

Sermon: 'Why pious people don't get healed'

Revd. Martin Turner

Methodist Central Hall, Westminster Sunday 7th February 6.30 pm

LESSON: Luke 18:9-14

A small boy was in the garden when he saw a mouse.
He was a horrible little boy as little boys often are at some stage of their development,
so he crept up on the poor mouse and grabbed it and biffed it and then stamped on it and killed it.
He then picked it up and ran inside to his Mum in the kitchen,
"Look Mummy" he cried excitedly,
"I've got a mouse, I saw it and I crept up on it and I biffed it and then I stamped on it and then...."
At that point he realised that his Mother was not alone,
she had a visitor,
and the visitor was the local Methodist Minister.
The small boy paused for thought before continuing,
"yes Mummy, I stamped on it,
and then the Lord called the little mouse home!"

How easy it is for us to be pious,
to slip into pious language when we are praying,
to talk in a pious way when we are with other Christians.

Now piety and the word pious are two of those words which have changed their meaning a lot across the centuries,
it used to be that piety was a thing to be aimed at,
it used to be that a pious person was revered as a person close to God.
If you look up in some dictionaries the definition is "devout" or "religious",
but sadly this is now a word which has become almost a term of abuse,
and in fact on one on-line dictionary the definition is
"Marked by false devotedness, solemnly hypocritical".
And that view is echoed in phrases we hear every day such as,
"Oh she's so pious,"
and we know exactly the sort of person being spoken about!
Piety these days is linked to a false or over-exaggerated religiosity,
and perhaps the words which now capture better what piety and a pious person used to be are when now we speak about holiness and a holy person,
the view of the pious is negative
the view of the holy positive.

Well here in the passage of scripture from Luke 18 and verses 9 to 14 we have two characters,
a Pharisee – a religious teacher,
and a tax collector – in those days not an upright employee of the state as now,
but a double-dealing collaborator with the Roman army of occupation,
and the thing that we can be quite clear about with this Pharisee is that he came into the pious category rather than the holy category!
Now I have preached on this passage of Scripture before here at the Methodist Central Hall,
but this evening I want to look at it through the eyes of this ministry of healing we share in during this service,
and I want to give three reasons why this pious man could not be helped by God,
which are also three reasons that pious people are not often healed,
and the three reasons are his self righteousness,
his self reliance,
and his self confidence.

The first reason then, his self righteousness.

Self righteousness was clearly something that Jesus did not like,
for in verse 9 here,
introducing the parable,
we read this,

verse 9

The whole reason for telling the parable was to confront self righteousness,
and I feel sure that the main reason Jesus stood so firmly against it was that self righteousness blocks the work of God,
for if you trust in your own righteousness what need is there for any other.

The great bible teacher,
the late Selwyn Hughes,
puts it like this,
"It is perilously possible to offer prayer without offering ourselves."
That is what this man does,
he offers prayer but as he prays the object of his prayer is not God but self,
the content of his prayer is not God but self,
in fact it's all about self,
how much better he was than other people,
how disciplined he was to fast twice a week,
how generous he was to tithe,
self,
self,
self,
and he assumes in his self-righteousness that all these attributes entitle

him to a hearing from God.

So please be careful as you come here and ask for prayer and healing,
don't think that because you are a preacher or hold a church office of some
sort that you have an edge over the others,
don't think that because you have fasted and prayed for many hours you will
have some sort of advantage in the healing stakes,
for as you come to God and seek His healing touch you need to put any
righteousness you think you may have to one side,
come as the broken man or woman you are and I am,
come as the tax collector came,
verse 13 here,

verse 13

He brought no righteousness,
but his prayer was not within himself,
his prayer was a cry of the heart to the living God,
and it was he who met with God,
it was he who went home justified,
self righteousness is such a block to healing.

Then the second reason pious people find problems with healing is their self reliance.

Of course there is nothing wrong with being self reliant in many areas of life.
The soldier venturing out into enemy territory has to be self-reliant to survive.
Those making their living off the land have to be far more self reliant than
many of us within cities,
but also in these troubled economic times many people,
especially young people,
are having to earn their living thorough exercising a great deal of self
reliance,
making a bit of money here and another bit there through a different job
or role,
their self reliance gets them though.

But when it comes to living out the Christian life,
when it comes to receiving from God,
then our self reliance can be a problem.

One of the problems is that in some ways we ministers encourage folk to be a bit self
reliant.

For example when we teach on prayer we tell folk to beware what we might call the
"shopping list" prayers;
those prayers where we come to God with a great list of people we want
healed or blessed,
friends and family members we want converted,
and things in our own lives we want sorted out!
Clearly we need to strike a balance when we come to God and ask for His

way,
His guidance,
rather than just telling Him what to do.

So I do not mean that,
what I do mean is that as people, part of the Christian life is turning away
from relying too much on self,
but rather opening up the whole of our lives,
our decisions,
our relationships,
our parables,
our actions,
to God.

So from our emptiness we seek God's fullness,
from our weakness we seek God's strength,
from our guilt we seek God's forgiveness,
from our restlessness we seek God's peace,
and from our sickness we seek God's healing.
That's natural,
that pleases God,
that is just plain common sense.

However sometimes our self reliance holds us back.
For men especially this can be pride,
a feeling that if they ask for prayer they look soft and as if they are not
coping.
Or it might be embarrassment because you have seen others weep as they
ask for healing and you do not want to weep in front of others so you decide
it is better not to bother to ask for prayer.
You are not used to asking for help,
you can manage quite well thank you very much.

Well this Pharisee did not mention God and seemed to have everything totally under
control in his life,
he asked for nothing so he got what he asked for,
he got nothing,
and there is no record of him being sorted out with God.

The tax gatherer however knew he had a problem,
he didn't ask for specific help for specific problems,
he just cried out to God from his need,
"God have mercy on me, a sinner"
No self reliance there,
what a wimp,
but he was the man who met God and who went home put right with God.

If you have come here tonight knowing that you need to meet with God in some way then please do not leave this place without asking for help.

You need to ask for help and prayer and healing tonight if you want to receive.

God loves to meet with you for He loves you so much,
but you need to ask him to do that,
putting away our self reliance and relying instead upon the living God.

Then the third of these attitudes which block healing – self confidence.

Now just last weekend I met someone for the first time.

I had heard all about her,
and one of the things that struck me when I met her was that for a girl of her age in the situation she was in she was very self confident.

But that wasn't a negative thing because she was simply herself,
she had good self worth and from a firm base she met other people and engaged with them in a positive way.

So be clear I am not against people being self confident.

Perhaps we should turn the phrase round and say that the problem is having too much confidence in self,
just as this Pharisee at prayer had.

In Proverbs chapter 6 and verse 17 there is a list called, I quote,

"Six things that the Lord hates",

and the very first of these is what is termed *"haughty eyes."*

I think that is a great phrase,

we know just what the writer means,

we know because we have all had other people's haughty eyes glance across us and dismiss us,

just as the haughty eyes of the Pharisee glanced across at the tax collector and dismiss him,

verse 11,

"God I thank you that I am not like other men,

robbers, evil doers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector."

Can't you imagine the look which went with that prayer?

Haughty eyes!

You see we have no room for self confidence before God for

He is holy and we are unholy,

He is outside of time and we are locked in time,

He knows all things and we know so little,

He is full of love and we so lack love.

We can have no self confidence at all before God if we stand as the woman or man who we are,

but we can have self confidence before God in Christ,

for on the cross Jesus Christ took all that is wrong in our lives and dealt with it.

We can have no confidence in self but we can have every confidence in

Jesus,
every confidence in His cross and what happened there,
every confidence in His love that reaches out to touch us.

Now that tax collector had no self confidence,
we can see that from his posture!
He stands at a distance,
he won't even look up,
he beats his breast,
and he prays from the very depth of his heart,
"God have mercy on me, a sinner."

As you come for healing tonight you may have all manner of reservations about this ministry,
you may have all manner of doubts as to whether or not God is able to heal
and whether or not you are worthy of His touch,
or you may feel sinful and unholy and inadequate.

But you see that is not a problem at all,
because your confidence doesn't have to be in some answer to the theological question as to whether or not God can heal.
Your confidence doesn't have to be in whether or not you are a worthy and good person.
Your confidence doesn't have to be in whether or not you like the look of the healing team.

Your confidence is not in your self confidence,
your confidence needs to be in Christ.
He is the healer,
he is the one who loves you,
he is the one who welcomes you to his table in bread and wine,
he is the one who can meet you in your brokenness and need and in one way or another bring to you His healing touch.

When that Pharisee came to pray self righteousness,
self reliance
and self confidence got him nowhere.

When that tax collector came to pray he had a complete lack of righteousness,
a lack of anything he knew he could rely upon,
a lack of confidence in his own worth and worthiness,
but these things got him everywhere!
As we read here in the second part of verse 14,
*"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled,
and he who humbles himself will be exalted"*

So come for healing and prayer tonight,
not because of anything to do with self,

but rather because you know your deep need,
and because in spite of everything you long and hope that Jesus can meet you
in it.

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