

# ***“The Perfect Prayer”***

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

**Corinth Reformed Church**  
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW  
Hickory, North Carolina 28601  
828.328.6196 [corinthtoday.org](http://corinthtoday.org)

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***Every prayer we pray is a prayer that doesn't deserve to be answered.***

***Luke 18:9-14***

***March 26, 2023***

***If it's human, it's not perfect***

For the third week in a row, I've borrowed some sermon ideas from Michael Card's commentary, *Luke: The Gospel of Achievement*. The song I've been singing at Christmas Eve services for 30 years, *Joseph's Song*, is by Michael Card.

Michael Card is also a biblical scholar and effective writer. I was reading his commentary this week on Luke 18:9-14. His heading is “The Perfect Prayer, 2.” That made me curious. Where was Perfect Prayer # 1? And is there a 3rd in Luke?

“Perfect” is a word we should use sparingly, but we don't. Even the Oxford dictionary assumes we're rarely talking about “perfect” in an absolute sense. A perfect dive would garner all 10's from the judges. A perfect game in baseball means nobody got on base, but it doesn't mean the pitcher threw all strikes.

Amazon has multiple products that use the brand name “Perfect.” I suppose they can never have a “new and improved” version. Then there are the movies, like “A Perfect Storm,” “The Perfect Guy,” or “Perfect Marriage.” If it involves human beings, it can't be perfect. One of my favorite things to say to new parents is, “There's never been a perfect set of parents and you won't be the first.”

So what about a perfect prayer? Is there such a thing? Would it be long or short? How would you judge its perfection? If the prayer is answered? If it draws you closer to God? If your prayer gives you peace? What makes a prayer perfect? Is there an example of one in Luke 18? Two of them, according to Michael Card. The first one is in our text. Let's look at the passage, and then you tell me if you think this prayer – or any prayer – should be called a “perfect prayer.”

## ***The setup***

Chapter 18 of Luke is big. It's because it's right before chapter 19, which is where Jesus enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. That's next Sunday. It's also big because of the themes that Luke reiterates from all through Jesus' ministry. We have stories in this chapter that are well-known – precisely because they're so important. Little children come to Jesus. A rich young ruler is told to sell everything and give it away, and Jesus says it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus predicts his death, for the first time.

Context matters in the study of the Bible. This story of the Pharisee and tax collector immediately follows another teaching on prayer. Chapter 18 begins, "Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up." You may recall a couple of Sundays ago when we looked at Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer that there were three lessons.

1. What should we say when we pray? Pray BIG and pray NOW.
2. How long should we keep praying? Until God answers.
3. Can we trust God to answer prayer? Yes.

Jesus is repeating that second lesson on prayer. The story Jesus tells here in chapter 18 parallels the story from chapter 11. That one was about a neighbor needing to borrow bread late at night. His friend won't give it to him because he's a friend or a neighbor. But he'll give it to him because he won't stop banging the door.

Here in chapter 18 Jesus tells a similar parable. This time it's about a "judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought." A widow comes to him repeatedly demanding justice and the judge finally gives her what she wants so that she won't keep bothering him and eventually come and attack him. This "unjust judge" represents God.

Jesus isn't saying that God is reluctant or unjust, but he is saying that God will seem like that sometimes and we need to keep praying anyway. Until God answers. That section closes with Jesus asking, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Will people be still believing, still praying?

All this sets up for Luke 18:9. Jesus' teaching is not just for "disciples." He's still also trying to get through to critics and self-identified adversaries. Some of them are listening in, and now Jesus turns his attention "to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else." If they heard what Jesus had just said about prayer, some of them were thinking, "Well, I know God hears my prayers. He must. If you're as faithful as I am in praying, if you pray correctly as I do, if you live in such a way that God looks kindly on you, if your theology is right, then of course God's going to pay attention to you. And if your life falls apart, you obviously did something to deserve it." The heresy of Job's friends never goes away.

Seeing the condescending looks, or maybe just knowing their condescending thoughts, Jesus says, “Let me tell you a story.” We met the Pharisees and tax collectors last week. When the holiness police (Pharisees) were mumbling that Jesus allowed crooked politicians (tax collectors) close to him, Jesus told three stories about God as a seeker. Heaven rejoices like a shepherd who has found the one lost sheep, like a woman who has found the one lost coin, like a father who wants both his wandering son and his resentful son to be with him. The Father wants the crooked politician in his circle. He also wants the holiness police.

The story begins, “Two men went up to the temple to pray.” Note what they have in common. They are in the same place – the massive stone platform Herod had expanded and renovated for the Jewish place of sacrifice and prayer. They’re both at the temple. They are both there for the same purpose – “to pray.” We don’t know whether they are there at the set times for public prayer – the morning and evening sacrifice – or came at different times. The temple would have been open 24/7. I suspect the Pharisee was there far more often than the tax collector. I also suspect he felt more comfortable, at home, like he belonged there.

The next phrase is interesting in the variety of translations. The older NIV says, “The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself” with a footnote that says, “Or to (himself).” Maybe it means he’s praying silently. The new NIV says, “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed.” *The Message* says, “The Pharisee posed and prayed....” The Greek places “to himself” in between the standing and the praying, so either makes sense. I think the emphasis is on the word “himself.” He’s a self-focused pray-er.

We get the content of his prayer in verses 11-12, and I want you to notice that it is a prayer of gratitude. He’s thankful! God gets credit from him in his prayer, credit for making him as good as he is. It’s important to note that his faith is strong. In his mind, life is about God. He does his acts of holiness, even his work as holiness police, for God. He’s confident of his own righteousness, but it’s righteousness he credits to God.

Have you heard someone say of an addict or an adulterer, “There but for the grace of God go I?” On one level it sounds humble. “I could be that person.” On another level it’s the same prayer this Pharisee prays. “God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even (and this is where it gets very personal) like this tax collector.” They must have been standing somewhere close by, in sight of each other. Or that’s how Jesus intends you to imagine the Pharisee.

The Pharisee even gives examples: “I fast twice a week (the standard was once a week at most; some say only on certain days of the year) and give a tenth of all I get” (again, that’s more than what was required). This is one of only two situations where the religious practice of tithing is mentioned in the New Testament (other than Hebrews 7 where it is used as an analogy), and in both cases tithing is a spiritual problem – if you think it merits favor with God or somehow justifies omission of justice and mercy and faithfulness. The Pharisee’s prayer is all about himself.

The tax collector stands in contrast. He won't even look up to heaven (which was the common practice in prayer). He beat his breast (which was considered a feminine act, even and especially in times of mourning). His prayer is the perfect prayer: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

I want to come back to that prayer and that word, "mercy," but before I do, let's look at what Jesus says to jolt his listeners to attention. This isn't just a story. This is a story with a perfect point to it.

"I'm saying to you," Jesus says, "This one (the tax collector) went down (you always go up *to* the temple and down *from* it) to his house justified (*dedikaiomenos*)." Here's a word that gets a Bible teacher really excited, especially when the sermon title is "The Perfect Prayer." This word "justified" means "declared right," made right with God. It's the first time in the New Testament – the only time in the Gospels – that this particular word group is used with the same meaning Paul will give it all through his letters. It's when God says you're perfect even when you're not, which Paul says only happens by the cross and Jesus' perfect payment for your sin.

But that's not what got me so excited. The verb is in the *perfect* tense. It means that this man went home "having been and remaining justified." You would think Jesus would have at least continued the story the way Zacchaeus continues in the next chapter – that he gave half of his possessions to the poor and decided to repay four fold anyone he had cheated. By virtue of this "perfect prayer," the tax collector in Jesus' parable went home "having been and remaining justified."

Jesus concludes with the repetition and restatement of what's called the Great Reversal. The one who self-humbles will be exalted (by God) and the one who self-exalts will be humbled (by God). This brings to Luke's mind the next story, when the disciples are rebuking parents for bringing babies to Jesus to bless them and Jesus says, "If you don't receive the kingdom of God like a child you can't enter it."

### ***The plea***

So let's go back to what Michael Card says about the tax collector's prayer. He says it's "the perfect prayer." He cites three places in Luke's gospel where a person or group prays this prayer or something like it.

- Ten lepers come to Jesus in Luke 17. "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"
- Here, it's a tax collector. "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!"
- Later in this chapter, a blind man. "Son of David, have mercy on me!"

Michael Card says that each time, this prayer is based on the Hebrew word *hesed*. It's a major theme in Luke's gospel, he says. It's a word that God uses to define himself in the Old Testament. *Hesed*, Card says, is "When the person from whom I have a right to expect nothing gives me everything." Lepers should expect nothing, and they're made whole. The blind man should expect nothing, and he sees.

The tax collector's prayer is a different, though, and the word he uses for "mercy" is different as well. My Dictionary of New Testament Theology spends 15 pages explaining this particular word for "mercy." I will spare you the discussion except to say that this word, unlike the other two prayers for mercy in Luke's gospel, is a prayer for atonement for sin, for reconciliation with God, for God to do whatever is necessary to clear away the guilt of the tax collector's sins. That's the prayer that sends this man home "having been and remaining right with God."

It's because of what Jesus is preparing to do. He is on the verge of perfectly demonstrating the *absolute* meaning of mercy. As Michael Card says,

(Jesus) will show the world what the *hesed* of God looks like. He will offer the world an unimaginable alternative. To those who have a right to expect nothing, Jesus will offer everything. It is a door to an infinite store of mercy.

### ***The perfect prayer***

So why is a prayer for mercy the perfect prayer? Can we say in any meaningful sense that a prayer for mercy is perfect?

Next to the Lord's Prayer, this prayer is the most common prayer in Christian history. In the South, this prayer exceeds the Lord's Prayer in frequency if you count phrases like "Laudamercy" or "lawsa mussy." For almost all of Christian history, the prayer, "Lord, have mercy upon us," has been part of Christian worship. Perhaps you've heard the Greek, *Kyrie Eleison*. If you think this is only a Catholic liturgy, turn to the back of our red hymnal, where you'll find the prayer for mercy twelve times, in No. 489, 499, 512, 515, 518, 519, 520, 523, 524, 525, 526, and 540.

But some of us were raised rather Pharisical about liturgies and the like, Catholic or otherwise. We're interested in what's in the Bible. The prayer for mercy is the most common prayer in the Bible. Let me give you a handful of examples.

- Jacob: "May God Almighty grant you mercy (in Egypt)." (Genesis 43:14)
- David: "Let me fall into the hands of the LORD, for his mercy is great." (1 Chronicles 21:13)
- Solomon: "Give attention to your servant's plea for mercy." (1 Kings 8:28)
- Nehemiah: "Remember me, my God, and show mercy to me." (Nehemiah 13:22)
- Job: "Though I were innocent, I could only plead with my Judge for mercy." (Job 9:15)
- "Have mercy on me, for I am faint." (Psalm 6:2)
- "Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love." (Psalm 25:6)
- "Be merciful to me, LORD, for I am in distress." (Psalm 31:9)
- "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love." (Psalm 51:1)
- "In your great mercy, turn to me." (Psalm 69:16)

- “Turn to me, and have mercy on me.” (Psalm 86:16)
- “I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.” (Psalm 142:1)
- “Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy.” (Isaiah 55:7)
- “He urged them to plead for mercy from the God of heaven.” (Daniel 2:18)
- “In wrath remember mercy.” (Habakkuk 3:2)
- Canaanite woman: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Matthew 15:22)
- A father: “Lord, have mercy on my son. He has seizures.” (Matthew 17:15)
- Lepers: “Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!” (Luke 17:13)
- Tax collector: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” (Luke 18:13)
- Blind Bartimaeus: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mark 10:47)
- Paul: “Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (2 Timothy 1:2)
- Paul: “May the Lord grant that he will find mercy on that day.” (2 Timothy 1:18)
- Barney: “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace to receive mercy.” (Hebrews 4:16)
- John: “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son.” (2 John 1:3)

Do you know who never prayed for mercy? Jesus! Because a prayer for mercy is a prayer for the needy, for the broken, for the sinful.

Frequency in church history or the Bible doesn’t address, however, why this is the *perfect* prayer. Let’s start with how it fits the model prayer. Remember that the Lord’s Prayer is basically two things: “Pray BIG, pray NOW.” The “Lord” part is BIG. “Have mercy” is NOW. Whatever the situation, whatever the need.

The reason this is the perfect prayer is because, when you think about it, it’s the only prayer. Every prayer we pray is a prayer we don’t deserve to have answered. Every prayer is a prayer God has no obligation to answer. “Lord, have mercy” is every prayer. Whether your prayer is three words (Lord, have mercy) or days of fasting and weeping or a lifetime of longing, it is this prayer.

When you’re desperate, Lord have mercy. When you’re sick, Lord have mercy. When you’re afraid, Lord have mercy. When you need wisdom, Lord have mercy. When you think the world is falling apart, Lord have mercy. When you pray for the world, for missions, for the persecuted church, for politicians you love and those you hate, Lord have mercy. When you want to hate your enemies or take revenge, Lord have mercy. When you already did, Lord, have mercy. When someone’s dying, Lord have mercy. When a new baby’s born, Lord have mercy. When someone asks you to pray an inappropriate, self-focused prayer, Lord, have mercy.

That’s the perfect prayer. Amen.