

Prayer and Humility

Devotional Reading: Psalm 141

Background Scripture: Nehemiah 1:4–11; Daniel 6:10;
Matthew 6:5–15; Luke 18:1–14; John 17:1–26

Today's Scripture: Genesis 18:25–27; Luke 18:9–14; 1 John 5:14–15

I. Bold Prayer Genesis 18:25–27

25 That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

26 And the LORD said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.

27 And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes.

25. In Genesis, God selects Abraham for a unique task and relationship. Those involve a promise to make him a great nation, to bless him, and to bless all the families of the earth through him (Genesis 12:1–3). The three verses of our first text take us to Abraham's reaction to God's decision to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah.

Abraham and the Lord are having a dialogue about the fate of the two cities just noted. This is of special concern to Abraham because his nephew, Lot, lives in Sodom. Sodom has an evil reputation, and the Lord plans to destroy the city. Being startled by the Lord's plan, Abraham begins to voice his objection.

Exactly what it is that should *be far from* the Lord in the current context is located between the two occurrences of that phrase. Abraham is making a bold appeal to the Lord to rethink the forthcoming destruction. Their conversation is predicated on the recognition that Sodom's fate has not yet been decided. But rather than telling the Lord what to do, Abraham asks the Lord to *do right*. The key question is, what is right? The basis of Abraham's appeal is the Lord's identity and character. Since He is the one who sets the standard for right and wrong—and indeed *is Himself* that standard—it is impossible for Him to do anything but what is right.

26. Abraham had begun his appeal by asking the Lord what He would do if 50 *righteous* people could be found living in Sodom.

27. Surprisingly, even after this initial agreement, *Abraham* does not stop. He continues to intercede boldly for the inhabitants of Sodom. He goes on to inquire regarding successively lower numbers of righteous people: 45, 40, 30, 20, and then 10! At each point, the Lord agrees to spare the whole city for the sake of the righteous.

Before continuing, however, Abraham recognizes the audacity of his plea. He has *taken upon* himself to speak unto the Lord even though Abraham is *but dust and*

ashes. To identify oneself in this way is an act of extreme humility. These terms also occur in circumstances of humiliation and contrition (Job 30:19; 42:6; Ezekiel 27:30).

Thus, Abraham's bold intercession is dependent on three things. First, he appeals based on the Lord's character. Second, he recognizes his own inferior status. In other words, in his boldness, he is humble. Third, he feels confident to approach the Lord because of the relationship that they share.

II. Humble Prayer

Luke 18:9–14

9 And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

10 Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.

11 The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.

12 I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.

13 And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

9. At the point of our lesson's second passage, Jesus has been on the way to Jerusalem since Luke 9:51. On this journey, Jesus teaches what His kingdom is like and who will have a place in it. The parable below helps to fill out that picture.

10. *The temple* was the place where people went to be in the presence of God, to worship, and to seek forgiveness for their own sins and the sins of the nation. Pharisees of the first century are respected for their dedication to the Law of Moses. They studied Scripture and were committed to lives of holiness and worship. Their presence at the temple for prayer is exactly what Luke's audience expects.

The *publican* or tax collector, on the other hand, is despised. These individuals are viewed as traitors as they collude with the Roman authorities to exact tax revenue from the Jewish population. No one would expect such a person to make an appearance at the temple.

11. Jesus shares the Pharisee's prayer first. The standing position is normal. That he prays *with himself* may mean that he intentionally separates himself from the rest of the worshippers. His attitude in prayer is made clear by what he goes on to say.

The Pharisee mentions particular groups that he will have nothing to do with: *extortioners*, *unjust*, and *adulterers*. It is unquestionably good that the Pharisee does not engage in the actions that these characterizations imply. But his foundation for avoiding these activities is his image as a "self-made man"—in other words, he has a bad case of believing that God owes him divine approval.

12. The Pharisee then reminds God (and himself) of his good deeds. Fasting is a good thing when it is practiced with godly motives. Tithing (giving a tenth of one's income) is also expected. Outwardly, this Pharisee meets or exceeds the expectations. Although this Pharisee has worked hard both to abstain from sinful actions and to do what is required, the result is pride and self-importance. He's not praying so much as he is bragging.

13. *The publican* also prays in a standing position, but the similarities end there. He

exhibits no self-congratulatory “thanks.” The fact that he is *standing afar off* indicates hesitation to approach the holy God. Like the Pharisee, he is separated from the other faithful supplicants, but with a different motive. Jesus’ extended description of the publican’s physical positioning helps the reader understand his distinct motivation for this separation.

The words of his prayer correspond to his physical demeanor; he prays for mercy, aware that he is *a sinner*. He has nothing to offer; he realizes that his deeds will not make him worthy. Rather, he depends on God’s mercy for forgiveness.

14. Jesus concludes the parable by giving His evaluation of the prayers. And this isn’t the only time in the Gospels where Jesus draws the sharp distinction between those who exalt themselves and those who humbly realize their situation and need (Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11).

This outcome would have been surprising to Jesus’ audience. A hated publican who is *justified* ahead of a devout Pharisee? What a reversal! This follows a pattern in Luke’s Gospel, beginning with Mary’s song (Luke 1:46–55), where the humble, poor, and despised are exalted by God, and the proud, rich, and strong are brought low.

III. Confident Prayer

1 John 5:14–15

14 And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us:

15 And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him.

14. The apostle John explicitly states his purpose in writing the letter we call 1 John: it is so that those who believe can know that they have eternal life (1 John 5:13). Throughout this letter, John encour-

ages and challenges his audience to walk in the light, obey God’s commands, and be confident in their standing before God. As the letter moves toward its conclusion, John applies this confidence to prayer.

John wants Christians to reach the day of judgment with *confidence* in their standing before God. Now, at the end of the letter, John encourages his audience to have confidence when they pray.

This confidence is possible only *in him*—in God. It is available to Christians because they believe in the name of the Son of God. It also allows them to know that God listens. There is, however, a condition to this confidence. Previously, John had said that Christians would receive their requests if they obeyed God’s commands (1 John 3:22). Here, the condition is *if we ask . . . according to his will*.

This raises (at least) two important questions. First, if prayers that are heard are prayers that are already *according to his will*, then why pray? The interaction between prayer and God’s will is complicated and cannot be adequately covered here. But John and Jesus clearly expected Christians to pray, and in some way, God hears and responds to believer’s prayers.

Second, how can Christians know God’s will in order to ask accordingly? It seems that what John envisions here is the Christian’s will, desires, and requests being conformed to God’s through prayer. The opposite of confident prayer is seen in James 1:6–7.

15. John explains what it means that God hears the Christian’s request: *we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him*. God’s hearing leads to acting. This is a persistent motif in Scripture. If our request aligns with God’s will, a positive answer is assured. Therefore, John encourages his readers to approach God confidently in prayer knowing that He cares, hears, and acts.

Involvement Learning

Prayer and Humility

Into the Lesson

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Boldness and humility seldom exist in the same person at the same time.

What makes it possible for both boldness and humility to coexist in the same person? What makes it difficult?

Today's lesson will concentrate on prayer and highlight ways both boldness and humility can be present as we pray.

Key Text

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

—Luke 18:14

Into the Word

Read Genesis 18:16–33. How is Abraham an example here?

Read Luke 18:9–14. How can Christians avoid pride in their prayers?

Read John 1:5–14. How is the praying described here both bold and humble?

Into Life

How do these passages encourage us to pray?

What situations call for bold prayers?

What situations call for humble prayers?

What steps can you take to achieve a better blend of the two qualities in your prayers?

How can we be both bold and humble in asking God for things in our prayers?

Thought to Remember

Pray humbly and boldly with confidence.