

# BaptistWay: Pride or humility?

December 30, 2013

• *The BaptistWay lesson for Jan. 12 focuses on Luke 18:9-17.*

## **Reversal in the Gospel of Luke**

By this point in the Gospel of Luke, a common theme of “reversal” has been intertwined throughout Jesus’s teachings, parables and actions. It surfaced a few weeks ago when we looked at the Parable of the Good Samaritan and noted his hearers expected the priest or the Levite to be the hero of the story, not the Samaritan. This theme continues in today’s text in the context of prayer and approaching God. It is a reminder God desires sincerity over formality, transparency over presentation.

In our church’s worship service, we have started incorporating the youth in reading Scripture. Originally, I was worried how this would come off to the congregation. Some of them are not great readers, have timid voices and lack expression. In the past, our youth minister always was the one to read the Scripture, and he did so with powerful sound and thoughtful inflection.

When he resigned upon graduating college, God led a parent to step up and take his place. This parent lacks the flash and personality of our former youth minister, but he has done something former youth workers have failed to accomplish: He has involved both parents and youth in the life of our church in a capacity that reaches beyond mere youth activities.

As it turns out, my concerns were all for naught. The caring and nurturing nature of our congregation gladly looks beyond appearance and sound when these youth read Scripture and rejoices they are taking an active part in our worship service. They understand this theme of reversal presented in our text better than I could have imagined.

## **Pray without giving up**

As we prepare to look at a familiar parable and incident recorded in Luke 18:9-17, it is important to note they fall immediately after another parable Jesus taught on the importance of praying persistently. In the parable of the persistent widow, Jesus teaches his children continually can approach God in confidence. We don't have to worry about bothering him or using up our allotted quota of his attention.

In *Prayer: Does it Make any Difference?* Phillip Yancey writes: "Why pray? Evidently, God likes to be asked. God certainly does not need our wisdom or our knowledge, nor even the information contained in our prayers ('your Father knows what you need before you ask him')."

But by inviting us into the partnership of creation, God also invites us into relationship. God is love, said the Apostle John. God does not merely have love or feel love. God is love and cannot not love. As such, God yearns for relationship with the creatures made in his image."

## **Approaching God in humility**

If the parable of the persistent widow teaches the value of prayer, the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector defines what valuable prayer looks like in practice. It is significant to note the audience to which this parable is directed: "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable" (v. 9). It isn't to people who are afraid of praying, or doubting whether or not God hears their prayer. It is to those who are certain their prayers benefit God more than they do themselves.

As the Pharisee prays "about himself" (v. 11), I can't help but be reminded of what I have come to call "Lord, we know..." prayers. How many times have you heard someone begin a prayer that way in a worship service? As if God does not already know what you know? We would never be so openly

hypocritical to actually thank God that we are better than another like the Pharisee, but we come close when we make our prayers only about who we are and what we know. The tax collector, on the other hand, understands his need for God's mercy (v. 13).

The theme of reversal would have hit Jesus' audience full force when they heard his words praising the tax collector's prayer over the Pharisee's (v. 14). To help us understand Jesus' emphasis is not on mere words or prayer formulas, Luke tells a story following these parables about Jesus insisting children be allowed to have access to him. Children were not perceived as cute like they are today. In fact, they were seen as lowly and unimportant. What seems like the right thing to do to us would have been a radical break from the ordinary. Jesus' actions emphasize that approaching him has nothing to do with saying the right thing and everything to do with having the right disposition.

### **The Jesus Prayer**

While attending George W. Truett Theological Seminary, I was part of a "covenant group" that met weekly and prayed for one another in various ways. One of the historical prayers we learned about and practiced was called "The Jesus Prayer." It is short, simple and taken straight out of the mouth of the tax collector in our parable: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Next time you are not sure you have anything of worth to say to God, try simply approaching him in this way. Set a time of 5-10 minutes where you repeat this phrase to God between intermittent periods of silence. Use the time to listen to God and to allow him fill you with his mercy and grace. You'll accomplish more from this than simply telling God what he already knows.