**How to Approach God in Prayer**

Based on [Luke 18:9-14](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk18.9-14)

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So many controversies that plague our lutheran churches today center on a misunderstanding of true worship. The misunderstanding is deeply trenched in protestant teachings of worship. They almost universally teach that the main “vertical” reason you go to church is to praise and thank God. Sure there are horizontal reasons...fellowship with other christians, etc. But to them, the only vertical reason is to lift your prayers and praise up to heaven...it’s not to receive forgiveness from God there. Only those who believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ, and the real forgiveness offered in the Lord’s Supper teach that the reason you go to church is to have your sins forgiven by Christ himself, and to leave justified.

But this confusion, or inversion, or maybe we should we say the “perversion” of true worship goes much further back than protestantism. Jesus teaches about it to his disciples. They need to know what true worship is, because when he ascends to the Father, they are the ones whom he commands to build his church. They are the ones to whom he says, “I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” They are the one’s to whom he will give the Holy Spirit and say “whoevers sins you forgive they are forgiven.” So he teaches a parable about the purpose of the temple, the church of God. The church is not a place for self-righteous Pharisees to exalt themselves before men. It is the place for tax-collectors and other humble sinners to be justified by the Son of God.

Jesus tells a parable to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt. This is the Pharisee. He is the arrogant, self-righteous church goer. He says, **“I thank you God that I am not like other men.**” This sounds very pious. The only problem is that it’s not true. He is like other men. All men, by their fallen nature, are in one boat...united in a mass of perdition. All men are alike, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. If the standard for justification is sinlessness, then the Pharisee is no better off than the tax collector.

“By the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.” If you want God to judge others by their sins, he will judge you by yours. And the scripture is clear, if you have broken one jot or tittle of the law, you are guilty of breaking all of it. It doesn’t matter how much you have pruned and primped your life so that you appear righteous before men. God sees the heart. If you want God to judge others according to their sins, so will he judge you, and you will not be justified.

The tax collector comes to God the judge, but he knows he’s a sinner. He doesn’t hide it or excuse it, or compare his sins with someone elses who are worse. He knows that if the standard is sinlessness, he’s doomed. So instead he approaches God and pleads not for justice, but for mercy. And insodoing he begs God to judge according to a different standard. “Don’t judge me according to my sins Lord. Judge according to repentance”

If God judges sins, all will be damned. If God judges according to repentance, then there is a way to be saved...the way of faith in the only begotten Son of God, who offered himself on the cross as a payment of atonement for your sin. He has made a way so that God doesn’t have to condemn your sins in you, because they’ve already been condemned in Christ who died for you. And because of Christ, we can come to God, not trying to hide our sins behind a veneer of good works. Instead, we can approach God in repentance, so that he would take our sins away.

Nevertheless, those who insist God judge according to sins will get what they desire. They will hold their neighbor in contempt, because they believe that salvation is a competition to compare good works with one another. They will not stand in the judgment, because they refused to humble themselves and receive the forgiveness of christ. Their guilt remains upon them, but the one who hears Christ’s word of forgiveness and believes has passed from death to life.

It is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick. The angels in heaven rejoice over one tax collector who repents, rather than over ninety-nine Pharisees who need no repentance. The Pharisees are those who come to church to be seen as “good christian people.” They don’t seek God’s righteousness there, they believe they bring their own. But the tax collectors are those who come to church to be forgiven by God; who humble themselves before the throne of grace; who make no issue of whether there are five-hundred or only five others in church that week.

Those who only come to church occasionally or not at all, maybe they don’t need forgiveness as much as we do...but neither do the angels rejoice over them; neither does the Great physician attend to them. They may believe they are already righteous so they don’t need to come to the temple; but those who come to church and receive the body and blood of christ leave justified.

And what happens when a Tax Collector goes to a church that doesn’t forgive sins, but only gives a forum for thanking God publically? He is starved of God’s gifts. What happens when a Pharisee goes to a church that forgives sins, he is scandalized by the suggestion he needs it; and if he is denied communion there is doubly enraged.

Christian brothers and sisters, be aware. There are pharisees today who believes the church exists to validate your christianity before men. They are understandably offended by the practice of closed-communion. If communion is only a way to prove to the world or to God that you are really a christian, then you come to church with the mind of a Pharisee. But if you teach that communion is the way that Jesus Christ forgives your sins here in time and there in eternity...then Pharisees shouldn’t want it. But Christ’s sheep who hear his voice would, as Martin Luther said, people would be beating down the doors to get in.

Beloved in the Lord, much of christendom is in a panic about how church attendance is declining; and about coming up with new ways and strategies to get the young people to come. But it’s not hard to get people to come to church; it’s getting them to come for the right reasons. It’s not hard to get sheep to come to church; only goats. The reason Christ’s sheep come to church is to hear his voice. They come to commune with him. You are his sheep, if you come here seeking from God the forgiveness of sin. And he will welcome you to his table to commune with his son, and leave there every time justified.