

## Scriptures

### Psalm 84:1-7

How I love your Temple, Lord Almighty!

<sup>2</sup> How I want to be there!

I long to be in the Lord's Temple.

With my whole being I sing for joy  
to the living God.

<sup>3</sup> Even the sparrows have built a nest,  
and the swallows have their own home;  
they keep their young near your altars,  
Lord Almighty, my king and my God.

<sup>4</sup> How happy are those who live in your Temple,  
always singing praise to you.

<sup>5</sup> How happy are those whose strength comes from you,  
who are eager to make the pilgrimage to Mount Zion.

<sup>6</sup> As they pass through the dry valley of Baca,  
it becomes a place of springs;  
the autumn rain fills it with pools.

<sup>7</sup> They grow stronger as they go;  
they will see the God of gods on Zion.

### 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

<sup>6</sup> As for me, the hour has come for me to be sacrificed; the time is here for me to leave this life. <sup>7</sup> I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith.<sup>8</sup> And now there is waiting for me the victory prize of being put right with God, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day—and not only to me, but to all those who wait with love for him to appear.

<sup>16</sup> No one stood by me the first time I defended myself; all deserted me. May God not count it against them! <sup>17</sup> But the Lord stayed with me and gave me strength, so that I was able to proclaim the full message for all the Gentiles to hear; and I was rescued from being sentenced to death. <sup>18</sup> And the Lord will rescue me from all evil and take me safely into his heavenly Kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

### Luke 18:9-14

<sup>9</sup> Jesus also told this parable to people who were sure of their own goodness and despised everybody else. <sup>10</sup> “Once there were two men who went up to the Temple to pray: one was a Pharisee, the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed, ‘I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. <sup>12</sup> I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.’ <sup>13</sup> But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, ‘God, have pity on me, a sinner!’ <sup>14</sup> I tell you,” said Jesus, “the tax collector, and not the Pharisee, was in the right with God when he went home. For those who make themselves great will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be made great.”

### Sermon: A man apart

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

This morning we're going to talk about prayer. We will learn in this passage in Luke that prayer is apocalyptic – prayer is revelatory. The way we pray reveals very much about us. Everything about prayer is revelatory – the places we choose to pray in, the frequency and occasions in which we pray, the postures of our bodies, the words we use – even the words we don't use. The way we pray shows an awful lot about the way we are, deep inside. Even when we try to hide, or to pretend, or pray using other people's words – we can't help but show our true selves in prayer. It just comes out.

A side note about praying prayers that someone else has written – when done in an effort to sidestep thoughtful prayer, using a prayer written by someone else is a way of avoidance – kind of cheating if you will. On the other hand, there are plenty of times when we read a prayer that says exactly what we wish we could say if only we had the right words. There are prayers we say together that are centuries old, and if prayed thoughtfully they are completely honest and are pleasing to God. It's the attitude that makes all the difference. We're going to find that this theme of attitude runs throughout the story this morning.

Let's begin by looking at the two men. There is a Pharisee, and a taxman. We like to look down upon the Pharisees as being overly strict killjoys, but in reality the Pharisees were heroes. Throughout the history of the Israelite people there is a constant theme of community: God's people rise and fall together. The whole nation is blessed or abandoned as one.

When the people turn away from God, then God leaves them to the mess they have made; when the people turn to God, he welcomes them and gives them peace. The way this is interpreted by the Jewish people is that if bad things are happening, it is because the people have abandoned God – to restore order they had better return to the life God called them to, and do it right quickly.

In the Hasmonean period, around 150 BC, there was a crisis brewing due to the aggressive Hellenization of Jewish life and territory during the time of Antiochus IV. The Jewish identity seemed to be slipping away. One of the responses to this was the formation of the Pharisaic movement which was essentially a renewed commitment to the study of the Torah: the careful observance of tradition and law in certain areas of life, such as tithing, purity laws, the Sabbath, marriage and divorce, and temple ritual. This group of men were trying to be as pure as they could be in hopes of saving the nation.

If we think back to the time of Abraham, God was about to destroy Sodom because it had become a cesspool of sin. Abraham pleaded with God saying 'What if there are fifty righteous God loving people in that city? Will you destroy the city and kill them too?' God relents, replying 'For the sake of 50, I will stay my hand and show mercy.'

As the narrative describes, Abraham bargains God down to 40, then 30, 20, and finally down to 10. It appears as though Abraham was a little worried - not sure how many good people there really were in that town – but the point is that for the sake of a handful of good people, God would spare the city. This is what was in the minds of the Pharisees – as their national identity seemed to be crumbling they hoped that through their efforts the entire nation would be spared ruin and would again receive God's grace.

Really, the Pharisees were heroes – sacrificially dedicating themselves to God for the sake of their neighbours. The Pharisees preserved the Israelite faith in God in the face of overwhelming Greek cultural influence, and continued to do so in the next century under the crushing force of Roman military domination. They were the keepers of the faith and they preserved it by maintaining clarity about the way the goodness of God ought to shape all of faithful life.

Now if we contrast this group of people to another group we can see some differences. The other man in this story is the taxman, so let's look at the tax collectors.

When the Romans took over, they weren't terribly interested in dominating their new territories; what they really wanted was good order and wealth. The newly acquired province of Judah was expected to behave, and send tribute to the empire. Enter the taxman.

The tax collector, of course, is seen as a collaborator. He's a turncoat, representing the interests of the oppressor against his own nation. He takes money from his own people, who don't have much, and he gives it to an emperor who already has far more than he needs. As part of this transaction, the tax collector is well remunerated.

So, if the Pharisees sacrifice their personal comfort and ambitions for the sake of the nation, the tax collectors sacrifice their nation for their own personal comfort and ambition. They couldn't be more opposite. It's no wonder that the

Pharisee looked at the tax collector in the way that he did. The Pharisee stood on the side of God. The tax collector stood on the side of Mammon – the empire, the world.

And when we get down to it, don't we try to raise our kids to be like Pharisees? We want a society in which people are civic minded, they follow the proper social orders and norms, they obey the law and don't cause trouble with the authorities. Our kids should learn the ways of ourselves and our parents and grandparents. We want our kids to be able to live a life in which they can say, 'My decisions have made me different from other people who live in scandalous ways. I have accepted faith, and therefore I am better off than someone who has not.' We want our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ to be praiseworthy people in the eyes of society.

The attributes of the tax collector, on the other hand, are characteristics that we abhor: personal profit above all, comfort and safety at the price of selling out your neighbour. One man is a beacon of light, the other a parasite. One unifies, the other divides.

I opened by saying that prayer is revelatory. Whether we want to or not we reveal our deepest selves in the way we pray, and in the way we don't pray. The revelation of these two men in our scripture this morning is very interesting.

In the prayer of the Pharisee we learn that the Pharisee sees himself as a hero. He knows that he is righteous, he is dedicated to God, to his nation, to the principles of good clean, well ordered living. What he says is not wrong – that he is not a cheater, or an adulterer – he is obeying the civil laws. He fasts and tithes; he obeys the religious laws. He really is a good person – righteous in his own eyes, and likely considered righteous in the eyes of society as well, though perhaps not very well liked.

But there's a fly in the ointment. This Pharisee is prideful, and judgmental. Prayer is supposed to be the focusing of our lives towards God, yet this man seems to want to focus God's attention upon his life. The direction is wrong. The Pharisee wants God to see him as he thinks others see him – upright and good – and in doing so he expresses that what he wants from God is what he expects from other men around him – respect and admiration for his sacrifice.

His pride extends to the judgement of those around him. He seems to be humble as he thanks God for allowing him to live a life of obedience, but then he turns to look at the tax collector and spits out a contemptuous 'thank you that I'm not like this one over here.'

A very interesting thing has just happened here. I said the Pharisees were heroes because they lived a life of sacrifice to save their whole nation – but then this Pharisee draws a line between himself and his fellow Israelite. He pours contempt on the very one who his actions are meant to save. He doesn't like the tax collector because the tax collector is only interested in personal gain – he's a traitor. But in this prayer the heart of the Pharisee is revealed and we see that his life of righteousness is not in fact a sacrifice to save others, but he is only interested in saving himself. It turns out that the Pharisee is the traitor – his judgement fractures the people of God; he plays right into the divide and conquer strategy of the Roman regime. And who benefits from this? The powers and the principalities. Not the Pharisee. Not the tax collector. Not the kingdom. The unifying hero has become the divisive villain.

We see that the Pharisee saw himself as society saw him – as a righteous man – and he revealed through his prayer that this is how he expected God to see him too. What we see as we read this story is that the truth is the opposite of this. So, what then about the tax collector? What does his prayer reveal?

The tax collector also saw himself as society saw him – but not in a good way as with the Pharisee. This man was viewed as an outcast, a sinful, selfish man with no courage or principles. Because of this, when he prays to God, he isn't asking God to see him as other men do, he desperately needs from God the opposite of what he gets from others.

The Living Faith says that prayer is openness to the presence of God; a focusing of our lives towards God, and that as we commune with God the Holy Spirit enables us to express our deepest longings. This is certainly true of the taxman. He isn't trying to put words in God's mouth as the Pharisee was, but he was most definitely expressing his deepest longing for love, for any kind of validation. He focused himself toward God and to his surprise and joy he found that

God did in fact love him. That taxman was saved; he was justified in the eyes of his Lord. He found that against everything that he could have imagined -against everything that society told him - that he was one of the ten; he was considered among the righteous. Through the course of that prayer he became one of the faithful remnant, that small but powerful bulwark against judgement. Meanwhile, the Pharisee had become judgement itself.

Preaching about judgement can be very challenging. Let's face it, when we read this story we sit in judgement of that Pharisee. We reverse the narrative, we say 'Thank God we are not like that horrible Pharisee,' and in doing so we become him. Any attempt by us to judge results in our being the Pharisee. There is no way out, no way around this. We become so easily trapped in the very trap of righteousness that this reading warns us of.

And our judgement is not limited to this man who died centuries ago. We do it in the present, to each other. It starts out as a benign statement, a brief observation or comparison. A glance that sizes up the other. One aspect of somebody that is singled out as being distasteful.

This division manifests itself in the way that we avoid making eye contact with certain people, or in the opposite way that we pay too much attention to the stranger in our midst – assuming the worst about them. We see it in the way that we scapegoat people.

I had a discussion after the second presidential debate in the States. As many of you are likely aware, the last question of the debate was for each candidate to name something positive that they admired in their opponent. I heard a chorus of people saying 'It's an impossible question - how could anyone say anything nice about Trump?'

According to God, nobody is beyond redemption. Nobody is a lost cause. If we can't find something nice to say about someone, that says a lot more about our worth than theirs. If we get to the point of so completely vilifying our opponents that they become that dehumanized, it is our character that should be called into question.

This is the trouble whenever we start to slide into any kind of us vs. them mentality. As soon as we fall prey to the temptation to divide humanity into any kind of groups, we have aligned ourselves squarely with the Pharisee. We've trapped ourselves.

Anytime you draw a line between who's 'in' and who's 'out,' this parable asserts, you will find God on the other side. That's important enough to repeat. Anytime you draw a line between who's 'in' and who's 'out,' you will find God on the other side. Once we understand this, the parable ultimately escapes even its narrative setting and reveals that it is not about self-righteousness and humility any more than it is about a pious Pharisee and desperate tax collector. Rather, this parable is about God: God who alone can judge the human heart; God who determines to justify the ungodly.

As soon as we start to question whether or not someone deserves a place in the kingdom, we would do well to remember this passage. As soon as someone points out the inadequacy of others, we would do well to remember this passage.

At the end of this story, the Pharisee will leave the Temple and return to his home being self-righteous. Nothing has changed; he felt himself righteous when he came in and righteous as he left. The tax collector, however, will leave the Temple and go back down to his home justified, that is, he is accounted righteous by the Holy One of Israel.

How has this happened? The tax collector makes neither sacrifice nor restitution. On what basis, then, is he named as righteous? On the basis of God's divine fiat and ordinance! We learn from both of the prayers we read this morning that we have nothing to claim but our dependence on God's mercy. When we manage to forget, if only for a moment, our human-constructed divisions and stand before God aware only of our need, then we, too, become justified by the God of Jesus and we are invited to return to our homes in mercy, grace, and gratitude.

The real divide is not between us and them; Jesus shows us the real divide is between the world that is and the world God intends for us. The divide is between the worldly kingdom and the heavenly kingdom. The good news is that Jesus

has bridged that divide – he has torn the veil and makes possible our salvation and our inclusion in the yet to come and already present Kingdom.

What is required, is so simple. I told the children about the breath prayer – the prayer of the tax collector. A simple prayer open to the presence of God; a focusing of our lives towards God. An expression of our deepest longing toward God through Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner’