

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“The Jesus Prayer”**  
**Luke 18:9-14,**  
**June 28, 2015**

A few weeks ago we talked about how prayer really does make a difference in our world and in us. I tend to think of it as the fertilizer to the soil in which God is gardening. No, there are no guarantees, no magic tricks with prayer. But in some mysterious way, our prayers do open up new possibilities in which God can work.

The next week we talked about how hard it can be to learn to pray and to keep at it. There're all kinds of barriers and distractions. But in many ways learning to pray is similar to the journey of intimacy in any relationship. It might start off a little uncomfortable at first, and that's OK. You don't know what to say and so you start with a few rehearsed lines, but after awhile it does become easier. You stop talking at God and begin talking with God.

Then, along the way you start to need words less and less. Kierkegaard said, **“A man prayed, and at first he thought that prayer was talking. But he became more and more quiet until in the end he realized that prayer is listening.”** Prayer is listening.

And eventually that listening moves us to simply being with God... like the couple who's been married for decades and no longer needs words. Sure words are still shared, but there are also periods of silence where they can just rest in one another's presence... where all is known and held in love. It's a picture of profound intimacy, of mysterious *union*. It's what Psalm 46 describes. **‘Be still, and know that I am God’ (Ps. 46:10)** Divine Union.

*That's where this is all taking us... if we'll keep at this life of prayer... if we'll learn to keep company with God over the long haul.*

Sounds beautiful, but if you're anything like me, then you're going to need some tools to help you get there along the way.

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This morning we heard two stories from Luke 18: the story of the Pharisee and the Tax collector praying at the temple... and the story of the blind man on the road to Jericho. When you read all that took place in Luke 18, you realize it was a busy day for Jesus, teaching, healing, answering questions, crowds pressing in.

There were all kinds of people there, watching, listening, wondering what it might mean for them and their lives. And I imagine... there *might* have been someone in the crowd named... oh, I don't know, Phinehas. It's a good Jewish name.

Let's imagine for a minute that Phinehas was there. He was a faithful Jew. He's grown up learning the stories of his ancestors. He could talk to you for hours about Abraham and Moses and David. He's not a ridged Pharisee, but Phinehas has been faithful to God most of his life. Sure, there was that period as a young adult where he stopped going to synagogue... but he eventually found his way back into faith.

He was there in the crowd the day. He heard Jesus tell the story of a persistent widow and the judge. And Phinehas wasn't a dense guy. He got the point. "Keep on praying." It's the kind of message he's heard before. "Prayer is important." He knew that. So, he prayed when he went to worship and even prayed at home somewhat regularly... well, at least he prayed as much as the next guy.

The thing is, he was bored with his prayers. After awhile it didn't seem to matter a whole lot. He knew he was supposed to, and so he did. He read the same list of names. He gave thanks for anything he could think of... but after years of doing it on again, off again... it all felt kind of dead to him. Yes, Phinehas knew Jesus was right. He knew he was supposed to pray. He just wasn't all that... interested.

He thought about all this as he stood there on the dusty road with people milling about. There were camels and sheep herders around him. People were busy. Some stopped to listen, but most of them were on their way somewhere. Off to the side were merchants selling bread and cooked fish. They were calling out over the sound of the sheep to try and get your attention. It was a noisy place... and pretty easy to get distracted.

As Phinehas was daydreaming about his own prayers along the way, he realized that Jesus was telling another story. This time about a Pharisee and a tax collector that were praying at the temple. He heard Jesus recite the Pharisee's prayer... and it was a good one. The Pharisee began by giving thanks to God... as you'd expect. Any good Pharisee could tell you that God is the source of every gift in your life... And this guy was no different. So he thanked God for leading him in the path of righteousness... for helping him to follow the straight and narrow way.

As Phinehas heard Jesus recite this prayer, he felt himself praying along. He too was thankful that he'd made his way back to faith... and that he'd learned to follow the One true God. Phinehas knew that it had saved him all kinds of heartache along the way.

Then he heard Jesus talk about the tax collector... who stood at a distance, and who prayed a simple prayer. You could tell he wasn't used to praying at all. All he said was, **"God, have mercy on me, a sinner."** It didn't seem like much of a prayer, but it got Phinehas thinking about his younger brother, Joash, who had become a tax collector several years ago. He wondered if one day Joash would repent too...

He wondered if he'd ever be able to forgive Joash...

He wondered if their father could...

Phinehas was thinking about all this when Jesus looked right in his direction and said, **“Between these two men, the Tax Collector is the one that met with God...”** He was a little surprised at Jesus. Phinehas didn’t know what to think. He wanted to ask Jesus about it, but by then there were all kinds of kids crowding around Jesus... and then some Rich Young Ruler started asking Jesus questions about Eternal life.

Phinehas wasn’t really interested in all that, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the Tax Collector... and what he prayed. **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** It was so simple... and yet... there was something deeply honest about it.

He was thinking about all this when suddenly he heard an old raspy voice, on the side of the road, call out. Phinehas lookse over and saw this blind beggar covered in dirt and rags. He’s just sitting there on the outskirts of Jericho. The old man looked crazy... So Phinehas tried to tell him to keep it down. But the beggar shouted out even louder. **“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!”**

Again, that same prayer... and next thing Phinehas knew, Jesus stopped, went over to the man... and healed him. The blind beggar prayed essentially the same prayer, and he was the one to meet with God that day.

When Phinehas went home that night he kept thinking about Jesus stories... the prayers in the temple... and the beggar on the side of the road. For some reason, he couldn’t get those words out of his mind. So rather than praying his usual prayers... he began to speak the simplest prayer that was aching to come out of him.

**“Lord Jesus, have mercy on me... a sinner.”**

Phinehas prayed those words over and over again that night...

**“Lord Jesus... Christ?, have mercy on me... a sinner.”**

**“Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me... a sinner.”**

As he prayed that over and over again, he felt something deep inside of him slowly moving... like a massive stone being rolled away in some place within him that he didn’t even know existed.

Over time Phinehas kept working with that prayer. He prayed it for himself.

**“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

He prayed it over his brother.

**“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on Joash.”**

He prayed it for his father. He prayed it when he didn’t know what else to pray.

**“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

Truth be told, the prayer wasn’t always as meaningful as it was the first night, but working with those words over time changed him. It changed the way he prayed. At times he would sit and repeat the prayer over and over and over again.

When his thoughts would wander off during prayer,

*when he'd start thinking about his to-do list...or reliving the conversation he had yesterday...he'd come back to focus by repeating the prayer again.*

***“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”***

*There was something about working with this prayer that made it's way into his very being... so that after years of praying it, he began embodying it... somehow... as if he was praying those words without ceasing.*

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That's the story I imagine taking place behind the scenes in Luke 18. Of course there may not have been anyone in the crowd that day named Phinehas, but what we do know is that along the way some Christian combined the prayer of the tax collector and the blind beggar in Luke 18... and they began praying what's become known for centuries now, as the Jesus Prayer.

**“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”**

Christians have taken that one line and prayed it over and over again.

It's a simple prayer that somehow holds the power of the gospel.

It's a prayer that Christians for centuries have used for repentance,

and for intercession...

and even for finding their way past all the noise of their thoughts to the simple and profound presence of God.

As one spiritual teacher put it: **“The Jesus Prayer helps to lift the whole life, body and soul, to a level where... all is subordinated to the one aim of centering... upon God”**  
(Mother Maria of Normanby)

The Jesus Prayer is not only rooted in scripture, but has been practiced for centuries by those that have sought a the kind of prayer life that awakens our souls, that deepest center of who we are, to the presence of God. It's not that we have to pray this prayer. There's no requirement here. And probably praying it once or twice won't really change you...

But if you're going to keep on praying...

and you're thirsty for a deeper kind of connection with the Divine,

then try working with this prayer for the next month....

Try praying it for 10 minuets a day for the rest of the summer.

See where it takes you.

It may feel strange at first. It may stir up some things you've been trying to ignore. But don't run away from it. Humble yourself... as Jesus says, and allow God to lift you into God's holy presence.

Amen.

Reflection:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

~The Jesus Prayer.