

"FIRST IMPRESSIONS"

30th SUNDAY -C-

October 26, 2025

**Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18; Psalm 34;
2 Timothy 4: 6-8. 16-18; Luke 18: 9-14**

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Dear Preachers:

Is Jesus being Sirach contradicting himself in today's first reading? The opening line reads, "The Lord is a God of justice, who knows no favorites, though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet God hears the cry of the oppressed." But the rest of the reading reveals a very partial God who has taken a very definite stand and turned a favoring ear toward "the oppressed...orphan...widow and the lowly." God does seem to have favorites, and they are not the ones our society calls "favored."

Sirach wrote in Hebrew around 180 BCE and fifty years later his work was translated into Greek for a dispersed Jewish community in a Hellenistic culture. He speaks to basic issues, particularly the inequalities in society. For those who see their comfort and riches as a blessing from God for their good deeds and social status, Sirach espouses another perspective. God has not favored the rich, no matter what visible signs they might point to of God's seeming approval.

If anything, God has chosen to take the side of the poor and to pay special attention to the prayer of the lowly—hence this reading's connection to today's gospel. Sirach suggests that if God is to be found standing with the poor and those treated unjustly, then we had better take more than a few steps in that direction ourselves. Justice requires that those who can, should help those who cannot.

Diane Bergant [with Richard Fragomeni, *Preaching the New Lectionary*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000.] points out the original Greek suggests that God not only hears the cry of the oppressed, God does more – God yields to their requests. "It's almost as if God is bound to respond positively to them. As a

covenant partner God is accountable to them, especially when other covenant partners disregard their responsibilities" (page 397). The surprise in both this first reading and the gospel is that those considered unacceptable in social and religious circles are the very ones whose prayer is heard – their prayer is "proper."

Today's gospel teaches us a lot about prayer. First, prayer doesn't have to be long. Both men in the parable prayed very brief prayers. (I had a theology teacher once who said prayer can be very, very short----"Help!".) But each man's prayer was very different. In his brief prayer the Pharisee said "I" four times. While he seems to thank God for his goodness, he really is patting himself on the back. In his view he is singular and unique. He thanks God for his not being like "the rest of humanity, greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector." In his own eyes he is a completed product. There is little room in him to be changed by his prayer. He might have said prayers, but he didn't pray because he didn't see any need to change. There was no space for God to enter his life.

On the other hand, we don't hear the word "I" from the tax collector. He refers to himself by using "me"—"O God, be merciful to me a sinner." "I"—"Me" What's the difference? One ("I") is the subject of the sentence, the cause of the action. The other ("ME") is the object, the recipient of another's action. The tax collector can't achieve mercy on his own, he reveals his need and desire for God to do something for him. He wants to be changed, and he trusts that God will help him make the necessary change in his life. What must have shocked those who heard this parable is how radical it is. The Pharisee is not a bad person, he is doing everything he should have been doing, he is completely dedicated to living the law's demands. In fact, he goes beyond what was required in religious law. He is offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God for his personal exemplary behavior.

As someone working for the Roman occupation, the tax collector's life would have been considered an abomination, a betrayal to Israel and her God. But God sets this sinner right, does what the people thought observance of the law would do – God justifies the sinner. What got the tax collector right with God had nothing to do with

strict observance of the law or a righteous public life. God accepted this sinner because he confessed his sin and hoped in God's mercy. When it comes right down to it, we are better off trusting in God's mercy than in our own efforts and what God might "owe" us in return.

Like the two men, we have come into this temple today to pray. Like the tax collector we recognize that we are not complete. We know we need to move over and leave room for God to continue shaping and molding us. What is in our hearts? Where do we need to make necessary changes in our lives? What are our desires and what are our limitations? We admit today that we are "works in progress," we admit our need for change and so we take prayerful positions before God. Unlike the Pharisee, we don't have to compare ourselves to others. We just have to be ourselves and be as honest with God as he was. God sees the empty spaces that need filling and the sins that need mercy. Who knows what work God be doing in us at this Eucharist today? Who knows what changes might come about when we put ourselves in God's hands today?

We might find ourselves:

- ☐ withholding criticism
- ☐ giving one another the benefit of the doubt
- ☐ letting judgment pass into God's hands
- ☐ forgetting the past mistakes and offenses of others
- ☐ willing to be surprised by another's growth in goodness

In short, we might find ourselves letting go of our fixed notions and positions and giving another person space and time to grow. If God changes us in prayer today, we just might find ourselves enabling others to change. What good does prayer do? Does it change God, or does it change us? The gospel today says the tax collector went home "Justified" - changed. That means he was in right relationship with God. Something had changed in him through his prayer. If we are not changed by our prayers then perhaps we haven't acknowledged God as the subject of our prayer and ourselves as the recipients of God's actions—the way the tax collector did. We may have said our prayers, but there is more to prayer than just words.

Click here for a link to this Sunday's readings:

<https://bible.usccb.org/bible/readings/102625.cfm>