

Criticality of Humility in Prayer

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time [C]

Sir 35:12-14,16-18; Ps 34:2-3,17-19,23; 2Tm 4:6-8,16-18; 2Cor5:19; Lk 18:9-14

Taking all of Christ's teachings into account,

- faith and charity were the topics He talked about the most.
- Behind those two, the subject He spoke on more than any other
 - was the need for prayer. (57.1)

And today, building on earlier lessons teaching that we should we pray

- with faith and with perseverance,
- Jesus gives us a parable to demonstrate the great importance
 - of praying to God with a humble heart:
 - a heart that is ready to acknowledge its failings,
 - is sorry for them, and seeking His forgiveness.

Scripture tells us that God resists the proud; opposes the proud (Jas 4:6; 1Pet 5:5)

- but “*a humble, contrite heart He will not spurn.*” (Ps 51:17)
- Indeed, as our first reading from Sirach attests:
 - It is the prayer of the lowly that pierces the clouds...

As is often the case, Jesus' parable is full of strong contrast and even irony:

- A Pharisee: a member of a group of religious leaders well-known for being meticulous about adhering to Mosaic Law
- And a tax collector: who, in the time of Christ, was viewed as a public sinner on par with prostitutes: (Lk 19:7)
 - They were seen as traitors, collecting heavy taxes on behalf of the oppressive Roman occupiers
 - And cheats who often collected more money than prescribed to enrich themselves.
- So when these two men went to the temple to pray,
 - it was no doubt shocking to some in Jesus' audience
 - that it was the tax collector who went home justified
 - not the Pharisee...
 - How could that be?
 - In short, because the shameful tax collector

- demonstrated true piety
- and the Pharisee, false piety.
- True piety from the tax collector in that he subjected himself to God, was humble before Him:
 - Aware of and honest about his sinfulness,
 - downcast eyes in sorrow & shame,
 - beating his chest as he pled for God's mercy.
- And false piety from the Pharisee who,
 - far from subjecting himself to God
 - -- and astonishingly under the pretense of prayer --
 - praises himself, exalts himself
 - while taking pot shots at others for their sinfulness.
- In the words of the Psalmist:
 - *"He so flatters himself in his mind that he knows not his guilt... All wisdom is gone."* (Ps 36:2,4)

So let's contemplate a handful of lessons from today's parable:

If there is ever a time for self-exaltation, prayer is definitely not that time...

- Recall that when we prepare ourselves for Confession,
 - we're taught to call to mind our sins –
 - sins of commission and sins of omission:
 - the things we did that were wrong
 - and the good we should have done, but did not.
 - Note the Pharisee did precisely the opposite:
 - calling to mind his good works and the sins he avoided.

Standing before God and taking pride in our good works

- is like the stem of an apple looking to the tree trunk and,
 - proudly pointing its apple, say: "Look what I made!"
- In essence, that's what the Pharisee was saying to God.
- The stem of an apple is little more than a conduit of the fruit-bearing tree,
 - and accordingly we should never feel boastful
 - over any good fruits that may come from living our faith.
- While God desires that we play a role in His great work, to work thru us,
 - He does not need us.

- Quite the opposite, we all desperately need Him.
- We are but channels of His graces, by no means the source...
 - and the Pharisee failed to grasp that.

Nor is prayer the time for disparaging others as the Pharisee did,

- looking down his pious nose
 - to thank God he wasn't *"like the rest of humanity – or even like this tax collector"*
- This is a fairly common tactic of those who have low self-esteem:
 - trying to put others down in effort to elevate themselves.
- It is a tactic that fails in our human relationships -- and even more so with God.

Even if our holiness really is better than the next guy, know that the standard or measure of our piety is in no way dependent on how we compare with our Christian brothers and sisters.

- Rather, as St. Josemaria Escriva put it so simply,
 - to be holy is to resemble Christ.
- So if we ever want to compare, then for a reality check
 - let us meditate on how we compare to Christ himself
 - and as we do so, prepare to be humbled...

We also see that merely going to the temple did not justify the Pharisee...

- (or the tax collector for that matter)
- Going to the temple was a good first step,
 - but what did the Pharisee do when he got there...?
 - He didn't worship God, that's for sure.

This is a reminder to us that when we likewise come to Mass

- more than being physically present -- which is certainly a great start –
 - Are we spiritually present?
 - Are we humbling ourselves before God?
 - Are we encountering God?
 - We hear with our ears, but are we listening with our heart..?
 - listening for guidance and correction from God
 - and then resolving to follow?
- In short, one thing we learn from our poor Pharisee

- is that it's entirely possible to be physically present
 - and yet go home having gained nothing...

And it does not seem to matter how many words we use in prayer or how flowery our speech is:

- Note today the Pharisee gave a somewhat lengthy oration
 - as compared to the tax collector's very short & simple plea.
- Regarding the words we use in prayer, quality over quantity is what matters more to God...

Nor does our outward appearance or others' expectations of us have any bearing on our piety.

- Our Pharisee made great efforts to appear holy from an outside perspective, scrupulously following all the rules...
 - but that unfortunately didn't mean he was holy on the inside...
- And that was apparently a common problem amongst the Pharisees,
 - one of the reasons Jesus was notoriously harsh with them,
 - calling them hypocrites who liked to clean the outside of the cup
 - but left the inside dirty: full of greed and self-indulgence. (Mt 23:25)

No, instead of all these other things,

- Jesus teaches us today that what really matters,
 - the fundamental virtue we need when coming to God in prayer:
 - is our Humility.
- On the surface we may be as meticulously clean as the Pharisee
 - or as dirty as the tax collector...
 - but it's our interior disposition that is of critical importance:
 - honestly recognizing our sins before God
 - being truly sorry for them
 - and then seeking His mercy.
 - The heart of the reviled tax-collector had all 3
 - and he went home justified.
 - The heart of the whitewashed Pharisee had none:
 - Ignoring or otherwise blind to his sins, praising himself,
 - and feeling no need to seek God's mercy,
 - he went home empty...

Before closing I'd like to take just 1 min to encourage you to vote next month...

How many times in the last couple of years have you said or heard someone say:

- "It's like the world is upside down..."?

There are a whole host of contentious, hot-button issues in our country today:

- some of which we can politely agree to disagree on;
- but there are also issues that we as Catholics should agree
 - are of deep moral concern.

And one thing is certain: increasingly, we as a nation are, to use Jesus' words,

- *"thinking not as God does, but as human beings do"* (Mk 8:33)

And the fruits of such folly are evident in

- the attempted undermining of God and Church and objective morality,
- the destabilizing of family, country and even civilized society.

So with all my heart I implore you today:

- Vote your Faith
- Remember, you are a Catholic first, American second,
 - and whatever party affiliation third.

CONCLUSION

Today we are reminded that, *"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"*

- We as individuals have sinned. We as a country have sinned.
 - Let us not be blind to it like the Pharisee;
 - but rather, like the tax collector,
 - humbly & honestly acknowledge our failings before God.
 - And with true sorrow, let us begin to change our ways:
 - individually in the confessional
 - and as a nation by our vote.

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Theme: Humble Before God

Scripture: "...everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." *Luke 18:14*

Challenge: Honestly acknowledge your shortcomings before God and resolve to change your ways.