

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time - Lectionary: 150

Reading 1 - [Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18](#)

The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites. Though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet he hears the cry of the oppressed. The Lord is not deaf to the wail of the orphan, nor to the widow when she pours out her complaint. The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens. The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right, and the Lord will not delay.

Responsorial Psalm - [Psalm 34:2-3, 17-18, 19, 23](#) R. (7a) The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

Reading 2 - [2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18](#)

Beloved: I am already being poured out like a libation, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. From now on the crown of righteousness awaits me, which the Lord, the just judge, will award to me on that day, and not only to me, but to all who have longed for his appearance. At my first defense no one appeared on my behalf, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them! But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength, so that through me the proclamation might be completed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Gospel - [Luke 18:9-14](#)

Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity -- greedy, dishonest, adulterous -- or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

The most excellent work of God's love; only the humble will know.

Last week I preached about the disposition of being persistent in prayer. This week we reflect on the disposition of humility, and a great prayer that can lead into the contemplative disposition of prayer that I preached about last week. The I speak of is known as the 'Jesus Prayer'. It goes like this,

“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.”

You can see the connection to the gospel reading, in the words of the tax collector. And should you ever forget the act of contrition in confession, this prayer is perfect. More on this prayer later.

Some might say that one of the lessons of today's readings is that God listens especially to the sinner and to the poor. But that interpretation would put Jesus at odds with the words of Sirach in the first reading, which said that *God knows no favorites and will not show partiality to the poor, but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged. He will not ignore the supplication of the orphan or the widow when she pours out her complaint.* It doesn't say that God listens less to rich or arrogant, or the deeply sinful person. What we know from the whole of scripture is that those who are not humbled by their poverty, whether it be material, physical, or spiritual... will find it difficult to pray, to know what kind of dialogue to have with God and to approach God with humility and thanksgiving.

The readings do however focus on the very themes of justice, humility, and faithfulness that ought to shape our prayerfulness and inform the content.

- **God's justice and attentiveness:** The Lord is described as a God of justice who does not show favoritism but hears the cries of the oppressed, including orphans and widows, and responds to the prayers of the lowly without delay.
- **Faithfulness and perseverance rewarded:** The second reading reflects on a faithful life completed well, with confidence in a crown of righteousness awaiting those who long for the Lord's appearance, emphasizing God's support in times of abandonment and danger.
- **Humility in prayer:** The Gospel recounts Jesus' parable contrasting what appears to be the self-righteous nature of a Pharisee and the humble devotion of a tax collector, illustrating that those who humble themselves are exalted, while those who exalt themselves will be humbled.

The first interpretation would instill in someone a greater sense of a punishing God, critical and harsh because of the offense we have caused. We imagine that God's reaction should be like ours. Seeing God in this way, after doing something we know is quite wrong, we might wonder how God could continue to love us. Yet, if that is the way we feel, we would be wrong about God. It is precisely as a sinner that a person most needs the love of God, most needs the help that comes from God. God sees the person who has sinned as a child who needs to be healed and restored. If we struggle to believe or understand this, we might want to prayerfully meditate on the parables of the Good Shepherd and the Prodigal Son.

It is important to recall to mind, for context, that this contrast Jesus sketches between the Pharisee and the tax collector would have been shocking to those who were listening. A faithful Jewish person would assume without question two things: A Pharisee is a very holy and devout man, and a tax collector was a traitor to his people and a public sinner. Something comparable for us today might be to replace these 1st century characters with a Priest and a drug dealer.

So why, in today's Gospel, did the Pharisee go home without being justified? He clearly believed himself to be a 'good' person, a man of righteous faith. He carefully keeps the Law, and the Commandments of God. He faithfully observes the obligations of a good Jew: he prays, he fasts and he gives

alms. Why? Because he is exalting himself, providing a list of his religious observances to God. He thanks God, but adds in a judgmental tone, that he is not like other people especially the tax collector. If prayer is conversation / dialogue with God, then this isn't that. He is 'praying to himself' as noted by Jesus.

This is a monologue containing his virtues. He is, in case God hadn't noticed, telling God, "God, you should be deeply grateful that you have someone like me who is so faithful in following your commands". God should be happy to have such a rare example like him. Especially when so many are like the tax collector. The Pharisee spoke to God in accord with his interior condition, a condition opposed to being justified in God, and so he was bound to go home unjustified. Jesus criticizes the Pharisee for not being aware that all these good things he claims to do have God as their source. Without God, he could do nothing, he would be nothing.

The Catholic Church teaches that justification is "the most excellent work of God's love" – a merciful act that removes sin and makes us just and holy in our whole being.¹ It is rooted in the Incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, who becomes our righteousness.² Through baptism we receive this grace, which "remits sins and renews the interior man".³ So, in the technical sense, being justified before God means that, through the free and merciful gift of Christ's saving work, a person is declared righteous and incorporated into the life of God. It is a 'legal' declaration which wipes guilt away, the wholehearted renewal of a person, a transformation that makes us truly holy and capable of sharing in Christ's righteousness. This grace-filled status is received in baptism, lived out in faith, and bears fruit in love-filled works, leading ultimately to the fullness of sanctification.

For a Jewish person of the time, closeness to God and the Temple was reserved for only those ritually clean and the tax collector is apparently deeply aware that his unclean. He believes himself to be far from holiness, in fact he feels so unworthy he keeps his distance, out of humility. But he also knows he needs the mercy which God gives. The tax collector can be said to have authentic faith which is essential for the justification that he will possess as he leaves to go home; without this faith no justification can occur.⁴ Pope Francis reminded us that religious observance and practice is an essential part of faith, for everyone.⁵ Genuine faith must be active in love of God and neighbor as oneself, wherein faith receives the grace that justifies and also prompts the believer to cooperate with that grace. Faith is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, and for a Christian it is given through Word and sacrament, that opens us to receive Christ's saving work.⁶

Justification, while initiated by God's grace alone, calls for a response. The Catholic tradition holds that after justification the faithful are equipped and called to good works. These works do not earn justification but perfect it, participating in the "renewal of life" that God continues to bring to completion.⁷ The Apostle James affirms that "*a man is justified by works and not by faith alone*", showing that works are the fruit of

¹ Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church 422;

https://www.vatican.va/archive/compendium_ccc/documents/archive_2005_compendium-ccc_en.html

² JDJ 1997, §15 1997 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity;

<https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-giustificazione/en.html>

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1989

⁴ JDJ 1997, §4.3 1997 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity;

<https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-giustificazione/en.html>

⁵ General Audience of 29 September 2021 - Catechesis on the Letter to the Galatians: 9. Life of

faith; https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2021/documents/papa-francesco_20210929_udienza-generale.html

⁶ JDJ 1997, §16 1997 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity;

<https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-giustificazione/en.html>

⁷ JDJ 1997, §15, 16 1997 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity;

<https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/dialoghi/sezione-occidentale/luterani/dialogo/documenti-di-dialogo/1999-dichiarazione-congiunta-sulla-dottrina-della-giustificazione/en.html>

a living faith.⁸ In sum, justification is God’s gratuitous act that declares us righteous, infuses us with sanctifying grace, awakens a living faith, and calls us to cooperate in love-filled works, leading us toward the ultimate fulfillment of our salvation.

St. Paul in the second reading and the tax collector in the gospel reading helps us to understand this disposition of humility. By disposition, I mean that this is a defining part of my identity from which I live, that I am humble before God. It's the disposition that God desires for us to have and is more than willing to help us acquire. They know they are sinners; they admit their sinfulness and are deeply aware of their need for God. They know that by themselves they cannot do anything good, that change is only possible by the grace of God. The tax collector humbly implores: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner!* St. Paul also understands from where his hope comes and to where his faithfulness leads. God will always come to the help of a sinner who, in humility and truth, recognizes his sin. On the other hand, how can God come to help a proud man, who thinks he can take care of himself?

In the 1st Letter of St. John it says: *“If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true....If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”*⁹ If we stay focused on God, keeping our gaze on Christ we will not become the person whom St. John describes above. We will not become spiritual narcissists. Rather, constantly revealing the truth of ourselves through that gaze of love, we will, like the tax collector and St. Paul, always trust in God and ask for God’s mercy.

But sometimes discouragement sets in when we see that we’re not where we wanted to be. We tire of asking for forgiveness. We can allow this discouragement to lead us into hopelessness and become trapped in despair. When you begin to sense this kind of sliding away from God, repeat over and over again; God loves me, Jesus have mercy on me a sinner. These words are key to our hope. Jesus is never tired of forgiving! We need to ask for the grace not to get tired of asking for forgiveness, because he never gets tired of forgiving. No sin is too big for Christ's mercy. We should never doubt God's mercy. It is infinite. The only thing that can hold back God's mercy is when we refuse to ask for it: he will not force his way into our hearts. As soon as we turn to God and reach out to God - God rushes towards us and floods us with forgiveness and grace.

The classical form of the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

The history of the Jesus Prayer goes back, as far as we know, to the early sixth century, with Diadochos, who taught that repetition of the prayer leads to inner stillness. Even earlier John Cassian recommended this type of prayer. In the fourth century Egypt, in Nitria, short "arrow" prayers were practiced.¹⁰

Disposition of Persistence in Prayer	We are all called to pray without ceasing, says St. Paul in 1 Thess 5:17. The real question is, <i>how</i> . The Jesus Prayer provides one good way to pray constantly. Our task is to draw nearer to God. St. Isaac of Syria says that it is impossible to draw near to God by any means other than <i>increasing prayer</i> .
The Power of the Name	Jesus explicitly gives us God's name, Father, and tells us to use the name in prayer. Jesus gives us access to the Godhead <i>through</i> the name. Jesus told His Apostles that they hadn't really used His Name in prayer enough. "Hitherto you have asked nothing in My Name; ask and you will receive, that your joy may be full" (Jn 16:23).

⁸ James 2:24

⁹ 1 John 1:6,8

¹⁰ <https://www.svots.edu/saying-jesus-prayer>

Hidden Martyrdom	Trying to pray repetitively is an inner asceticism. According to St Ignatius Brianchaninov, trying to pray without ceasing is a "hidden martyrdom." Prayer requires super-human courage, given the atmosphere of the world today. our call to martyrdom takes the form of being attentive to the present moment, relying upon God's power always, and doing His will.
Who can Say the Prayer	Clearly, the Jesus Prayer is not only for monks. It's for everyone. We use the Jesus Prayer to do God's will, not our own bidding. There are no prerequisites for saying the Jesus Prayer. We are all sinners and need to pray, always. We try to keep the Commandments, be living members of His Body on earth, and try to find a guide.
When to Pray	The Jesus Prayer is recommended in the morning, following our prayer rule, for some period of time, perhaps 10 or 15 minutes. If that is impossible, then sometime before noon, or in the evening. This might be called "formal" use of the prayer. The second form of the Jesus Prayer is the "free" use of the prayer. This means at any and all other times of the day, or night. This is especially true for the semi-automatic tasks such as driving, doing dishes, walking, being unable to sleep, etc. The Jesus Prayer is notably useful in time of extreme concern or upset. When alone, we might find it helpful to pray the Jesus Prayer, out loud. This can help lower the distraction level.
Prayer of the Heart	The Jesus Prayer is also called the Prayer of the Heart. Someone said the heart is a dimension of interior consciousness, awareness, where we come in touch with an inner space, a space of no dimensions. This consciousness is timeless, the place where tears reside and deep contact with the present moment abide, and from which restful movement comes. Acting out of our heart means to act lightly, with vigor and enthusiasm. When not in that inner awareness, we are restless, agitated and self-concerned. There is within us a space, a field of the heart, in which we find a Divine Reality, and from which we are called to live. The mind, then, is to descend into that inner sanctuary, the Hermitage within, by means of the Jesus Prayer or wordless contemplation, and to stay there throughout our active day, and evening. We descend with our mind into our heart, and <i>we live there</i> . The heart is Christ's palace. There, Christ the King comes to take His rest.
Silence	Silence is a choice. We choose the things we want to do. These things, then, order and measure our lives from communion to communion. Silence, at its best, is God-awareness. We quiet down our outer and inner lives and listen to God speak. We need to be attentive if we are to hear anything. Outer silence is a choice. Outer silence calms the senses. Inner silence can usually be achieved only by substituting one thought for another. Hence, the Jesus Prayer overrides our usual compulsive stream of consciousness about our own anxieties. Beginning with this form of prayer, then we might be led to deeper inner stillness, prayer without words.
Contemplation	Contemplation has been described as clear awareness without words. Contemplation is a "seeing clearly." We lay aside thoughts, not to lead to a vacuum or drowsiness, but to inner plenitude. We deny to affirm. Wordless contemplation is not an absence, but a presence, a God-awareness. The aim is to bring us into a direct meeting with a personal God, on God's terms. Inner silence, inner stillness, called hesychia, is experienced by wordless sitting, imageless contemplation. When consciousness strays, a phrase like "Lord Jesus" can be used to bring the mind back, and then the person sits quietly in the presence of the Lord. The desire of wordless sitting awareness is to open oneself to God, to listen to God. Both the Jesus Prayer and contemplation make us single-centered, concentrating upon the <i>here</i> and <i>now</i> , focused, one-pointed. The point is God.
Intercessory Prayer	Saint Therese, had difficulty knowing that God heard her prayers for others. As a youth, she decided to put God "to the test" once and for all. She prayed fervently for the salvation of a callused serial killer of women, Henri Pranzini. Pranzini was caught, found guilty and sentenced to the guillotine. During this time, Therese prayed that he be saved, and that she be given a sign that a conversion took place. Pranzini became more arrogant. Therese persisted. On the execution day, Pranzini walked up the steps, put his head onto the block, still jeering. Then, unexpectedly, he lifted up, grabbed the crucifix hanging from the side of the nearby priest, and Pranzini kissed the feet of Christ three times. Pranzini publicly repented. He then put his head back down onto the block, and the guillotine fell. Therese claimed that her prayers were answered. Is this really the way intercessory prayer works? In a word, yes. How? The answer to that rests somewhere in God's mysterious ways. What we do know, for certain, is that every prayer for someone else is heard, and in God's goodness, answered, for the other person's good. We have a noble and royal vocation, to pray and make an untold difference in the entire cosmos.

<p>How Does It Work?</p>	<p>There is a world of difference between thinking, or talking, about quiet prayer, and actually praying. Like beginning swimmers, we only learn by getting wet. The Fathers tell us that, often, the first thing that happens is an experience of darkness and resistance. Then, when we persist, peace begins to replace the darkness. The temptations may become more severe, even temptations to stop the praying, but we sin less. The Fathers tell us that, as we continue to pray and live the commandments, go to Church and listen to our spiritual Father, we can expect to become freed from indecision, upset and hesitation. Our will becomes stronger. We can expect to be available to others in ways we otherwise would not have been, and we will become more effective and creative. In the beginning, there may be no new insights and no pleasant feelings. By faith, the Christian believes that spending time <i>wanting</i> to pray, and actually praying, does touch a Merciful God. God hears. And, in turn, Divine Truth is known through direct experience, sometimes called intuition. Something is happening, and changing at a deeper level of consciousness, unnoticed. We can expect invisible, subtle snares, sent from Satan, precisely because we have upscaled our efforts, and are turning to God. In a sense, we rouse the enemy to action. St. John Chrysostom says that when we begin to pray we stir the snake (living within us) to action, and that prayer can lay the snake low. When we begin to pray, we expend desire and effort. The results are up to God. Real prayer is a gift from God, not the payment for our perspiration. Prayer works in the Unseen Warfare as a power/gift from Jesus, given as a function of our ability to receive it. We increase our ability to receive by asking for the increase, and God grants it as He sees fit, in His tender, all sweet and merciful manner.</p>
<p>Not Yoga</p>	<p>Sitting, saying the Jesus Prayer, or in wordless contemplation, is not Yoga or any far Eastern practice. The difference is the Christian encounter with the living God, Jesus. The postures, techniques and outer form may be similar, but the content is unique in Christian prayer. The content of Christian prayer is Jesus. Sometimes the difference is likened to a priceless painting. We might admire the exquisite frame of the painting, and rightly so. But the frame is not the masterpiece.</p>
<p>Techniques & Psychosomatic Issues</p>	<p>The Orthodox understanding of the role of the body in prayer rests upon a sound anthropology. The body, soul and spirit act as a single unit, not divided or split up. Therefore, the body has a role in prayer. How we involve the body can be understood in three ways. Sometimes this is called psychotechniques. 1. Breathing, 2. Inner Exploration, and 3. Posture. Across the centuries, these issues have been explosive.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Breathing. Bishop Kallistos Ware says that if we pray the Jesus Prayer for short periods, ten or fifteen minutes at the beginning, then there is no problem matching the words of the prayer to our breath. We are to breath naturally, without playing with the rhythm of the breath. On the inhale, we can say, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God." On the exhale, we can say, "have mercy on me, a sinner." We are to breath and pray slowly and reverently and attentively. 2. Posture. The usual position, is a comfortable sitting position in a chair. Sometimes standing is recommended. Usually the eyes are kept closed. Posture can take many forms, as long as the postures are reverent. <p>In summary, it can be said that physical methods are optional and not at all necessary. Physical techniques are more suitable for beginners, says St Gregory Palamas. Physical techniques are potentially dangerous, and not to be used without a guide. St Theophan suggests, "Make a habit of having the intellect stand in the heart, but not in a physical way."</p>
<p>The Jesus Prayer Medicine</p>	<p>As medicine, the Jesus Prayer is destructive of the passions and altering of conduct. Just as a doctor places a dressing on a patient's wound, and the dressing works without the patient's knowing how, calling on the Name of God "removes the passions" without our knowing how and why. The Holy Name, when repeated quietly, penetrates the soul rather like a drop of oil, spreading out and impregnating a cloth. Our modern translation of "mercy" is limited and insufficient. "Mercy" comes from the Greek <i>eleison</i>. <i>Eleison</i> has the same root as <i>elaion</i> which means olive and olive oil. In the Middle East, olive oil provides physical healing for many sicknesses, particularly respiratory. "Have mercy" means to have "healing oil" on my soul. The Fathers tell us that praying the Sacred Name changes our personality, from overstrain to joy.</p>

Summary

Fr. Blair synthesizes key theological insights concerning the relationship between humility, prayer, and divine justification. The central argument is that humility is the essential disposition for an authentic relationship with God, while pride and self-righteousness create a barrier to receiving divine grace. This is primarily illustrated through Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, which reveals that those who humble themselves will be exalted and vice versa.

The analysis defines "justification" as a core theological concept: "the most excellent work of God's love." It is a gratuitous act of God's mercy, rooted in the work of Christ, that removes sin and sanctifies the individual. While initiated by grace alone and received in baptism, justification requires a human response of authentic faith. This living faith, in turn, bears fruit in love-filled works, which are understood not as a means of earning salvation but as a cooperative participation in the ongoing process of sanctification. Finally, the document underscores the infinite and ever-present nature of God's mercy, urging perseverance in seeking forgiveness and trust in God, who is portrayed not as a punishing judge but as a loving father seeking to heal and restore.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Justification	Defined as "the most excellent work of God's love." It is a free and merciful act from God that removes sin, makes a person holy, and is a wholehearted renewal of a person. It is a 'legal' declaration that wipes guilt away and is received in baptism.
Humility	An interior disposition of acknowledging one's sinfulness and complete dependence on God. It is essential for authentic prayer and for being exalted (justified) by God, as demonstrated by the tax collector.
Faith	Described as essential for justification to occur. It is itself a gift of the Holy Spirit, given through Word and sacrament, that opens a person to receive Christ's saving work. Genuine faith must be active in love of God and neighbor.
Prayer	Presented as a conversation or dialogue with God. True prayer is characterized by humility and thanksgiving, not a self-congratulatory monologue of one's own virtues.
Pharisee	A 1st-century character representing a holy and devout man who carefully keeps the Law. In the parable, he represents self-righteousness, pride, and a judgmental spirit that prevents justification.
Tax Collector	A 1st-century character representing a public sinner and traitor. In the parable, he represents humility, authentic faith, and a deep awareness of sin, which leads to his justification.
Spiritual Narcissist	A person who deceives themselves by claiming to have no sin. This condition prevents one from recognizing the truth of their need for God and His mercy.
Good Works	The fruit of a living faith. While they do not earn justification, they are a necessary response to God's grace, participating in the "renewal of life" and perfecting the justification already received.
Grace	A free and merciful gift from God. The grace of justification remits sins, renews the interior person, and equips the faithful for good works.