

Homily of Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C

A major part of last Sunday's reflection was on prayer. Again this Sunday, the Church presents us with readings to help us to continue our reflection on prayer. This shows how important prayer is to our journey of faith. We hear it often said, "A prayer-less Christian is a powerless Christian."

The first reading encourages us to cry to the Lord when we are oppressed by life's events because "the prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds." Our Psalm today says, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves."

In the second reading, St. Paul says of himself, "For I am already being poured out like a libation... I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me..." We may not be able to, boldly, make these claims as St. Paul did. We pray to God to give us the grace to bring out our very best in our various callings; compete well, not lose faith, and finish our race. St. Paul also mentions in the reading the desertion he suffered, but was sustained and strengthened by the Lord. St. Paul's experience reminds us that we might at some point, also, suffer desertion. We might at some point be brokenhearted and crushed in the spirit. When these happen, let us rely on the Lord who never deserts us. The Lord sustains and strengthens us.

Jesus gives us the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Gospel to help us examine how we pray and the motives of our prayers. The parable helps us to understand why some prayers "pierce the clouds," and why some prayers do not. The parable: "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity — greedy, dishonest, adulterous — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former..."

This parable reminds us of some passages in the Scripture: James 4:3, "You ask and do not receive because you ask with wrong motives..." This is very evident with the prayer of the Pharisee. He prayed to himself, glorified himself, and spoke uncharitably about others. He was arrogant and despised everyone else. But the tax collector prayed to God, and was humble and contrite of heart. Psalm 51:17, "A humble and contrite heart you will not spurn, O Lord." Proverbs 14:21, "He who despises his neighbor sins..." James 4:6, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." 1 Peter 5:6, "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

Some examples of when we pray with wrong motives:

We pray with wrong motives when we pray pretentiously and for show.

We pray with wrong motives when we pray with sin in our hearts.

We pray with wrong motives when we put God to test by our prayers.

We pray with wrong motives when we see prayer as magic.

We pray with wrong motives when we pray "not God's will but our will."

We pray with wrong motives when we have selfish and avaricious intentions.

There are, also, some spiritual indispositions that negatively affect our prayers:

We are indisposed to prayer when we lack faith.

We are indisposed to prayer when we surrender to any manner of discouragement.

We are indisposed to prayer when our prayers are not sustained with good works.

We are indisposed to prayer when we are plagued with uncontrolled distractions.

We are indisposed to prayer when we lack spiritual connectedness with the Divine.

We are indisposed to prayer when we give in to mind and body weakness.

We are, again, indisposed to prayer when we pray with sin in our hearts.

St. Augustine summarizes all the above as "praying in a fleshy, unspiritual manner."

Jesus teaches us by his own prayer life that it is important to be in constant communication with God in prayer; of which without, we will be within the destructive arms of the Evil One. Jesus says that it is only by prayer that we can cast the Evil One out (Mark 9:29). Every saint we know and every saint we can think of was a person of prayer. Let us, therefore, always, try to dispose ourselves to prayer and let us, also, always, try to pray with good motives.

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