

St John's Parish Communion - 26 October 2025

Luke 18.9–14

Prayer: Lord, through the written word, and the spoken word,
may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen

'Two men went up to the Temple to pray,'

Q: How did they pray?

I want to take us back a few weeks to Luke's account of Jesus' response when the disciples ask-*'Lord, teach us to pray'*

You may remember the speech bubbles I stuck round the edge of the pulpit.

Q: Do you remember what each of them said?

Please Sorry Thank you You're amazing! A pattern for prayer
Let's bear those in mind as we look at each of these men in their prayers.

Tax Collector: Was standing *'far off'* – in an inconspicuous corner of the Temple.
Out of the way of prying eyes. Perhaps so that he would not be recognised and heckled.

Tax collectors were hated in biblical times and were regarded as sinners. They were Jews who worked for the Romans, so this made them traitors. People resented paying taxes to the foreigners who ruled over them.

The Romans didn't pay Tax Collectors a wage, they were expected to take extra money from the taxpayers and keep some for themselves. Many tax collectors were very dishonest and abused this system by taking far too much. Consequently they were despised and had hardly any friends. It must have taken so much courage for this man to come into the Temple at all.

But it seems this Tax Collector was very upset. He was bowed over and couldn't bring himself to look up to heaven. He felt so out of place and so unworthy. He was acutely aware of God's presence and of the gaping gulf between him and God. He was beating his breast as he admitted his cheating and dishonesty, and deep within was crying out, *"God, be merciful to me, a sinner!"*

Let's look at what parts of the 'prayer pattern' we see and hear from him.

By his demeanour and the fact that he has had the courage to come into the Temple to pray is honouring to God. I'm unworthy = **You're Amazing!**

He calls himself 'a sinner' - repenting before God = **Sorry**

Asking for Mercy, which is when God doesn't respond to us as we deserve = **Please.**

Interestingly, we don't hear any **Thanksgiving** from him at this moment because he is weighed down with the horror of his behaviour.

In contrast... **The Pharisee**, who has stood in a very prominent place in the Temple – does not stop saying **thank you**...

*God, I thank you that I am not like other people:
thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.*

But is he praising God?

‘You know I am very zealous. I obey all the Laws, I fast twice a week’.

It was only necessary to fast once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Why choose twice a week? Because they were market days!

The Pharisees would clothe themselves in rags, whiten their faces, look very miserable and walk about in the crowds, basically showing off their piety. ‘Look at me, how humble I am’!

Not humble at all - quite the reverse! Rather, ensuring they were the centre of attention.

Looking at these two men it seems to me that one is emptying himself out of all the things that separate him from God; really devastated at how mean he has been to line his own pockets whilst others suffer.

In comparison, the other one is filling himself up with pride...self-importance - ‘Look what I do - how diligently I keep the laws, how extremely humble I am – I fast more than I am required to’.

This man is promoting himself. His prayers are nothing to do with God, he is trumpeting his own zealousness.

You may laugh at me now, but as I was sitting, contrasting these two men, into my mind came the TV programme – ‘Sort your life out’.

If you haven’t come across it, Stacey Solomon + team:

- Dilly, the meticulous organiser
- Iwan, the cleaning maestro
- And Rob, the ingenious carpenter

(plus goodness knows how many extra crew and camera team!)

This team is invited into the homes of families whose daily life has ground to a halt, due to the mountains of STUFF they have accumulated.

Sometimes the team can’t even get in the front door for all the boxes and bags stacked up against it.

The reasons the families have come to this crisis point is that family life is not functioning at all well. It’s often triggered by unfortunate or unexpected circumstances, by which they are emotionally and physically weighed down and struggling to hold everything together, and family life is suffering.

They know they need to ‘Declutter’, they know they can’t do it without help.

One householder describes it thus:

‘The house is like a size 16 trying to fit into a size 10 dress’

Why does this happen? Things that get in the way...

- You get something new – jeans say – then don't dispose of the old pair – 'just in case' – I could put a patch on the old ones – (and when will you get time to do that?!)
- Likes picking up bargains – some found still with labels on!
- a new model has come out – How many old phones are still in the house? Lots
- wishing to hold on to things that evoke memories – Have you kept anything from your childhood? Holiday mementos?

So the '**Sort your life out**' tried and trusted system is:

STRIP: they take everything out of the house – they're next confronted with it spread out in a large warehouse

SORT: 1st bit is easy - **remove all that they:** - don't want / is broken / doesn't work/ out of date food/ doesn't fit

Pare down: remove duplicates – do you really need 100 mugs, 23 pairs of swimming goggles, over 60 obsolete chargers? [e.g. *from the show*]

Eventually, taking into account the size of the challenge - to get a clearer house - they need to discard - 40/50/60% of the contents. This includes some hard decisions!

The final bit is...

SYSTEMISE: That's when the team of TV 'helpers' gets to organize the rooms - make more space.

I won't go into all that – it's the magic bit - you can find an episode for yourself...

- if you wish!

What's this got to do with Jesus' parable?

The Pharisee has been:

- Over-zealous with collecting 'good deeds'
- Over-enthusiastic about keep the Law - practising it much further than required

All this STUFF, however good, has caused him to lose sight of God.

In contrast, the Tax Collector has taken a good look at himself, doesn't like what he sees and has come in humility to ask God to 'declutter' ... well actually, to declutter his heart!

He is opening himself up, clearing himself out and confessing to God the distance that has grown between them.

The Pharisee didn't really go to the Temple to pray; he went to tell God (and everyone who was there) how good he was! There is no sense of sin, no sense of need, nor any humble dependence on God.

No Sorry – No Please – No You're Awesome!

All that the Pharisee said was probably true – in his zealous keeping of the law - and performing religious rites - but... his prayer shows us that his focus was himself...

*God, I thank you that I am not like other people:
thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.
(I'm much better than them!)*

But the Tax Collector is **not** comparing himself with other people – he is standing before God.

True prayer depends on with whom we compare ourselves.

When we put our lives beside the life of Jesus and kneel before the holiness of God, we recognise there is a big gulf, where the only thing to say is

“God be merciful to me – a sinner”.

In effect we’re saying ‘*Lord. ‘declutter’ me!* Take away the unnecessary, distracting and harmful baggage that is getting in the way of deepening my relationship with you.

The challenge this parable gives us, is to maintain a daily humble prayer relationship with God which will ensure that it doesn’t get ‘cluttered’ with our own, or others’ STUFF.

This reminded me of a phrase which has stayed with me for years from AW Towzer’s book ‘The Pursuit of God’. He asks the question...

Who or what is on the throne of your heart?

Who or what is on the throne of our hearts?

Interestingly, in the Tax Collector’s prayer we hear **You’re amazing! Sorry, Please**, but we don’t hear any **Thanksgiving** from him at this moment because he is weighed down with remorse.

However, by the time we get to the end of the parable, Jesus says to his listeners...

¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified [Just as if I’d... never sinned] rather than the other man;... for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’

I suspect this man would have been praising and thanking God all the way home!

Amen.