, “I tell you this: [the tax collector] went down to his home justified, rather than the other,” (rather than the Pharisee). That’s how it’s translated, anyway: “rather than”. “[The tax collector] went down to his home justified, rather than the [Pharisee].”

The words “rather than” are a translation into English of the Greek word *para*. I’m just going to give you four letters of Greek, don’t worry: *para*, p–a–r–a. Now, *para* is a preposition. What is a

proposition? It's a part of speech that is used to express spatial or temporal (which is to say, time-based) relationships. Let me give you examples, for those of you who are like, "Ehh, uhh?". In the phrase "above the clouds," "above" is a proposition; in the phrase "before Christmas," "before" is a proposition; in the phrase "around the neighborhood," "around" is a proposition; in the phrase "rather than the Pharisee," "rather than" functions propositionally. Okay?

And *para* in Greek is a proposition that certainly *can* mean "contrary to" or "rather than," which is to say, the translators of the New Revised Standard Version red Bibles that we have all around the room are justified [chuckles] in their translation to say that the tax collector went home justified, rather than the Pharisee. That being said, *para*, as a preposition, is much more often used to mean "alongside," or "next to." Think of the word "parallel"; these are 2 lines that are alongside each other. Think of the word "paralegal"; that's somebody who works alongside a legal professional (a lawyer). So, *para* is more likely to mean "alongside" or "next to" and it can *even mean* "because of."

So, how might a slightly different translation of that little tiny Greek word—just those four letters, *para*—alter our understanding of the lesson that Jesus is trying to teach? See, if the tax collector goes home justified, rather than the Pharisee, that's one meaning, and it certainly would have surprised the original audience, but it doesn't surprise us all that much—doesn't challenge us all that much. But if the tax collector goes home justified *alongside* the Pharisee, now that's something worth thinking about. That means that the playing field has not been flipped, but it's been leveled out.

And boy howdy, if the tax collector goes home justified *because* of the Pharisee, that one's going to give us some trouble, isn't it? [chuckles] We don't necessarily like that idea so much, that the Pharisee is *so* righteous that it just overflows and all the people around him are justified by his righteousness. That's not what we were taught, those of us who were raised in Sunday school and to understand Christian theology in a certain way.

Let me just gently suggest, before we completely dismiss that last possible translation—that the tax collector was justified because of the Pharisee—let me just gently remind us that the way the Jewish faith is conceived is in community. Right? Abraham was made the father of a great family, a great nation, so that all the nations, all the families of the Earth, would be blessed; that was the particularized calling of the Israelites. And faith was practiced much more communally than it comes naturally to us to assume that it was. I would even argue that in the early days of the Christian faith, and actually in other parts of the world to this day, that

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Christian faith is practiced more communally than we are used to hearing it described here. or practiced here.

To put some very specific meaning on this, I would just say that the, um, every head bowed, every eye closed, this is just between you and the Holy Spirit, you're doing business with God, come to the altar, pray the prayer, confess *your* sins, ask Jesus into *your* heart, make him the Lord of *your* life—all of that singular pronoun language—it's done a great deal of good in drawing people to Christ, and I don't want to toss that out, either. But it has also come at the cost of dismissing any kind of communal understanding of our faith, any sense that we are here with and for each other, any sense that someone might leave this place justified because of someone else being there with us.

Now, we could have a good long argument over brunch about that. I'm not actually trying to make a particular argument in that direction; I do want us to think about how these simple (seemingly simple) translation decisions in our Bible can make us think one thing or another. So, in other words, we could argue that the minor points of Greek propositions, at some length. We could argue about the first-century expectations of a Near Eastern person, at some length. Now we just spent some time talking about it. It's interesting and good to do that; it actually, I think, enrich our understanding of the Bible.

I don't think you have to do any of that to get a message from this parable, though, even from our 21st-century perspective, where flipping the script isn't actually going to do the trick for us in the same way, because I think there's a fairly clear and simple message, right here, right down the middle of this road that we're on with Jesus, which is this: If you read this parable for the first time and come away thinking anything like, "Thank God I am not like the Pharisees," [chuckles] well, let's just say you are now the intended audience for this parable. [crowd laughs] Script-flipping all put to the side, if you find yourself going, "Oh man, I am so glad I am not a self-righteous, hypocritical, overly religious temple maniac" ... wow. Guess what? This one's for you, and you have some thinking to do.

Speaking of the intended audience for this parable, I skipped right over that part, but Luke kinda gives it to us right at the beginning, doesn't he? Did you catch that? He says at the beginning, before the parable gets underway, "[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted themselves—who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt," and we read that and go, "Oh man, he's gonna get the Pharisees today; I can't wait!" Until you might stop and think that you're trusting in your own self and considering others with contempt, even when the others are the religious expert people.

And I think that's actually consistent with what's going on in this story, anyway. If you read this section of the Gospel of Luke in context, there's not really any evidence that Jesus is travelling around with Pharisees, but there's a lot of evidence that he's traveling around with his disciples, right? His whole discourse is about how his disciples ought to live, and I don't see any reason why we should suddenly shift the target of this parable to some outside group, just because that group happens to be mentioned in the story. I'd like to think that Jesus' own disciples were convicted by this story, as well.

But if you're ready for some graduate-level spirituality, I think that's going to mean, for us, getting over the idea that for one person to be entirely right, another person must be entirely wrong. I think that dualistic thinking that it's either this or that, it's either black or white, it's either all or nothing, does not serve us well. It's going to become a barrier between us and Jesus, if we're paying much attention, before much time has passed. And so I am left thinking, and perhaps you are also left thinking, what are the consequences of our wanting the full depths of God's grace for ourselves, but only the shallow waters of legalism for everybody else? And that might be something that we ought to pray about.

Lord Jesus, we encounter you in this story. Help us to be open to the idea that maybe it's here to convict us—not the religious hypocrites, not the right-wingers, not the self-righteous bigots, but us. Allow us to trust you to take care of them, too; to convict them, too; and for now, to focus on what you might be saying to us. Help us to admit that we have been that which we have criticized, that we are the ones for whom we have contempt; and when this realization dawns on us, give us the courage, oh Lord, to confess our sins and seek your forgiveness, and that of others. Give us the strength, oh Lord, to repent, to turn away, and change our minds and our hearts and our attitudes and our actions. Give us the grace in our own lifetimes to swim in the deep waters of grace with all of your children. We pray in your name, oh Lord. Amen.

When we are convicted by the scriptures, by the Word of God, the natural response for us is to come and seek God's grace, and that is what is on offer each Sunday as we celebrate Holy Communion together. Artisan's communion table is the table not of this church, but of the Lord Jesus, himself; it is made ready for all who seek him in this place and time. Which is to say that whether or not you are a member or regular attender of our church, this table is open for you to experience and as a place for you to receive God's grace and goodness.

So, as we sing these last couple of songs, I invite you to come, if you'd like, to receive the bread and the wine or the juice. Remember Christ's body, which is broken for you; remember his blood, which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. Come and receive this spiritual nourishment, this act of community, of union, of communion.

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And if you're not ready for that moment, that's okay. You can stay where you are, you can think or pray or sing along. There's also a member of our prayer team at the back corner of the room who'd be glad to pray with you today, if you would benefit from that or like that. So, our table is open; let's continue to worship God together in sacrament, in song, and in prayer. Amen.

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at ArtisanChurch.com.