

Showing Up to Pray

By Rev. Robert McTeigue, S.J.

October 23, 2022 - Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Sirach 35.12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18; Luke 18.9-14

How do you know when you're doing something wrong? As I ask that question, I think back to a friend who taught kindergarten. She said to one of her students, "Jonny—you've got your shoes on the wrong feet." The little boy started crying unconsolably. Finally, through the sobs, he was able to wail, "But these *are* my feet!" I think that even at such a young age, eventually he would have said, "You know . . . something just doesn't feel right . . ." Fortunately, Jonny had an alert teacher and kept him from hurting himself.

What about prayer? How do you know when you're doing it right? As a priest, I'm asked very often to help people who want to "pray more" or to "pray better." Of course, Our Lord never asked us to pray more or pray better. Instead, He instructed us to "pray always." But that's another topic for another time.

I think that we're not very good at evaluating our prayer; we may be as inexpert as little Jonny with his shoes on the wrong feet. Here's what I mean: Many people think that prayer is "good" if, after praying, they feel good. Likewise, many people think that prayer is "lousy" if, after praying, they feel lousy. That's two ways of getting it wrong. The first sign of good prayer is prayer where you actually show up to pray. Showing up isn't the only thing we need to do in prayer, but it is the indispensable first step.

The Prayer of the Pharisee

Our Lord's parable in Luke 18 presents us with two men who show up to pray. So far, so good. But one man gets it right and the other gets it very, very wrong. What's the difference? The difference is truth. One man prays in the truth; the other man prays in delusion. Let's start by looking at the man who got it wrong.

The Pharisee prays as if God has won the lottery for having such a fine person like that Pharisee on the divine payroll. The Pharisee certainly doesn't lack self-esteem! God is presented with a list of the Pharisee's achievements and a clear outline out of his moral superiority. He's not just better than that tax collector over there. The tax collector is just a handy illustration. The Pharisee gives thanks he is not like other men. He's superior to them all; he's sure of it, and he wants to make sure that God is sure of it too. Commenting on the Pharisee in this parable, Saint Augustine notes, "If you look into his words, you will find that he asked nothing of God. He goes up indeed to pray, but instead of asking God, praises himself." In other words, the Pharisee is self-satisfied. He is full of himself. Consequently, he leaves no room for God, and, tragically, is unaware of the lack.

This is the key for understanding the prayer of the Pharisee. Despite his expertise, he has not been formed and reformed by the revelation of God. Because he has little awareness of the absolute holiness of God, the Pharisee has little awareness of himself as a sinner, as a beggar, as a reprobate. Because he cannot imagine himself as a sinner, he cannot imagine himself in need of a savior. Because he does not welcome God's savior, the Pharisee will not find himself to be the Father's adopted son.

The Prayer of the Tax Collector

How different from the prayer of the tax collector! If the Pharisee embodied pride, the tax collector embodied humility. Humility is not a false modesty about one's own gifts. If Tiger Woods says that he's a lousy golf player, that

doesn't mean he's humble—it just means that he's not good at lying. Humility is rooted in the telling the truth. The tax collector had some glimpse of the truth about himself and the truth about God.

Biblical commentator William Barclay puts the matter clearly: “But the question is not, ‘Am I as good as my neighbor?’ The question is, ‘Am I as good as God?’” Clearly, the tax collector asked the right question and came up with the right answer. Let's connect this with the observation that humility is rooted in telling the truth. The unchanging truth is that God is absolutely holy. The awkward truth is that we are called to become so holy that we can see the face of God and live. The horrifying truth is that we are unrighteous sinners who cannot make ourselves pleasing to God or earn God's favor. The amazing truth is that the Christ of God defeats sin and offers to share His victory with us. An honest man can see that he is a sinner. Cooperating with the grace of God, an honest man can discover that he is a loved sinner.

Prayer and Humility

What does all of this have to do with us and the lives we lead? What does it tell us about how we are to pray and worship?

Our prayer must begin by our showing up. Our prayer must be rooted in humility, which is to say rooted in truth—true knowledge and love of God, and true knowledge of and proper regard for ourselves. In the presence of God, no one can boast. The best we can do is to stand next to Christ and say, “I'm with Him!”

Almighty God, who created us from nothing and saved us from ourselves by the sacrifice of His Christ is worthy to be praised, adored, and worshipped. It is, as the Church has said in her worship for millennia, *Dignum et iustum est*—*it is right and just*—that we offer God worthy worship. The perfect worship of God is made present at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Many Church documents speak of the Eucharist as, “...the source and summit of our lives,” but I fear that these words are spoken rather glibly.

If we lived in union with the truth of the Eucharist, would we tolerate ugly buildings, shabby vestments, insipid preaching, vapid hymns? If we prayed with the humility of the tax collector, would we really worship our saving God by coming to Mass late, leaving early, and dressed like we're on our way to the gym? No, of course not. But because we do tolerate—to the point of not even noticing—the slapdash way of Sunday worship over at the parish of Saint Typical's, I suspect that we are more inclined to pray like the Pharisee, thinking that God owes us simply because we showed up and did what we wanted to, according to our own terms and standards. Between now and the next Mass you attend, assuming we all live that long, we have some soul searching to do. In that time, I will ask you to pray for three graces, the special blessings.

First, pray for the grace of humility—an honest acknowledgement of God's holiness and our own sinfulness.

Second, pray for the grace of obedience—a decision to act on the saving truths that only the humble can know.

Third, pray for the grace of gratitude—a heart overflowing into the worthy worship of God.

If we do that, and we pray and live with humility, obedience, and gratitude, then we will know the truth of the words found in today's Psalm: “When the just cry out, the LORD hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them.”

May God's Holy Name be praised now and forever.

Fr. Robert McTeigue, S. J., Ph.D., is host of The Catholic Current, airing on the Station of the Cross Catholic Media Network. His latest books from Ignatius Press are Real Philosophy for Real People: Tools for Truthful Living (2020) and Christendom Lost and Found: Meditations for a Post Post-Christian Era (2022).

For Further Reading

- *Thomas Aquinas, [Catena Aurea](#)*
- *W. Barclay, [The Gospel of Luke](#)*

In Short . . .

- *True prayer requires humility and truth.*
- *True prayer leads to worthy worship.*
- *Our way of prayer and worship merits scrutiny, so as to avoid praying as the Pharisee.*