

These last two Sundays, the theme of the scriptures seems to be one of prayer. Last week we saw how we should be persistent in prayer. We were given the example of the widow asking for justice and not giving up in her cause for it. Today we see the contrasting prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Today's Gospel passage is actually the second time in Luke's Gospel that Jesus says, "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted." We heard this exact same thing 7 weeks ago and we may not have listened to it then so Jesus brings it back to the forefront again today.

Let's take a look at the different prayers each of these people offered up to God. The Pharisee, naturally, looked with a cynical eye at the tax collector. Perhaps he had reason to be annoyed with him. Maybe just the day before the tax collector had been collecting money from him, too much money that was heading to the hated Romans, Money that was lining the tax collector's pocket.

But, on the other hand, the Pharisee felt good about himself. He used money responsibly, he read the prophets, he was a faithful husband, he helped the poor, he fasted twice a week, and he tithed. Upon entering the temple, the Pharisee was overwhelmed with his own goodness. "God, I thank you that I am not like other men!"

Does this sound familiar? How often do we judge others by thinking how much better we are than them? How often do we look suspiciously at those who seem to be

coming up short? How often do we find ourselves judging others rather harshly, especially when we don't have all the facts?

For some of us it's a person's choice of clothing. For others it's the number of piercings a person might have. For others it's a person's job or language or skin color or background or lifestyle. "Thank God I am not like ...(you fill in the blank)."

The humble tax collector who prays for forgiveness becomes the icon of justification in the parable. The tax collector was not concerned about the shortcomings or failings of other people. He was only interested in seeking forgiveness for his own faults and looking toward correcting them.

A genuine prayer life begins by a sincere examination of conscience, as evidenced by the tax collector, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." By focusing on oneself rather than the other (as seen by the Pharisee's prayer), a sense of humility is cultivated within. It is humility in prayer that is pleasing to God.

The difference between the two men lies in the fact that the tax collector acknowledged his sin, but not the Pharisee. His posture of standing at a distance would indicate his humility, whereas the Pharisee wanted to be noticed by all. The tax collector's whole demeanor is humble—not raising his eyes as the Pharisee did, but

beating his breast acknowledging himself as a sinner. What trips up the Pharisee is not his healthy self-image, but his condemnation of others. We know whose prayer was heard. In asking for nothing the Pharisee received nothing.

What the author in the Book of Sirach points out is also shocking—that God knows no favorites, neither the privileged nor less privileged. God’s concern is justice not favoritism. But God does love the poor.

God makes it clear that He hears the cry of the poor like the widow, orphans, or other oppressed. He hears their cry because they know that without God’s help they can not go on. Their pleading for help will not go unheeded as the psalmist also brings out.

When we look at the second reading, at first glance, this scripture seems the opposite of the first two. It seems as though Paul is telling Timothy how much he himself has done. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness...” (4:7-8) But as one reads further, one realizes that Paul is not boasting. Rather, he is pointing to the grace of God that has brought him through his struggle.

Paul tells Timothy that even when he was deserted by all, Paul is quick to offer his forgiveness of those who have deserted him when he says: “May it not be held against them!” He acknowledged that God came and gave him strength and delivered

him from the lion's mouth. Paul trusts that he will be delivered from every evil. In the end, he will be brought to God's heavenly kingdom. Not because of what Paul has done, but trusting in God's amazing grace. Paul turns inward and focuses on the strength and confidence in his relationship with the Lord.

So, on this World Mission Day we ask God to hear the cries of the afflicted and those suffering injustices. Maybe it can begin with all of us accepting the tax collector's prayer and making it our own: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner."