

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible, light a candle beside it, and place near them symbols or photos of people and things for which group members thank God.

**LEADER:** God, our ancestors called you their refuge and strength, their fortress and shield.

**ALL:** Their shade and path through the wilderness.

**LEADER:** Holy One, you told Moses your name—

**ALL:** I Am Who Causes All to Be.

**LEADER:** Creator, we call you many names.

**EACH:** Takes turns calling out a name or title for God, such as Father, Mother, Friend, Healer.

**LEADER:** You are with us, God whose goodness exhausts all names.

**ALL:** We come to hear and respond to your Word.

**D**eserve is a loaded word. Marketers know its power. They propose to send us on a dream vacation or sell us a shiny, safer car. Who doesn't need to relax and be safe?

*Deserve* is a word familiar to teachers. Students argue they

# SUNDAY

## by SUNDAY

deserve a better grade because they worked long and hard and did more research than ever before. What do they deserve for not doing daily assignments? What percentage of a grade? Now parents can follow online how sons and daughters are doing and weigh in on grades supportively, critically, contentiously.

In our work lives, who deserves promotions? What do I deserve if I can't work? If I don't work or don't earn enough?

Occasionally an inner city Catholic school calls asking for money. Usually a parent working a low-wage job has gotten sick or had hours cut and is short on rent. Some work two and three jobs to pay the relentlessly regular costs of family life—rent, food, and utilities. These are the bills many parishes helped people pay during the pandemic.

Parish and school mission trips to Central America often give young people experiences of intense faith and difficult living standards. Students come home

grateful for what they have and freshly aware of the needs of children born into poverty.

Such trips surface the question: What does every human person deserve? Food, water, shelter, clothing, education, health care...

Sunday's gospel is about praying to God. The parable places each of us before God to express the relationship we have with Holy One. What attitude do we bring? Will our prayer ask to meet next month's sales goals? Will it express our needs, our anxieties, our gratitude?

In Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, one man prays in gratitude and one asks for mercy. What does each deserve?

- How is it any of us deserve life?
- How do I measure what I or others deserve?





# GOSPEL

## Who's got a prayerful attitude?

**NARRATOR:** To some who were confident of their own self-worth but considered everyone else worthless Jesus told this parable.

**JESUS:** Two men went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee

stood and prayed these things concerning himself—

**PHARISEE:** I give you thanks, O God, that I am not like other people—greedy, unjust, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on all that I own.

**JESUS:** The tax collector, standing far off, did not raise his eyes toward heaven. He beat his breast.

**TAX COLLECTOR:** O God, be merciful to me, sinner that I am.

**JESUS:** I say to you, this man rather than the first went down to his house worthy in God's sight. All who make little of themselves will be lifted up, but all who make much of themselves will be brought down.

Luke 18.9-14

## Who am I? Who is God? How do I pray?

Most Christians see the Pharisee in the Sunday's gospel as a stock hypocrite. Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish New Testament scholar, sees both the Pharisee and the publican as extreme figures. In her book *Short Stories by Jesus*, she explores parables like Sunday's gospel, looking for how the parable might have prodded and provoked original Jewish hearers. She helps us see with Jewish eyes rather than Christian assumptions.

Among the religious groups of Jesus' time, Pharisees are closest in outlook and values to Jesus. Often Pharisees serve as the foils in the stories about Jesus, but like him they are teachers. Their place is in schools, teaching in the villages, not the temple where priests serve, or the synagogues, which have their own leaders.

For Levine the Pharisee and the tax collector are caricatures. The Pharisee is over the top sincere and pious. A tax collector praying and asking

for mercy would strain belief in Jesus' time. Those who collect for the Romans show no mercy to others and gain wealth at their expense.

Viewing the Pharisee as an ideal Jew makes Jesus' parable more provocative for Christians today. If the Pharisee was a practicing, contemporary Catholic, he might be an usher at the 10:30 Mass, a member of the parish council, someone who practices sacrificial giving, plays guitar at two Masses a month, sells the quota of raffle tickets, does an honest day's work on the job, sends the kids to Catholic school, teaches in the parish school of religion, and volunteers at the soup kitchen. He could be a man or woman, president of the Altar and Rosary or the Holy Name Society. The Pharisee is not one of *them*, but one of *us*.

Pharisees practiced their religion. Their strict observance of the law distinguished them as a group. They kept the commandments, paid a tenth of

their income for the support of the temple, and fasted twice a week. They were good, religious people, the school and religion teachers of their time, and progressive in applying the Law of Moses to cases that came to them.

● How does seeing the Pharisee as a positive, respected person change the impact of Jesus' parable on you?

The Pharisee stands front and center to pray in the temple. His pious and righteous, law-keeping life is the main content of his prayer, not God's goodness. Nonetheless he is doing what God expects. He is sincere and responsible, Levine points out, but boastful.

His prayer peaks in its first four words, "I thank you, God." From then on, it's all about him. In his prayer this Pharisee divides the human race into two groups—himself and other people. He keeps the law; others covet their neighbor's goods and spouses. He tithes; others forget

their temple pledges.

His religious practices do not function to express his faith and commitment to God but to separate him from sinners and sin. His rosaries and attendance at daily Mass insulate him from people like the tax collector. His religion is exclusionary.

The tax collector is a stock outsider among gospel characters. The tax collector works for the occupying Romans. His regular contact with foreigners makes him ritually unclean, so he can't keep the Mosaic law. His work puts him outside the boundaries of the holy.

Some tax collectors like Zacchaeus in Luke 19.1-10 have reputations for overcharging. The stereotypical tax collector is traitorous, greedy, unholy.

The Pharisee supposes that the very prayer that distances him from the tax collector brings him near God. The tax collector, on the other hand, supposes he is unworthy to be anything but distant from God.

● **Finish the Pharisee's prayer, "I thank you, God, that I am not like..." in your own words.**

● **Finish the tax collector's prayer, "God, be merciful to me..." in your own words.**

Jesus tells this parable to the men and women disciples who are following him to Jerusalem. The parable creates room for them and for us to assess where we fit between these two contrasting examples of prayer. Outward signs of



Mass leading into the Sign of Peace: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you, look not on our sins but on the faith of your Church." I find comfort in other people having faith when I don't.

Neither character is flawless. The pious one is boastful; the

exploitive one is humble. Both raise questions to ask ourselves. Who do we praise in our prayer, God or ourselves? Does the mercy we seek from God really lead us to change, to stop exploiting people who are poor, to seek reconciliation with those we hurt?

The Protestant Reformation began more than 500 years ago with Martin Luther's insight that God is gracious, rather than judging. God freely bestows love and life upon all of us, not because we deserve it or have earned God's blessings, but because God is God. God is love.

In the end, perhaps the parable is really about God and the abundant mercy God has for all of us.

● **In what prayer practice do you persist? How has this practice changed you?**

● **How does your prayer insulate you from others? How does your prayer connect you with others?**

piety do not make the Pharisee an insider with God, nor does sinful self-interest place the tax collector beyond God's mercy. Perhaps among Jesus' disciples some are making negative judgments about others. The parable invites them to see themselves in its mirror.

The parable seems to come down on the side of the tax collector. "This man rather than the first went down to his house worthy in God's sight" (18.14). Luke attaches a saying that affirms the humility of the tax collector and puts the Pharisee in a negative light.

Professor Levine, however, explores the meanings of the "pesky Greek preposition *para*," translated as *rather than* in the parable. It is the prefix in words such a *parallel*, *paradox*, *paraclete*. Besides *rather than*, it can mean *because of* or *alongside*.

The conclusion becomes—"This man went down to his home justified *alongside* the other or *because of* the other." The parable then asks us to recognize how we affect one another. It has the spirit of the prayer at



## FIRST READING

### God favors justice.

Jesus ben Sirach tells us he wrote the wise instructions in the book that bears his name “as they gushed forth from my heart’s understanding” (50.27). He lived in Jerusalem and wrote around 180 B.C. In Sirach 35, this wise teacher insists there is more to true worship than making offerings.

“One who returns a kindness offers fine flour,” he says (35.2). The person who keeps the law makes the equivalent of the temple sacrifice called a peace offering. Sirach cautions against trying to bribe God or against making a public sacrifice without also keeping the law.

### God will answer.

God is a God of justice who knows no favorites.

Though God will not favor the poor, yet God hears the cry of the oppressed.

God hears the prayer of the orphan and the widow as she tells her story.

Those who serve God are heard; their petitions reach the heavens.

The prayers of the lowly

pierce the clouds;  
they pray without rest until  
their prayer reaches its goal;  
they will not let up  
until the Most High responds,  
judges justly, and affirms the right.

Sirach 35.12-14, 16-18

Like Jesus’ parable and Sirach’s wisdom the Second Vatican Council encouraged Catholics not to separate heaven from earth, temple from world. The Council calls us to work for justice as well as pray for it, not to put the wiping away of every tear solely in God’s hand.

Liberation theology teaches us that God identifies with the poor. God’s partiality is for justice, not for those who keep the law without doing justice.

Sirach makes meeting the needs of poor widows and fatherless children a litmus test of the authenticity of our prayer and worship. Then as now, women and children made up a significant percentage of the poor.

Many churches work with Bread for the World to advocate in Congress to end hunger at home and abroad. Malnourishment in the first 1,000 days of a baby’s life

creates irreversible damage and may make them dependent on others for life. Nutritionists know how to treat malnourishment with plumpynut and help babies flourish.

● How can you accompany your prayer to God in heaven with work for those in need here on Earth?

● What do children deserve?

## PRAY

Take a little quiet time to surface your concerns and reflect on them.

**LEADER:** Open us to the needs of those who struggle among us.

**ALL:** Let us act with care and justice toward those we raise up in prayer.

*Make individual prayers for people in need.*

**LEADER:** God is near the brokenhearted.

**ALL:** God saves the crushed in spirit and hears the cry of the poor. Amen.



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## DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

Food banks and private charities provide 5-7% of the food to the 60 million food insecure people in our country, one in every 20 bags of groceries. The federal government does the rest with its programs SNAP (formerly food stamps), WIC for mothers and babies, and school lunches. Write your member of Congress to support child nutrition programs.

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