

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time C - How to Pray

Oct 26, 2025

Today, Jesus gives a very strong but consoling teaching about prayer. It involves a Pharisee and a tax collector. To better understand the example Jesus uses, we should put ourselves in the first century AD. A faithful Jewish person would assume without question two things: a Pharisee is a very holy and devout man but a tax collector was a traitor and a public sinner. Thus, while today we have a negative view of the Pharisees, this was not the case in the time of Jesus. In this light, the example Jesus uses was incredibly shocking to his listeners. The Pharisee's prayer has three problems: the first problem is he prays to himself. At its heart, the Catholic Catechism (2558) tells us what prayer is by taking a quote from St. Therese of Lisieux. "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy." Prayer reaches out to God. It is turning oneself toward heaven. It is love. But the prayer of the Pharisee lacks any relationship to God. Second problem is his prayer is awfully boastful and conceited. Instead of looking toward heaven, he is merely looking in a mirror, admiring his self-proclaimed virtue. This is spiritual narcissism, a self-love that destroys his soul. Third problem with his prayer is that he spends time looking around to make sure he is "ahead of the rest". It reveals that the Pharisee's spiritual pursuits are actually feeding his arrogance. He is looking down on others and judging them

We turn now to the tax collector. Jesus says this man was justified, despite his public status. It makes sense when we hear Jesus explain his main point: "Everyone who exalts himself is humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:14). We are all called to be like Jesus, who humbled himself to die on a cross. This is ultimately why humility is so great a virtue. It is the virtue of Jesus! The tax collector only stays at the back of the Temple. Unlike the Pharisee, he is at least living in the truth. Unlike the Pharisee, he has a humble opinion of himself. For a Jewish person of the time, closeness to God and the Temple was reserved for only those ritually clean. Many things could make a person unclean, such as touching blood or eating the wrong food. This tax collector knows he is unclean and far from holiness. He does not feel worthy to walk up to God, but rather keeps his distance, out of humility. The man is also sincere in his repentance as shown in the beating of his breast and he knows he needs mercy from God.

John Newton, the author of *Amazing Grace*, lived a life marked by rebellion and sin before discovering God's love and his Christian faith. Born in 1725 in London, Newton was a sailor whose early years were defined by disobedience, the slave-trade, and blasphemous profanity. One day while he was aboard a slave ship, a violent storm off of Ireland changed everything in his life. As the ship nearly sank, Newton, fearing death, cried out, "Lord, have mercy upon us!" Newton's life was saved, and as a result, Newton began to recognize his own sinfulness and his need for God's mercy. The storm he survived had planted a seed. He realized God's love didn't demand perfection all at once. Instead, he began the long road of humility. Coming before God as a broken man, Newton found grace that "saved a wretch like me." He wrote the words to the hymn that made him famous. In it, he reveals the truth of his life: God's love meets us in our sin, requiring only a humble heart to receive it. Newton's life teaches us that no sin is too great for God's redeeming grace. We are all sinners like the tax collector and the Pharisee. All of us are saved by "Amazing Grace".

The author Victor Hugo created a fictional character named Inspector Javert in the book *Les Misérables*. Inspector Javert is a kindred spirit to this front-row Pharisee in today's Gospel. Javert is the self-righteous, law-abiding, severe and unrelenting policeman. He has no mercy both for others and himself. The law is his god. Javert has no sense of redemption, conversion, or mercy in his worldview. He is projecting his own twisted and suffering views on life onto God. The poor and suffering Jean Valjean is kindred spirit to the tax collector in the back of the church. He is trying to

turn his life around and do good. And yet, Javert looks down on him, as does the Pharisee to the tax collector. As he pursues Jean Valjean throughout the book, at a certain point, Valjean has the opportunity to kill Javert but stays his hand and grants him mercy. This was an unbearable event for Javert, who himself had never once granted mercy to anyone. Valjean's act of mercy and forgiveness cannot be tolerated because Javert cannot understand mercy or love. Javert cannot bend his worldview to wrap his mind around Valjean's mercy, so he does not bend, but he breaks. Javert kills himself. Javert's prayers to heaven reveal a man to be pitied. This unbending adherence to the letter of the law embodies an exaggerated characterization of a man who lacks love, mercy, and humility. He is the Pharisee in today's Gospel.

The tax collector today was able to renew his fidelity to God and went home justified. It's as if he went to the sacrament of confession! Catholic theologians refer to the sacrament of confession as the "second plank of salvation" because it offers a means of spiritual rescue after the "shipwreck" of sin. Just as a plank can save a person after a shipwreck, confession offers a way to be saved after falling into sin. Baptism is the first plank. But God has a backup plan when we don't allow his grace to enter our hearts. After baptism, we still sin. When we fall into grave sin, and separate ourselves from God, the sacrament of confession provides a way to restore the grace lost through sin and we reconcile with God and the Church. If we find ourselves in the front of church, boasting like a Pharisee, or in the back of church, like the tax collector, we should seek out the sacrament of confession.

All of us have to ask ourselves about our prayer lives. The two men in today's Gospel both did something right: they attempted to make prayer a part of their day. If we start the day with prayer, we are asking God for his help and for him to be a part of our day. If we don't, we are basically telling God that we don't need him! We should all have a daily quiet time. We never let a day go by without eating, because we know our bodies need nourishment. Many people almost never let a day go by without exercising, because they know their bodies need that stimulation. Why not do the same thing for our souls? That's what a daily quiet time is for. Prayer does not have to be hard. Choose a time and place in which there is no interruption. Then do three things: First, welcome God into our heart. Recognize that Christ is with us and wants to be with us. Think of all the blessings he has given us. Second, read. Take out a spiritual book, a Bible, or a favorite prayer book and read a paragraph or two, slowly. Third, reflect. Think about what we read. Listen to what God wants to say to us through it. It's that simple! Jesus prays all the time: early in the morning, late in the evening, when he is tired, when he needs some quiet time away from the crowd, when he is in agony at the Garden of Gethesamane. He is in constant communion with God the Father and he always seek to do God's will. Jesus teaches us to drink in all the graces God has in store for us. Today, he is hoping we'll decide to become better pray-ers!