

21 Days of Prayer – The Heart of Prayer

I. Introduction

A. A while back I gave up after a second attempt to read the memoirs of a Columbian politician, a presidential candidate who was kidnapped by revolutionary forces back in 2002 and held hostage in the Amazon jungle until 2008.¹

B. This time I made it about one-third of the way through. The book is filled with descriptions of the jungle and the challenges of living there:

1. Snakes and bugs and tropical diseases, jaguars and all manner things that can kill you. And there was tension between guards and prisoners and between prisoners and prisoners. There were escape attempts and rescue attempts.

C. It's a true story and there is plenty of excitement. And it's pretty well written. But I gave up a second time because the author – the former presidential candidate – writes from a position of her own goodness. She does not seem able to see how she does anything wrong or to learn from what is going on or to be able to empathize with the plight of the other hostages. I found it very off-putting.

D. I am, of course, very good at spotting self-righteousness in other people.

E. What does any of this have to do with prayer? Well, according to Jesus, a fair bit.

II. Let me back up.

A. Two weeks ago, when we started this series on *21 Days of Prayer*, we looked at 2 Chronicles 7:14. **If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land.**

1. From there I noted the ebb and flow of people (both as individuals and as groups). How we tend to run a bit hot and cold on all manner of things, including our relationship with God. I traced this through the Old and New Testaments and down through history. I then paused to note that this last year has been littered with obvious challenges. And I rehearsed the 8 points I have tacked to the wall in front of my desk: many things are going right; some things are more fragile than I realized; things are not going back to the way they were; in addition to change we should expect hard; I need to be more like Christ; the church needs to be more shaped by the Gospel; God is in control; and while I can't do everything, I can do the right thing. Which lead me into some comments on prayer.

2. Last week, Carlos took us to Isaiah and I Thess to talk about prayer as a way of stepping into the presence and deep peace of God – the Shalom of Shalom.

B. Alongside this we have had a series of daily prayer devotions done by all manner of people and covering all kinds of topics: What is prayer? What are the types of prayer? How should we pray?

C. And we've held prayer workshops and provided some other prayer resources.

III. Today I want us to focus on a teaching Jesus did on prayer.

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- A. This was not the plan. And I like to work the plan. I intended to look at the prayers of Elijah – the Old Testament prophet who shows up at the Mount of Transfiguration. He has a fascinating life. And he prays some big prayers and some desperate prayers and, well, I think there is a lot to learn about prayer from him.
- B. But that didn't work as planned and I sensed the need – or perhaps it's an opportunity – to push on the idea of our posture in prayer. Not our physical posture – I think any position works, though the older I get the more of a fan of kneeling I become. Which is inconvenient. It was a lot easier to kneel when my knees weren't so creaky.
- C. What I am talking about is our heart or our attitude. I want to focus here because Jesus seems to make a pretty big point of it in Luke 18.
- IV. As you likely know, Jesus does a fair bit of teaching on prayer.
- A. When the disciples asked him to teach them to pray, he gives them the Lord's Prayer. "Our Father."
- B. In John 17 he treats them – and us - to a doctoral seminar on prayer. We get to listen in as He talks to His Father. We get something like that in his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.
- C. There are other ways in which He instructs us on prayer – such as his ongoing example, which is likely what lead the disciples to ask him to teach them to pray. They do not ask him to teach them how to walk on water or turn water into wine or catch fish or lead well, or any of the things I would likely have been asking about. They seemed to sense that his prayer life was a big part of the essence of who He was and what He was about. Having lived with him and watched him up close and personal, they knew that prayer was a powerful factor in his life. And they sense that they can pray better, so they ask him to coach them.
- D. Well, in addition to those sections, we also have some passages where Jesus teaches others about prayer, such as Luke 18. I want to turn here.
- V. **Luke 18:9 reads: To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else,**
- A. Do note, he was not talking to everyone. He was aiming at those who "were confident in their own righteousness." Some of us may not relate to this.
- B. He's talking to those who are sure that they're on God's side – or that He is on theirs. We can imagine that their social media is full of messages that reinforce this view.
- C. I share this to note, you may not associate yourself with this prayer or this attitude. It may not be the way you think. As a result, you may not be the target of this teaching. It does not apply to you. Or, here is another possibility: it absolutely does.
- D. Jesus is teaching about prayer. One guy in this story prays that he is glad that he is not like the other guy. Jesus says, he has it wrong. Stay with me here. Like virtually every treatment involving pride, it's layered.
1. It may be that as we read this, you realize that you have some pride issues. You think you are better than other people.

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2. Or it may be that you think you are not, and you are glad that you do not think you are better. You are not like the guy who thinks he is better. Which, of course, means you are end up thinking you are better than the person who thinks they are better than the other person.

- VI.** Let me keep reading. **Jesus told this parable: 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.**
- A. Most of us already know that the Pharisees are the bad guys – they are the self-righteous, smug religious guys that Jesus comes after. So we already don’t like them. Unfortunately, that makes it hard to misunderstand what is going on here.
- VII. 10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week (which was way more than was expected) and give a tenth of all I get**
- A. This is called tithing. The first ten percent is given as a statement about God owning everything. It was the Old Testament law. The New Testament doesn’t say as much about it. It does get Jesus’s endorsement, but as a rule the suggestion in the New Testament is higher.
- B. The point is, this guy was doing the right things. He was trying hard to be good. He was generous. He’s got some issues, but he’s a good guy. He’s a good neighbor.
- VIII. V13: “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God.**
- A. Justified is a theological and quasi-legal term that means “to be made right with God.” It implies that God declares that we are forgiven, reconciled to Him. From this point on, when God looks at our sin, He sees His Son.
- B. Go to 2 Cor. 5:12: The life and death and work of Jesus is transferred to our account. We get his goodness and he takes our sin and God says, “your good to go.”
- IX. I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.**
- X. So, two guys pray. Two prayers. One good, one bad. One God accepts. One God doesn’t. This looks simple on the face of it. The Pharisee is a jerk. The tax collector is a hero. And we think, I’m glad I’m like the tax collector. OK, but... this is not that simple.

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A. For starters, as I have already noted, the contrast here is not actually between a religious jerk who is all bad and a humble civil servant who has it all dialed in. That is not how the 1st century Jewish listener would have heard this. When we hear “Pharisee” we think “bad guy.” We picture a smug, self-righteous, religious do-gooder. But in the first century, the Pharisees were respected. I’m sure some could be a bit holy-roller. Some could come off a bit too serious, be a bit heavy-handed with their faith. But they took God seriously and were generous with their money and helped others. They were misguided – and it is so easy to be religiously misguided - but they generally meant well and tried hard.

1. The odds are really high that I’m a Pharisee. And that you are as well. “Look at you, you’re at church on a holiday weekend!” And you probably give money away and volunteer and are in a small group. I volunteer at Matthew Homes. Hey, I’m trying.” Right, that’s exactly the way a Pharisee thinks.
 - a) Especially when a Pharisee looks at the tax collector. Because tax collectors were bad. After the Romans conquered an area, they took bids on tax franchises. And basically, whoever said they could get the most money out of their friends and family got the job. The deal was, the one who promised the Romans the most money was given the franchise, and then they set to work collecting more than the amount they promised to the Romans, because that is what they got to keep.
 - b) You didn’t become a tax collector by being nice or fair. You got the job by being willing to do anything to anyone. This wasn’t an IRS agent working within a legitimate system. There were no laws. There was no tax code. There were thugs selling out their Mom and cousins for their own well being. There were guys who came by threatening to break your thumb or take your daughter unless you gave him whatever outlandish dollar amount he asked for.
 - c) And you hated the guy all the more because he was one of you. He was supposed to be on your side, but he was a traitor. In the first century you couldn’t get much lower than a tax collector.
2. So, on the first pass you realize, Jesus sets up a contrast between:
 - a) a religious man – a holy man, a community leader, a great neighbor, a generous “good guy.” A guy you like.
 - b) And a scoundrel – a lecherous, carousing, cheat others, abuse women, laugh at the plight of the poor, jerk. A guy you hate.
 - c) And then Jesus mixes it up by saying, the guy like you is the loser who prayer is offensive to God because he is so full of himself. And the guy you can’t stand finds favor with God because of his humility.
3. So, your first option is to say, I’m in trouble here. My prayers are offensive to God because I think too highly of myself.

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- B. However, the next option is to think – wait for it – I am glad that I realize how bad I am, and that I am better than the person who thinks he’s better than the person. “I am glad that I am nothing like the guy who says he is nothing like the guy.” Wait. Uh oh. Does that mean, I am still that guy?
1. Am I proud of not being proud? Because I think that means I’m proud.
- C. Men and women, Jesus sets up something here that is almost certain to bite all of us. I think there is a safe space here. But it’s illusive. And if you think you have managed to land in the safe space, you almost certainly have not.
- D. The contrast that Jesus sets up is between a priest who has a reputation for praying and fasting and being generous, and the lecherous brut who used to beat you up on the playground and now has the power of Roman Empire behind him to take anything of yours he wants. And then to come back tomorrow and do it again.
- E. Jesus brilliantly gets us all on the same level. We think we get it. We think we know who we should be like. But then as we think it through, we realize that we are just messing up in a more subtle way.
- XI. And the teaching point on prayer is, we must approach in an attitude of humility – and do so without any pride in that humility. We must approach with an understanding that God does not owe us anything.
- XII. Do you ever think that God should answer your prayers because you’ve been good?
- A. I volunteered at the church this week. I recycle. I obeyed the speed limit. I voted. I used my time wisely. I’m not a liberal. I am not a conservative. I homeschool. I send my kids to private school. I wear a mask. I do not wear a mask. I did the dishes last week. I had a quiet time.
- B. Do you ever think – just a bit – that we earn God’s favor. Put God in our debt.
- C. The tax collector understands that isn’t going to happen. But he is no hero. And as soon we think we are superior to the Pharisee because of the Pharisee’s pride, we get busted for pride issues of our own.
- XIII. There are a number of things worth noting here, for instance:
- A. Comparison is always a fool’s errand. If you are comparing yourself to someone other than Jesus – and coming out on top in some way – you are doing it wrong! You are a Pharisee. But if you are comparing yourself to someone else and losing, that doesn’t mean you are doing it right either. We always compare selectively and from a distance, so we can feel better or worse depending on how we control the variables. Other people are not the standard, and we may be working our comparison on the things that do not matter and doing so from a distance that means our perceptions may be all wrong.

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B. And spiritual pride is always a problem. This is a point Paul illustrates in a very different way in Philippians 3. There he says, if you want religion, I can give you that. I was way more religious than you could ever dream of being. I was born to the right family, right tribe, circumcised on the eighth day, went to the right schools, studied under the right rabbis, got straight As in Pharisee school. I was graduated ‘most likely to be martyred.’ I excelled in religion. I had the best religious resume possible. Better than yours. And then I met Jesus and realized that I still fell short – in fact, those efforts were worthless. That what I needed was the gift of righteousness that only He can offer.

C. But let’s keep our focus on prayer. And here I think the message is two fold:

1. The good news is, with humility – which is just an honest assessment of who we are - we can come to God. It does not matter how bad we are. It’s hard to find someone worse than a tax collector. Jesus suggests the prayers of this man were heard by God.

a) We should not believe that God is not going to hear our prayer just because we have sinned. We need to confess that sin before him and marvel that even as broken as we are, he hears – and loves.

b) God doesn’t listen to our prayers based on our morality. It’s unfair – but it’s grace

c) I am not recommending sinning. Sinning is stupid. It ruins your life. It ruins your ability to feel; It robs you of true freedom. It leads to pain and dysfunction

2. The bad news is, we cannot come to him thinking he owes us a thing. We must come aware of our brokenness. And that is a hard posture to maintain, because it is very easy to be proud of our lack of pride.

a) This may be unpleasant news, but you have no bargaining power with God. And we plead the blood and righteousness of Christ. But – here is the good news, we can come to God and be heard through Christ today.

¹ Ingrid Betancourt