

# On Prayer: A Side Reflection on the Pharisee and the Tax Collector

## Part I

### I

Growing up I was under the impression that the only prayer that counted was the improvised prayer. At best you could think about what you wanted to say beforehand, but to pray a written prayer was just like giving lip service. The only way to mean it was to let it come from your heart on the spot. This was my firm conviction up until I heard one of the elders of my church growing up pray. Let's call him Mr. Smith, that's not his name, I changed it to protect the innocent. Now Mr. Smith was a very spiritual person, and when he got up to pray he really let it flow from the heart. The problem was that he didn't stop letting it flow. His prayer flowed and flowed and flowed. Now before you get self-conscious about whether the preacher thinks you're going too long in your prayer I want to say two things. First, I have two fidgety kids, so every prayer is too long. Second, though, the length of this man's prayers has not been rivaled I think since Jesus prayed in the Garden. The point here is that Mr. Smith's prayers were so long I started to believe in the value of sticking to a script.

This is not the only thing that makes me believe in the value of simple, rote prayers. Every human being, I'm convinced, goes through times in which the thought of having to bow the head and close the eyes and think a bunch of thoughts to God seems exhausting or unwelcome or impossible. A friend of mine that suffers from severe, clinical depression has the phrases "Lord, have mercy" and "Christ, have mercy" tattooed on his arms, one on each. He told me that there are times when he just can't pray. He's mentally exhausted, he's too lost, he's too angry. But he can come up for air for just long enough to say these two quick, simple prayers from the heart: Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.

There are only a handful of words and phrases from the Bible that have found a stable place in the spiritual vocabulary of Christians. Most people know the Lord's Prayer, or at least could catch on pretty quick. We might know some of Romans 8 or Philippians 2 or the Fruits of the Spirit or the Beatitudes or the some of the Benedictions. The phrase that the tax collector utters in Luke 18 is among those words that many Christians around the world know by heart: God, have mercy on me, a sinner. By these words the sinner was reconciled to God. There is a strong sense in which the life of a Christian could be a spent trying to figure out how to say these words.

### II

There is a difference between saying something and meaning it. My two boys fight all the time, and whenever one of them hits the other they have to stop and say "I'm sorry." I think maybe my oldest, Oliver, is starting to mean it sometimes. But when both of them were younger they didn't mean it. Let's be honest. I'm not sure they really know how. They're just practicing the words because that's the thing their parents told them to do, or that's the thing that will let them continue to do the things he wants to do. Toddlers can get away with that sort of thing. The older we get, the more aware we become of ourselves, the less we can get away with cheap words.

How do you say “God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” and mean it? It’s easy enough to say those words. We could all bow our heads, and close our eyes, and I could say “Repeat after me! God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” but it would mean very little.

Or we could be weighed down by guilt, and our spiritual survival mechanism might kick in and we’d be reaching for whatever prayer might let us not have to deal with all these bad feelings anymore. We might read the Bible like some kind of life instruction manual and stumble upon Luke 18. “Aha! There it is!” We could recite these words like some kind of magical incantation, and it might mean something—doing something is better than doing nothing, but it wouldn’t mean what it meant to the tax collector.

How can we come to that place where we could say these words—God, have mercy on me, a sinner—and really mean them in the depths of our being? To have no ulterior motives, to admit that everything the Pharisees say is true, to bow our heads and beat our chests with sincerity, to ask for nothing but God’s mercy? That is the kind of thing that reconciles a person to God; that is the kind of self-emptying love that God breathes into his new creation. We could do a lot worse than live our lives trying to figure out how to truly pray this prayer.