

How, and how not to prayJohn 11 v.54.

After Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany, He did not remain in the vicinity of Jerusalem, for there was too much danger in that region. Had not the Sanhedrin resolved to put Jesus to death?

And ... certainly, the Lord Jesus would die, but only when His time came.

That is why He went with His disciples to another place. Whether He returned again to Perea we cannot say for certain. In the Bible it says that He went to a city called Ephraim, and that He there continued (verse 54).

There too He is soon surrounded by a great multitude. On one of these occasions He told some parables concerning the subject of prayer.

Listen, and I will recount them.

Luke 18 vv.1-18.

In a certain city there lived a judge. He was, of course, an important man. He had to make decisions. He had to help the oppressed and ensure that everything was done in truth and fairness.

But now read what God's Word tells us about this man.

"He feared not God, nor regarded man!"

He took no account of God or His Word. He was no upright judge - he was indeed an unjust judge. He laid himself open to bribery. The poor were always condemned by him, and the rich, who were prepared to give him money, were always in the right. He was cruel. He had no sympathy. He would laugh at the tears of a poor widow. He thought only of his own riches and honour. What a terrible picture of a man, isn't it?

One day a poor widow came to him. She had been done some wrong by some person or other. She comes now to the judge and makes her complaint. She asks him to help her.

But the judge will not even listen to her. He refuses to act on her behalf. He sends her away rudely and harshly.

Poor, poor widow. Who else can save her from her adversary? ...

She does not go home however and give up the fight. No, again and again she returns to the judge's house and asks urgently for him to act.

She keeps on coming. Day in, day out, her cry is heard: "Judge my cause!"

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The judge is very annoyed about her. The citizens hear it too, and perhaps look at her sympathetically.

"Judge my cause - avenge me of my adversary."

At last the judge can bear it no longer. He must put a stop to this. He will be rid of her continual complaint. And do you know what he does? ...

Just read it in the Word of God.

"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 wear me."

He calls her before him, examines her case, and passes judgment. At last! The widow's adversary is punished and the poor woman is saved from her tormentor who had been attempting to oppress her.

"Hear what the unjust judge saith," says the Lord Jesus, "and shall not God avenge His own elect, which cry day and night unto Him?"

O, boys and girls, you can cry day and night to the Lord for mercy. The Lord Jesus told this parable on purpose, to show not only the Jews, but you too, that you can never pray too much.

Keep on; persevere! ... Do you do that too? ...

Do you still pray to the Lord at night before you go to sleep and in the morning before you leave your bedroom? ... Do you need the Lord in everything? ... Do you pray from the heart, or do you just gabble a few words quickly?

May the Lord grant that you may seek Him in truth, and that, through grace, you may find Him too!

Perhaps a few of you are thinking: "How then must we pray?"

To make this quite clear, the Lord Jesus told a second parable. Pay attention!

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Luke 18 vv. 9-14.

Solemnly through Jerusalem's streets there walks a very eminent Pharisee. He walks down the middle of the street, that all may see him. When passers-by greet him respectfully and stand awhile to look at him, he glows with pride. Whither is he going?

Just look! He directs his steps towards the temple. What has he to do there? ... Well, he is going to the house of God to pray!

What a devout man, isn't he? After all, prayer is a good work, is it not?

Slowly he climbs up to the temple. Solemnly he mounts the steps. He steps inside and seeks out a spot in the middle of the temple. There he stands. All can see him.

Then he spreads out his hands towards heaven and prays!

"God, I thank thee" - thus he begins, what reverence, isn't it? ... And then he continues: "I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican."

What a good, pious man this Pharisee must have been, don't you think?

He has not yet finished his prayer however. O no! There is more to come. Just listen. "I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess."

At last he has finished. He departs from the temple with just as much solemnity and state as he had when he came. His face is lit by a proud smile.

But ... has this Pharisee really prayed? ... Has he called upon God for help or for counsel? ... No indeed, he has asked for nothing at all. He has ~~merely~~ merely told the Lord what a devout man he is. He needs no help. He can earn heaven all by himself.

Not one word about a Surety, a Saviour for his guilt. No, he is much too pious, much too good to need a Saviour. What has he to do with Jesus? ... In his heart there is no room for the Messiah.

What the Pharisee did was not PRAYER it was only SELF-PRAISE.

The Lord loathes such prayers.

With all his piety that Pharisee was still a wicked man. He went away just as he had come. His heart was full of pride. He hoped that people had seen him, that they had heard his words. For him that was the most important thing; his object had then been achieved.

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The Pharisee had "prayed" that he was not like this publican. Which publican? ...

O, at the same time as the Pharisee, a publican also had gone up to the temple to pray. No, the publican did not walk up the middle of the street! Neither did he hold his head proudly on high.

On the contrary! With bowed head he crept past the houses as he made his way onwards. This publican was ashamed of himself before God and man. He was ashamed of his wicked, evil life. He hoped that no-one would see him; that nobody would notice him.

Yet he wanted to confess before God his deep, deep guilt! Yet he wanted to plead for mercy, for he could not do without the Lord.

He stands at the back, in a corner of the temple, as inconspicuous as possible. He does not stretch up his hands towards heaven. Nor does he thank God. Still less does he praise himself.

O, he is not worthy to enter this holy place, but still he cannot keep away.

But what must he say? ... Nothing! Nothing! It would be just, were the holy God to condemn him. It would be righteous if he were thrust into hell. If God were never to look upon him, it would be right.

Great tears trickle down his cheeks. Tears of true, upright repentance! Tears of sorrow, because he had sinned against God.

Look at him standing there with his head bowed. He smites upon his breast in sorrow and shame. No, he has not much to say. Neither can anybody understand or overhear them. Only God in heaven above hears them.

His lips tremble as he stammers: "God be merciful to me a sinner."

That is not a long prayer, is it? No, but was then the prayer of the Pharisee so much the better? Could that be true? ...

No ... This publican confessed that he was a sinner. This publican pleaded, though with but few words, for mercy, for forgiveness.

A Saviour? ... A Surety for his guilt? ... Yes, that was precisely what the publican needed. He could not save himself. He needed the help of ANOTHER.

In his heart room was made for the Lord Jesus. He could not do without the pardoning blood of the Son of God.

And, what next? ... A wonderful peace comes into the heart of this wicked man. An undeserved peace. O, how good was God to him, to such a bad man, such a great sinner.

The Lord wrought in the heart of that publican the belief that his sins are forgiven for Christ's sake.

Look, there he returns home. His eyes are wet with tears. They are tears of gratitude. He takes no notice of people. He does not mind any more what they think of him, for that cannot take away the peace in his heart. He does not see the angry looks they cast at him. He does not notice the contemptuous laugh of the Pharisee.

Peace fills his soul. Peace with God! O, he cannot describe the joy, he can only taste of it.

The prayer of the Pharisee went no higher than the temple roof, but the short prayer of the publican went up ~~in~~ to heaven; it came unto God and God heard and answered it.

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What a serious lesson is contained in this parable. A lesson for us too!

Do you pray that you are better than your friend because he or she doesn't like school, or is so rude, or because he or she has even been known to steal. Are you so much better, and do you tell the Lord so? ... Yes? ...

Then you may just as well stop, because that is not PRAYER. God hates such words. Do not think that God hears and answers such prayers.

Are there some among you who are like the publican? ... Are there some who have sorrow for sin? ... Are there some who are sorrowful because they are without God? ... The Lord only knows that!

O, boys and girls, ask the Lord to teach you to pray. Ask the Lord to discover to you your sin and guilt. Ask for the in-working of God's Spirit. Certainly it is true that we should "pray without ceasing"! But then may your prayer be like that of the sorrowful publican: "God be merciful to me a sinner."

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