

Praying to Ourselves

March 26 – Luke 18:1-14

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Day 85 – 280 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Jesus shared two parables about prayer to show that “at all times we ought to pray and not lose heart” (v.1). The first story was about the widow and the unrighteous judge (v.2-8). The second story was about the Pharisee and the tax-collector (v.9-14).

The judge in the first story was wicked and corrupt. He did not fear God or respect man. Thus, he did not rule justly or fairly but rather ruled in favor of those who offered bribes. The poor widow, then, only had one option — to annoy the judge with her persistent pleas for help. Eventually, the judge relented.

Jesus’ parable was meant to encourage His followers. If an unrighteous judge responds favorably to cries for help, how much more will our righteous God respond to our prayers? Besides, He sent His Son to make a way for us to stand before Him. Therefore, let us “approach the throne of grace with confidence,” pray at all times and not lose heart (*Heb. 4:16*).

However, the second story is a warning. God does not accept all prayers. **While He wants us to be confident to approach Him, He does not want us to be arrogant.** To be confident is to have full belief or assurance in someone or something, in this case that God welcomes us into His presence and wants to hear and answer our prayers. But to be arrogant is to assume an undue degree of self-importance and presume upon God to listen and respond.

The Pharisee trusted in himself and his own righteousness. He bragged to God of his good works and how he was not like everyone else. In contrast, the tax-collector approached God in humility, recognizing his sinfulness and pleading for mercy. To whom would God respond? “Everyone who exalts himself (Pharisee) will be humbled, but he who humbles himself (tax-collector) will be exalted” (v.14).

Daily Reflection

Imagine two people come to you asking for help with a project. One of them is arrogant, presumptuous, and condescending, obnoxiously demanding you help him out of a sense of entitlement. The other person comes to you in tears, apologizes for bothering you, expresses that he cannot seem to complete the project alone and has nowhere else to turn, then humbly asks for your assistance. Which person are you more likely or willing to help?

Which one of these requests best describes your prayers? While God wants us to pray and confide in Him, He cares a great deal about the attitude in which we approach Him. **He expects confidence but not arrogance.**

Take a minute to evaluate your attitude in prayer. Have you been arrogant, presumptuous, condescending, obnoxious, demanding, short, angry, or entitled? Confess to God in humility and repent of your selfishness.

There was one phrase that caught my attention. **“The Pharisee was praying to himself...”** (v.11). When we approach God in an arrogant and self-righteous attitude, we are not praying to Him. He is not listening. **We are only praying to ourselves, and in that moment, we are acting as our own god.**

A Match Made in Heaven

March 27 – Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:1-12

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Today in Your Reading

Jesus responded to the Pharisees' question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason at all?" Of course, this was a loaded question intended to trap and condemn Jesus. The setting of the conversation provides the context for the question. Jesus was in the region beyond the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was well-known. John had been arrested and killed for pointing out the king's adulterous affair. The Pharisees were hoping that Jesus would suffer the same fate (*Matt. 14:1-12*).

However, as always, Jesus saw through their charade. The Pharisees were well-known for distorting or expanding Scripture to justify their self-righteous, sinful lifestyle. They believed divorce was acceptable for any reason at all, basing their practice on *Deuteronomy 24:1-4*, where Moses allowed certificates of divorce for "any indecency." Their interpretation of "any indecency" was broad, an open door to divorce for any reason at all. But Jesus exposed their flawed reasoning by taking them back to the original design of the Creator.

Let's review Jesus' statements. First, **marriage was God's idea, not man's** (*Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:6*). Therefore, **He determines the guidelines for marriage, not us**. Second, marriage was designed for one man and one woman. Since God made human beings male and female, with complementary physical differences, they were tailored to fulfill His procreation mandate (*Gen. 1:28*). Third, God intended for the two to become one flesh, meaning that marriage is an everlasting bond (until death). "What God has joined, let no man separate" (*Matt. 19:6*).

The disciples recognized the seriousness of marriage to the point that they said it might be better to remain single (*v.10*). Jesus affirmed that singleness might be better for some, but not for all. Singleness might be better for those who can't have children or for those who desire to focus on "the kingdom of God" (*v.11, 12*).

Daily Reflection

Divorce was never part of God's design. But our sinful, hardened hearts have wrecked God's original intent. Today, nearly half of all marriages end in divorce, and the percentage increases drastically in second and third marriages. **Our culture exerts more effort looking for ways around marriage than it does esteeming it.** In fact, we've rejected biblical marriage and redefined it to suit our pleasures. What's worse, we have glorified and normalized adultery. Divorce should be a rarity, difficult to attain, yet we have devalued it to a mere \$100 to annul.

With such high percentages, it is probable that you have been touched by divorce in some way. Is that true? If so, what consequences have you seen as a result of divorce? If not, what do you credit as the reason?

While divorce is egregious in the sight of God (*Mal. 2:16*), it is not the unpardonable sin. We serve a merciful, loving God who forgives and restores. What we have ruined, He is able to redeem. Furthermore, though earthly relationships often fail, our God is faithful. He will never leave us or forsake us.

Nothing to Give, Everything to Gain

March 28 – Mark 10:13-31; Matthew 19:13-30; Luke 18:15-30

Today in Your Reading

Jesus ministered to the children and met a rich young ruler. It is not an accident that these two stories are placed side by side in the Bible. God, in His providence, wanted us to learn an important gospel truth. The key is in the last verse of our passage, “Many who are first will be last, and the last, first” (Mk. 10:31).

When parents brought their babies and toddlers to be blessed by Jesus, the disciples grew impatient (v.13, 16). But Jesus permitted the children to come to Him, “For the kingdom of God (salvation) belongs to such as these. Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all” (v.14, 15). In other words, salvation requires nothing of us, for we don’t have anything to give to God that would impress Him. **We must come to Him with simple childlike faith, having nothing to give and everything to receive.**

Contrast the scene with the children to that of the rich young ruler who asked, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (v.17). The word *inherit* is an interesting choice of words. It is possible that this man had inherited great wealth at a young age. He had every earthly good, but he recognized that there was one thing that he still lacked (v.22; Matt. 19:20). Apparently, he believed that he could give or do something to earn salvation.

Jesus quickly nipped his notions in the bud. He appealed to the man’s conscience by pointing out his sin. Notice that He said, “No one is good but God” (v.18), meaning the rest of us are sinful. Then, when Jesus pointed the man to God’s commandments (v.19-22), the ruler insisted upon his goodness. But, when Jesus told Him to sell everything and follow Him, He was not teaching a works-based salvation; rather He was revealing the man’s idol — wealth. But giving up his possessions was a bridge too far. He went away grieving because he chose his wealth over his eternal destiny.

Daily Reflection

It is clear to see that we are not saved by our wealth, our wisdom, or our works. No amount of goods or goodness can earn eternal life. Those who come to God with everything to offer Him (like the ruler) will walk away with nothing from Him. But those who come to Him empty-handed, with nothing to offer Him (like the children), and trust in Him for salvation, will walk away with everything. “With people, salvation is impossible. But with God, all things are possible” (v.27). Those who are first on this earth will end up last, and those who are last will end up first.

The disciples understood the lesson. Peter said, “We have left everything to follow you” (v.28). What do you think it means to leave everything to follow Jesus? Have you done this?

Re-read Jesus’ promise in *Mark 10:29, 30*. How do His words encourage and/or challenge you?

All Aboard!

March 29 – Matthew 20:1-16

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Today in Your Reading

Jesus told the parable of the vineyard workers. His story is a continuation of the previous passage (19:27-30) and a more detailed response to Peter's question. He had asked Jesus, "We have left everything and followed You, so what will there be for us?" In Peter's question, there is perhaps a little pride and the expectation that the disciples should receive more than others who were coming to Christ.

Jesus, who knew men's hearts and minds, addressed Peter's expectations with a proper response. "Everyone... will inherit eternal life, and those who are first will be last, and the last, first" (19:29, 30). To illustrate this truth, Jesus shared the parable.

"The kingdom of heaven," He said, "is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for His vineyard" (20:1). The kingdom of heaven is salvation or eternal life (19:29), and the landowner is God. The Jewish workday began at 6:00 AM, which is when He found His first workers. However, throughout the day, the landowner hired more laborers (at 9:00 AM, 12:00 PM, 3:00 PM, and 5:00 PM). Since the workday ended at 6:00 PM, the last set of workers were hired for one hour of work.

At the end of the day, when the landowner told His foreman to pay the workers, the grumbling began (20:10, 11). Those hired at the beginning of the day thought that they would receive more than those who worked less. However, everyone received the same wage. The landowner replied, "Take what is yours and go, but I wish to give to the last man the same as you" (v.13).

While the landowner's actions may seem unfair to us today, we must remember that the parable is not about workers' rights or just compensation. Parables portray spiritual truths, and the spiritual truth here is that **every follower of Christ will inherit eternal life and the many other benefits of salvation.**

Some people are saved at an early age, but others don't come to Jesus until their death bed. Both groups (and everyone in between) will inherit eternal life. Remember the thief on the cross who believed in Jesus just before his death? He, too, will receive the same salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life as His faithful disciples.

Simply put, some people board a train early, and some board it right on time; but others hop on the train as it is departing. **In the end, they are all on the same train bound for the same destination.**

Daily Reflection

Before our sense of fairness charges God with an injustice, we must remember that we are all fallen, imperfect, unworthy sinners who deserve God's judgment. We will only inherit eternal life because God is merciful, not because we deserve anything from God (Rom. 9:15, 16). Thus, we have no reason to complain and every reason to rejoice with those who are saved.

Another truth to remember is that the Bible speaks of individual rewards that we will receive in heaven, aside from eternal life. This parable by no means negates that promise. Again, the topic is eternal life, which all believers receive.

To close, re-read Verse 15. Jesus said something interesting. "Is your eye envious because I am generous?" The word *envious* is the word for evil. The phrase "evil eye" was common in the Jewish culture. When someone had an evil eye, he was envious or jealous of others for some reason.

Have you ever had an evil eye, envious or jealous of others because of God's generosity towards them? An evil eye is evidence that you are looking in the wrong place. **Instead of looking at others, you should be looking at God. He has been more than generous to you. You are on the train bound to eternity with Him.**

True Greatness

March 30 – Mk. 10:32-45; Matt. 20:17-28; Lk. 18:31-34

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Day 89 – 276 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Jesus proceeded to Jerusalem, the city where His earthly life and ministry would come to an end. In fact, He predicted what would happen to Him so that “all things written through the prophets will be accomplished” (Lk. 18:31-33). But evidently, this news did not phase the disciples, as they did not comprehend it (v.34).

Why weren't they paying attention? The answer is revealed in the following verses. They were preoccupied with holding some place of prominence in Christ's coming kingdom. They were convinced that the Lord was about to establish His earthly dominion, and they wanted to be in a position of power and prestige.

James and John even had the gall to ask Jesus to sit beside Him in the kingdom. What's worse, they used their mother to plead their case (Mk. 10:35-37; Matt. 20:21). Though Jesus told them that they would drink from the same cup of suffering, assigning such places of honor was not up to Him but the Father (Mk. 10:38-40).

When the other disciples heard what the sons of Zebedee had done, they were furious (v.41). It seems that the topic of who was the greatest among them was part of an ongoing conversation. That's when Jesus interrupted their competition and explained **the meaning of greatness** from His perspective.

The worldly example of greatness for the disciples was the Romans, who utilized the top-down method of leadership. Those at the top lorded their authority over those who were below them (v.42). But this approach to authority or leadership is not to be the way of Christ's followers. **Greatness, in His eyes, is not one who is served by others; true greatness is one who serves others** (v.43, 44). Jesus Himself had all authority given to Him. No one is more worthy to be served, yet He did not come to be served but to serve, to give His life away for the good of others (v.45). **That is true greatness.**

Daily Reflection

The world would have us believe that when we obtain a position of authority that we have arrived and that those “below” us exist to do our bidding. We even use words like climbing the ladder, rising to levels of leadership, being promoted, and getting a raise. We have been duped into thinking that the person sitting in the big office is somehow the most important and deserves loyalty and obedience.

However, from God's perspective, that is not the case. In Scripture we see that God expects those in authority to serve those under authority. Leaders are ministers of God for the good of others (Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet. 5:1-3).

In the space below, draw two triangles. The first one (left) should have the point at the top. In the middle of the triangle, draw an arrow pointing down to the line at the bottom. Label the top point, “Leaders,” and label the bottom line, “Followers.” The second triangle (right) should be inverted with the point at the bottom. From the point at the bottom, draw an arrow pointing to the top line. Label the top line, “Followers” and the bottom point, “Leaders.”

The worldly model of greatness is upside down. Jesus turned it right-side up. When one “ascends” to greatness, he should descend the triangle. In other words, the more authority one is given, the more people he exists to serve. To ascend the scale of greatness is to descend the scale of servitude. Is this how you view greatness? Do you aspire to be served or to serve? He who wishes to be first will be last.

New Eyes

March 31 – Matt. 20:29-34; Mk. 10:46-52; Lk. 18:35-43

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Day 90 – 275 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Jesus healed two blind men near the cities of Jericho (the old one destroyed in *Joshua* and the rebuilt one). The more vocal of the two men was named Bartimaeus. Since they were blind, they had to beg for help. Thus, they had positioned themselves along a busy highway.

Jesus was now 15 miles from Jerusalem, where He would be arrested, tried, and crucified. Thus, this was the last time Jesus would visit Jericho.

As Jesus was passing by, the blind men cried out, "Son of David, have mercy on us!" By calling Jesus the Son of David, these men expressed belief that Jesus was the Messiah (*Matt. 1:1*). What an ironic scene. Amid the spiritually blind nation of Israel there were two physically blind men demonstrating great faith.

The symbolism is further expressed when Jesus asked these men what He could do for them. They replied, "We want our eyes to be opened" (*Matt. 20:33*). Both Mark and Luke recorded Bartimaeus as saying, "I want to regain my sight" (*Mk. 10:51; Lk. 18:41*). Perhaps, Bartimaeus started life with good eyesight and then became blind at some point in his life.

Again, we see a picture of God's people, Israel. At one point in their history, they knew and loved God. They even obeyed His commands and remained faithful to Him. But somewhere along the way, they lost sight of their identity as His people. They disobeyed His commands, worshipped idols and false gods, and broke their covenant with Him.

Jesus came to help Israel regain its sight, but the people's hearts were hardened, and they would not believe. In fact, they would deliver Jesus to corrupt leaders who would murder Him. Because of their blind and hardened state, the Lord would turn to the Gentiles (non-Jews). We will see this theme play out repeatedly in the weeks to come.

Daily Reflection

I love what Luke says about Bartimaeus. "He immediately regained his sight and began following Jesus, glorifying God. When all the people saw it, they gave praise to God" (v.43). Most people, after regaining their sight, would have immediately reported it to family and friends. Perhaps, they would find a job and start a new life, but not Bartimaeus. His first thought was to follow the one who restored him and bring glory to His name.

Bartimaeus had new eyes, a new hope, a new life, and new joy, and with these came a new mission, to celebrate Christ before others so that they, too, might believe in Him.

Does Bartimaeus' actions describe you? Have you gone on with your life after salvation, acting as if nothing happened, or have you followed Jesus faithfully and glorified Him before others?

Perhaps, your eyes were "opened" at one point in your past, but now you no longer see clearly. Though your salvation is secure in Christ, you have drifted away from Him and gotten lost in the crowd. Maybe over time your eyes have been clouded by the fog of worldly distractions, sin, selfishness, heartache, difficulty, or broken relationships. **Cry out to the Lord and ask Him to restore your sight**, then recommit to following and glorifying Him.

God is in the business of opening eyes for the first time, and He also enables old eyes to see again. Which is it for you? Don't miss this chance to cry out to the Lord. He is passing by.

Big and Small

April 1 – Luke 19:1-27

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Day 91 – 274 Days to Go

Today in Your Reading

Jesus met and transformed Zacchaeus, then told the parable of the minas. These stories probably took place in the newer city of Jericho (the old one was destroyed), as Jesus continued His final journey to Jerusalem.

We are told that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, meaning that he probably managed all the tax collectors in that area. In other words, he was a big man (despite his small stature) and very wealthy, which means that he abused his authority to enrich himself at the people's expense. Of course, all tax collectors did that, which made them the most despised men in town. That's ironic in light of the meaning of Zacchaeus' name — "pure or just."

However, despite Zacchaeus' position or corruption, Jesus sought Him out and changed His life. In fact, Zacchaeus became a follower of Christ and radically changed his ways, making restitution with the townspeople for his theft. While it is rare for a wealthy person to follow Christ (remember the rich young ruler), it is not impossible. No one is outside of God's reach.

As Jesus was nearing Jerusalem for the last time, it was rumored that He was about to defeat His enemies and establish His earthly kingdom. However, since that was not the case (until His second coming), He wanted His followers to know that He would be going away for a while. Thus, Jesus told the story of the nobleman and his servants (v.11-27).

In the story, the nobleman went away to receive His kingdom and left his servants in charge of some of His money, "to do business until he returned" (v.13). Although it may not have been clear at the time, we can see today that Jesus was prophesying His departure to heaven, to receive His kingdom. **Until His return, His followers (that's us) are to be busy about His work, investing the time, talents, and treasures He's given us for making disciples.**

Upon his return, the nobleman called each of his servants to give an account for his efforts and to reward him for his investment. To those who were faithful with what they had been given to them he gave appropriate responsibilities, but to the one who wasted his time and squandered his opportunity, what he had was taken away and given to someone else.

Notice in the background of the story that there were enemies who were working against the nobleman, to keep him from ruling. They were dealt with severely upon the nobleman's return. This, of course, is symbolic of those working against Jesus. They will be judged and destroyed in the end.

Daily Reflection

The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that **the gospel changes the hearts of the big and small;** and changed people change society. The gospel is the greatest change agent in history. It not only transforms the lives of individuals, but it also transforms communities.

The parable of the minas reminds us that **we all have a part to play in the kingdom of God, whether big or small.** While our efforts may differ, our responsibility is the same — faithful service to our King until He returns.

Take a minute to assess your efforts as one of His stewards. What have you done with your mina? Have you worked hard to invest it, or have you been lazy and unproductive?

It might be big. It might be small. But the Lord has work to do for all. Let's get busy.