



## May We Humbly Pray

By Rev. Francis Martin

*Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time,  
October 27, 2013*

*Readings: Sirach 35.12-14, 16-18;  
2 Timothy 4.6-8, 16-18; Luke 18.9-14*

Before we even begin to pray, we should take time to reflect on the basic attitude and approach we bring to our prayer. We hear this message clearly in today's gospel, as Jesus tells us the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We also reflect on this story in light of the second reading, in which Saint Paul, writing from prison, shares with Timothy his confidence in the Lord and his peace as he faces the future. Similarly, today's psalm guides our hearts to learn how to pray in adversity and leads us to express our own confidence in God.

### God's Attentiveness and Mercy

But let us begin with today's first reading from Sirach. The passage leads off with the statement that the Lord is a God of justice who knows no favorites. Sirach then proceeds to express how God is attentive to the cry of the widow, and how he hears the pleas of the oppressed. We should recall this care when Jesus tells us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5.48), for it is this very aspect of the Father's love that he is urging us to imitate. Indeed, Luke's account of the same saying is worded this way: "Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful" (Lk 6.36).

Sirach further promises that anyone who serves God by imitating his mercy toward others is "willingly heard" when he prays – as Jesus likewise teaches us: "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25.40).

The verses of today's responsorial psalm echo this message. We hear the refrain: "The Lord hears the cry of the poor." Consider also this encouraging statement from the first stanza: "The lowly will hear me and be glad." We may ask, who are these "lowly," and why are they glad? It may be helpful to note that the Hebrew word here is *anawim*, which evokes the image of those who are needy but find true peace in their dependence upon God. Jesus himself was one of the *anawim* and prayed these very psalms.

Whenever Jesus prayed this psalm he knew that millions of people over countless generations would rejoice at the manner in which the Father heard the prayer of his Son and delivered him, raising him from the dead. We too are invited to rejoice in the same way. This means that we are invited to be among the lowly, and thus when we hear, believe in, and experience the presence of the risen Jesus, we too are glad.

Saint Augustine comments on the power of our prayer to unite us with Christ:

When we speak to God, praying, we do not separate the Son from him, and when the Body of the Son prays it does not separate its head from itself. Thus it is he, the one Savior of his Body, our Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God who prays for us and prays in us and is prayed to by us. He prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our Head, he is prayed to by us as our God. Let us then, recognize our voice in his and his voice in ours. (*On Psalm 85*)

In today's second reading we encounter the prayer of Saint Paul, another servant of God who knows that his deliverance, in this world and the next, will come from God. Paul describes his life as a libation, a pouring out of wine over the sacrificial victim about to be consumed. Here he may be alluding to the description of the suffering servant song in Isaiah: "because he poured out his life to death. . . ." (Is 53.12). In any event, Paul knows, as does the poor man of Psalm 34, that God holds his life securely in his hands, and that God can be trusted. As he reflects on his life Paul can say: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil threat and will bring me safe to his heavenly kingdom."

In the gospel reading, the two previous readings and the responsorial psalm coalesce in the parable Jesus tells us of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We ought to remember at this point the teaching of *Verbum Domini* (56), on the presence of Jesus in and through the Liturgy of the Word:

The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet, we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God's word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard.

### Whom Does Jesus Address?

Saint Luke writes: "Jesus addressed this parable to *those who were convinced of their righteousness and despised everyone else*." On this thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, we should pay close attention to Jesus' intended audience – and not be too quick to exclude ourselves. Otherwise, we might fail to grasp the full import of what the Lord is telling us.

Sometimes a major difficulty, a stumbling block inhibiting our prayer, is a lack of self-awareness. Moreover, unless we are willing to have the Lord show us how desperately we need his mercy, our prayers may be the functional equivalent of thanking God for not being like "that hypocrite up there in the front of the Church" – in which case we are no better than the Pharisee, for we are hypocrites ourselves!

Years ago when I was in the monastery, I became close to one of the older monks, Père André, who was teaching me French. One morning he went to the infirmary, where it was discovered that he was suffering a severe heart attack.

Later that evening, I went to visit Père André and brought him his favorite book, the autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. He explained that he wasn't interested in reading just then, and that he had been thinking all day. When I asked him what he had been thinking about, he replied with a beautiful, almost whimsical, expression on his face: "I have been thinking how great God is and how small we are." I still see that face every once in a while when I think of or pray for Père André. There's a pretty good chance he was not as desperate as the tax collector in our Lord's parable today, but he knew where he stood, and he was truly joyful to be so dependent on the mercy of God.

A Suggestion

I have a suggestion: Read the parable of today's gospel over and over several times. If you do, something is likely to happen. You will sense the enthusiasm with which our Lord described the prayer of the tax collector and how profoundly he, the Sinless One, identified with him. You will understand what it means to be a son or daughter of the Father, and what it means to be a forgiven sinner. As this happens you might also receive the gift of tears, that is, the experience of coming to grasp the depth of our sinfulness, and how it is met and overcome by the depth of God's love.

Pope Francis described this experience another way in a brief homily this past Easter Tuesday. Meditating on the passage about Mary Magdalene's weeping upon seeing the empty tomb, the pope encouraged the faithful to be like her.

Jesus loved Mary Magdalene in her lowly sinfulness and humility, and for this reason she was forgiven. Still, in spite of this grace, she was devastated when she did not find Jesus' body in the tomb, and in turn she wept.

"All of us have felt joy, sadness, and sorrow in our lives," the pope remarked. These are all occasions when people are naturally inclined to weep. The gift of tears transforms this natural experience, however, and our tears "prepare the eyes to look, to see the Lord," in the words of the pope.

With this gift, Pope Francis added, we are "able to say with our lives, 'I have seen the Lord,' not because he has appeared, but because 'I have seen him in my heart.'"

None of this is possible, however, unless we first relinquish our satisfaction with ourselves. We need first to admit, in honest humility, how radically we depend on God and his mercy, and how incapable we are of providing for ourselves. Only then we are prepared to pray as the tax collector did, and to go home justified.

About the Author

Fr. Francis Martin is founder and president of Father Francis Martin Ministries and its recent outreach, The Word Proclaimed Institute. In addition to over sixty scholarly articles, Fr. Martin's publications include The Life Changer, Baptism in the Holy Spirit, The Feminist Question, The Fire in the Cloud, and Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word, as well as Acts in the Ancient Christian Commentary Series.

FOR FURTHER READING

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2558-2565; 2725-2745.

Saint John Chrysostom, "Concerning Lowliness of Mind," available at: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1907.htm>

John Paul II, Veritatis splendor, 104-105, available at : [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/)

"Pope Francis asks for 'gift of tears' to see Risen Christ," Catholic News Agency (April 3, 2013), available at: <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-asks-for-gift-of-tears-to-see-risen-christ/>

Rafael Cardinal Merry de Val, "Litany of Humility," available at: <http://www.ewtn.com/devotionals/prayers/humility.htm>



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IN SHORT . . .

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- **The Lord is attentive to the cry of the widow, and he hears the pleas of the oppressed. We recall this care when Jesus tells us to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.**
- **Anyone who serves God by imitating his mercy toward others is willingly heard when he prays.**
- **Unless we are willing to have the Lord show us how desperately we need his mercy, our prayers may be no better than those of hypocrites.**
- **Are we really humble? Do we really understand our true state? Do we trust God enough to let him lead us onto the plane of genuine virtue and a Christian life?**
- **Jesus described the prayer of the tax collector with enthusiasm, and even though he was sinless, he profoundly identified with him.**