

Prayer: 'Religious' – and Real

Key Verse:

“As it is written, there is no-one righteous, not even one.”

Romans 3:10

Extra: From this study what do you see as of particular importance to us today?

Level 5 lesson 25

Read: Luke 18:1-17

Further: Proverbs 16:18-25

PERSISTENT PRAYER

A widow who had been wronged, applied to a judge for justice. Someone was treating her wrongly and she rightly looked to the judge for help. But this judge didn't care about justice at all. He flatly refused to grant the widow her request, even though she was entitled to it legally.

Undeterred, the widow kept up her appeals for justice. Finally, to 'get rid of her', the unjust judge granted her justice. Jesus wanted them to see that if a sinful, uncaring judge will respond to persistent appeals, how much more will our Heavenly Father respond to the prayers of His beloved children?

God is absolutely holy and righteous; perfectly just - and loves us with an immeasurable love. Of course He will answer our calls for justice, mercy and strength. However, like that widow, we too must be prepared to pray persistently and patiently, leaving God to answer at the perfect time and in His perfect way.

POINTLESS PRAYER

In His second parable, Jesus taught the disciples another very important attitude to prayer. Often in those days, the Pharisees could be seen praying very long, loud prayers in public - or even announcing their gifts at the temple by blowing trumpets!(Matthew 6:2-5) They thought they were so righteous and 'looked down' on others who they considered sinners. You may have even met some people like this. Jesus described how two men, one a Pharisee and the other a Publican, a well-known sinner, went up to the Temple to pray.

The Pharisee stood with his head up, full of pride and self-importance. His prayer was all about himself; what a fine citizen he was compared to others; how he never missed church and really, just what a wonderful person he was! He certainly didn't seem to

remember any sins he'd committed. His only thanks were that he was such a terrific person- not like this wretched sinner next to him! Jesus makes a telling comment about this man. He said that, "he prayed with himself!" God ignores the prayer of anyone who comes to Him with such self-righteous pride as this Pharisee did. How mistaken he was to approach his Creator in his own merit and self-righteousness. This was totally pointless prayer!

POWERFUL PRAYER

But note the difference between the two men. The tax-collector stood at the back with head bowed, in complete humility. Not only his sins, but his sinful condition made him feel unworthy to approach a Holy God. In repentant sorrow, he could only look to God for mercy. His prayer was brief, but real and to the point. "God be merciful to me a sinner!" Jesus made it clear that he received it; "this man went down to his house justified (declared righteous)" He said. Let us learn this great lesson too: God "hates a proud look," and the powerful prayer is the one prayed in humility and dependence on God.

PRECIOUS PEOPLE

Jesus again demonstrated the necessity of humility, in an incident shortly after this. Some young children were brought to Him for blessing (it was customary for mothers to bring their babies for a Rabbi's blessing.) The disciples tried to send them away, mistakenly thinking Jesus was too important to worry about little children. But He showed them that people (not looks) are important, and gently insisted, "Let the little children come to Me: for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Only those who come humbly to the Saviour - like those little children, with no thought of self-righteousness or merit - can ever enter Heaven. How well Jesus demonstrated this character trait in His own life, always ready to obey His Father's will, both in prayer and in deed. How much we need to reflect that same humility in our prayer - and in our lives too.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. What did you learn about prayer in Jesus' first parable?

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2. What was wrong with the Pharisee's prayer?

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3. Why did God answer the Publican's prayer?

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4. What did he receive from God?

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5. What did the Lord say to those who brought their children to Him?

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My Name is: _____ Age: _____

A Sad, Rich Man

Key Verse:

“He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.”

Luke 1:53

Level 5 lesson 26

Extra: Can you give some reasons why it is hard for rich people to be saved?

Read: Luke 18:18-43

Further: Mark 10:17-31

Ever wished you had lots of money and possessions, with a respected position in society? Ever thought that if you just had those things, life would be truly fulfilling and complete? Well in our story today, we meet a young man who ‘had it all.’ But something still nagged away inside...

A SEARCHING QUESTION

This man, a rich, young ruler, had been standing in the crowd, listening as Jesus taught. As Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, he knew he must speak to Him; this was what interested him! Respectfully, he knelt down at the Lord’s feet asking Him this question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” All his wealth and prestige had not brought him peace of mind about this.

We can learn much from Jesus’ answer. “Why do you call me good?” He asked “No-one is good except God.” Jesus wanted to establish something important right at the start; He is not just another ‘good man’ - He is God! Unless we accept that, we will come no closer to the Kingdom of God, and eternal life. Did the ruler mean what he said, or was he merely being polite? Already, he was thinking hard! The Lord then referred him to the Ten Commandments, quoting five which the ruler knew well. Immediately, he replied, “I have kept all those since I was a boy!” Mark’s Gospel tells us that at this point Jesus “looked on him and loved him.” He knew this young man’s heart and his earnest desire for eternal life.

However, Jesus also knew that he did not understand one thing. God wants to be our ‘first love’ - in fact, this is the very first Commandment! This man, well-intentioned as he seemed to be, was trying to earn eternal life. Something else though, was his first real love...

SAD DECISION

Jesus’ next words cut right to his heart; “Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in Heaven - and come and follow Me!” Jesus knew exactly what had captured this man’s heart; we see it clearly in his response: “When he heard this, he went away sad, for he was very rich.” He loved his

money and privileged lifestyle here on earth more than the eternal life he claimed to seek! The promise of eternal riches and heavenly treasure could not convince him to forsake his earthly wealth. As he walked sadly away, Jesus commented, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! In fact, He said, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!”

This is not because money and possessions are wrong in themselves; but Jesus knew what a grip they can get on our hearts. It is hard to forsake riches here and now, for heavenly riches in a day to come; and the more we have, the harder it becomes to let go of it. However, we need to always remember what Jesus said as He talked about this, “What does it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

TRUE RICHES

Someone has said, “It is a wise man who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose!” Friends, earthly riches are temporary - we must all die one day, and no matter how much we accumulate, we will leave it all behind! How foolish to cling tightly to it, till death wrenches it from our grasp - only to find that in eternity we are bankrupt, facing only the wrath and condemnation of God. Yet so many people, trapped by the love of money and materialism - do just as this young man did!

The disciples were a bit shocked at what had just happened; they thought that such a person would make a fine Christian. “Who then can be saved?” they asked. Jesus explained that “it was impossible with men but not with God.” The work of salvation is something only God can do; sinful man can neither keep the Law, nor change his heart to love God. However, it is possible with God, who will save rich and poor alike, if they will repent and follow Jesus; who “though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.” 2 Corinthians 8:9.

There are many warnings in Scripture about pursuing earthly prosperity and missing eternal life - what this rich, young man was really seeking. Hold the material blessings of God in an ‘open hand’ - always ready to share and distribute freely to those in need, and to the work of the Lord. Our faith needs to be firmly in the promises of God’s Word and not in the state of our bank account. Make sure you are storing up ‘treasure in Heaven’ - where it lasts forever!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why did Jesus have the right to be referred to as ‘good’?	.....
2. What showed that the young ruler did not love God with all his heart and soul?	.....
3. Why was the rich man sad?	.....
4. Why is it hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God?	.....
5. How should we treat any wealth God blesses us with?	.....

A Glad Rich Man

Key Verse:

“Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.”

John 1:12

Extra: How would you help someone like Zacchaeus if they came to you for help?

Level 5 lesson 27

Read: Luke 19:1-10

Further: Matthew 9:9-13

Today’s story concerns another rich man, Zacchaeus; he too, was concerned about eternal life. He realised that despite his wealth, there was something missing in his life...

A GREAT DESIRE

Zacchaeus in fact, was terribly unhappy. He lived in a very nice house in the prosperous city of Jericho, and had become very wealthy, largely through illegal means. He was employed by the Romans who governed the Land of Israel, to collect the taxes they had imposed. This made him extremely unpopular for a start, as many people considered him a traitor.

In addition, Zacchaeus used his position of authority to ‘line his own pockets’ - at his own countrymen’s expense! He would routinely charge them far too much and of course the people were powerless to complain or do anything about it.

One day, Zacchaeus saw crowds hurrying along the street past his office. Curiously he enquired what was happening and discovered that Jesus was coming to Jericho and intended to pass nearby. Zacchaeus had heard so much about this great Teacher. He had wanted to see and listen to Him for a long time, and he decided to join the crowd and hopefully fulfil his long-held desire.

Unfortunately for Zacchaeus, Jesus was surrounded by a great crowd of people. Zacchaeus you see was very short - and being so unpopular there was no way anybody would make room for him or allow him through the crowd to the front. Looking down the road, Zacchaeus saw that the procession would soon pass under a large sycamore tree overhanging the street. Here was his only chance! Running ahead of the crowd, Zacchaeus cast aside his pride and gathering his robes around him, he climbed up into the tree. Soon he was perched in the branches, with a perfect view of the road below where Jesus would soon walk by.

A GREAT MEETING

Zacchaeus’ excitement mounted as he saw Jesus getting closer. He strained to catch a glimpse of Him and to hear His words as He spoke to the slow moving crowd. But nothing could have prepared him for what followed next; Jesus stopped right under the tree! Zacchaeus’ heart

began to pound - and then something even more amazing happened. Jesus looked straight up at him and called his name! “Zacchaeus!” How did...? Interrupting his thoughts, Jesus continued, “Come down Zacchaeus – I’m coming to your house for tea!” Zacchaeus could barely contain his excitement. Scrambling down out of the tree, he greeted the Lord Jesus, before leading Him away to where he lived - although he suspected Jesus already knew!

Yes, Jesus did know all about Zacchaeus! He knew the dissatisfaction in his life - even with all his wealth. He knew of his desire to be right with God and to deal with all the sin and guilt in his heart which had made him so miserable.

A GREAT CHANGE

The crowd, however, were surprised that Jesus went to eat with Zacchaeus, “a sinner!” Of course, he was a sinner, but Jesus was “The friend of sinners,” who came, “not to call the righteous - but sinners to repentance”. Many in the crowd would have loved to dine with Jesus and ‘make a good impression’ on Him. Jesus knew that Zacchaeus was ready for Jesus to make an impression on him - an impression that would change his life forever! Exactly what passed between Zacchaeus and the Lord while they were dining together, we don’t know. However, we do know that Zacchaeus finished the meal a changed man. He stood and said to the Lord, “Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything I will pay back four times the amount!”

GREAT GAIN

This was amazing! Previously Zacchaeus had craved this world’s wealth, but now he had found eternal salvation, “The pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:44-46) and his earthly wealth had suddenly lost its appeal. Now he cared more for doing what he knew to be honest and right. His meeting with the Saviour had changed his life in a moment. Jesus knew it to be the result of a new found faith in Himself as the Christ. He immediately responded to this statement with these wonderful words, “Today is salvation come to this house ... For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Yes, Zacchaeus had been lost, but now he was found. Before he had only earthly wealth, but now he had eternal life! Here was one rich man who had ‘gone through the eye of a needle’ to find salvation in Christ. Will you choose Christ today too? Is Jesus asking to come to your place today? Don’t delay - ask Him in!

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Give two reasons why Zacchaeus was so unpopular.	.....
2. What did Jesus do and say to Zacchaeus when He reached the tree?	.....
3. How did Zacchaeus prove that he was really saved?	.....
4. In what ways can we follow Zacchaeus’ example?	.....
5. What are the big differences between the sad man of the last lesson, and Zacchaeus now?	.....

Supper at Bethany

Key Verse:

“We love because He first loved us.”

1 John 4:19

Extra: If you had been alive then, how do you think you would have acted?

Level 5 lesson 28

Read: John 12:1-11

Further: Exodus 12:1-11

Many of you will know the Passover was probably the most significant of all the Jewish religious festivals. It was a powerful reminder of God’s judgment against sinful Pharaoh, and His marvellous protection through the sacrificial Passover Lamb. Wherever the Passover Lamb had been slain and its blood smeared on the front doorposts, God’s Angel of Death had ‘passed over’ and spared the first-born child, just as God had promised. Elsewhere in Egypt, there was immense grief and sorrow which led finally, to deliverance from slavery for the Hebrews.

Now, the annual Passover feast was only six days away, and John the Baptist’s cry concerning Jesus – “Behold the LAMB OF GOD, which takes away the sin of the world!” takes on special meaning. In less than a week, Jesus was to become the ultimate Passover Lamb, sacrificed for the sin of the world!

Hostile Jews at Jerusalem, led by the Pharisees and religious leaders, were determined to kill Jesus, but in nearby Bethany, there were still those who loved Him dearly. Two sisters, Mary and Martha, and their brother Lazarus, held a special dinner in His honour. Lazarus was the one whom Jesus had raised from the dead a little while previously.

As you can imagine, he had become something of a celebrity; he had become known to many simply as ‘the man Jesus raised from the dead.’ Many people wanted to talk to him and see him for themselves. Yet our story today is not really about Lazarus. Although he loved the Lord deeply, the focus of our story is on his sister Mary and what happened during the meal in Bethany. If the dinner is the same as that mentioned in Mark 14 and Matthew 26, the Lord’s disciples were there along with Simon the Leper, at whose home the dinner was held. There were, however, possibly two dinners, one six days before the Passover and the other two days before the Passover. If so, then we are studying the first one in this lesson.

MARY WORSHIPS

This was a time of special fellowship for these friends of Jesus. I’m sure He also appreciated it a great deal, knowing all that lay ahead during the coming week. As they reclined at the low table, Mary showed her devotion to the Lord in a very striking way, for all to witness.

Taking a bottle of very costly perfume, [worth approximately a year’s wages], she poured it over Jesus’

feet and wiped them gently with her hair. The whole house was filled with the beautiful fragrance of the perfume. Mary, you may remember, had shown her love for Jesus on a previous occasion, when He visited their home, choosing to spend time with Him while Martha worked in the kitchen. Her actions on that day, led Martha to complain to Jesus about her sister’s apparent laziness.

MISERABLE HYPOCRISY

Mary’s latest act of devotion was also criticised by some as wasteful. The disciples, of course, had witnessed this act of devotion, and one of them (that miserable man, Judas Iscariot) asked, “Why wasn’t this perfume sold and the money given to the poor?” (v5) This sounds extremely pious and selfless but in reality it was terrible hypocrisy.

Verse 6 reveals that Judas had no concern for the poor whatever! He was in charge of the disciple’s money-box, where money collected for the poor was kept. This despicable man was a thief who would steal from his companions, the funds that belonged to the poor. And yet he talked about giving to the poor! Such is the terrible nature of the hypocrite who can shout about the sins of others and not consider their own at all. Only a few days later, Judas would reveal his ‘true colours’ and betray his Master for a few coins.

MARY DEFENDED

In contrast, Jesus again defended Mary. “Leave her alone!” He chided. “She has done this in preparation for my burial.” He went on, “You will always have the poor among you; but you will not always have Me.” (v7-8) There is a real lesson for us here. Giving to the poor, or acts of service (in the kitchen in Martha’s case) are both good and necessary things. However, Jesus shows us clearly in His responses on both occasions, that He desires a heart of worshipful devotion and love even more.

We can so often be busy doing things for God that we actually spend very little time worshipping Him, and enjoying fellowship with Him - which is His foremost concern. Judas shows us that we can do things for Christ, yet be far from Him in our hearts. Again, Mary had “chosen that better part” and her act of devotion was recognised by the Lord.

Obviously, Jesus’ presence in Bethany again, attracted a lot of attention. Many Jews came to see Him and Lazarus. Their presence together was in itself an undeniable testimony; one who had been raised from the dead, and the One who had raised him! Many left convinced Jesus was the Messiah, and believed in Him. The priests, unable to deny the miracle, were determined NOT to believe and instead planned how they could kill Lazarus.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why was it appropriate that Jesus die at the Passover time?	.....
2. What did Mary’s act show?	.....
3. What proves Judas to be a hypocrite and deceiver?	.....
4. What did many of the Jews do because of the miracle of raising Lazarus from the dead?	.....
5. Why did the priests want to kill Lazarus?	.....