

*"Mercy Down So High"*

*Luke 18:9-14*

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There's something intrusive about watching someone pray. It's like glimpsing a couple kissing in public—it's invasive to look too long or to listening for what they say after the kiss.

If I felt this threat of spiritual voyeurism this summer when our Costa Rica mission trip team made a visit to a Catholic cathedral in San Cristóbal. Tourists like us walked the aisles with tilted heads, gawking at stained glass and ornate wood and a ceiling that scraped the clouds. This tourist here, the one shod in clunky work boots, kicked a kneeler. A loud clack bounced off the floor and walls and knocked into the faithful actually using the kneelers, jostling them from their prayers.

My klutziness was partly from purposeful inattention to the people there to pray. It's weird to rubberneck at praying people. There was a nicely dressed man who looked as though he might have law practice or financial firm. An older woman with gray streaked hair and a deeply creased face who held a well-worn rosary. A young couple whose shoulders lightly touched—had I the courage might have looked too see if they wore wedding bands but that seemed to pry.

Was it prying to wonder what these were saying, these people in the house of prayer? Were they confessing sins? Asking God's help? Interceding for a friend?

And what was God hearing—not just in the words they said but in what God hears between the lines? Those yearnings that come to expression only when you stop putting words to them? Those prayers left unsaid, but still in the all-knowing purview of God. There's much that goes in prayer space! Such mystery there amid tourists in jeans snapping pictures. The cameras mostly stayed trained on the building. To sharpen one's focus on a person at prayer just feels like breaking and entering.

Yet that's what Jesus does in this parable about two men who pray in the temple. Jesus says let me tell you a story. I want you to watch these guys pray. Listen to their words. Discern their hearts. It seems a little intrusive. Although praying out loud in public wasn't nearly as weird in the temple as it would be in a church today. There was such no thing as silent prayer then. The Temple was a noisy place, with worshippers raising hands and lifting voices to God. That was the custom—stretch your arms to sky and speak up. Everyone at once.

There was a lot that went on in the Temple. Early in the morning the priests would bring wood and stoke the sacrifice fires. All through the day the faithful brought lambs and doves as offerings that said, "Thanks, God," and "Have mercy," and "I am devoted to you." So as the sacrifice smoke went up like hands reaching for God's blessing, the hands of God's people went up with their prayers so that .... what? The "so what" of the prayers is what Jesus seems to want us to think about.

He points to a man that looks different from the rest. He's standing apart, removed from the action. You can't tell whether he withdrew himself or the people moved away from

him. But you can tell he's clearly not at peace with the way his life has gone. We're left to wonder why. Jesus says he was a tax collector but doesn't say more beyond that. There were plenty of tax collectors back then that were as crooked as Mafia frontmen. Maybe this one was or maybe he wasn't. Jesus doesn't say. So we're left to wonder, what was this guy up to last night? What kind of week has he had? What has he done or left undone? We don't know specifics but the way his hands are pounding his breast, it looks like Ali and Frazier are having it out upon his chest. He behaves more like a widow that's lost an only son than one of the faithful at daily prayers.

Those who dare to get close enough hear the seven words he moans to the floor, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. God, be merciful to me, a sinner." There seemed to be no telling when he'd let up. Whatever his life had been he was sorry. Sincerely sorry.

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There's another man that also stands a distance from the crowd. Only this one's taken his place up front, not at the back like the tax man. This guy's face shines like a hundred watt bulb. You can just tell he is feeling good, having slept well with a clear conscience, happy with who he is. The closer we get the more thrilled he seems to be with the life that he's got. It's not hard to hear him—the volume of his voice rises above the rest. I guess he could be one those naturally loud talkers, but you can't avoid the impression he's trying to throw his prayer into as many ears as he can.

Jesus says he's a Pharisee, someone known for religious devotion, and that he prays, "God, I thank you that I'm not like other people. That I'm not a robber or crook or adulterer or, heaven forbid, like that tax collector way over there in the corner." At which, perhaps a few others briefly interrupt their prayers to look at the tax collector who doesn't know he been singled out. He's still swinging away, eyes on his shoes, "God have mercy, God have mercy, God have mercy."

The story is almost laughable. Part parable, part political cartoon. We need to be careful, though, because this story is a trap door beneath our feet. The man Jesus names the Pharisee so turns us off for his smug, self-assured piety, his self-possessed pleasure with his good character, that we are oh, so tempted to say, "Thank you, God, that I am not like that Pharisee." At which point the trap door swings open and we discover that we are just like him.

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This story is one of the few in which it's explained why Jesus told it: "He...told this parable," says Luke, "to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt." Righteous is one of those big, \$100 Bible words. It's a word that gives scholars a career's worth of work and that incited a reformation. There's a lot to say about what "righteous" means but it's probably enough to say righteous has to do with having your stuff together. That things are right with your life. That what God gives a thumbs up to what your life is about, and not just kind of or mostly but thoroughly and completely. God approves of it all.

Contempt is not so big a word but, in Jesus' opinion, is a big spiritual problem. If righteous means that you have all your stuff together, contempt is the suggestion that

other people don't. It's sneaky how this happens. Just a little passing thought: who are these people that want to buy so much house? If folks would take out mortgages they can afford (like I have) this wouldn't be such a mess." It's sneaky how contempt gets us. "The way people drive! I can't believe he just ran that light! Thank goodness everyone doesn't drive like that (I sure don't!) or the roads would be a mess!" Contempt can breed like rabbits.

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There's an interesting element to the context of this story of the tax collector and Pharisee. Luke has set it in such a way that we don't really know to whom Jesus told it. I mean, who was around him hearing the story. There's a Pharisee in the story but Luke doesn't say Jesus told it with Pharisees in mind. The disciples were typically with Jesus but the text doesn't say Jesus aimed this word at them. It would seem that Luke means to leave no one off he hook. It would be too easy to say Jesus meant the story for those people, which would be to say, not really for me. Of course, when we say that the trap door gives way again under our feet. No, Jesus told this story for us all because we all need to hear the gospel.

In a book about grace Yale University theologian Miroslav Volf points to an Ernest Hemingway short story. Let me tell you a bit story. It goes:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of [the newspaper] which said: PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MONTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA and how a squadron of the [civil guard] had to be called out to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.<sup>1</sup>

How many of us secretly long for the forgiveness of something? How many of us yearn for our lives to be healed by mercy? How many of us like to pretend our lives are really okay?

When the Pharisee and the tax collector left the Temple both were in pretty good shape. The Pharisee went home and presumably kept on living a good life. He kept tithing and fasting, kept his morals straight. He may have been called to lead the building campaign or to serve as a confirmation sponsor. He may be been nominated for Session, may have taught Sunday school. He likely ran his business right. Jesus doesn't begrudge him this or say he should live any other way. It's just that the tax collector, he walked home with all forgiven. He went home with a heart lightened by the mercy of God. The one had his good life, the other had God. Tell me, Jesus seems to ask, which of these two was blessed?

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest Hemingway, "The Capital of the World," cited in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 127.

It's a lot more comfortable to count we seem to be living right than to acknowledge, as we said in this morning's prayer of confession, that we are sinners in the company of sinners. Jesus asks us to be honest. What is a moral or relational failure that eats us up? What are things we've done or left undone that we'd like to pack away and store in some dark, dank corner of the basement of the soul?

Jesus told this story to have us know that God has a key to our basement. God sends Jesus down the steps to breathe in the mildew and rifle through the stuff of our lives—some of which might cause others to look on us with contempt, some of which might make us look with contempt upon ourselves.

Jesus goes down there, takes it all in his arms, and does this shocking thing. He starts to say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner. God, have mercy on me, a sinner. God, have mercy on me, a sinner," which we cannot believe because of all people Jesus is the one who is righteous. The one who had all his stuff together with God and everyone else. Still, he's saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Again and again he says this, all the unworthy stuff of our lives held there his arms.

I'll tell you why Jesus is doing this. Why he has the nasty stuff our lives in his arms and begging God's mercy. Standing in our place before God, coming to God for us. It's like when Luke says they led Jesus away to be crucified at the place that is called The Skull. Jesus said, "Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And the criminal that hung by at his side—the one the jeering crowds held in contempt—said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

That's what he's doing, taking us unto himself our every thought, word and deed—holding our flaws and failures and misdeeds in his arms, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." "God be merciful to me," He is remembering us. Remembering you from the cross. Remembering us all to God, remembering us into God's kingdom.

And so there in that basement our voices join his, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." "God, have mercy on me, a sinner," our heads bowed down, the prayer pulsing through our veins. Who knows how long this goes on, but when we look up the basement is gone and we're standing in a broad place. Jesus looks at us with empty hands and says, "All is forgiven."

I don't know what your life brought to this house of prayer today, but you may leave it hands of Jesus and walk home holding the mercy of God.