Do you pray like the Pharisee or do you pray like the publican? Like the self-righteous or the tax gatherer? When you stand in the temple to pray do you pray like someone who “trusts in themselves” or like someone who needs a Savior? As a Pastor I am a pretty good diagnostician; I can listen to how someone prays and pretty much figure out their heart. This sermon begins a short sermon series on “Dear and Glorious Physician Stories”, a series from the perspective of the Gospel writer Luke, who was himself a doctor. It is a reference to Colossians 4: 14 where Paul is writing, “Luke, the beloved physician”. And if you want the shorthand condensed version of this entire series just ruminate on Jesus’ words quoted at Luke 5: 31: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.” You don’t need a doctor if you’re not sick. If you think you’re whole and well, you don’t need Jesus. If you think you’ve got this all figured out you don’t need the Lord. If you think you don’t need a balm in Gilead to heal the sin sick soul then you don’t need the Great Physician. If you have no need then why the heck are you here????

So Jesus tells a parable and it is directed to, as our scripture I just read to you notes, “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others” (Luke 18: 9) Of all the Gospel writers Luke alone, the Dear and Glorious Physician, records this story Jesus told. So the Pharisee is standing in the Temple and the Tax Collector is standing in the Temple and both are praying. And Jesus, the great story teller, contrasts the two prayers. The Pharisee begins, “God” but it is clear he is really not addressing the Lord, he is not actually praying to God, he is not speaking to God. He is speaking to himself. Much of our praying is not addressed to God; it is just an internal conversation with ourselves. Do we take time to enter into the presence and holiness of God? Do we see ourselves speaking with the Lord? As Jesus’ parable notes, the Pharisee “prayed thus with himself” (v. 11) Exactly. He wasn’t praying to God, he was talking to himself. And of course he was praying to himself. He obviously had all this God stuff figured out. He didn’t need the Almighty. He was the Master of his own soul. His goodness made him right in relationship to God. He didn’t need God. He wasn’t sick. He didn’t need the Great Physician. So speak to the one he truly worshipped in his own life. Speak to himself. “O Pharisee, Lord of my own life, I’m glad I’m a really good person and not like those people over there. I do everything right. I fast and I tithe. I got it all figured out and I do everything I need to do. I deserve to go to heaven. In my name I pray it. Amen.” How do you pray? Do you pray like the Pharisee?

Some people quote scripture at God in prayer. He doesn’t need that; remember He knows that already, after all, He wrote it. Some people pray over and over again, “Help me” or “Help us”. Well, we know who they think is really the important actor on the face of the earth. WE ARE. I AM. We just need a little help from you, God. I’ve got my plan and I’ve got this all figured out, so just help me to do what I want to do. Or the one I hate the most, the person who prays to
try to send a message to someone else in the room. “If these miserable stiff necked people would just do everything I want them to do then what a great church we would have. In my name I ask myself and help me a little bit God. Amen.” Not a prayer. Praying to the wrong person. You think you really don’t need the Lord. Message received. How do you pray?

And then there was the prayer of the tax collector, the man shunned by his society, the publican, the man who was constantly reminded that he was no good. In humility he beat his breast, I see it with tears streaming down his face, he prays: “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” (v. 13) Oh, he is most definitely addressing the Almighty because he has diagnosed one of the great character traits and attributes of God – God’s MERCY. Mercy, is that we receive, not what we deserve, but what someone else gives us because of their kindness, grace, and steadfast love. The tax collector knows he deserves judgment, that there is much in his life that is not perfect, and he knows he needs God, and what God can do for him, that he cannot do for himself. God has mercy on whom God chooses to have mercy. God gives and God takes away; blessed be the name of the Lord. God, YOU are merciful. I am a sinner. That’s who YOU are; and that’s who I AM. Exactly. And because of who the tax collector knows he is, he also knows that only God can cure him, only God can heal him of his sinful condition, only God possesses the MERCY that only God can give him to give him life. This prayer is sometimes referred to as The Jesus Prayer, “O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, be merciful to me a sinner.” Often when I am praying in my prayer closet I pray this over and over again to quiet my own thoughts, to enter into the presence of a merciful God, and to remind me who I am, and who God is, and why I need HIM so. How do you pray? Like the Pharisee or like the sinner?

We men really think we never need a doctor. It will go away on its own. No it won’t. If I just keep going eventually it will get better. But it never does. We think we are impervious. Immortal. We think we never need to go to the doctor. We don’t need medicine. We don’t need rest. Everyone else may have to, but I don’t. I have to get up and I have to preach, lead the session meeting, whatever. Merely a flesh wound. I’ve been sick as a dog all January. I would start to feel a little better and then resume my regular activities and WHAM get clobbered and get sick again, worse than before. I should go to the doctor, I would say. And then put it off and find reasons not to go. Anybody else like this? Finally, I went to the doctor. Finally, I got the right medicine. And finally I got better. And then I think to myself, “Why didn’t I go to the doctor at the beginning of January? Why did I put it off and wait so long? Exactly. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (v. 14) Everyone who thinks they don’t need the Great Physician will stay sick and everyone who in humility admits they need a Savior will be cured. Change your attitude today; sooner rather than later. Don’t put it off even one day. Of course, someone like Luke, the dear and glorious physician, would understand this. Do you? How do you pray? And what does that tell you about yourself? Do you, or do you not, need Jesus? Amen and Amen.

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IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!