

St Luke's 9:30, Oct 19th 2025

Luke 18:1-14, Jeremiah 31:27-34, 2 Timothy 3:10-4:5

I was channel-surfing when I came across a TV cooking personality promoting some homespun philosophy. She finished extolling the merits of her latest niche diet with a flourish; 'You are what you eat!' she proclaimed. Applause.

Today I propose a spiritual version; 'You are what you pray.'¹

We've become quite familiar with stump-cam, and kiss-cam (thanks to Coldplay). But what if someone set up a pray-cam at your place? From your prayers, what would they deduce about the God you believe in? And would that be any different from the God you tell people you believe in?

It might depend on the way we experienced life, while we were growing up. It's long been known that that will influence how we relate to people. It's also likely to affect the way we see God, and therefore how we approach prayer. If our family were capably enabled people, and we were always the good guys, we know we were born with gold card members' access. Our prayers will be confident. If on the other hand we believe that God doesn't really care about us, perhaps because no-one else in our lives did when it mattered, our prayer life will probably struggle to get off the ground. Indirectly, I think that's one of the big spiritual harms of poverty.

That may have been the situation of our widow in the Luke reading. She had little influence compared with a judge. This judge was a paid civic magistrate in a public court. Back then, there were no police to bring cases against law-breakers. If you had been dealt with unjustly by someone in power, you had to bring your argument to the judge yourself. And bribery of judges was rife. A widow without resources had little hope of getting a favourable outcome against an opponent of means. The widow used the only weapon she had, which was persistence.

If you're used to dealing with Centrelink, or the NDIS, or My Aged Care, you've probably acquired some skill in how to make the right amount of noise at the right time, with the right frequency. Such background attitudes can infiltrate our prayers. 'Maybe if I keep knocking at God's window, it will be easier for him to respond to me than not to.' It's a big bad world out there, right? We sometimes reinforce that idea to our children in the folk stories we've inherited and pass on. I'm reminded of the story of Little Red Riding Hood. -You know, she goes to visit her sick grandmother, only to be eaten by the wolf who has taken Grandma's place. A young child once told me with great conviction

¹ That's not a directly Biblical quote, but it finds a sympathetic parallel in several places e.g. James 5:16, Luke 18:1, Proverbs 23:7

that the moral of that story is ‘never trust your grandmother’. I wanted to challenge such an impression of grandma, but I wasn’t sure what to say.

Jesus challenges the widow’s impression of God. It’s a parable of contrast, not of like comparison. Unlike the judge, God doesn’t answer your prayer mainly in order to get you out of his in-tray; we’re told that God cares about justice and is working to set the world to rights. For most of us here, the fact that we’re sitting in a Christian church on a Sunday morning probably means we’d say we trust God a bit more than the average punter does. Our prayers might be justly confident, but they could become just a little bit contaminated by entitlement. In our second parable, that seems to have happened to one of the temple visitors. To paint the background, the really essential prayer task was done inside the temple by the priest on the people’s behalf, especially annually at the sacrifice of Atonement. But religiously inclined individuals who were in a position to juggle their work hours might choose to attend the public prayer sessions at the temple, which were held three times a day. It’s no surprise that we find a member of the Pharisees, a man in good standing, at the public session. But the tax collector is pretty brave to be seen there at all. Any such collaborator with the pagan-looking Roman forces would be about as popular there as, well, a tax collector in a synagogue. And everyone had the option of praying privately at home.

The prayers of these two men, Pharisee and tax collector, are a study in contrast. The religious man manages to refer to himself in the first person four times in two verses. (Actually, it’s five times in the original.) That’s quite a grammatical achievement. He didn’t really go to pray so much as to inform God, and everyone else within earshot, how good he was. He points out that he exceeds the rules regarding both fasting and tithing. And he does. -The twice-weekly mini-fast is not a requirement. Similarly the tithing of other than his direct produce is not required, so he figures he’s in credit there too. He’s a pillar of religious society. He had no doubt that God would listen to him. People always listen to him.

As a real-life experience of someone taking a strikingly different approach to prayer, I’m reminded of an incident in my secondary school in NZ back in the 70s. Mona’s class were rostered on duty to lead part of the school assembly. As in many state schools back then, assembly included a hymn and a prayer, and there would be a short talk with some sort of spiritual content. This all happened on cue, and the class presented its item. Following that, Mona decided that something was missing. Unscripted, she quietly walked over to the podium and recited the Lord’s prayer in Maori. The school was silent, and some joined in the amen. Afterwards, back in class, Mona’s class teacher was dismissive. ‘Mona, why did you do that? Most of the school wouldn’t understand you.’ The girl explained patiently, ‘But I wasn’t talking to them.’

The tax collector wasn't talking to his human audience either. Neither was he presenting a case. He didn't expect God to weigh up the relevant excuses, consider mitigating circumstances and hopefully decide he might in fact be good enough. He's coming to God as the one who can simply choose to have mercy on him.

These parables aren't really about conversion. It seems from context that Jesus is talking to those who are already believers. He's saying something both to those who struggle to see themselves worthy of a place at the table, and also to those who might be thinking they're a cut above the hoi polloi. They might not like the thought of making the entry process too easy. 'We must have standards, you know.' We in the modern church might be in danger of setting barriers too, perhaps barriers that God didn't set. Yet the Jeremiah reading, 'I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more',² isn't a million miles away from Luke's 'God be merciful to me, a sinner'.

Maybe accepting our spiritual dependence on God gets a bit easier as we get older. You might have to accept help for physical things you would once have done yourself. I had to think about this when my daughter had to call an ambulance a few weeks ago, just because I couldn't get off the floor after stooping to pick up something I'd dropped. I felt silly – I wasn't even hurt. But I can't get myself up. In a way, that was a practical parable -we can't save ourselves, so Jesus acted to do it through the cross and resurrection. He still takes the initiative through his calling of us and others. And our beliefs about the basis on which we are saved will affect the nature of our prayers.

I began today by wondering what someone else would learn about us from observing our prayer life. What would they deduce about the God we really believe in? Jesus encouraged his original disciples to pray always and not lose heart! Let our relationships with God, and each other, show our belief in the God who loves us, wants to continuously relate with us, and who acted for us because he desires our highest good. Amen

² Jer 31:34