

**THE  
BON AIR  
PULPIT**

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Scripture: Luke 18:9-14

Sermon: *The Spirit of Brokenness*

One of the most remarkable statistics about American people is what they say about their prayer lives. In a recent survey, nearly three-fourths of Americans said they pray at least once a week and about 50 percent say they pray more than once a week. The poet said that prayer is our native tongue, we breathe our native air, and surely--since worship is very much a part of our prayer life--then you and I need to understand better how we can make contact with God. Jesus taught us by parables, he gave us principles, he gave us a pattern--everything that he could do to help us to know how to pray. I hope the passage of Scripture we are going to read today it will strengthen you as you deal day by day with your communication with God. In his teachings, Jesus many times used people. He kind of let them walk across the stage and let us see them. That's the way He is going to teach us this morning in the story that he gave us in the book of Luke, Chapter 18. *"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself: 'God I thank you I am not like other men--I am not a robber, an evil-doer, an adulterer--I am not even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give a tenth of all that I have.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up into heaven, but he beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"* And then this is the truth that Jesus teaches us. *"I tell*

*you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For whosoever will exalt himself will be humbled. And he who humbles himself will be exalted.'"*

Let these two figures that Jesus told us about come before your mind. Let me tell you about the Pharisee. The Pharisee belonged to a group of about ten or twelve thousand men. The reason the group was formed is that Israel is a small country between great powers, and throughout history these great powers would overrun Israel, and therefore many of the cultural experiences of these other people would become a part of Israel. And even in the few times Israel was free, the great powers would use Israel as the hinge for the area and run great roads for their commerce through it. And in between what we call the Old Testament and New Testament, the Greeks had come, the Romans had come, and these Israelite men said, "Our country is going to lose its identity. The people of God are going to lose their significance. All of our faith, our customs, our rituals, are going to be gone. We want to keep our country strong, we want to keep our faith alive." And so a Pharisee was a person who said, "I am the keeper of the law." They were men who would be wrapped around with a flag, they would be bathed in baptismal waters, they would be the kind of men that many of you here could identify with as being strong men of faith and strong men of their country. They were people who had even gone to the Old Testament and determined that God had given us 932 different commandments. Some of them were commandments, some of them were prohibitions; and just to make sure they helped God out they added 1500 other commandments that they needed to keep. And so here they were, men of faith; here they were, men of country; here they were, standing strong. And Jesus looked at that man--He didn't condemn all Pharisees--he condemned that man because, He said, there are even good people who make mistakes in prayer. And the title of the

sermon could very well be *Mistakes That Good People Make About Prayer*.

Now, the other man, the Bible calls a tax collector. I need to stop just for a moment. We have people in our church who work for IRS. I want to say to you: that is a noble calling. As you know, before I came here ten years ago, I pastored down in eastern North Carolina. Eastern North Carolina raises more hogs than anywhere else in the country. So I hadn't been there very long until, you know, I get to Luke, Chapter 15, the prodigal son, and he lived among the hogs; and the largest hog farmer came up to see me and he said, "Well, I wondered when you were going to get the boy and the hogs together." So, when we say tax collector, you recognize that we are talking about a different breed of animal. A tax collector was a hireling. He was a person who had sold out his country and, to some degree, sold out his soul. A publican was a supervisor, and what he hired were Jews to collect money from the others. The supervisor would say, "I want a thousand dollars. I don't care how much you raise, give me a thousand." And what happened many times is that the tax collectors would raise two or three thousand dollars, give the publican a thousand, keep all the rest, and everybody knew they were thieves. And so when people saw them come down the street they would go to the other side of the street; and they actually passed a law in the Synagogue that said a tax collector, a thief, a robber, a hireling, could not go to heaven.

So, here you are. Here is the best man you could find in the community. Here is the worst man you could find in the community. Jesus said, "Let me tell you about prayer. The best man made mistakes and I heard the prayer of the worst man." And everybody said, "How can that happen?" And then Jesus told us the mistakes that good people make about their prayers. Many of you in this room pray on a regular basis, you come to church, you read your Bible, you seek to serve God--so

hear it again: *mistakes that good people make about prayer*.

*The first one Jesus said they make is that they become complacent in their walk with God. They want to impress God with their dedication. Someone has said they want to tell God how far they have come rather than how far they need to go. Anytime you see a person who has an unbroken ego, he always tells you about his achievements. I know some people who can tell you how bad they are. "I can drink anybody under the table." "I can tell you how many notches I have on my gun." "I can tell you what I did and got by with it." They want to brag about their achievements. "I have made so much money," "I have so many positions," "I have so much authority." And if you have an unbroken ego it even affects you in your relationship to God. "Look, God, at what I do. I go to church, I fast, I give, I pray." And what they are doing is simply calling attention to themselves. And what Jesus is saying is that the person who has an unbroken ego always wants to call attention to himself. He is like the rooster who wakes up every morning and thinks the sun rises to hear him crow. He just always is calling attention to himself. Jesus said the man who is always calling attention to himself cannot talk to God. God is not impressed. Jesus said that when he prayed he talked to himself. I have been amazed when I have heard people pray sometimes--talking to themselves.*

I remember when we were in a college setting and a young ministerial student was asked to pray. He had just learned some long theological term and he used it in his prayer, knowing the rest of us would not know it. He then spelled it and defined it. I am sure God was very grateful.

I have been speaking in various places across Virginia recently. At an associational meeting recently they were

remembering the dead. And the fellow got up to remember-- but after I was to speak they were to have a big debate or conversation about reorganization of their whole association-- and so the fellow got up to pray, and this was his prayer, "Dear God, remember we want to remember those who have died, and we pray that they are with you. Now, dear Lord, you know that most of us are here tonight because we are getting ready to talk about this reorganization and we want, Lord, everybody to remember that the person who has the most votes wins. Amen." Now, I am sure God did not know parliamentary procedure; but the person praying was giving ample proof: you all better watch out, I've got the votes. Someone said it was the best prayer they ever heard to a Boston audience. Some people want to just talk to God, they want to inform Him, they want to tell Him everything they can tell Him. And the Bible says that when you begin to talk only about yourself and your ego is unbroken, then God never hears.

So what is He trying to tell us? He is trying to say to us that the problem with the Pharisee was that he had a narrow view of what religion is. I like the person who said He did not condemn the Pharisee because he kept his religion; He condemned him because he had a religion he could keep—a narrow view of what goodness really is. Jesus helped us understand that in another place, in Matthew 23:23. He said, "*I say to you Pharisees and keepers of the law, you give a tenth of all of your spices, your mint, your dill, your cummin, but you have neglected the most important matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faithfulness.*" Can you see the picture? Here is a fellow getting ready to make some soufflé, and he is going to use these little old herbs, and so he is sitting there and counting them all, and one out of ten he puts over here--he is going to give that one to God. And Jesus said, "Do you think religion is counting seeds? Do you think that all it is about is putting one over here? Let me ask you. What about justice? What about mercy? What about

faithfulness? " So to the person who comes in the presence of God and begins to talk about himself God begins to say, "Don't you see what this whole thing is about? It is so much bigger than you ever imagined." The person who begins to understand that begins to understand what true humility is all about. He begins to understand that it is far bigger than he knows.

An astronomer and a theologian were talking one day and the astronomer said to the theologian, "I don't know why y'all have to study so much and read your Bible and go to school. I can tell you everything there is to know about God." The theologian asked, "Oh, what is that?" He said, "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*" The theologian said, "Well, I don't know why you astronomers go to school. I know everything about astronomy. "Twinkle, twinkle, little star."

Do you understand that when you come into the presence of God, Creator, Sustainer, Provider, you ask, "Who are we to come with our little deeds of how good we are?" *You understand not only how shallow the Pharisee's religion was, but how small his God was.* Whenever people have had a new sense of God's presence, they have all been captured again by the very presence of God in his greatness.

You might recall the story in history: King Louis decided he would put aside the number beside his name and he would call himself Louis the Great. He went to Notre Dame. A priest was there and that day all of the candles were out, and he had two candles on the altar. Louis the Great sat before them. And the priest gave the shortest sermon ever delivered in Notre Dame. He walked down, blew out the candles and said, "Only God is Great." Has he ever blown out your candle? Have you ever come to recognize that prayer is coming into the presence of the Almighty? There is no prayer without humility and there is no prayer without brokenness.

Not only was he complacent, *but the second mistake Jesus said he made was that he began to compare himself with others.* So he lifted himself up where he could look down on other people. Comparison is a thing that we all like to do. In this story it was the good person who compared himself to the bad person. "Lord, I am glad I am not like them." Often it is the other way. The bad person compares himself to the good person. I was talking to a man the other day who said, "I don't need to come down to your church; I can be as good as you can without going to church." I said, "That is very interesting. I try to go to church and try to pray and try to read my Bible and try to do other things to be good; but you say you can be as good as I can without even going to church. What do you do?" He said, "Nothing." I said, "I don't think I want to try your religion. I think I will keep mine." But, you see, we always want to get into comparisons. Jesus said that when you begin to compare yourself with others, you begin to try then to compare yourself to God. See, the issue is not whether you are as good as I, or I am as good as you; the issue is how do you compare in God's sight? And once I began to understand that, then I understand that I am not to get into the comparison business at all.

I love the little incident out of George Kauffman's play called The President's Daughter. The president's daughter had two children, the grandchildren of the president. She took them to look at the portrait of their granddaddy. The young man said, "I think I could fill his shoes." His sister said, "I think it was the other end of Granddaddy that was the most important."

Pharisees always have to have sinners. They always have to be better than somebody else. What Jesus is trying to tell us is that when we put ourselves in the presence of Jesus, then none of us feel worthy to open our eyes. The prayer from the shadows. I can't even lift my head. No recitation of virtues. Simply a broken man who said, "Dear God, if there is ever going to be any good done, it

is because of your mercy." And Jesus said, "God heard his prayer." There is a beautiful spiritual that says, "It's me, it's me, it's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It's me, it's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer. It ain't my brother, and it ain't my sister, but it's me, oh, Lord, standing in the need of prayer." Do you understand that when you go into your prayer closet, if you are not on your knees, that you are in the wrong position? And if you are not broken then the healer doesn't reach to help.

The very essence of goodness is that goodness comes down and says, "What can I do to help?" And once I understand the goodness of Jesus then I come down to the needs and hurts of others and say, "What can I do to help you?" Faith doesn't bring you mirrors. It brings you windows. Today, some of us need a fresh brokenness of our spirit to recognize that we can only come into His presence because of His mercy, He can hear our prayers only because of what Christ has done for us, only his blood washes away our sins. Have you ever had that brokenness that just takes you down and says, "Dear God, all I can do is lift my hands. Dear God, if ever anything good is going to happen, it's going to be because of you."