

10-26-2025 Words of Worship, Morning Prayers

Morning Prayer – I invite you to participate and respond in the prayer this morning. After each “section” of prayer, I’ll say, “Lord, in your mercy...” and I’ll wait for you all to reply, “Hear our prayers”. Let’s pray.

With all your people God, we pray for The Universal Church

- For the followers of Jesus all around the world, those who are being persecuted for their faith, for those who struggle to keep their faith because their lives are so difficult, and for those who take their faith for granted because their lives are not difficult. Lord, in your mercy...

God, we pray for the well-being of creation – for the will and the wisdom to care for your earth.

- We pray for the people who are trying to recover from disasters – the hurricane in the Caribbean, the earthquake in the Philippines, the flooding in parts of Mexico and India. We pray for the Indigenous people in Alaska who are dealing with destruction from the remnants of a typhoon and those in California still reeling from wildfires.
- We pray for the land itself and the waters and all the creatures that live on it and in it. Lord, in your mercy...

We continue to pray Lord God, for peace with justice in your world.

- For the leaders of nations, of states and cities, of councils and bodies that make decisions. We pray for your wisdom, for your Spirit to move in ways that bring your compassion and care to the people of the world.
- We pray for those who live in situations of war and fear – in Gaza and the West Bank, in Ukraine, in Sudan...
- We pray for those who are living in personal, hidden situations of fear and violence – where there’s abuse or brokenness, addiction or infidelity. Lord, in your mercy...

We pray dear God, for those we know and love who are hurting – in mind, body or spirit.

- We pray for those who are grieving... Sandy and her family... all of us who know and love Steve and grieve his loss. Be with Sandy and all the family as they travel and make plans and tend to all the details of gathering on Tuesday and Wednesday for services of worship and remembrance. May that be a blessed and holy time.
- We pray for those who are sick and need healing, for those who are old and need reassurance, for those who feel lost and need your Spirit to guide them. Lord, in your mercy...

We offer our praises and our thanks to you, God.

- We thank you for family and friends, for opportunities to gather freely to worship you, to fellowship, to nurture and grow our faith within this community.
- We thank you for times of celebration – of marking life’s significant passages
- Thank you for Brooke and Eli’s wedding yesterday, for this new chapter in their lives and their commitment to it. We pray your blessings on them and their families.
- We thank you God, for the gifts of our young people – that they can play and excel in athletics and music and academic achievements and in all of their amazing growth and development. Be with each of them as they learn who they are – and who you are in their lives. Lord, in your mercy...

Into your hands God, we commend ourselves – our lives and our hopes, our struggles and our dreams, our joy and our sorrow, the every-day-ness and the extraordinary. We are your people and you are our God. Amen.

Let's continue to worship as we give our tithes and offerings. Elsie Unruh will play our offertory music this morning.

Prayer – Gracious God, from whom all blessings flow, we thank you for each opportunity that we have to give back a portion of what we've been given. Help us to be grateful and generous givers here at church and in all areas of our lives. Amen.

2025-10-26 Prayers of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector – Luke 18:9-14 **Pastor Lois Harder**

Nobody is a hero in this story. And nobody is a villain either. Jesus does it again... he tells a story, but seems to leave us without a clear, cut and dried, black or white, this or that “moral to the story”.

Jesus was the ultimate storyteller with his parables. As one writer put it, “Parables are like fishing lures: they are full of attractive features – feathers, bright colors – and they end with a sharp little barb!” (Feasting on the Word, Year C Volume 4, pg. 213) With Jesus' parables, it usually took some time for people to “get it”. Sometimes a lifetime!

The telling of this story is right in line with the ways Luke often tells the stories of Jesus telling stories. There are these role reversals – the one who is righteous is humbled by God. And the one who is humble is lifted up by God. And that's true in this story too! But before we come to the simple conclusion that the Pharisee is bad and the tax collector is good, let's look a little more closely. There were two men who went up to the Temple to pray.

Maybe we can apply our sometimes useful method of trying to identify which of the characters in the story we relate to... there are just these two, so... do you see yourself in the Pharisee or the tax-collector? In fairness, when you ask yourself this question, you have to try not to think of yourself as Mennonite. We Mennos would not be inclined to pray publicly like EITHER the Pharisee OR the tax collector, so it might be kind of a cultural impossibility to imagine anyone overhearing our prayers. But maybe that's also part of the 21st century challenge of this story; we'll come back to that. IF someone overheard your prayers would they hear a prayer like the Pharisee was praying or a prayer like the tax collector was praying?

Unlike us Mennonites, it was typical for Jewish people to pray aloud at the temple – that was one of reasons people went to the temple, to offer their prayers. And the Pharisees were particularly known for praying out loud. But not like our morning prayer – it wasn't a corporate prayer spoken on behalf of the people, it was a personal, individual prayer. And in this story, the Pharisee is revealing his “complete dedication to observing the laws of Moses. As he recites his behavior he is describing someone who exceeds the demands of the laws.” (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C, pg. 456) He's grateful that he's not a thief, a rogue or an adulterer, that he fasts twice a week and gives a tenth of all his income. His prayer is full of thanksgiving

for his upstanding behavior and in solid rabbinic tradition he makes reference to the psalms – Psalm 17:3-5 says, “If you try my heart, if you visit me by night, if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress. As for what others do, by the word of your lips I have avoided the ways of the violent. My steps have held fast to your paths, my feet have not slipped.” It’s a pretty confident prayer!

Now, if someone overheard our prayers, who of us hasn’t at least *thought* a prayer – or at least had the thoughts, similar to the Pharisees’... “O Lord, I thank you that I made the right decision to come to church rather than stay home and get my shopping or my laundry done. I’m grateful, Lord, that I’m not misguided enough to be registered as a member of the *other* political party, and I’m so glad that I’m here *every* Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. I give my tithe and I serve on a board and 5 committees! Most importantly, I’m thankful that I don’t have the issues that that guy sitting 3 pews ahead of me has. What a mess!” It must be human nature to compare ourselves to others and size ourselves up using someone else as the measuring stick, somehow forgetting in that moment that we’re each uniquely made, but all of us in God’s image.

As I mentioned earlier, the tax collector isn’t exactly the underdog hero in this story either. This is a Jewish guy who works for Rome, “collecting (oppressive amounts of) taxes from his own people. He’s a reprehensible character, religiously unclean and politically a traitor.” (Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C, pg. 456) But, the prayer that he’s offering also aligns and brings to mind the Psalms. His prayer recalls the prayer of confession in Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me... create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.” So he’s praying the right words, but meanwhile, his life does not reflect those words.

Both of these fellows had come to the temple to pray – a pious and faithful act. Both were genuine and transparent with their prayers. They meant what they said and they said what they meant. Both were in need of God’s mercy – but only one of the prayers reflected that.

In the very first sentence of the parable we read that Jesus was telling this story... “to some who trusted in *themselves* that they were righteous AND regarded others with contempt.” The prayer of the Pharisee, although it was a prayer of thanksgiving and a description of his righteous behavior, revealed that his thanksgiving was not to God, but he was thankful for his own righteousness. Furthermore, in his faithful piety he had come to regard others with contempt. His righteousness had become scorn and intolerance of others.

The tax collector’s prayer was vulnerable, a direct call for God’s mercy spoken in a stance of humble repentance – with his eyes down and beating his breast, acknowledging his need for God’s merciful intervention in his life. Can you imagine praying such a desperate, honest prayer out loud, with others around, hearing your plea? It’s one thing to confess our sinfulness in the solitude of our own heart. It’s quite another to pray such a prayer aloud, in the temple.

Our prayers likely show our motivations as well as our true allegiances. The Pharisee was motivated by his commitment to the religious establishment. He was “careful in his religious

observance and generous with his money. No doubt, he was, in the eyes of the world as well as in his own eyes, a good person and a religious person.” The problem was NOT how religious he was or how hard he worked to follow the laws. The problem was that his allegiance was to the laws and not to the God who gave them. He couldn’t see or name his dependence on God.

The tax collector seemed to be motivated by his genuine desire for mercy and forgiveness. His allegiance may have remained with Rome – the parable doesn’t tell us that. But he took the first step in this prayer acknowledging his deep need for God.

While both of these people remembered to call on the wisdom of the psalms in their prayers, neither of them, in this instance, seemed to reach directly for the greatest commandment – love God and love people. Although, that idea may have been partly what was motivating the tax collector to make his heartfelt confession. I certainly have some hard work to do on that one. I suppose we all do. It seems to be one of our greatest challenges, to remember that only by God’s love and grace do we have a place in this world. And since we only get this one, brief lifespan to love God and love people, there’s no better place to begin that work than in our prayers. As Jesus showed us, it’s only through his Spirit that we can be empowered to do it.

As one writer observed, as we consider our own prayers in light of these two, maybe the most significant thing to remember is the way Jesus taught us to pray. That prayer is entirely centered on God and is the prayer of one whose motivation is to be completely faithful and whose allegiance is to God alone. So let’s close with the Lord’s Prayer, together... Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...

Sources:

Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4

Preaching Through the Christian Year, Year C

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30-3/commentary-on-luke-189-14-6>

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Benediction – (VT 844 adapted)

May the face of God shine on you, with words of promise whispered in your ear.

May the peace of Jesus steady you, when the world is shaking and challenges come.

May the joy of the Spirit carry you, may holy Hope wash over you every day.