

Prayer and Humility

Devotional Reading: Psalm 141

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 1:4–11; Daniel 6:10; Matthew 6:5–15; Luke 18:1–14;
John 17:1–26

Genesis 18:25–27

25 That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

26 And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.

27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.

Luke 18:9–14

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

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

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

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

13 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.

14 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.

1 John 5:14–15

14 And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:

15 And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

Key Text

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 18:14**

Enduring Beliefs of the Church Unit 2: Grace and Reconciliation Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List the characteristics of prayer from the lesson’s Scripture texts.
2. Discern which occasions call for bold prayer and which occasions call for humble prayer.
3. State a way to ask God for good things while humbly sharing the gospel with friends and neighbors.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. God, I Need You!
- B. Lesson Context

I. Bold Prayer (Genesis 18:25–27)

- A. Abraham’s Petition (v. 25)
- B. The Lord’s Promise (vv. 26–27)

II. Humble Prayer (Luke 18:9–14)

- A. Jesus’ Parable (vv. 9–10)
- B. The Pharisee (vv. 11–12)
- C. The Tax Collector (vv. 13–14)

No Excuses

III. Confident Prayer (1 John 5:14–15)

- A. Our Request (v. 14)
- B. God's Response (v. 15)

Praying for a Miracle

Conclusion

- A. The Foundation of Prayer
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Abraham

Ay-bruh-ham.

Abram

Ay-brum.

Gethsemane

Geth-sem-uh-nee (G as in get).

Gomorraah

Guh-more-uh.

Sodom

Sod-um.

Zacchaeus

Zack-key-us.

Introduction

A. God, I Need You!

I knew, maybe for the first time in my life, that I really needed help. As a logistics analyst in a large textile firm, my role was to purchase all the necessary components of the clothing we produced and make sure they arrived at the production facility on time. Things were not going well. As I struggled to keep track of everything, I was terrified that I would fail. Who could help? I was not sure anyone could.

On the way to work one day, I began to pray. For the first time, these prayers came from a place of desperation. Within a couple of months, something had changed. The job was still difficult and fastpaced. But my experience of the job was different. Fear had been replaced with peace. I realized that God cares to listen to the prayers of His children.

B. Lesson Context

The word *pray* occurs in 348 verses in the Bible in 74 different forms. Today's lesson takes us into three of those instances. We take care, however, to remember that these three textual segments occur within the broader context of the Bible as a whole. While there are times when prayer is at best a waste of time (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11; 1 John 5:16b; etc.) and at worst an improper substitute for action that God is expecting us to take (see Exodus 14:15), in the many circumstances where prayer is an appropriate action, there are various postures we might take, which the passages below depict.

I. Bold Prayer

(Genesis 18:25–27)

In Genesis, God selects Abraham for a unique task and relationship. Those involve a promise to make him a great nation, to bless him, and to bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:1–3). Following God's call, Abraham (known as Abram at the time) journeys to a new land with his wife, Sarah (Sarai), and their nephew, Lot (12:4–9). Through many circumstances, Abraham comes to know God more and to trust Him—Genesis 16:1–4 recording a notable failure—even when it looks impossible for the promises to be fulfilled. The three verses of our first text take us to Abraham's reaction to God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

A. Abraham's Petition (v. 25)

25. That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Abraham and the Lord are having a dialogue about the fate of the two cities just noted. This is of special concern to Abraham because his nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom (Genesis 14:12). Sodom has an evil reputation (13:13), and the Lord plans to destroy the city (18:20–21). Being startled by the Lord's plan, Abraham begins to voice his objection in the verse now before us.

Exactly what it is that should *be far from* the Lord in the current context is located between the two occurrences of that phrase. Abraham is making a bold appeal to the Lord to rethink the forthcoming destruction. Their conversation is predicated on the recognition that Sodom's fate has not yet been decided. But rather than telling the Lord what to do, Abraham asks the Lord to *do right*. The key question is, what is right? The basis of Abraham's appeal is the Lord's identity and character. Since He is the one who sets the standard for right and wrong—and indeed *is Himself* that standard—it is impossible for Him to do anything but what is right.

B. The Lord's Promise (vv. 26–27)

26. And the Lord said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.

Abraham had begun his appeal by asking the Lord what He would do if 50 *righteous* people could be found living in Sodom (Genesis 18:24). The verse before us now is the Lord's answer.

27. And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.

Surprisingly, even after this initial agreement, *Abraham* does not stop. He continues to intercede boldly for the inhabitants of Sodom. He goes on to inquire regarding successively lower numbers of righteous people: 45, 40, 30, 20, and then 10! At each point, the Lord agrees to spare the whole city for the sake of the righteous.

Before continuing, however, Abraham recognizes the audacity of his plea. He has *taken upon himself to speak unto the Lord* even though Abraham is *but dust and ashes*. To identify oneself in this way is an act of extreme humility. These terms also occur in circumstances of humiliation and contrition (Job 30:19; 42:6; Ezekiel 27:30). God is attentive to the man's concerns. Implicit in this recognition is a second one: Abraham knows that the Lord, as God, knows what is wise. He also knows that the Lord cares to listen because the Lord initiated this conversation (Genesis 18:20).

Thus, Abraham's bold intercession is dependent on three things. First, he appeals based on the Lord's character. Second, he recognizes his own inferior status. In other words, in his boldness, he is humble. Third, he feels confident to approach the Lord because of the relationship that they share (Genesis 18:17–19).

What Do You Think?

Would you have been as bold as Abraham in his situation?

Digging Deeper

What caused Abraham to have such faith to pray boldly?

II. Humble Prayer

(Luke 18:9–14)

At the point of our lesson's second passage, Jesus has been on the way to Jerusalem since Luke 9:51. He has announced His pending death twice (Luke 9:21–22, 43–45) and will do so a third time shortly after the parable of today's study (18:31–34). On this journey, Jesus teaches what His kingdom is like and who will have a place in it. The parable below helps to fill out that picture, connecting the preceding parable—also about prayer—with the story that follows, which emphasizes the need for humility.

A. Jesus' Parable (vv. 9–10)

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

Up until chapter 18 of his Gospel, Luke introduces most of Jesus' parables with a minimal note that He was addressing "them" (Luke 5:36; 6:39; 8:4; 12:16; 14:7; 15:3). At one point, Peter is even confused about whom the parable is for (12:41).

But chapter 18 is different. There are two parables here; the first one is addressed to the disciples (Luke 18:1, tracking the identity of "them" back to 17:22), and the second begins in the verse now at hand. The description fits the Pharisees well, although Luke does not state that explicitly. By leaving the identification a bit vague, perhaps Luke is allowing the readers to consider whether they fit this description.

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

The opening lines of the parable set the context for a regular activity for devout Jews in Jesus' time (Acts 3:1). *The temple* was the place where people went to be in the presence of God, to worship, and to seek forgiveness for their own sins and the sins of the nation. Pharisees of the first century are respected for their dedication to the Law of Moses. They studied Scripture and were committed to lives of holiness and worship. Their presence at the temple for prayer is exactly what Luke's audience expects.

The publican or tax collector, on the other hand, is despised. These individuals are viewed as traitors as they collude with the Roman authorities to exact tax revenue from the Jewish population. They are often dishonest (like Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1–10) and classified along with notorious sinners (Luke 5:30; 7:34; 15:1). No one would expect such a person to make an appearance at the temple.

B. The Pharisee (vv. 11–12)

11. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

Jesus shares the Pharisee's prayer first. The standing position is normal (Mark 11:25). That he prays *with himself* may mean that he intentionally separates himself from the rest of the worshippers. His attitude in prayer is made clear by what he goes on to say.

Thanking *God* is appropriate content for prayer, of course (Psalms 106:47; 136:2, 26; Jeremiah 33:11; etc.). However, for the Pharisee, what is seemingly a prayer of gratitude is actually one of pride. He is thankful not for God but for himself. He makes sure that God knows he is *not as other men are*.

The Pharisee mentions particular groups that he will have nothing to do with: *extortioners, unjust, and adulterers*. It is unquestionably good that the Pharisee does not engage in the actions that these characterizations imply. But his foundation for avoiding these activities is his image as a “self-made man”—in other words, he has a bad case of believing that God owes him divine approval. This results from (or results in) an attitude of superiority to people he views as unrighteous. He even makes it a point of wagging a finger at a person who is particularly unrighteous: the *publican*.

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

The Pharisee then reminds God (and himself) of his good deeds. Both fasting and tithing are characteristics of the devout. Fasting is a good thing when it is practiced with godly motives (see Joel 2:12; contrast Zechariah 7:4–5). Tithing (giving a tenth of one's income) is also expected (see Leviticus 27:30; contrast Malachi 3:8–10). Outwardly, this Pharisee meets or exceeds the expectations. But Matthew 23:13–36 reveals the Pharisees' legalism, their works-righteousness mentality, and their hypocrisy (see also Luke 11:37–52). Although this Pharisee has worked hard both to abstain from sinful actions and to do what is required, the result is pride and self-importance. He's not praying so much as he is bragging.

What Do You Think?

How can we avoid “bragging” in our prayers like the Pharisee?

Digging Deeper

What misaligned speech habits can you identify in your own prayers?

C. The Tax Collector (vv. 13–14)

13. 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.

The publican also prays in a standing position, but the similarities end there. He exhibits no self-congratulatory “thanks.” The fact that he is *standing afar off* indicates hesitation to approach the holy God. Like the Pharisee, he is separated from the other faithful supplicants, but with a different motive. Jesus’ extended description of the publican’s physical positioning helps the reader understand his distinct motivation for this separation.

The words of his prayer correspond to his physical demeanor; he prays for mercy, aware that he is *a sinner*. He has nothing to offer; he realizes that his deeds will not make him worthy. Rather, he depends on God’s mercy for forgiveness.

We can pause here to remind ourselves that what Jesus is teaching is nothing new. God’s approval of the publican’s humility is well reflected in Isaiah 66:2b and elsewhere. To beat one’s *breast* is an outward sign of this inward disposition, one of internal distress (Jeremiah 31:19; Luke 23:48; etc.).

A final interesting feature is the relative lengths of the two prayers: more than 30 words for the Pharisee but only 7 words for the publican. The latter is consistent with passages such as Ecclesiastes 5:2b and Matthew 6:7. We ought to be wary of where wordiness can lead!

What Do You Think?

What is the most important part of the publican’s prayer?

Digging Deeper

How might you incorporate such aspects of humble prayer into your prayers?

No Excuses

A video on social media showed a man standing before a judge to answer for a burglary charge. The judge looked at the man closely, recognizing him as a boy she had gone to middle school with. When the recognition became mutual, he began to cry. Holding his head in his hands, he repeated, “Oh my goodness, oh my goodness!”

The judge said she remembered his kindness, intelligence, and friendship from their younger days. She expressed her sadness that he had made some poor decisions. The man was subsequently convicted and sentenced to prison. When released 10 months later, the judge was right there waiting for him. They embraced and renewed their friendship as she encouraged him to take a better path in life, and he vowed to do so.

Relationships break when offenses are committed. As true as that is for human-to-human connections, it is all the more so with God-to-human relationships. God, the ultimate judge, has provided the means for restoring our broken relationship through Jesus, but it’s not automatic. Our choice is either to be a self-justifying Pharisee or to be an admitted sinner. “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word” (Isaiah 66:2b). Be sure to make the right choice.

—L. M. W.

14. 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.

Jesus concludes the parable by giving His evaluation of the prayers. And this isn’t the only time in the Gospels where Jesus draws the sharp distinction between those who exalt themselves and those who humbly realize their situation and need (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11).

This outcome would have been surprising to Jesus’ audience. A hated publican who is *justified* ahead of a devout Pharisee? What a reversal! This follows a pattern in Luke’s Gospel, beginning with Mary’s song (Luke 1:46–55), where the humble, poor, and despised are exalted by God, and the proud, rich, and strong are brought low.

III. Confident Prayer

(1 John 5:14–15)

As he did in his Gospel (John 20:31), the apostle John explicitly states his purpose in writing the letter we call 1 John: it is so that those who believe can know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). Throughout this letter, John encourages and challenges his audience to walk in the light, obey God’s commands, and be confident in their standing

before God. As the letter moves toward its conclusion, John applies this confidence to prayer.

A. Our Request (v. 14)

14. And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us.

Confidence has been a consistent theme in John's letter. He wants Christians to reach the day of judgment with confidence in their standing before God (1 John 2:28; 3:21; 4:17). Now, at the end of the letter, John encourages his audience to have confidence when they pray.

This confidence is possible only *in him*—in God (1 John 5:6–12). It is available to Christians because they believe in the name of the Son of God (5:13). It also allows them to know that God listens. There is, however, a condition to this confidence. Previously, John had said that Christians would receive their requests if they obeyed God's commands (3:22). Here, the condition is *if we ask ... according to his will*.

This raises (at least) two important questions. First, if prayers that are heard are prayers that are already *according to his will*, then why pray? Won't such things happen anyway? The interaction between prayer and God's will is complicated and cannot be adequately covered here. But John and Jesus clearly expected Christians to pray, and in some way, God hears and responds to believer's prayers (John 14:13–14; 15:7, 16; 16:23–24).

Second, how can Christians know God's will in order to ask accordingly? It seems that what John envisions here is the Christian's will, desires, and requests being conformed to God's through prayer. We can follow Jesus' example. At Gethsemane, he prayed, "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36).

The opposite of confident prayer is seen in James 1:6–7: "But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord."

B. God's Response (v. 15)

15. And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

John explains what it means that God hears the Christian's request: *we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him*. God's hearing leads to acting. This is a persistent motif in Scripture (Exodus 3:7; 1 Kings 3:12; 2 Kings 20:5; Luke 1:13; etc.). If our request aligns with God's will, a positive answer is assured. Therefore, John

encourages his readers to approach God confidently in prayer knowing that He cares, hears, and acts.

What Do You Think?

What is the difference between appropriate and inappropriate confidence in prayer?

Digging Deeper

How does 1 John 5:14–15 describe appropriate confidence?

Praying for a Miracle

“Chaplain, please pray that God will save my baby! Pray for a miracle!” the dad begged me. I looked at his tiny son, attached to machines keeping him alive. My head said this baby would not live. I had a flash of shame for doubting that God would save him, but God had not spared the physical lives of many children with whom I had worked over the years. I looked into the father’s eyes to see both hope and fear.

“Okay,” I answered, pushing my own doubt aside. “Let’s pray for a miracle for your baby.” We laid our hands on the blanket covering the tiny body and prayed that God would heal the child. The father confidently approached the throne of God with his request.

You may be wondering if a miracle did indeed take place. I will not reveal the answer to that question because God’s response is not the point of the story. The point, rather, is that our prayer was evidence of our confidence that God would do His will in this situation. Do you approach God in prayer with this kind of confidence?

—L. M. W.

Conclusion

A. The Foundation of Prayer

These three passages of today’s lesson address prayer from distinct angles. In Genesis, Abraham makes his request in terms of appealing to God’s character; Abraham does so while acknowledging his own subordinate status. In the Gospel of Luke, the publican acknowledges his status as a sinner as he seeks God’s mercy. In 1 John, Christians are encouraged to pray with confidence because of their relationship with God, conformity to God’s will, and God’s disposition to listen to His children.

God’s character is the constant in these three passages. It must serve as the foundation for prayer today. Abraham’s rhetorical question, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do

right?” has never lost its validity. Abraham’s bold appeal is consistent both with the Lord’s character and with Abraham’s desire to do what was right.

Christians can pray confidently because God delights in our prayers and wants to grant our requests (but see the cautions cited in the Lesson Context at the beginning of this lesson). Christians can pray boldly by aligning their requests with what God has revealed about His desires. Christians also are to pray humbly because we know that God is God, and we are not.

As we pray today, we will do well to follow the examples in this lesson. More important than the physical posture one assumes in prayer is one’s heart posture. Additionally, prayer is an important means by which the human will is conformed to the divine will. The better we know God, the more we seek God, the more our prayers will be answered because they will align with who God is and what God wants to do in the world. Certain circumstances may call for more boldness or more humility depending on the context. Yet humble, confident boldness that is grounded in God’s character should undergird all our prayers.

What Do You Think?

What type of prayer do you find infrequent in your life: bold, humble, or confident?

Digging Deeper

What examples in Scripture might inspire your growth in that area?

B. Prayer

Lord, You are worthy of all praise. We come to You seeking your mercy and knowing that You care to hear and answer our petitions. Conform our wills to Yours. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Pray humbly and boldly with confidence.