

17 July 2016

## Parables on Prayer

Luke 18:1-14

There was in a certain health insurance company a claims manager who neither feared God nor cared for people. All that mattered to him was the company bottom line, and with that in mind he developed policies for his staff that required them to deny every claim except routine checkups at least once, and to deny all claims for more than a thousand dollars a minimum of three times. He put together a list of reasons to give for denying claims – from “not covered under your plan” to “incorrect code entered” to “experimental procedure” – and he trained his staff to use all three excuses when necessary. He saved the company millions and by these means rose to the position of VP for claims.

But a certain widow submitted a claim for a cancer treatment. The final bill for the treatment was close to \$50,000, and the claims department did everything that they could to deny it. They told her it was not covered under her plan, and she sent them a copy of her paperwork proving that it was. They told her the code had been entered incorrectly, and she tied up three different operators for a week looking for the correct code, until they finally had to admit that it had, in fact, been done right the first time. Then she had four different doctors write letters proving that her treatment was a standard therapy and not experimental. Her last two letters came on a lawyer’s stationery, so the claims department took the case to the VP, the one who neither feared God nor cared for people. He was disgusted, and he desperately wanted to deny the claim, but even he had to admit that this widow was not going to just go away and that fighting longer might end up costing the company even more. Reluctantly, he approved the claim, and the company paid for the treatment.

So by persistence this widow got even a soul-less bureaucrat to give in and listen. Now, a question for you: Who cares more for your welfare? This health insurance claim executive, or the Heavenly Father who made you in his own image? So why are you afraid to ask God for what you need? I promise you, God will listen.

Hear now this parable of Jesus, from Luke 18:1-8:

*Then Jesus told them a parable about their need to pray always and not to lose heart. He said, ‘In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, “Grant me justice against my opponent.” For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, “Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.”’ And the Lord said, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them. And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?’*

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So, our Father hears our prayers. But, of course, we don't always get what we ask for when we pray. Why is that? Maybe we aren't doing it right. Maybe we need to learn *how* to pray.

“Welcome, students. That's the bell, so please find a seat and let's get started. First, let's make sure you're in the right class. This is Intermediate Prayer, Religion 206. Everyone in the right place? Good, good. Now, everyone here has had Beginning Prayer, Religion 102, right? That's a prerequisite for this course. Good.

“My teaching assistant will be handing out syllabi for the term, but on this first day of the semester let me just go over that information orally, so that we're all on the same page as we continue. First, I am Dr. Morris of the Department of Applied Spirituality. I've been teaching this class for eight years, but before that I served in the pastorate for 25 years, where I prayed professionally. If you've already bought your required texts, you'll see that I'm the author of one of them, *The Perfect Public Pray-er*.

“In this intermediate level class, our focus will be on prayer in the church, which is why this course is required for those seeking church vocations. I assume that includes many of you. If you have your syllabus, please open it to page two, which describes the different units we'll be covering.

“Unit One is on Prayers of Opening and Dismissal. The point of this sort of prayer is to quiet everyone down and get a meeting started or ended. It also includes the required prayer before a church dinner. In this unit, we'll discuss appropriate length and learn certain phrases that can be used and reused in different settings. A lot of classes leave this type of prayer out, but in the church setting this is one of the most common prayers you will be asked to pray. Indeed I know some pastors for whom the beginning and ending of meetings and the start of church dinners are the only times they ever pray. So you need to get this down.

“In Unit Two, we will cover the informational prayer, in all its different forms. For instance, you'll see we have a couple of weeks on prayer of announcement – ‘Lord, we ask your blessing on our Funnel Cake stand at the fair, next Tuesday through Thursday from 10am to 7pm, and we especially ask you to warm the hearts of potential volunteers for Wednesday afternoon, where we still need help’ – that kind of thing. Then we'll touch on the theological prayer, the teaching prayer, and the important ‘Prologue to the Sermon’ prayer. Then we'll have the midterm.

“In our third, and final, unit we will take up the ‘Persuasive Prayer.’ We will spend a lot of time on this one, because it will not have been covered in any of your previous classes. This is an essential prayer genre in the local church, and you will be required to write and present samples of each of the following types. First, you will recite a ‘Prayer for Controversy,’ in which you use your public prayer as a way to make people who oppose you in the church look bad. For instance, ‘Lord, you know the trials that our church faces as we consider the remodelling project. I ask you to work your grace and truth upon the hearts of those who seek their own selfish way and oppose the floral pattern for the pew cushions.’ After that, you will be required to compose and present a ‘Prayer of Self-Congratulation.’ This is one of the most difficult sorts of prayer to pray, because it *sounds* sort of un-ministerial. In this class, you will learn techniques for making

yourself look good, but in a humble and self-effacing way. “God, I come before you now in the company of your saints, but still a humble child in your presence, just as I am every morning for an hour before dawn, seeking your will.” This is very effective prayer, done right. After all, to get your own way in a church, nothing works better than a reminder of your own superior holiness.

“Any questions on the syllabus? Good. Now I want you read the first 25 pages of *The Perfect Public Prayer* before our next session, and I also want each of you to complete a short assignment. This will just be for my sake, so I can get to know you better, as well as have some idea how proficient each of you is in the field of professional praying. I need each of you to write down the following phrases – ready? *grant us in your mercy, O Lord you know that, to the nourishment of our bodies, in Thy holy will, the gift and the giver, shower your blessings upon, and ask in your gracious name.* Do you have all those phrases? Good. I want you each to compose a prayer of 300 words or fewer that uses every one of them. I’ll collect them next time.

“Yes? . . . Oh, yes. Thank you. That’s a very good question. For those who didn’t hear, this young man asked if the content of the prayer matters. No, it doesn’t. All that matters is that the prayer flows well and sounds spiritual. Just use all those phrases in such a way that it *feels* as if it means something. Excellent. I look forward to our semester together.”

We now continue reading from Luke 18, verses 9-14:

*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ‘Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” But the tax-collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.’*

One concluding word. You all understood that in little skit about the Intermediate Prayer class wasn’t serious, right? There aren’t really any classes like that. Nobody teaches pastors how to pray phony prayers that use ornate prayer language without saying anything. No, we generally figure out how to do it all by ourselves.

Which is why we need to hear Jesus’ parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector. Here is what we pastors and others who pray publically need to remember: (1) If the intended audience of our prayer is not God but the people in front of us, then it isn’t a prayer, (2) if even one small secondary purpose of the prayer is to make us look good, then it isn’t a prayer, (3) if any part of our prayer is intended to make any other person look bad, it’s not a prayer, and (4) if the goal of the prayer is to impress God, we are greatly misled and are wasting our time. So what *is* prayer? It is what the tax-collector in the parable did. Prayer is coming before God aware of our own unworthiness but nevertheless opening ourselves to God’s grace. If you do that, the words you use don’t matter – or even if you use no words at all. I tell you, the one who prays that prayer will go home justified before God.