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## In the End, Judgment Belongs to God

### Biblical Reflection for 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

ROME, OCT. 19, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Last Sunday's Gospel focused on the necessity of prayer (Luke 18:1-8). The second of two parables in Chapter 18:9-15 condemns the self-righteous, critical attitude of the Pharisee and teaches that the fundamental attitude of the Christian disciple must be the recognition of sinfulness and complete dependence on God's graciousness.

Today's Gospel parable recalls Luke's story of the pardoning of the sinful woman (7:36-50) where a similar contrast is presented between the critical attitude of the Pharisee Simon and the love shown by the pardoned sinner.

One of Luke's favorite themes, the reversal brought about by the coming of Jesus, is beautifully illustrated in today's Gospel. The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector is directed to a particular kind of people: those who were law-abiding in their own eyes but who looked down on everyone else. The Pharisee, a member of the group of the so-called righteous, prayed "with himself," and the whole prayer he gives is focused on himself and his good works. He is a legend unto himself, shining in his own eyes, especially as he compares himself to the tax collector, the one who belonged to the despised group in society.

#### The great distance

The tax collector knew that he wasn't any good. He couldn't reverse the cheating he had done. Acts of penance, like trying to pay back the people he had cheated, wouldn't really help. He couldn't expect people to excuse or forgive him. The only thing he knew was that it was only possible to admit his guilt when he came and brought it before God. That God would forgive him, he didn't dare to hope. And it was only in this way that he was able to experience Jesus' word to him, "You are good because I have accepted you."

In the parable we are told that the tax collector stood at a great distance. This great distance separating the two people is not only a matter of geographical or physical distance, but rather of the great distance in their status in society and in their attitudes. When the tax collector prays, he cries out to God, begging him for mercy. In the end, judgment belongs to God.

The provocative story warns us of our own behavior in prayer, word and deed. This parable was a shock to its first hearers. If anyone in Judaism would not go home from the temple justified, it would be a tax collector. One who worked for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people, a participant in a harsh and corrupt system, politically a traitor, religiously unclean, a publican, was a reprehensible character. While his prayer was in the spirit of the Miserere (Psalm 51), his life was offensive.

#### Doing justice to the parable

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The Pharisee is not a venomous villain and the publican is not the generous, common man or woman. To reduce these characters to caricatures does not do justice to the parable. If the Pharisee is pictured as a villain and the tax collector a hero, then each gets what he deserves, there is no surprise of grace and the parable is stripped of its real meaning. The meaning of the story is not that all Pharisees are by their nature false, dishonest, proud and arrogant, and that all tax collectors are really poor, humble, truthful people deep down inside. Luke tells us that to set oneself apart from "the rest" is to go home unjustified, unapproved and ungraced by God.

In Jesus' parable, what each person receives is "in spite of," not "because of." When the two men are viewed in terms of character and community expectations, without labels or prejudice, the parable still shocks us, and still carries the power both to offend and bless. We cannot preach about this parable and depict the characters in such a way that people go out the doors of our Churches this day saying to themselves, and perhaps to others, "Thank God I am not like the Pharisee." It is possible that the reversal could be reversed!

The prayer of the lowly is heard

The words of today's first reading from Sirach (35:12-14, 16-18) are most fitting to understand the spirit required of us in today's Gospel parable: "The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens. The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right, and the Lord will not delay."

Paul's life poured out like a libation

Today's Second Letter of Timothy (4:6-8, 16-18) offers us an important insight into St. Paul's ministry. Paul, in prison in Rome, saw death approaching and sketched an evaluation full of recognition and hope. He was at peace with God and with himself and faced death serenely, in the knowledge that he had spent his whole life, sparing no effort, at the service of the Gospel. Paul knew that his death through martyrdom was imminent. He regards it as an act of worship in which his blood will be poured out in sacrifice (cf. Exodus 29:38-40; Philippians 2:17). At the close of his life Paul could testify to the accomplishment of what Christ himself foretold concerning him at the time of his conversion, "I will show him what he will have to suffer for my name" (Acts 9:16).

Having spent the past two weeks in Rome preparing for and taking part in the canonization ceremonies of six new saints for the Church on Sunday, Oct. 17, the memory of Peter and Paul hovers mightily over this city. Peter and Paul, each with his own personal and ecclesial experience, testify that the Lord never abandoned them, even amid the harshest trials. The Lord was with Peter to deliver him from the hands of his opponents in Jerusalem; he was with Paul in his constant apostolic endeavors to communicate to him the strength of his grace, to make him a fearless proclaimer of the Gospel for the benefit of the nations (2 Timothy 4:17).

Paul modeled his life on Jesus Christ. During the Last Supper, Jesus had already anticipated the event of Calvary. He accepts the death on the cross and with his acceptance transforms the act of violence into an act of giving, of self-giving poured forth, "Even if I am to be poured out as a libation on the sacrificial offering of your faith," Paul says on the basis of this and in regard to his own imminent martyrdom in Philippians 2:17. At the Last Supper the cross is already present, accepted and transformed by Jesus.

To live in constant intimacy with God

In conclusion, I offer you an excerpt of Pope Benedict XVI's letter to seminarians that was published on Oct. 18, 2010. Though written on the occasion of the conclusion of the Year of Priests last June, the rich, personal, Papal message speaks to all of us in light of today's Scripture readings:

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"Anyone who wishes to become a priest must be first and foremost a 'man of God,' to use the expression of St. Paul (2 Timothy 6:11). For us God is not some abstract hypothesis; he is not some stranger who left the scene after the "big bang." God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. In the face of Jesus Christ we see the face of God. In his words we hear God himself speaking to us. It follows that the most important thing in our path towards priesthood and during the whole of our priestly lives is our personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

"The priest is not the leader of a sort of association whose membership he tries to maintain and expand. He is God's messenger to his people. He wants to lead them to God and in this way to foster authentic communion between all men and women. That is why it is so important, dear friends, that you learn to live in constant intimacy with God. When the Lord tells us to 'pray constantly,' he is obviously not asking us to recite endless prayers, but urging us never to lose our inner closeness to God.

"Praying means growing in this intimacy. So it is important that our day should begin and end with prayer; that we listen to God as the Scriptures are read; that we share with him our desires and our hopes, our joys and our troubles, our failures and our thanks for all his blessings, and thus keep him ever before us as the point of reference for our lives. In this way we grow aware of our failings and learn to improve, but we also come to appreciate all the beauty and goodness, which we daily take for granted and so we grow in gratitude. With gratitude comes joy for the fact that God is close to us and that we can serve him."

May the Lord make us better servants who do what we ought, never focusing on being better than or above others, but recognizing our obligation to be greater servants to others, precisely because we have been given so much, forgiven so much, and blessed so much. May God grant us generous hearts as we serve Him and love him in others! To him be glory forever and ever.

[The readings for 30th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14]

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