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300c, 2016

Some people are attracted to prayer because it seems like such a great opportunity to get what we want. After all, didn't Jesus say: Ask, and you will receive; & whatever you ask for in my name, I will do?

Can you imagine a better way of getting what you want than by asking God and receiving exactly what we ask for? This just sounds like a good deal, but prayer is not @ a deal, good or bad

And certainly prayer is not about trying to manipulate God.

If prayer is not understood as part of a growing relationship with God, it will never be understood at all by us...

2. In today's gospel account of the Pharisee in the Temple, we can assume that the Pharisee spoke the truth: that he avoided all sin, he fasted twice per week, and he gave a tenth of his earnings away. So we have to ask: how does he become the bad guy?

Truth be told, he becomes the bad guy because of his so-called prayer

He begins his prayer in an ugly manner: I thank you God that I am not like other men

But to be a member of the human race is just that—to belong to a humanity that is weak, broken and sinful and this man wanted no part of such humanity

the righteousness of this Pharisee was sterile because he is full of harsh judgments

HE JUST WANTED TO MAKE SURE THAT God noticed that he did more than even the law required. He justified himself through these deeds and actually had no need of God's love or mercy; notice that he asked nothing of God, not even for a blessing.



Actually, he prayed to himself. If the truth be told, he just wanted to be seen and admired by all...

Unfortunately, there's some of this guy in all of us: thanking God that we aren't like others: bullies, abusers of children, drug dealers and wife beaters—the broken people of our society

Certainly, next to these poor souls, we all look pretty good

However, all of us—saint or sinner—must compare our lives to the life of Jesus & that leads us to feel less cocky @ how we're doing

3. The Pharisee forgot this, but the tax collector knew that he was a sinner, knew that he had done wrong, knew that he was in need of God's mercy

He strikes his chest.

In the Middle East, this gesture is mostly associated with women. Men only strike their chest as a sign of extreme anguish, as the tax collector did.

The tax collector knew himself; he didn't bother to send out all sorts of excuses, or make light of his failings

Rather, he owned his failings; took responsibility for his failings; he recognized the emptiness, discouragement of his soul and threw himself upon God's mercy in order to have a closer relationship with God.

The Pharisee may have prayed often, but it is this sinner who helps us to understand something about a prayer that is pleasing to God

Some time back, there was a book, entitled: "Every Saint has a past, every sinner has a future. Today's gospel offers a similar message: the Pharisee doesn't seem to be aware of his past any more than the sinner is aware of his future.

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What the tax collector isn't doing is standing in the back of the temple wishing that he was more like the Pharisee. What the tax collector was actually doing was praying.

4. To this end, I believe that there are four qualities necessary for prayer:

First, God blesses a humility that opens us to the true condition of our moral lives—away from the games we play and the self-serving press releases that we hand out
Pride robbed the Pharisee of self-insight; consequently, he basically prayed to himself

Fortunately we don't have to beg God or promise him anything or be someone important for God to listen to our prayers—but we do have to trust God and know that he is merciful.

Heedful of this lesson, the Church, at the beginning of each Eucharistic Celebration, has us turn toward God to ask for mercy for our failings this past week

Secondly, we should realize that self-sufficiency & self-contentment displeases the Lord

Most people go thru life and tally successes & failures

That's ok, as long as we see in our failures opportunity for spiritual reversals

Unfortunately, the fully self-sufficient person cannot accept that God's ways are not his ways

Thirdly, those who despise people cannot pray

We are part of a great army of sinning, suffering, and sorrowing humanity

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Sadly, the Pharisee's prayer made it clear that he was full of loathing for the rest of humanity

Finally, we must compare ourselves to God, not to evil folks

If we compare ourselves with totally immoral people, then there is no perceived need for self-improvement on our part.

The Pharisee was all too pleased to be competing with that sinful tax-collector

But the tax collector is not pleased with himself
his focus is upon God, with whom he knows he cannot compete

His heart is empty; he is miserable & desperate
He honestly wants to be converted
He honestly wants to be a better human being

5. But let us not forget that the whole relationship between prayer & providence remains a mystery.

There are lots of puzzling questions @ the links between our prayers, God's answers to our prayers, and Divine providence

When we were children, and our parents didn't allow us to play with the trouble-makers in the neighborhood; at the time, this seemed stupid and uncaring...but as we gradually began to mature, then we again began to trust our parent's insights.

So it is that we must learn to trust our Heavenly Father when we analyze God's answer to our prayers

In other words, God sees the short-sightedness of our prayer & adjusts His answer accordingly—this is often tough to appreciate.

But remember that God takes into perspective our whole destiny, our present and our future, when responding to our prayers, which is something that we cannot do



for ourselves—but most importantly, we should also realize that the basic reality of prayer is not about asking and receiving, but rather putting ourselves in closer contact with our God.

that's why Mary's prayer—be it done to me according to thy will—is so important; prayer is not @ forcing God to our way of thinking, but acknowledging that his ways are better than our ways and at times, that takes a great act of faith on our part, especially when we ask for wonderful, positive things.

We need to acknowledge that our earthly life of a few moments is only the beginning of our eternal life.

God is always present to us, even though we are not always conscious of this presence

But thru our prayers, our communication with God, we are acknowledging this presence

6. We all look fairly good when we compare ourselves to pharisaical types, but how do we do when we compare ourselves to the brutally honest, self-appraisal of the tax collector? Note that it was the tax collector who returned home justified.

Actually an awareness of our sins can help us in our lives to be far more compassionate and understanding towards others in their sinfulness and weakness. In the depths of our sinfulness, we must never lose sight of the God who is always standing by and waiting to come to us at the merest signal that we want to grow in love and trust of him.

And so the question remains: what is the direction of our lives?

And what are we willing to do, what are we willing to change in order to have a more intimate walk with our God?