

Sermon on Wednesday 24 September 2025

by Rev. Bill Church

Readings: Psalm 1. 1-3 & Luke 18. 9-14

Whose prayer does God accept?

We often lament the divisions and differences within and between Christian churches. There was something similar in the religion of the first century Holy Land.

There were the Sadducees, prominent in controlling the Temple and the High Priesthood and conservative in that they did not believe in a resurrection (a majority view in the Old Testament).

The Pharisees sought fully and strictly to comply with the Law of Moses and did believe in a resurrection.

The Essenes were even stricter and separated themselves from urban life, withdrawing to the desert and forming a monastic-like community.

And then there were the Samaritans, who claimed to be Jews but were rejected by mainstream Jews and had their own holy place instead of the Jerusalem Temple.

Quite apart from assorted pagans and followers of eastern mystic cults.

On the face of it, Jesus looked closer to the Pharisees than to the others, but the Pharisees in general get a bad press in the Gospels.

Partly, this may be because of religious politics when the Gospels were being compiled. The Pharisees rebuilt Judaism after the destruction of the Temple in AD70, on the synagogue model, and began the process of easing Christians out of the synagogues.

But, also, because Jesus criticised them for being too strict and too literal, following the letter of the law rather than the spirit or underlying purpose; and even more for thinking that their undoubtedly genuine pursuit of the Law of Moses made them better than others who did not strive so hard.

Hence this parable of two men, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector going to pray in the Temple.

We can assume that the Pharisee was a genuinely good citizen and properly observant. Like the man in Psalm 1, he should have been like a tree planted by the riverside but, instead, he was more like a tree rotting in stagnant water.

The Pharisee used his prayer time to tell God how good he was.

I am reminded of Nehemiah who, in the book of that name, pauses his narrative about rebuilding Jerusalem to remind God to put his good deeds down as credits in his celestial double-entry bookkeeping account.

And, just as Nehemiah also asked God to mark up hefty debit entries for his opponents, the Pharisee was telling God how much better he was than that tax collector he had just spotted.

We can assume that the tax collector was profiting from a morally blemished business and was not religiously meticulous. But, for him, the starting point was that he needed forgiveness.

His prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner", reminds us of the Jesus Prayer (which must be based on it): "Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner".

It was he, not the other, who went home justified – that is, made righteous.

We hope, but are not told, that he went on to live a better life.

The challenge for us from this parable is to try as hard as we can to live a life pleasing to God, but not to get stuck up about it, not to look down on others who seem to be acting less worthily, and above all to remember that we need God's mercy.

"Lord Jesus Christ, son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner."