

HOW DO YOU PRAY?

TODAY'S GOSPEL WHEN FIRST READING IT, WE CAN FIND IT EASY TO UNDERSTAND IN BLACK AND WHITE TERMS. THE PHARISEE IS THE PERFECT EXAMPLE OF WHAT **NOT** TO DO WHEN YOU PRAY. MEANWHILE THE TAX COLLECTOR IS FOR US AN EXAMPLE OF HOW TO PRAY AS A SINNER.

HOWEVER, IF WE TAKE THE TIME TO PONDER ON THIS PARABLE WE COULD BEGIN TO ASK OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT THESE TWO MEN. IT WAS CUSTOM TO GO TO THE TEMPLE TO PRAY AT NINE IN THE MORNING, MIDDAY, AND THREE IN THE AFTERNOON. WHY?

THIS CUSTOM WAS STARTED BY THE THREE PATRIARCHS - ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND JACOB. EACH ONE OF THESE MEN WERE KNOWN FOR PARTICULAR QUALITIES WHICH THEY INTRODUCED INTO THE SERVICE OF GOD. **ABRAHAM SERVED GOD WITH LOVE; ISAAC—WITH AWE; JACOB—WITH MERCY.** NOT THAT EACH LACKED THE QUALITIES OF THE OTHERS, BUT EACH HAD A PARTICULAR QUALITY WHICH WAS MORE APPARENT. **ABRAHAM DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF ESPECIALLY IN THE QUALITY OF KINDNESS AND LOVE, WHILE ISAAC EXCELLED ESPECIALLY IN THE QUALITY OF JUSTICE AND REVERENCE, AND JACOB INHERITED BOTH THESE QUALITIES,** BRINGING OUT A NEW QUALITY WHICH COMBINED THE FIRST TWO INTO THE WELL-BALANCED AND LASTING QUALITY OF TRUTH AND MERCY.

WHEN THE TORAH WAS GIVEN AT MOUNT SINAI TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE , A WAY OF LIFE WAS SET OUT BY GOD. TORAH MEANS "*TEACHING,*" "*INSTRUCTION,*" "*GUIDANCE*"; FOR THE TORAH TEACHES THE WAY OF LIFE IN EVERY DETAIL OF DAILY LIFE. **THE TORAH CONTAINS 613 COMMANDMENTS.** AMONG THEM IS THE COMMAND TO "SERVE GOD WITH ALL OUR HEART AND ALL OUR SOUL."

HOW DO WE SERVE GOD WITH OUR HEART? *BY PRAYING TO HIM. IN DOING SO, WE FULFILL NOT ONLY THE COMMANDMENT OF PRAYING TO GOD, BUT ALSO THE OTHER COMMANDMENTS, SUCH AS TO LOVE GOD AND TO FEAR HIM, WHICH ARE SEPARATE COMMANDMENTS.*

THERE ARE OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT THESE TWO MEN, THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR, JUST BECAUSE THIS PHARISEE WAS THE WAY HE WAS, DID THAT MEAN ALL THE PHARISEES WERE TO BE WRITTEN OFF? I DON'T THINK SO. *REMEMBER IT WAS JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA , A MEMBER OF THE PHARISEES THAT PROVIDED JESUS HIS BURIAL TOMB. NICODEMUS WAS ALSO A MEMBER OF THE PHARISEES AND BOUGHT EXPENSIVE OILS AND SPICES FOR JESUS' BODY TO BE PROPERLY PREPARED.* WE LOOK AT THIS TAX COLLECTOR AND RIGHT AWAY RECALL **ZACCHAEUS** WHO AFTER MEETING JESUS WAS GOING TO MAKE IT RIGHT WITH THOSE HE HAD CHEATED. ANOTHER TAX COLLECTOR, **MATTHEW,** WAS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS! DOES THIS MEAN ALL THE TAX

COLLECTORS WERE GOOD PEOPLE? I AM FAIRLY CERTAIN THAT MANY OF THEM “ROBBED” THE PEOPLE BY TAKING “EXTRA” TAX MONEY. **WE CAN'T AUTOMATICALLY ASSUME BECAUSE OF THE BEHAVIOR OF A CERTAIN INDIVIDUAL WE COME ACROSS IS GOOD OR BAD.**

I RECENTLY ATTENDED A SEMINAR. THE SPEAKER MADE SOME ASSUMPTIONS (WRONGLY I MIGHT ADD) AFTER MEETING CERTAIN PEOPLE HE HAS HAD DISCUSSIONS WITH. I TOLD HIM I WAS SUCH A PERSON HE HAD DESCRIBED, BUT DID NOT IGNORE SCIENCE LIKE HE HAD DESCRIBED SUCH PEOPLE DO.

TROUBLE IS WE DO THIS ALMOST EVERYDAY – MAKE AN “INSTANT” JUDGMENT BASED ON OUR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCES. IF WE ARE A DISCIPLE OF JESUS CHRIST THEN LIKE HIM WE SHOULD ENCOUNTER PEOPLE WITH A BLANK SLATE IF YOU WILL. **WE DON'T WANT PEOPLE TO MAKE A QUICK JUDGMENT ABOUT US, SO WHY DO WE NOT AFFORD THEM THE SAME COURTESY WE SO DESIRE?** THE PHARISEE DID THIS INTO TODAY'S READING, PUTTING DOWN THE TAX COLLECTOR AND “BUNCHING” THEM ALL TOGETHER.

I FOUND THIS ANSWER WHILE PREPARING FOR THIS MESSAGE IN ONE OF THE COMMENTARIES **“YOU JUDGE PEOPLE BY THEIR ACTIONS AND YOURSELF BY YOUR INTENTIONS”** THIS SUMS UP WHAT MANY OF US DO, BUT REALLY DON'T WANT TO ADMIT IT. YOU KNOW GOD KNOWS AND HE IS THERE WAITING SO PATIENTLY TO HEAR OUR PRAYER OF THE TAX COLLECTOR - “GOD, SHOW ME MERCY TO ME, A SINNER”. HE **WILL** EXTEND HIS FORGIVENESS AND SHOWER US WITH HIS GRACE!!!! WE DON'T HAVE TO COME TO GOD ALL PUFFED UP AND SHOW HIM HOW GOOD WE HAVE BEEN. THE TAX COLLECTOR SENSED WHEN HE WENT HOME HE HAD BEEN FORGIVEN. HE HAD A “FREEDOM” THAT THE PHARISEE NO MATTER HOW LONG HIS “THAT A BOYS” LIST WAS HAD NO SUCH “FREEDOM” HE WAS A “SLAVE” TO THE LAW AND HAD TO KEEP “PERFORMING”.

PEOPLE TODAY FALL INTO THE TRAP OF PERFORMING FOR GOD OR MANY TIMES THEY JUST THROW THEIR HANDS UP AND SAY “ I CAN'T DO THIS!!” THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO JUST GIVE UP AND BECOME “CHURCH ZOMBIES” COMING EVERY SUNDAY. BUT THERE IS NO MEANING IN CHURCH FOR THEM. FOR THOSE PEOPLE IT MAY EVENTUALLY LEAD TO JUST DROPPING OUT OF CHURCH!!!

THERE ARE NUMEROUS VERSES ABOUT HOW OUR LOVE CAN ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER, BUILD EACH OTHER UP. I THESSALONIANS 5:11 “So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.” **CAN WE SAY THAT IS WHAT WE DO HERE AT CENTENNIAL?** OR MAYBE WE SOUND LIKE THE PHARISEE AND ELEVATE OURSELVES AND PUT DOWN OTHERS? A CARELESS WORD, A JUICY PIECE OF GOSSIP? **THINGS ARE ROUGH ENOUGH OUT THERE – CHURCH SHOULD BE A SAFE HAVEN, A PLACE TO REST AND REFRESH.** ONE CHURCH I ATTENDED MADE THE LIGHTHOUSE A SYMBOL ON ALL ITS LETTERHEAD AND CARDS. WE

INVITED PEOPLE TO A "SAFE HARBOR" FROM THE STORMS RAGING OUT THERE.

THERE IS A VERSE I FOUND WHEN LOOKING FOR VERSES ABOUT ENCOURAGING EACH OTHER, IT COMES FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS 9:11 *"The church then had **peace** throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and it became stronger as the believers lived in the fear of the Lord. And with the **encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it also grew in numbers**".* THIS VERSE IS VERY INTERESTING, BECAUSE I BELIEVE IT IS A RECIPE, A "HOW TO" GROW THE CHURCH. IF WE BELIEVE HEBREWS 13:8 *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."*, THEN WE BELIEVE THAT WHAT WORKED BACK THEN IS TRUE FOR THE CHURCH TODAY!

ARE OUR CHURCHES EMPTYING BECAUSE THERE IS NO PEACE, NO REST? HAVE WE KEPT OUR RESPECT FOR GOD? HAVE WE RELIED ON THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT? WHEN WE DRIFT FROM THESE THINGS WHAT "POWER" IS LEFT IN THE CHURCH, BUT THAT OF MAN AND WE ALL KNOW HOW THAT WORKS OUT!!! IT MAY KEEP THE DOORS OPEN FOR AWHILE, BUT WHEN GOD IS ABSENT THERE IS NOTHING NO MATTER HOW BRIGHT OR SHINY THAT WILL ATTRACT PEOPLE FOR LONG. **IT IS OUR LOVE AND THE RELATIONSHIPS THAT LOVE FOSTERS.**

BACK TO THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR. **IT WAS TRADITION, ACTUALLY LAW THAT THEY COME TO THE TEMPLE AND PRAY. THE QUESTION IS WHY DID THEY, OTHER THAN THE LAW, COME TO CHURCH?** ONE REASON FOR THE PHARISEE WAS TO BE SEEN. HE GAVE MUCH THOUGHT TO WHAT HE SHOULD WEAR, WHAT HE WOULD SAY AND EVEN WHERE HE WOULD STAND – WHERE THE MOST PEOPLE COULD SEE HIM!!! NOW FOR THE TAX COLLECTOR, THE MESSAGE SAYS "HE HID IN THE SHADOWS!" HE CAME JUST AS HE WAS!

WHY ARE WE HERE? I KINDA KNOW WHY I AM HERE, BUT ASK YOURSELF **WHAT BROUGHT YOU HERE?** NOW THAT IS WHAT I CALL A "HEART ANSWER", SOMETHING BETWEEN GOD AND YOU. *AFTER ALL WE ARE NOT HERE TO GAIN PRAISE IN THE SIGHT OF MAN - COLOSSIANS 3:23 "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men" OR GALATIANS 1:10 "For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."* **WE ARE HERE TO SEEK GOD AND EXPECT HIS PRESENCE!**

THAT IS THE FOUNDATION FOR OUR ATTITUDE IN CHURCH. *FOR THE PHARISEE HIS ATTITUDE WAS ONE OF SUPERIORITY AND ARROGANCE. NOTICE IN HIS PRAYER THERE IS NO CALL THAT HE NEEDS SOMETHING. "PRIDE" SELDOM ADMITS A NEED.* WE CAN COME TO CHURCH WEEK AFTER WEEK, HURTING, BUT PRIDE PREVENTS US FROM TALKING TO GOD OR ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE "FAMILY". **IF YOU ARE HURTING I AM HERE TO SAY ANYTIME BEFORE OR AFTER THE SERVICE WE CAN PRAY TOGETHER. I NEED NO GREAT DETAIL, AFTER ALL GOD KNOWS BEST WHAT YOU NEED.**

PRIDE CAN DO ANOTHER THING – SEE THE FAULTS IN EVERYBODY ELSE. IT IS ABOUT THE LOG IN OUR EYE, WHICH THE PHARISEE SAW ONLY IN THE EYE OF THE TAX COLLECTOR.

There is a story in which a man described a house in Scotland that was painted white. The house stood out clean and brilliant against the dark green backdrop of the grass-covered hills. One day it snowed and the entire country side was transformed into a winter wonderland. When the man looked at the cottage against the backdrop of the pure fallen snow, he noticed for the first time it was dingy and dirty. It was the same house, just a different backdrop. When you compare yourself to a rapist, you may appear to be morally clean, but when you stand up next to the purity of Jesus Christ, you see a different picture.

WE ALL STUMBLE AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER AND SOME US STUMBLE MORE OFTEN. JESUS IS OUR EXAMPLE, BECAUSE IF WE ELEVATE SOMEONE EVENTUALLY THAT PERSON WILL LET US DOWN. I HAD A FRIEND AND SOMEONE JUST “WORSHIPED” HIM, BUT HE TOLD HIM TO LOOK TO JESUS NOT HIM.

THE TAX COLLECTOR REALIZED HE WAS A SINNER, PLAIN AND SIMPLE, AND HE NEEDED TO CALL OUT TO GOD FOR MERCY, FORGIVENESS AND GRACE. *THAT IS THE ATTITUDE WE MUST CARRY IN THE DOORS AND BACK OUT THE DOORS,* AND WE MUST FEEL OR REALIZE WE ARE ALL EQUAL IN THE SIGHT OF GOD.

NOW AT THE END OF PRAYER THE MEN WENT HOME. *LEFT UNSAID IN THIS PARABLE IS THE FACT THAT THE PHARISEE WENT HOME UNCHANGED AND HE WAS RELIGIOUS AND PROUD OF IT!!!* REMEMBER JESUS UNLIKE OUR RELIGION TODAY WAS MORE CONCERNED WITH THE INWARD PURITY AFTER ALL HE SAID IN MARK 7:15 “It’s not what goes into your body that defiles you; you are defiled by what comes from your heart.” THE PHARISEE WAS SO OCCUPIED WITH OUTWARD APPEARANCE. *FOR US, SOONER OR LATER YOU WILL FIND IT TOO DIFFICULT TO “KEEP UP APPEARANCES”* AND IN A MOMENT LET OUT WHAT IS IN YOUR HEART. **THAT IS WHY IT IS SO IMPORTANT WE HEAL THE WHOLE BODY, ESPECIALLY THE SPIRITUAL.**

THE TAX COLLECTOR WENT HOME LEAVING HIS BURDENS WITH GOD AND SO THANKFUL FOR A MERCIFUL GOD. *IF YOU ARE NOT WALKING OUT OUR OF CHURCH THIS MORNING KNOWING YOU ARE FORGIVEN BY A LOVING AND GRACIOUS GOD, YOU MISSED WHAT GOD HAS FOR YOU. GOD OFFERS GRACE SO THAT YOUR SPIRITUAL WALK CAN BE SO MUCH MORE.*

PRAYER IS OUR WAY TO TALK TO GOD, BUT STAY AROUND LONG ENOUGH TO LISTEN TO WHAT WE HAS TO SAY TO YOU. AMEN.