

Explore the Bible: Worthy

March 2, 2021

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 21 focuses on Luke 18:9-17.*

What most of us will never see but something upon which we all depend is a giant underground water tank, the Edwards Aquifer. Especially in South Central Texas, the Edwards is the primary source for drinking water, agriculture and recreation. The water it makes available is the equivalent of 5.3 million Olympic-sized swimming pools.

Suffice it to say, although the Aquifer is not visible above ground, without it, life as it is now known in the areas its services would not be possible. When God created this world, God built in a reserve of one of the most essential of all human resources in the Edwards, one of the largest aquifers in all the world.

If there were a spiritual aquifer, one that runs out of sight but is essential to people who follow Jesus, it would be the one Jesus highlighted in this brief text. It is a perfect witness to that which Jesus will demonstrate on the cross in short order.

A self-righteous Pharisee

Jesus told a parable about two different men who went to the temple to pray. The first man he describes as arrogant and extremely self-centered. Jesus says he was a Pharisee, a man who would almost certainly be described as one of the most “holy” of all men. However, he betrays the fact that, “holy” as he may be in the eyes of others, his heart has not truly been converted to the ways of God’s kingdom.

Jesus specifically says that the man “prayed about himself.” He went

further to brag on himself to God, that he is not like evildoers, men who rob and commit adultery and such. He goes so far as to contrast himself with the tax collector, the one who had also gone to the temple to pray.

Tax collectors, of course, were some of the most despised in any Jewish community. Jews themselves, they were seen as henchmen for the Roman government which allowed them to tax people at any rate they chose, including a nice slice off the top for themselves. No doubt, many families suffered under that system of taxation and were often taxed beyond their ability to pay and support their families.

Tax collectors were some of the most despised men in any Jewish community. They were viewed as traitors, worthy of hell.

It was to this man that the Pharisee compared himself and, by doing so, he thought, improved his stature not just with other men but also with God.

It would be easy to stop at this very point and learn a great deal about what Jesus believed prayer to be, and not to be. Prayer is not about us. It is one thing to pray for our needs. It is another thing altogether to wave our ethical standards in God's face as our ticket into God's presence.

The Pharisee, like we all do too often, thought of grace as transactional. We do for God. and God is supposed to do for us accordingly. No such thing is taught in Scripture— especially not in the life and teachings of Jesus.

Remember, when Jesus was praying in the garden prior to his arrest and crucifixion and was hoping, even praying, there would be another way to accomplish his holy mission without the cross. In the end, Jesus, not praying about himself, surrendered to the purposes of God when he said, "Father . . . not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39).

A penitent tax collector

The tax collector, praying in the temple at the same time, approached God in a totally opposite manner than did the Pharisee. He acknowledged his lack of credentials to ask anything of God. To God, the man referred to himself in terms of his unworthiness for anything good from God. He could not even stand to turn his face heavenward. In his body language, staring at the ground and beating himself, demonstrated that prayer was about God and God's will, not himself and his own will.

"God, have mercy on me, a sinner," he cried to God. He had nothing to present to God as good, and all he could hope for was the goodness of God and his willingness to surrender to it.

Jesus, again, went on to prove this to be his attitude toward God the Father on the cross. With his words and his literal body language, Jesus surrendered to the mercy of God even as he died.

It is that spirit of surrender that is the Edwards Aquafer of the kingdom of God. The only way to be true followers of Jesus is to do as this man in the temple, to forget oneself and dive headfirst into the always immeasurably deep mercy of God.

Every prayer should start and end in that spirit. When it is all said and done, it will be that spirit that ensures the victory of God's kingdom in our lives and in the little part of the world that is ours in which to live and die.

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