

“An Audacious Prayer”

Luke 18:9-14 ⁹ To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood up and prayed about {11 Or to} himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-- robbers, evildoers, adulterers-- or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

“An Audacious Prayer”

Forgive me; I would like to bring in a bit of the American political scene to illustrate the audacious request or prayer of this tax collector. Several weeks ago Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited the US to make a speech somewhere. While there, he made the audacious request to visit Ground Zero of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center to pay his respects. This event became fodder for immediate responses from both the Republican and Democrat presidential candidates. Republican contender Rudy Giuliani, the mayor of New York on 9/11, said, "Under no circumstances...This is a man who has made threats against America and Israel, is harboring Bin Laden's son and other al-Qaeda leaders, is shipping arms to Iraqi insurgents and is pursuing the development of nuclear weapons. Assisting Ahmadinejad in touring Ground Zero - hallowed ground for all Americans - is outrageous." Another Republican candidate Mitt Romney said, "Ahmadinejad's shockingly audacious request should be met with a vehement no. It's inconceivable that any consideration would be given to the idea of entertaining the leader of a state sponsor of terror at Ground Zero. This would deeply offend the sensibilities of Americans from all corners of our nation. Instead of entertaining Ahmadinejad, we should be indicting him."

Regardless of your opinion of the Iranian president, one cannot help but admit that, considering the relationship between the two nations and the rhetoric that has been exchanged, President Ahmadinejad's request to visit Ground Zero is pretty much off the scale when it comes to audacity. For the sake of definition, audacity can mean daring to or willingness to challenge assumptions or conventions and it can also mean a lack of respect in somebody's behavior toward another person. I like to define it as tacky with a vengeance.

Now, in comparison, this tax collector coming into the temple in Jerusalem to pray would appear to some as being audacious and the some to whom I refer are the self-righteous such as this Pharisee who thought he was righteous and looked with contempt on others such as the tax collector whom were considered to be the wicked or unrighteous. Tax collectors, you may know, were usually Jewish people appointed by the Romans to collect taxes for Caesar. They were often quick to use extortion and always took a little extra for themselves. Most Jews in Jesus' day looked upon tax collectors as traitorous scum who had rejected their Jewish birthright as one of God's chosen people for the love of

“An Audacious Prayer”

money. The Pharisees in particular would have looked down upon tax collectors because they believed themselves to be the only people in Israel to be upholding the righteous requirements of their birthright as the chosen people of God. In the eyes of the Pharisee, this tax collector's presence in the temple would be akin to the audacity of President Ahmadinejad should he have gone to Ground Zero.

But, the presence of the tax collector in the temple is not where the gross audacity lay in this text. Rather, it lies in his prayer. We have here that he prays, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” It is translated this way because we no longer have the concept in the English language and in Western culture of what he actually prays. He is not simply asking God to be merciful to him because he is a sinner. There is a word in the Greek language “eleeo” which means to have mercy, but that is not the verb he uses. In fact, Luke uses that word exclusively for physical healing from diseases. Lepers and blind people come to Jesus asking for mercy and he heals them. Rather, here he uses another verb, “hilaskomai”, which in this sentence would mean “be for me the sacrifice that removes my sin so that you may deal graciously with me”. The mercy this tax collector asks for is that God himself be the sacrifice that atones for his sin so that God can show him grace. That is one very audacious prayer. Asking, pleading with, begging God to be his sacrifice. That was unheard of and indeed would have been considered blasphemous. We don't know why he would ask such a thing other than that his own sense of sinfulness, of shame, of having betrayed his birthright was so great that he knew there was nothing...no lamb, no goat, no bull...that he could bring as a sacrifice that could atone his wickedness.

Yet, this prayer in all its audacity is the central message of the Christian faith as we have it in the Bible. God himself has indeed become the sacrifice that atones for all humanity's sin so that God can be gracious with us. God has made it so that we can have unhindered access to his very self through Christ Jesus in the Holy Spirit. Jesus' death on the cross was truly more than simply a political tragedy. He was indeed bearing unto death humanity's sin in his body so that sin and its stain of shame, guilt, and fear may be removed so that we can be clean in heart by the free gift God's presence with us as the Holy Spirit.

Saying that Jesus' death was a sacrifice is very unpopular these days, actually for the last two centuries. Modernity in its arrogance dismissed this idea outright by thinking we are smart enough to know that's not what loving and good God's do. Theologians and Biblical Scholars began to say that this stuff about sacrifice in the Bible was just ancient Israelite religion doing what most ancient religions did; sacrifice something to appease the gods so that they will grant your request. Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of what we call Classical Liberalism, said that all religions basically seek the same God. If all human beings were honest with themselves they would realize that they have a feeling naturally within them which he called “absolute dependence” and it is this feeling that proves that there is a God, but a God which we cannot possibly know. Then he goes onto say that if we just develop our basic goodness in prayer, contemplating this feeling of dependence, and living morally upright lives we will be pleasing to God and will wind up where God wants us to be. In

“An Audacious Prayer”

Schleiermacher's system sin is simply being bad and we can overcome it and there is no such thing as evil.

Classical Liberalism and its secular brother called Progress ruled the day until WWI when good people entrenched themselves in the bloodiest war humanity has ever known and then came Hitler. We are not basically good. We are not righteous in ourselves as the Pharisees and Liberalism claimed. Indeed, the line between good and evil runs not between us and them, but right down the middle of each of us. When we are honest with ourselves what we find is not Schleiermacher's feeling of “absolute dependence”. Rather, we find that line. We are all capable of and have done some pretty horrendous things. Even when we thought we were doing good and believed ourselves to be acting according to truth, we have hurt people gravely. The only way to cure humanity's disease of sin is for God to carry out this tax collector's audacious request.

Schleiermacher and Modernity made two grave errors. First, they said God cannot be known. The true Christian faith says that God can be known, that God has revealed himself as Trinity by becoming the man Jesus Christ and this self-revelation continues on by the presence of the Holy Spirit with us. We know we have met the Holy Spirit when we find ourselves saying “I have been inexplicably changed and Jesus Christ did it”. Usually, that change comes with the experience of knowing God has forgiven *my* sin and relieved *my* guilt, shame, and fear. Sometimes, it comes with a very real awareness that though I thought I had done it my way, to quote Sinatra, God was actually doing my life his way. God can be known because he chooses to reveal himself.

Second, the sacrifices in the Old Testament were not simply something that ancient people did to get a god on their side. The Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to Jesus' death and resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. In the Old Testament sin was dealt with by life passing through death and by being born away unto to death. Several places in the Old Testament it is written that the life of an animal is in its blood. On the Day of Atonement they sacrificed to atone for sin. First, they killed a bull and a goat and took their blood and sprinkled it all over the priesthood and the temple to cover over and cleanse away the stain of sin incurred in dealing with people. Then they took a second goat and the priest laid his hand upon it and whispered the sins of the people into its ear. It was then led away and set free as the scapegoat in the wilderness where it would be devoured. Jesus Christ is the only human whose life has passed through death in resurrection and this new life is being sprinkled around all over creation in the gift of the Holy Spirit to Christian communities. If you want me to say it graphically because the Holy Spirit is with and in us, the Christian church here at Claude, we are a puddle of the blood of new life and new creation covering over the stain of sin which is hidden in everyone. Furthermore, each of us, because the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us, is a sprinkle of that same living blood. Our sins have been born away and devoured in death by Jesus Christ, our scapegoat. There is nothing, no sin, no shame, no false pride, no guilt, no fear, that can separate us from our loving and good God because he has gotten his hands dirty and dealt with our sin and evil by taking it upon himself and dying with it that we might be free of it. Sin and evil are very real and we are all

“An Audacious Prayer”

part of it, but God has gotten his hands dirty and dealt with it once and for all. Friends, hear this good news: This saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, that he himself bore our sins in his body on the cross. All who are in Christ Jesus are new creation. The old life is gone and a new life has begun. Friends, hear this good news you are forgiven. This tax collector's audacious prayer has been answered for each of us. Rise up and live as the new creation that you are. The old life only leads to death. Don't turn your back on Jesus or dismiss him with modern arrogance for only in him can God be known. God has given us more than a feeling. He has freely given us open access to himself so that we might learn to trust him. Friends, come to Jesus and find your life that is hidden in God with him. Amen.