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Our parable today offers some light on our attitude in offering prayers to God. The Pharisee, a righteous man in the community, and the tax collector, a self-confessed wicked and sinful man, go up to the temple to offer their prayers to God.

The devout Jew, who would pray two and three times a day, in the morning, sometimes at noon and then in the evening, and many would head to the temple to do their prayers. (They thought that praying in the temple would be more effective.) The Pharisee hasn't gone to the temple to pray, but really to boast how good he is. The key word for him was "I". True prayer is offered to God and not to inform God how good we are. He was there to boast.

He boasted about how he was so much better than other men, he fasted twice a week, though they were only required by Jewish law to fast on the Day of Atonement. He fasted on Mondays and Thursdays. All so he could gain special merit from heaven. He did all the right things at the right time and in the right place. He is proud of himself.

The tax collector, he knew where he stood in his place in life. He worked for the Romans; he took money from his fellow countrymen. He was able to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. He went to pray to God to ask for forgiveness of his sins and to repent: "God have mercy on me, a sinner." Now, because of this prayer, Jesus says that the tax collector, with his heart-broken, self-despising prayer, has won his acceptance before God. He didn't give an alibi for his work. He just pleaded with God to clean a soul that was dark and sinful.

This parable has taught us several things about prayer. No one boasting proudly about what he has done can make it a prayer. The Pharisee said that he was not like the other men - thieves, the adulterer and the tax collector; no one can call it a prayer when they despise others. In prayer, we do not lift ourselves above others. We must remember that we are one of a great number of sinning, suffering, sorrowing humanity kneeling before the throne of God.

Our true judgement comes not from comparing our life against others, but by comparing our life against Jesus, our God. The Pharisee was comparing himself against the other men when the tax collector was comparing himself against God. He knew he had fallen short and was asking for forgiveness.

The question is not, "Am I as good as my neighbor?" but "Am I as good as God?"

There was a man traveling by train in Scotland and they passed a little cabin, white and shiny and gleaming. It looked so bright and shiny. A few days later he was traveling back home and he passed the same little cabin. In the meantime, the snow had fallen, bright and beautiful and pure white. The white cabin now looked drab and soiled, almost gray amongst God's pure white fallen snow.

We are like that cabin. It all depends upon what we compare ourselves to. If we compare our lives to Jesus and God's holiness, there isn't much to say but 'God be merciful to me, a sinner.'

It's hard for me not to think that God must judge me according to my deeds, but my deeds mean nothing to God. It's hard to believe that God loves me, regardless of what I do.

While we were sinners, Christ died for us to show us his love. It was not the good people that Christ died to save, but sinners. Not God's friends, but those who were hostile to him. God loves us and we are important to him. We are made in his own image to be friends of God. Even though we do things not acceptable to God, he reaches out to us and calls us to come to him. Not because of our love or our righteousness, but because of *his* love and his righteousness and holiness.

In our first reading, Paul tells Timothy his final instructions. He feels that his time is up, he has had thirty years as an apostle. When he was first jailed, no one came to his support, but all deserted him. Paul proclaims, "The Lord stood by me and gave me strength so that through me the good news message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it." Here again, God will stand with us, even when our friends don't.

The question is, will we humble ourselves and will we repent with fasting and tears and mourning and enter into the rest and peace that God freely offers us?

Jesus closes this parable with, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." So we need to be humble. Not to think of how we might be better than some others, but rather to think of who we are before God. We need to be humble in our prayer but not proud of our humility. Both men in the gospel story prayed to God. Faith requires prayer. And prayer we need to be humble, sincere and persistent.

The prayer of the tax collector was the basis of the Jesus prayer. Remember the rosary and the Jesus prayer that you say on the rosary? "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

This is an Anglican rosary, or sometimes called prayer beads. Say this once for every bead on the rosary.

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

A great way to relieve stress.

*Almighty God, give us the courage to seek your forgiveness and your grace.
We thank you for the guidance and your love you have given us.*

Amen.