

One-page Synopsis: OT XXX [C] Sunday (Oct 23) Lk 18:9-14 (L-16)

Introduction: The main theme of today's Gospel is that true humility must be the hallmark of our prayers. However, the central focus of today's parable is not on prayer itself, but rather on pride, humility and the role of grace in our salvation.

Scripture lessons: The first reading, from Sirach, is a perfect companion piece to the Gospel parable. In one striking image from Sirach, the writer talks about "*the prayer of the lowly, piercing the clouds to reach the unseen throne of God.*" Such prayers are heard because they come from the hearts of people who know how much they need God. Although God has no favorites and answers the prayers of all, the oppressed, the orphans, the widows, and those who can least help themselves are His special concern. The best prayer is humble and selfless service. In the second reading, Paul, a former Pharisee, humbly acknowledges his work as accomplished by the grace of God, and he thanks God for enabling him to fight a good battle -- to run a good race while keeping his Faith intact and proclaiming it. In today's Gospel parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus reminds us that God hears the prayers those who approach Him in humility with a repentant heart. God did not hear the prayer of the Pharisee because he exalted himself. His prayer was a prayer of thanksgiving that he was not as evil as other people. He announced to God his freedom from sin and detailed his fidelity in observing the prescribed fast and in giving tithes. The tax collector's prayer, "*O God, be merciful to me, a sinner,*" was heard because he humbled himself, acknowledging his sins and requesting God's mercy.

Life messages: 1) Let us evict the Pharisee and revive the publican in each of us. We become the proud Pharisee when we brag about our achievements giving no credit to God, when we seek praise and recognition from others for our accomplishments, and when we degrade others with insensitive comments, hurting their feelings. In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to imitate the humble publican (tax collector), by acknowledging our total dependence on God and His grace for all our achievements and blessings; by confessing to God daily our sinfulness and asking for His pardon and forgiveness; by praying for God's continued daily support through His grace and for His strengthening through the daily anointing and of His Holy Spirit living within us; and by becoming more sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, serving them as best as we can. 2) Let us include all the necessary ingredients in our prayers. Our personal prayers must include our request for pardon and forgiveness for our sins, thanksgiving for the numerous blessings we receive daily from God, praise and worship, surrendering of our life and all our activities completely and unconditionally to God,

acknowledging our weakness and total dependence on Him, and finally, presenting our needs and petitions, accompanied by the fervent request for God's strengthening in our weakness and temptations by the daily anointing of His Holy Spirit. Let us pray every day: "*Be merciful to me, a sinner.*"

OT XXX [C] (Oct 23): Sir 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Tm 4:6-8, 16-18; Lk 18:9-14

Anecdote # 1: "Proud about what?" A news reporter once asked Mother Teresa if she had ever been tempted to be proud. Mother Theresa retorted with a smile, "Proud about what?" The reporter replied, "Why, about the wonderful things you have been doing for the poorest of the poor!" Then came her answer, "I never knew I had done anything, because it was God who worked in and through my Sisters and volunteers." True humility differentiates a saint from a sinner. If we are proud of our talents, our family connections, our reputation, or our achievements in life, today's Gospel tells us that we need Jesus to rid us of our pride and make us truly humble.

#2: "No, Madam, he did not." William Barclay tells the story of the woman tourist in Germany. The guide took a group through Beethoven's house. He showed them the piano on which the genius had composed his Moonlight Sonata. A woman in the group immediately sat down and played some bars from the sonata. The guide told the group that Paderewski (world renowned Polish pianist and composer) had recently been shown the piano. The woman gushed, "And I wager he sat down and played just as I did." Archly the guide said, "No, Madam. He said he was not worthy to touch those keys."

3: **Truly humble of heart:** Dorothy Day died in November 1980 at the age of 84. Reporting on her death, the *New York Times* called her the most influential person in the history of American Catholicism. In her book, *From Union Square to Rome*, she describes her conversion to Christ. One of her first attractions came in childhood. One day she discovered the mother of one of her girlfriends kneeling in prayer. The sight of this kneeling woman moved her deeply. She never forgot it. In the same book she tells how, in the days before her conversion, she often spent the entire night in a tavern. Then she would go to an early morning Mass at St. Joseph's Church on Sixth Avenue. What attracted her to St. Joseph's were the people kneeling in prayer. She writes: "I longed for their Faith... So I used to go in and kneel in a back pew." Eventually Dorothy Day received the gift of Faith and entered the Church. (*Mark Link in 'Sunday Homilies'*)

4: "Don't you know this is a fast-day?" Once there was a rabbi who was at the point of death. The Jewish community proclaimed a day of fasting in order to induce the Heavenly Judge to commute the sentence of death. When the entire congregation was gathered in the synagogue for penance and prayer, the village drunkard went to the village tavern for some schnapps (white brandy). Another Jew saw him and rebuked him saying, "Don't you know this is a fast-day and everyone is in the synagogue praying for the healing of our rabbi? You shouldn't be drinking." The drunkard agreed, went to the synagogue and prayed, "Dear God! Please restore our rabbi to good health so that I can have my schnapps!" The rabbi recovered, and his healing was seen to be granted because of the sincere prayer of the drunkard. Addressing his people on the following Sabbath, the rabbi prayed: "May God preserve our village drunkard until he is a hundred and twenty years! Know that his prayer was heard by God when yours were not because he put his whole heart and soul into his prayer!" [Nathan Ausubel, ed., *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, p. 161). Today's Gospel tells us how God heard the prayers of a humble sinner and ignored the proud prayer of a self-righteous Pharisee.

Introduction: The main theme of today's Gospel is that true humility must be the hallmark of our prayers. However, the central focus of today's parable is not on prayer itself, but rather on pride, humility and the role of grace in our salvation. The first reading, taken from Sirach, is a perfect companion piece to the Gospel parable. In one striking image from Sirach, the writer talks about *"the prayer of the lowly, piercing the clouds to reach the unseen throne of God."* Such prayers are heard because they come from the hearts of people who know how much they need God. Although God has no favorites and answers the prayers of all, the oppressed, the orphans, the widows, and those who can least help themselves are His special concern. The best prayer is humble and selfless service. In the second reading, Paul celebrates the fact that he is near the finish line of his life, like a runner running a race, and that he has kept the Faith right up to this point. He humbly awaits "the crown of righteousness" that only God can give him. *"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith!"* In today's Gospel parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus reminds us that God hears the prayers those who approach Him in humility. God did not hear the prayer of the Pharisee because he exalted himself. His prayer was a prayer of thanksgiving that he was not as evil as other people; he announced to God his freedom from sin and detailed his fidelity in observing the prescribed fasts and in giving tithes. The tax collector's prayer, *"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner,"* was heard because he humbled himself acknowledging his sins and requesting God's mercy.

First reading, [Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18](#): Around 175 BC, many Jews, living in cities where pagans were in the majority, unknowingly assimilated their culture. Hence Sirach, a wise Jew, taught them how faithful Jews should live a good life, what moral and spiritual choices they should make and what behavior would be honorable in religious people. Chapter 35 begins with a discussion of the kinds of sacrifice that would be truly acceptable to God. These include keeping the law, observing the commandments (verse 1), doing works of charity, giving alms (verse 2), refraining from evil and avoiding injustice (verse 3). In the passage chosen for the first reading, Sirach asserts that the just God has no favorites. Rather, He always hears and grants the humble prayers of the widows, the orphans, the lowly, the weak and the oppressed.

Second Reading, [2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#): Paul sees his imminent martyrdom in terms of sacrificial worship. That's what he means by the expression, "*I am already being poured out like a libation.*" *The New Jerusalem Bible* says, in a footnote to this verse, "Libations of wine, water or oil were poured over the victims not only in Gentile sacrifices but also in Jewish ones, see [Exodus 29:40](#) and [Numbers 28:7](#)." In the second paragraph, Paul thanks God for vindicating him in his first trial before the Roman magistrate, giving him a chance to bear witness to the Gospel before the pagans. But, though *rescued once from the lion's mouth*, Paul is realistic in predicting that he is bound for the Lord's Heavenly Kingdom, finishing his life's race as a humble "Apostle of the Gentiles." He writes, "*I have finished the race; I have kept the Faith. From now on, the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for His appearance.*" Although, like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, Paul reports his accomplishments, like the publican, he humbly acknowledges the source of strength for the success of his apostolate: "*The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.*"

Exegesis. **The context:** Luke's Gospel shows special concern for the poor and the outsider. Luke may have included the parable we hear today, which concerns the acceptability of the prayers of the humble publican as opposed to those of the proud Pharisee, at least in part, to encourage the Gentile converts who did not practice the Jewish Law as the Pharisees did. In this parable, we see that God values the prayer of any humble and contrite heart. Luke puts greater emphasis on prayer than do the other Gospel writers, and he often mentions Jesus' prayers (Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:18; 9:28, 29; 11:1). The parables about prayer unique to Luke's Gospel are: 1) The Friend at Midnight (11:5-8), 2) The Widow and the Judge (18:1-8), and 3) The Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18:9-14). These parables teach us to pray persistently, and humbly. The central focus of today's

parable is not on prayer, but rather on pride, humility and the role of grace in our salvation.

Analysis: The parable has a two-fold meaning, giving us i) a warning against pride and contempt for others, and ii) an admonition to approach God with a humble and repentant heart. The parable was mainly intended to convict the Pharisees who, on the one hand, proudly claimed they obeyed all the rules and regulations of the Jewish Law, while on the other hand, they ignored the Mosaic precepts of mercy and compassion. The Pharisees were looked upon as devout, law-abiding citizens and models of righteousness. But they were proud and self-righteous. The tax collectors, on the other hand, were the most-hated group because they collected taxes for a foreign empire, and became rich by cheating people, often threatening them with false accusations. In other words, they collaborated with the Romans and stole from the Jews. Hence, they were considered by their fellow-Jews to be traitors, unclean and sinful. The parable, however, shows that both men were sinners: the difference was that the publican realized that he was, but the Pharisee did not.

The assessment of their prayers: Devout Jews observed three prayer-times daily, at nine AM, twelve midday and three PM. They also considered prayer in the Temple as more efficacious than that made anywhere else. In the parable, Jesus tells us about two men who went to pray, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee stood in the very front section of the Temple, distancing himself from his inferiors, and his prayer was egotistical. He looked upon himself as superior to other people, and listed all his pious acts. The Jewish Law required fasting only on the Day of Atonement, but this Pharisee fasted twice a week, possibly, on Monday and Friday, the market days, when the largest possible audience would see his whitened face and disheveled clothing -- the external marks of his fasting. Although he was required to tithe only on his agricultural produce (Dt 14:22; Nm 18:21), this Pharisee paid tithes on all his wealth. He was sure that he had done all that the law of God required --and even more, thus creating a "surplus" of righteousness and making the Almighty his "debtor."

The Pharisee's prayer: In short, the proud and self-righteous Pharisee did not really go to pray to God, but only to tell God how good he was in the guise of thanking Him. He said this prayer "to himself"! His prayer was also ineffective because he was proud, despising all others, including the tax collector, labeling them sinners. He was really a good man, but he lacked compassion for others. If the first big mistake of the Pharisee was to think that God would be impressed by his boasting, the second was in his thinking that he was better than others. The

Pharisee got what he asked for, which was nothing, while the sinner got what he asked for, which was everything. Two things especially make our prayers void and of no effect: a proud sense of our own righteousness, and a contempt for others. But a humble heart is contrary to both of these.

The tax collector's prayer: The second person was the tax collector. He stood at the back of the Temple and would not even lift his eyes to God. He confessed his sins and humbly asked for God's mercy: "*Kyrie, eleison*" - "*O God, be merciful to me--a sinner.*" His prayer was short, but to the purpose. His heartbroken, humble prayer won him acceptance before God. His only virtue was his humility, which led him to repentance and prompted him to ask for mercy. While the Pharisee asked God, in effect, "Am I not better than my fellow-men?" the tax collector's question to himself was, "Am I as good as God?" Having defrauded his neighbors on behalf of the Roman overlords, the tax collector had much to be humble about. He was a sinner, personally and corporately, a state which prompted him to pray: "*God be merciful to me -- a sinner.*" The Pharisee prayed as one who needed no forgiveness, and he got none; the tax collector prayed as one who needed forgiveness, and he received it. "Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays." (Soren Kierkegaard). "If no change occurs as a result of prayer, then one has not really prayed." (Fr. Raymond Brown).

We might object to God's forgiving the tax collector as he did not formally confess any sins, make a statement of repentance, offer to change his life or make any reparations for his sins (as the tax collector, Zacchaeus, did). God's approval of his prayer might appear to us to be a cheap form of grace. But let us remember that the humble prayer of the tax collector implied all the formalities of repentance, restitution and change of life, and framed them in his awareness of his total unworthiness compared to the holiness of God. And so, as Jesus tells his audience and us, as a reward of his humble prayer for mercy, the tax collector received it and went home truly "justified," i.e., "reconciled to God." St. Paul reminds us: "*Not because of any righteous deeds we have done but because of His mercy, He has saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit*" (Titus: 3:5). The last words of the Gospel reading are a warning to us all: "*Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

Life messages: 1) Let us evict the Pharisee and revive the publican in each of us. We become the proud Pharisee when we brag about our achievements giving no credit to God, when we seek praise and recognition from others for our accomplishments, and when we degrade others with insensitive comments, hurting their feelings. In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges us to imitate the humble publican (tax collector) by acknowledging our total dependence on God and His

grace for all our achievements and blessings; by confessing to God daily our sinfulness and asking for His pardon and forgiveness; by praying for God's continued daily support through His grace and for His strengthening through the daily anointing and of His Holy Spirit living within us; and by becoming more sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, serving them as best as we can. 2) Let us include all the necessary ingredients in our prayers. Our personal prayers must include our request for pardon and forgiveness for our sins, thanksgiving for the numerous blessings we receive daily from God, praise and worship, surrendering of our life and all our activities completely and unconditionally to God, acknowledging our weakness and total dependence on Him and finally, presenting our needs and petitions, accompanied by the fervent request for God's strengthening in our weakness and temptations by the daily anointing of His Holy Spirit. Let us pray every day: "*Be merciful to me, a sinner.*"

3) Let us rid ourselves of self-justification: It is a tragedy that those who justify themselves leave no room to receive grace. Morally they may be living exemplary lives, yet their self-justification leaves no room for the grace of God to take hold. God cannot give grace to them because they are not ready to receive it; they are too full. If we are proud and complacent, there is not much room for God. On the other hand, if we are truly humble we will find grace, mercy and peace. There must be a space in our lives for grace to enter and work its miracle. One lesson of the parable for us is that we must keep our focus entirely on God and our relationship with Him, recognizing that we are constantly in need of His mercy and forgiveness.

4) Let us ask for God's unconditional love and mercy during the Holy Mass. The Gospel is about God's Divine Mercy. The tax collector saw this clearly: "*Be merciful to me, a sinner.*" We repeat this phrase at the Holy Mass and in the Divine Mercy Prayer: "Eternal Father, we offer you the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Your dearly beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, in atonement for our sins and those of the whole world." This is why we are gathered together every Sunday morning. We tell God that we offer Him His dearly beloved Son in atonement for our sins. Let us conclude with the *Divine Mercy Prayer*: "*For the sake of His Sorrowful Passion, have mercy on us, and on the whole world.*"

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