

# 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

Today's Scripture: Genesis 18:25–27; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 5:14–15

## I. Bold Prayer Genesis 18:25–27

<sup>25</sup> **Far be it from you to do such a thing—to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"**

<sup>26</sup> **The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."**

<sup>27</sup> **Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes,"**

25. Abraham and the Lord are having a dialogue about the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (although the second city is not mentioned in these verses). This is of special concern to Abraham because his nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom. Sodom has an evil reputation, and the Lord plans to destroy the city. Being startled by the Lord's plan, Abraham begins to voice his objection.

*Far be it from you* occurs twice in this verse. 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, it is impossible for him to do anything but what is right.

26. Abraham begins his appeal by asking the Lord what he would do if *50 righteous people* were found living in Sodom. The Lord answers, *I will spare them*.

27. 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 *been so bold to speak to 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 like the book of Job. God is attentive to Abraham'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. Third, he feels confident to approach the Lord because of the relationship that they share.

## II. Humble Prayer

### Luke 18:9–14

<sup>9</sup> **To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:**

<sup>10</sup> **“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’**

<sup>13</sup> **“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.’**

<sup>14</sup> **“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.”**

9. This is the beginning of the second parable in a set. Up until chapter 18 of his Gospel, Luke introduces most of Jesus' parables with a minimal note that he was addressing “them.” The description in this verse 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 the description.

10. The opening lines of the parable set the context for a regular activity for devout Jews in Jesus' time. *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 *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 seen as dishonest and classified along with notorious sinners.

11. Jesus shares the Pharisee's prayer first. The standing position is normal (Mark 11:25). That he prays by 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. He holds an attitude of superiority to people he views as unrighteous.

12. The Pharisee then reminds God of his good deeds. Both fasting and tithing are characteristics of the devout. Outwardly, this Pharisee meets or exceeds expectations. But Matthew 23:13–36 reveals the Pharisees' legalism, their works-righteousness mentality, and their hypocrisy. Although this Pharisee has worked hard both to abstain from sinful actions and to do what is required, he's not praying so much as he is bragging.

13. *The tax collector* also prays in a standing position, but the similarities end there. He exhibits no self-congratulatory “thanks.” The fact that he *stood at a distance* indicates hesitation to approach the holy God. Like the Pharisee, he is separated from the other faithful supplicants, but with a different motive.

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 tax collector'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.

A final interesting feature is the relative lengths of the two prayers: more than 30 words for the Pharisee but only seven words for the tax collector. We ought to be wary of where wordiness might lead!

14. Jesus concludes the parable by giving his evaluation of the prayers. This isn't the only time in the Gospels where Jesus draws a sharp distinction between those who exalt themselves and those who humbly realize their situation and need.

This outcome would have been surprising to Jesus' audience. A hated tax collector who is *justified* ahead of a devout Pharisee? What a reversal! This follows a pattern in Luke's Gospel, beginning with Mary's song, 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

**<sup>14</sup> This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.**

**<sup>15</sup> And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.**

14. *Confidence* has been a consistent theme in John's letter. He wants Christians to reach the day of judgment with confidence. Now, at the end of the letter, John encourages his audience to have confidence when they pray.

This confidence is possible only *in*

*approaching God*. It is available to Christians because they believe in the name of the Son of God. 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. 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.

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, . . . everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36).

The opposite of confident prayer is seen in James 1:6–7: "But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord."

15. John explains what it means that God hears the Christian's request: *we know that we have what we asked of him*. God's hearing leads to acting. This is a persistent motif in Scripture. 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.

# Involvement Learning

## Prayer and Humility

### Into the Lesson

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

*Boldness and humility seldom exist in the same person at the same time.*

What makes it possible for both boldness and humility to coexist? What makes it difficult?

Today's lesson will concentrate on prayer and highlight ways both boldness and humility can be present as we pray.

### Key Text

"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."

—Luke 18:14

### Into the Word

Read Genesis 18:16–33. How is Abraham an example here?

Read Luke 18:9–14. How can Christians avoid pride in their prayers?

Read John 1:5–14. How is the praying described here both bold and humble?

### Into Life

How do these passages encourage us to pray?

What situations call for bold prayers?

What situations call for humble prayers?

What steps can you take to achieve a better blend of the two qualities in your prayers?

How can we be both bold and humble in asking God for things in our prayers?

### Thought to Remember

Pray humbly and boldly with confidence.