

Russell Kelfer

God, Be Merciful

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Series: The Parables of Scripture

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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The Master loved to tell stories; special kinds of stories. He loved to weave into word pictures fictional tales about regular, every day occurrences, knowing that those with “ears to hear” would get much more than the story line. They would have injected into their spiritual blood stream a series of absolutes and principles that, properly applied to the heart, would produce spiritual growth.

In our last study, we listened as Jesus told one of those stories (He called them parables) about someone who awakened his neighbor in the middle of the night asking for food for an unexpected visitor. The man, shocked from slumber, didn’t respond too well. He argued that his kids were asleep, he was asleep, and it was just too much trouble to lend the poor neighbor three loaves of bread at midnight. In other words, “Thanks for dropping by, but don’t call again between the hours of ten and six. Bye.” In today’s society, he would have gotten one of those “press one, press two, press three” recordings, and the last one would have said, “Thank you for calling the Smith household. We lend bread between the hours of 8 am and 9 pm Monday through Thursdays. Please limit your crises to those hours. Oh, yes, God loves you and so do we.”

This neighbor, however, didn’t want to take no for an answer, and the Scripture reads, “though he will not rise and give (to) him because he is his friend, *because of his persistence*, he will rise and give him whatever he needs.” The neighbor’s persistent intensity won out. Because he kept asking, he finally got what he needed. Then Jesus added, “Keep on asking, then, and you *will* receive; keep on seeking, and you *will* find what you’re seeking; keep on knocking and it *will* be opened unto you.” That was followed by a verbal picture of a father whose child was asking for something good, and the assumption that no parents would give their child a rock instead of a piece of bread, or a snake in place of a piece of fish, or a scorpion when the son had sought an egg.

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Jesus added, “If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?” Indeed. Jesus had woven a tale of a parent-child relationship and told a story of a persistent neighbor to teach us how to pray. We learned from that parable why God sometimes intentionally waits to answer our prayers, and why the faith generated as we wait is often more important than the request itself.

The parable we want to address in this lesson is found in Luke, chapter 18, and it is preceded by still another that both validates and elaborates on the one in our last study. Let’s begin reading in Luke 18:1

And he spake a parable unto them to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint;

Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:

And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

And he would not for a while: but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man;

Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.

And the Lord said, Hear what the unjust judge saith.

And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?

I tell you that he will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?
(Luke 18:1-8)

The purpose of this parable is stated clearly in the first verse. He spoke a parable unto them to this end, (for this purpose) to elaborate on the fact that men ought to keep on praying and not give up. The key character in this story was a judge who neither feared God nor man. His motivations were not pure. He was concerned only about “number one”. The second person in the parable was a widow woman who lived in the same city who needed help. She was not of significance in the world’s eyes, but, like the neighbor in the prior story, she was persistent.

The judge, said no for a while, but finally, he made a decision. He would not give her what she wanted because he thought it

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would please God (he didn't fear God), and he would not help her because he was afraid of her or anyone she might send to threaten him (he had no regard for what man could or might do), she was simply wearing him down with her continual pleading, so he gave in and gave her what she was begging for. Having told of this very brief encounter and the woman's eventual success, Jesus makes the application. He says, "Shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him, though He bear long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily."

In other words, if a wicked unbeliever will reward persistence with a positive response, won't a holy God, who loves His children enough to die for them, honor their persistence so long as it is in harmony with what's best for them? He will. He will avenge them speedily. Then He adds an unusual postscript. He says:

Nevertheless when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

The implication is: "Though God honors this kind of faith (the faith that believes enough to keep on asking), at the end of the age, will that kind of faith be prevalent?" Apparently not.

The issue again is faith, and the persistence being described in these two parables is symbolic of that faith. Hebrews 11 says it clearly:

But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

Faith believes that God is who He says He is and that He rewards those who diligently and persistently seek Him. The man or woman of faith so believes that they will not stop asking until they have an answer. If the answer is no, they will still praise Him, but they won't quit asking until they have an answer.

With that, Jesus turned back to his attentive crowd, and immediately began still another story. It may seem that He has changed topics abruptly, but I think you will see that one draws from the other quite naturally. He went on:

And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I

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thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

(Luke 18:9-14)

Here is another of those parables which is so familiar we might easily overlook its personal implications. It is one we ought to read and reread regularly as we bow before God and seek His face. It is, in reality, also about prayer. But this one, instead of dealing with insistence and persistence in prayer, deals with a more hidden issue: humility in prayer. It has particular significance for the active evangelical Christians of our day who tend to look at the rest of the body of Christ in a somewhat condescending way, and while talking about the need for humility and a servant heart, are so busy condemning every one else's theology they fail to see that they are destroying the reputation of God by the arrogance with which they perceive their own spirituality.

This is not an easy lesson either to teach or to hear. It is, however, a matter of grave importance to God. Therefore, it must be a matter of great significance to us. The passage begins by portraying an incident that takes place in the temple. Unlike most of the parables, Scripture tells us who this one is aimed at. It is designed for those "who trust in themselves that they are righteous and despise others".

If you have already dismissed yourself from that group, be careful. That may be a good sign you shouldn't have. I have found this passage very uncomfortable to study seriously. You may, as we proceed, come to the same conclusion.

"Those who trust in themselves" is an interesting phrase. It literally means "to have a great deal of self confidence". We hear a lot today about having a "positive self-image". Be careful. Some of that teaching is designed to build up self at the expense of God's image. We have not only the right but the responsibility to have a positive image of who we are in Christ. But apart from

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Him, we are absolutely nothing. Nothing means nothing. That means to whatever degree you are trusting in your own abilities, your own education, your own creativity, apart from the miracle-working grace of God, you are a fool. Jesus said that apart from the Father He could do nothing. Apart from the Father, He was nothing, for He was operating in the Father's image. He was totally in obedience. He did not even speak without the Father putting the words in His mouth. He did not have a "positive self-image". He had a complete spirit of dependence, which meant that anything He did or said without the Father saying it or doing it was worth zero.

Satan is clever. He knows that you'll never buy that "I can do it for God" routine. So he moves into your life in tiny increments, quietly taking over rooms in your heart and space in your mind, creating little pockets of self-confidence, until that spirit of release that comes from being totally in God's control has dissipated, and you didn't even know it happened.

The vogue of the day in Christian circles is to try to balance the world's concept of self with God's concept of dependence. Don't try. It won't work. This parable is designed to prove that. This man was very confident of his own righteousness. That word righteousness is another interesting word. If you look in a concordance, you will find the word *dikaios* {dik'-ah-yos} which means

Righteous, observing divine laws

a) in a wide sense, upright, righteous, virtuous, keeping the commands of God

1) of those who seem to themselves to be righteous, who pride themselves to be righteous, who pride themselves in their virtues, whether real or imagined

b) in a narrower sense, rendering to each his due and that in a judicial sense, passing just judgment on others, whether expressed in words or shown by the manner of dealing with them.

It has, then, to do with two things:

1- How you perceive yourself

2- How you perceive others relative to yourself

It is those two attitudes that surface in this parable. Jesus begins by describing the two characters in the story. "Two men

went up into the temple to pray.” From God’s perspective, they were two men with identical opportunities to worship. They weren’t described in any other fashion as they entered the temple. So many of the labels we put on people, and the limits we place on people are of man, and not of God. The difference between these two men turned out not to be in their station in life, but rather in the condition of their hearts, and that condition turned out to be the reverse of what man would expect in terms of acceptance.

“One was a Pharisee, the other a publican.” One was highly regarded as a religious authority, a spiritual example. The other was the epitome of man’s corruption, a lowly tax collector who made his living at the expense of others and whose very profession made his spiritual potential suspect.

“The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.” What a powerful statement. “He prayed thus with himself”. He was really praying for himself and thus in reality to himself. He hadn’t come to make contact with God. He had come to eulogize his own righteousness in front of others, and to confirm to himself just how much more religious he was than others who gathered there. He was on stage, if you will, and he was using the platform of prayer as a means to promote his own self-righteousness. How that must break the heart of God. And how we ought to think long and hard about when and why God might say that of us. “He or she stood and prayed thus with (or to) himself or herself”.

Real prayer is prayed solely to God. To whatever degree your prayer is tailored for the audience or for the others who are praying, to that degree you are not praying. When asked by another what he thought of Reverend so and so’s prayer, one man answered, It was one of the most eloquent prayers ever offered to a Boston audience. Prayers weren’t designed for an audience. That’s why we were told in Matthew:

But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.
(Matthew 6:6)

This man was praying to himself. He was offering his prayer as an example to man of his righteousness, not to God as an example of his sinfulness.

“I thank God that I am not as other men.” The key to his sin was in his condescension. He saw his “SQ” (his spiritual

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quotient) as a direct reflection of what he did, not who he was. He was not like other men, because he did certain things they didn't do, and the doing of those things, he determined, had earned him special favor with God. In today's world, he might have prayed, "Lord, I have a quiet time every day. I memorize Scripture. I attend Wednesday night prayer meeting. I serve on the deacon board. I thank you that I am not like these other people who just come to church on Sunday."

God is pleased that you have a quiet time. God loves it that you memorize Scripture. God probably sees a blessing from your coming to church on Wednesday and serving on the board, but if your heart is not right with God, and if there is unconfessed sin in your life, or if there is unfinished business in the area of obedience, God is not impressed with any of those things. Man looks on the outward appearance. Man is easily impressed. God looks on the heart. And whether or not I teach or preach or write or witness (or attend gatherings where people do) does not move God. He wants my heart to be pure, my motives clean, and my desires to be solely His. And the last thing He wants me to do is think that because I teach or witness or do anything else, He ought to see me the way men might see me—as some kind of a spiritual person I'm not. This is serious business. This man had a disease of the heart that is passed down from generation to generation by the religious system, whatever it happens to be. It sets up some kind of external measuring stick to determine what things we can do to be seen and considered spiritual, and before long, we impute to God His approval of these same things.

In his day, as a Pharisee, he was proud of all kinds of activities that set him apart from the common folk. The literal translation of verse 11 would read: "*The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as all other men.*" He then categorized all other men. There were the extortioners, the unjust, and the adulterers, and he concluded, "even as this tax-collector". *They* were the scum of the earth. *He* was the cream of the crop. There were two categories of people. The righteous (him) and everyone else. Don't laugh. Not yet. We haven't gotten to the application portion of the lesson yet. Rabbi Simeon ben Jochal once said, "If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two. If there is only one, I am he."

I don't know if God gets nauseated or not, but if He does, that ought to do it. I know He gets heartbroken. And that certainly

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did it. Whatever he was doing, the Pharisee in this story was not praying. And beloved, often when we are proudest of our utterances to God in a group setting, we are not praying either. We are rehearsing before man what we think man needs to hear, while a grieving God is looking steadfastly on our hearts, weeping.

Our hero now begins his list of “good works” in case God has forgotten to check them off. He reminds God and everyone listening that “I fast twice a week”. There was only one obligatory day of fasting, The Day of Atonement, but those who wanted extra brownie points could also fast on Mondays and Thursdays. Those just happen to be market days in Jerusalem, days when they could be seen by the largest number of people.

I say seen, because those who fasted whitened their faces and appeared in disheveled clothing, drawing attention to the fact that they were suffering for God’s benefit. Can you imagine how Jesus’ words in Matthew 6 must have affected them? He said:

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face;

That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. (Matthew 6:16-18)

The best way to fast is *transparently*. No one should know but God. Don’t tell your friends, don’t act put upon, don’t gloat over your self-discipline and let it slip in your conversations to your friends. Don’t invite someone to lunch and piously refuse to order, hoping they’ll get the picture. When you do, you have your reward, for sure, and it isn’t what you thought it would be. Wash your face. Dress as you normally would. And above all, keep quiet about it. Appear not unto men to fast. This man was arrogantly parading his fasting as a mark of religiosity. He missed the whole point of fasting.

He said he also gave tithes of all he possessed. I doubt it. Tithes were not generally given on all of one’s possessions, but on the increase of his produce. The issue, however, wasn’t how

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much he gave, but his heart attitude in giving it. Jesus said again:

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven.

Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth:

That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

(Matthew 6:1-4)

Now everyone in the temple knew how much he fasted and how much he tithed. And, in case God had a lapse of memory, the Pharisee must have thought, He, too, had been reminded. This man was doing this in the name of prayer. Notice that the name of God was not used except once in verse 11. The dominant word is the personal pronoun, "I". Watch for that in your own prayer life. It is a good measuring stick of whether or not you are praying or promoting.

The tax collector, meanwhile, stood off in the distance. He did not feel worthy of coming nearer. He could not so much as look up to heaven. So humbled was he to be in the presence of holiness, all he could do was beat his chest and cry, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner".

The focus of his prayer was God's mercy. The object of grief was not the sins of others, but his own. The end result was that Jesus said that God heard the tax collector, forgave him and renewed his right standing with the Father. The Pharisee's prayer, meanwhile, wasn't even heard. There's a good reason: He didn't pray, he preached. He didn't talk to God; he talked to his audience. They may have justified him, but God didn't.

This story is much more than it appears on the surface. It holds a treasure of principles about the real heart attitude of a man or woman that frees God to hear and answer prayer. Let's look, in closing, at five thoughts that surface:

Persistence

There are five words that characterize this lesson. The first is persistence. This parable follows on the heels of that second parable on persistence. There is a reason. The neighbor begging for food at midnight and the widow pleading for help from the judge had one thing in common: they wouldn't give up hope, so they didn't quit asking. They were serious enough to be persistent. How serious are we? What does it take for us to give up our quest for spiritual treasures, or our intercessory pleadings for others? How easily are we discouraged when we have asked God to minister to our children or our mates or our business associates and nothing has happened? How quickly do we stop asking when we prayed for a certain character quality to develop in our lives and we sensed a huge setback? Was that setback not a part of the plan? Have we not missed the point?

Jesus asked the question: "When the Son of Man cometh, shall He find faith on the earth?" The last days would be filled with men and women who are carrying the banners of evangelical self-righteousness, but are devoid of the humility and the dogged confidence in God that stays on its knees night and day because the darker the days, the nearer the dawn. Oh, beloved, the body of Christ needs persistent prayers in this age; men and women who believe His promises and trust His word, and who, as the enemy's sword glistens in the night, actually pray with more excitement because the very presence of his onslaughts mean we are closer to the center of the battlefield. If you get nothing else from these passages, review the persistence with which you pray. Look back over your prayer lists and see the things you stopped asking God for, just because He delayed a little while to test your faith. Ask His forgiveness. Ask Him to teach you to be tenaciously diligent in asking.

Privacy

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican, meanwhile, offers a series of principles for us to consider. It brings us to our second word about prayer—privacy. Make no mistake about it; there is a place for corporate prayer, and a place for two or more to gather together in His Name. There are, however, basic limitations to those kinds of prayer gatherings, and they are no substitute for time alone in the presence of God. The passage in Matthew 6 reminds us that we are to have a prayer closet. It

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need not be an actual closet, but a place where you can shut the door, and where your Father can hear in secret. The Pharisee prayed “thus with himself”. He wasn’t alone with God. He had an audience. He played to the audience.

Don’t criticize him until you have examined how you pray in groups. Don’t we usually want to be sure we hear what the others are praying about, so we can say something different? Don’t we spend time rehearsing in our minds what we’ll say when it gets to be our turn, rather than worshipping and offering praise to God? Don’t we often struggle to think of something unique so we will appear spiritual to the others? Are we prone to be really honest about the secret sins of our hearts in the presence of others? Of course not. We usually shouldn’t be. Then when is corporate prayer appropriate? It is appropriate when we are teaching others to pray, when we are wanting to join together in unity for a common request, when we want to come to God as one in spirit. But even then, we must guard against praying thus to ourselves. Prayer is a private conversation between a man or woman and God. Occasionally, there is a party line. Usually not.

Pride

The major issue, however, has to do with the Pharisee’s pride as he approached the throne of God. He “thanked God that he was not as other men”. Now, don’t jump on him yet. Think about your own prayer life. Think about your own conversations with other believers. How often do you judge condescendingly others simply because they belong to a denomination you consider apostate when, in reality, you know nothing about their walk with God? Think about how often you tell your friends you are going to “pray for” so and so, when the implication is that you are praying for them because they just aren’t spiritually “with it” as you are. How do you know that, in their heart of hearts, they are not purer in spirit than you? More committed to dying to self than you? More tender towards the needs of others than you? In your arrogance, have you categorized them as apostate because they fellowship where they do? Could they have categorized you as a Pharisee because you fellowship where you do?

The safest way to pray is to thank God that others are not like you. That God, who knows your heart and theirs, surely needs to be asked to forgive you for your judgmental spirit, and

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that their sins need to be left between them and God. If you know of an angry or adulterous spirit, pray for them accordingly, but not condescendingly. Your heart may be ripe for Satan to pluck next. Humility is the door through which real prayer must enter. You cannot worship God while you are adoring yourself, or comparing yourself with others who, unfortunately (you surmise), are not like you.

Presumption

The fourth word is presumption. This man presumed that God was looking with favor upon him because of outward signs of religiosity. He fasted twice a week. Wow. He tithed on everything. Big deal. He was arrogantly self-satisfied because of things he did or didn't do. As we discussed earlier, in our generation it may be that we attend that Bible study, or we belong to that prayer group, or we memorize those verses. God forgive us. "Let Him that glories, glory in the Lord" (and nothing else).

Ask yourself, as you approach God's throne or as you think of your own heart, do you tend to justify yourself based on the fact that you teach Sunday School or you disciple others or you do anything else? Beloved, if you do those things, you are only being obedient to the minimum requirements of discipleship. God is grateful for your obedience, but that obedience does not justify an impure heart or an insensitive spirit or an angry, bitter heart. God is only impressed with what we do when it issues forth out of a surrendered heart that is cleansed and dependent. It isn't what we do, beloved, that justifies us. It is what He has done. Get a grasp on grace.

Penitence

This brings us to the final word penitence. The publican couldn't so much as look up into the heavens. So grieved was he over his sins—that he began to beat on his chest, crying out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." The literal wording would be: "Be merciful to me, the greatest of sinners." He wasn't expecting God to hear him because of who he was in the kingdom. He was in awe that God would so much as allow so great a sinner as he to enter the temple at all.

He never mentioned any of his accomplishments. He only mentioned his sins. He never called attention to his righteousness; he only cried out for God's righteousness to be imputed to him.

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He never compared himself with anyone less spiritual; he didn't consider anyone to be less spiritual. He approached a holy God as we all should, completely penitent and unworthy to so much as call His Holy Name.

And apart from grace, beloved, that is who we are. Were it not for His miracle on that Cross, we would have no basis upon which to approach His throne at all. Grace is always undeserved. Thus, as we say the words, "Our Father" may we never forget this man's cry, "Be merciful to me, a sinner." May our very approach to the prayer chamber call attention in our hearts to our sinfulness. May we fall on our faces before a holy God without so much as a thought about who we are or what we've done to be recognized in the Christian community. All of that amounts to nothing when compared to God's holiness. We are not to compare our righteousness with others whom we consider less spiritual; we are to compare our righteousness with God's, and fall on our faces in utter grief over our sins.

May our singular heart attitude be: "Oh, God, be merciful to me. I am the vilest of sinners. Please hear me, Oh, God, only because of your amazing grace." When we have learned to consistently approach God like that, we will have found the doorway to His heart. Enter that doorway, beloved, and discover what a merciful God we have.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- Read Luke 18:1-8 again. What are the similarities to Luke 11:5-13? What are the differences? What key theme runs through both?

2- Read Luke 18:9-14 again. Who were the “publicans”? To what would you liken them in today’s society? To what would you liken the Pharisees?

3- What does it mean in verse 14 when it says “this man went down to his house justified”?

A Challenge to Further Application

1- The Pharisee prayed “thus with himself”. Have you ever done that? What motivated you to do that? What should you do in your heart before you pray in public?

2- What group or groups of people have you categorized in your own mind that you (at least sub-consciously) “thank God that you are not like them”?

3- What things do you “do” that make you feel more justified in God’s sight? Do you think He will tolerate sin because you do those things?

4- How persistent are you when you pray? Are there things you quit praying for that God may be waiting to answer?

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Luke 18:13 this week.

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