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General audience: how do we pray?

Vatican City, 1 June 2016 – The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, by which Jesus teaches us how to pray to invoke the Father's mercy, was the theme of the Pope's catechesis during this week's Wednesday general audience in St. Peter's Square, attended by more than 15,000 people.

The protagonists enter the temple to pray, but they do so in very different ways and obtain the opposite results. The pharisee prays on his feet and uses many words. His is a prayer of thanks to God, but in reality it is a display of his own merits, with an air of superiority over other men, whom he qualifies as "extortioners, unjust, adulterers", including "this tax collector" among them. "It is precisely this that is the problem: the Pharisee prays to God, but in reality he is looking at and praying to himself", explained the Holy Father. "Instead of standing before God, he stands before a mirror. Although he is in the temple, he feels no need to prostrate himself before God's majesty; he stands and feels sure of himself, as if the temple were his! He lists the good works he has performed: he is irreproachable, he observes the Law beyond the call of duty, he fasts twice a week and he pays tithes on all he earns. ... In short, rather than praying, the Pharisee takes pleasure in his observance of the precepts. Even his attitude and his words are far from the way of acting and speaking of God, Who loves all men and does not despise sinners. The Pharisee, instead, is disdainful towards sinners, even when he indicates the other person who is there. Considering himself righteous, the Pharisee neglects the most important commandment: love for God and neighbour."

Therefore, "it is not enough to ask ourselves how much we pray; we must also ask how we pray, or rather, how our heart is: it is important to examine it to evaluate our thoughts and feelings, and to eradicate arrogance and hypocrisy. But, I ask myself, is it possible to pray with arrogance? No. Can one pray with hypocrisy? No. We must pray by placing ourselves before God as we are. Not like the Pharisee, who prayed with arrogance and hypocrisy. We are all caught up in the frenetic pace of daily life and are often at the mercy of our sensations, dazed and confused. We need to learn how to resume the journey towards our heart and to recover the value of intimacy and silence, because it is there that God encounters us and speaks to us. Only by starting there can we, in turn, encounter others and speak with them. The Pharisee set out for the temple and is sure of himself, but he does not realise that he has lost the way of his heart."

"By contrast, the tax collector appears in the temple with a humble and repentant heart, and 'standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast'. His prayer is very short, not long like that of the

Pharisee: 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. Nothing more. A beautiful prayer! In fact, tax collectors, or publicans as they were known, were considered to be impure people, who submitted to the foreign occupiers; they were regarded in a poor light and in general associated with 'sinners'. The parable teaches that one is righteous or a sinner not by virtue of one's social standing but rather by one's way of relating to God and brothers. His gestures of penance and his simple words reveal his awareness of his condition. His prayer is essential. He acts humbly, sure only of being a sinner in need of mercy. While the Pharisee asked for nothing as he already had everything, the publican can only beg for God's mercy."

"Presenting himself empty-handed, with his naked heart, and acknowledging himself as a sinner, the publican teaches us the condition necessary to receive the Lord's forgiveness. In the end he, so despised, is transformed into an icon of the true believer."

Jesus concludes the parable: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted".

"Of these two, who is the corrupt?" asked the Holy Father. "The Pharisee is the icon of corruption because he pretends to pray when all he really does is boast. So, in life he who believes himself righteous and judges others with disdain is corrupt and hypocritical. Arrogance compromises every good act, emptying prayer and distancing one from God and from others. If God prefers humility it is not to debase us: humility is the necessary precondition for being lifted up again by Him, so as to experience the mercy that comes to fill our emptiness. The prayer of the arrogant does not reach God's heart, but the humility of the wretched opens it up. God has a predilection for the humble and, encountering a humble heart, He opens His own fully."

"This humility is what the Virgin Mary expresses in her song, the Magnificat: 'He has looked on the humble estate of His servant. ... And His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation'", concluded Pope Francis, invoking the help of Mary our Mother to pray with a humble heart and inviting the faithful in the Square to repeat three times the tax collector's brief prayer: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner".
