

Today, Jesus gives us one of His most consoling teachings about prayer; The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. These two men could not appear more different: one is confident in his own holiness, the other painfully aware of his sin. Yet, by the end of the parable, Jesus turns every expectation upside down. It is the sinner, not the righteous man, who goes home justified.

To understand the shock this story caused, we must see it through first-century eyes. In that world, the Pharisee was the model of holiness, a faithful, devout and respected man whom everyone thought was close to God. The tax collector, on the other hand, was despised; A traitor working for Rome, enriching himself at his people's expense. He was seen as unclean and morally corrupt. So when Jesus said that the tax collector went home justified, people must have been shocked. How could a sinner be made right with God while a righteous man is not?

Although the pharisee went to pray, there was something terribly wrong in what he did, and 3 problems arose.

**He prays to himself:** Luke tells us he “prayed to himself.” That phrase says it all. Prayer is meant to lift our hearts to God. The Catechism, quoting St. Thérèse of Lisieux, says, “For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; a simple look turned toward heaven, a cry of recognition and of love.”

The Pharisee's prayer, though, never rises beyond himself. His words circle around his own virtues; fasting, giving alms, keeping the law. These may be good works, but instead of opening his heart, he closes it. His prayer becomes self-admiration rather than communion. He is speaking not to God but about himself. Prayer without love is empty.

**He is boastful:** We can picture him standing tall, chest lifted, listing his virtues as if giving a report. He forgets that holiness is a gift, not a personal achievement. The moment we make ourselves the center of prayer, we lose its essence; which is relationship. His supposed thanksgiving lacks any gratitude. There is only pride. Instead of looking up toward heaven, he looks into the mirror of his own imagined righteousness.

**He is competitive:** Finally, his eyes drift sideways toward others. "I thank you, God, that I am not like other men." He turns prayer into comparison. His judgment of others poisons his heart and blinds him to mercy. Spiritual arrogance turns religion into a contest, and he wants to win. How easy it is for us to fall into that same temptation — measuring our worth by looking down on others instead of looking up to God. Yet only God's mercy can justify a soul; our comparisons cannot.

Now, turn your gaze to the tax collector. He stands far off, near the back of the temple. He will not lift his eyes. He

beats his chest and whispers the only words he can find:  
“God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

This simple prayer, has echoed through the centuries. The Eastern Church treasures it as the “Jesus Prayer”: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” In one breath, it captures the whole Gospel.

Unlike the Pharisee, this man lives in truth. He does not disguise his brokenness. He knows his need, and yet he still turns to God. That is humility. Not humiliation, but truth lived in love. He does not justify himself; he lets God justify him. And Jesus declares, “This man went home justified.”

It’s not easy to admit we are sinners. The world tells us to project strength, control, perfection. But the Gospel offers something far better: freedom through truth. When we acknowledge our sin before God, we do not lose dignity; we recover it. Because in that act, we finally let God be God.

Each of us is a sinner, but more importantly, each of us is a sinner infinitely loved by Christ. His mercy is not based on our success but on our openness. The moment we say, “Have mercy on me,” grace flows in. The proud heart stays closed, but the humble heart becomes God’s dwelling place.

This humility is not self-hatred. It is seeing ourselves as we truly are. Fragile and weak, yet beloved. We are not meant to pretend or perform for God. We are meant to be honest, like the tax collector, standing before our merciful Father in truth.

Today, the Gospel invites us to pray as we truly are, simply as children before the One who loves us. During the Eucharistic Prayer take a moment to whisper in your heart, “Jesus, I believe in your love for me. Have mercy on me, a sinner.” Let those words become your prayer.

And when you receive Him in the Eucharist, give thanks for His mercy. The gift which transforms everything. The holiest prayer is not the longest or most eloquent, but the one spoken from a humble heart that knows its need for God. Let us go before the Lord in that spirit today. Let us imitate the tax collector’s truth, his honesty, his humility, repeating what the tax collector says: O God, be merciful to me a sinner.