

## 30st Sunday in Ordinary Time

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### TWO WAYS OF PRAYING



#### A mosaic in Ravenna

A sixth-century wall mosaic in a church in Ravenna can serve as an illustration for today's Gospel. Two men stand in front of a small building with columns – the temple. The man on the right has his hands raised, as we do during the Lord's Prayer. It is the early Christian gesture of prayer. The man is depicted frontally. He stands proudly upright and looks forward with his large, dark, almond-shaped eyes. We also find the same pose in catacomb paintings and on sarcophagus reliefs: in the portraits of the deceased, but also in Noah in the ark, Daniel in the lion's den, and the three young men in the fiery furnace. It is the typical pose of the pious, the faithful, the person connected to God. In the aforementioned mosaic, it is the Pharisee from today's Gospel. Indeed a good man, who did not do all kinds of wrong things, and fasted more and paid more of his income than was necessary, and was therefore respected by everyone.

The man on the left of the mosaic doesn't look as proud as his neighbor. He has his head bowed, his hand on his chest, and we see him slightly from the side. He's the tax collector from the Gospel. It's fitting that he's more modest, because people like him were universally despised as collaborators and extortionists.

## **The prayer of the pharisee and the publican**

The Gospel surprises us because it reverses the roles.

The publican *went home again justified*, righteous in the eyes of God, but the other did not. Why? Hear how both pray. The Pharisee's prayer is an 'I-prayer': I don't do bad things, I fast, I pay a tenth of all my income. Now, everyone wants to be affirmed by others, but the Pharisee affirms himself by listing his good deeds. And what's worse, he affirms himself by putting the other down: I am not like other people, and certainly not like that publican. Here, a distinction is made between 'our kind of people' and 'the rest', 'the others'. The Pharisee does address God, but one might wonder if he actually loves God. If you are truly connected to God, you don't look down on your fellow human beings, who, like you, have come from God's creative hand. The Pharisee withdraws into himself: he isolates himself from 'the others', but in doing so, he also isolates himself from God. His prayer isn't really a prayer, it's not a conversation with God. The Gospel, therefore, says that he *said this prayer to himself*. He believes he doesn't need God's mercy. Because he fulfilled the law so meticulously, even going above and beyond what was prescribed, he believed he was entitled to heaven. Something for something. God was in his debt.

Now, the tax collector. His position at the back of the temple, his bowed head, the gesture of his hand against his chest, emphasizing his *mea culpa*, contrast with the Pharisee's attitude. His words are also completely different: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner*. He doesn't expect a reward, but hopes for forgiveness.

The story concludes that the tax collector went home justified, while the other did not. The tax collector confessed his guilt, opened himself to the forgiving God, and was therefore justified by God. The Pharisee justified himself and was therefore not justified by God.

## **The pharisee and the publican within us**

Jesus told this parable with reference *to some people who prided themselves on being upright and despised everyone else*. The Pharisees come to mind. But not all Pharisees are the same. For example, Nicodemus was a Pharisee who was well-disposed toward Jesus (John 3:1). Moreover, in every follower of Jesus—including us—something of the Pharisee resides. The Pharisee's thinking in terms of 'I', 'we', and 'the others' is common in all circles. It is easier to blame others than to blame ourselves.

Now that we know more about the effects of genetic predisposition, upbringing, and social environment on us, we understand better that the word 'guilt' must be used with caution. But such insights do not mean that we do not make mistakes, whether through inability or unwillingness (which we don't always know ourselves). The attitude of the tax collector suits us: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner*. Or, to put it in the words of the Lord's Prayer: *forgive us our trespasses*.

This petition also has a social dimension: *forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us*. The Pharisee's arrogance closed him in on himself, separated from God and 'others'. The publican's humility creates connections: with the forgiving God who continually gives us new opportunities, and with other people, to whom we, in turn, forgive and grant new opportunities.