

Cliche It Up!

I can remember growing up listening to older people lead prayers, lead singing, or deliver invitations that had the most eloquent words I had ever heard. Phrases flowed with such grace that Shakespeare would be envious, and afterwards everyone would say, "Amen" or nod in approval. When I reached the age where it became my turn to take part in public worship, I returned to these times, called to mind specific phrases or words that I remember hearing other people say, memorized them, then recited them with pinpoint accuracy. After it was over, a sigh of relief came to me as I felt my job was done, and that I had done the congregation proud.

But wait, who was I *supposed* to be making proud? At 14, I sought the approval of my older brothers and sisters, because they were the ones I would have direct contact with for the time being. The words flowed from my lips just as well (in my mind at least) as those from others, so why should God not be satisfied with my service? It has only come to mind within the past several years that the words I offered up, without any thought as to who I was addressing, were useless, and only "reached as high as the ceiling."

If we look at the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18, we see two distinct prayers offered to God. However, whereas the Pharisee offers a hypocritical praise to God for his "*righteous state*," the tax collector humbles himself, acknowledges his sinful state, and is "*justified rather than the other*." Why, if both were prayers to God, was one accepted and the other rejected? It goes back to a problem of focus. The Pharisee put his attention not on God, but on the other Pharisees, Jim the scribe, and the grapefruit attendant down the street. His focus was not to speak to God, but rather to speak to everyone else about how great he was. The Pharisee might as well have been standing on the temple in a multi-colored robe, screaming it into a megaphone, and wearing a neon green shirt that says, "I am the greatest." The tax collector, on the other hand, offered not praise to himself, but relied exclusively on the forgiveness and grace of God to build him up. It mattered not if he were the only one in the room, his prayer was one of repentance; one of humility; one of focus.

Today, we might be saying, "Well I would never brag about how great I am to other people, that is just rude." But what is the difference between that and when we use 12-syllable words that we do not understand, and do not know how to use? No one would speak to others in a way that was incomprehensible, but rather communicate a message so that both would understand, otherwise what would be the purpose? The name of God, and

especially approaching Him in prayer, should be treated as holy and reverent, not a time to draw attention to oneself. In Leviticus 22:32, God tells Israel exactly how important His name is, saying, "*You shall not profane my holy name, but I will be hallowed against the Children of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you ...*" His name is infinitely higher than ours, so whose should we be exalting with our service?

Everything that we do in our service to God should have a purpose fueling it, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:26, "*Thus I fight, not as one who beats the air.*" When we approach God in prayer, song, or speech, we come to Him with an objective. Once that goal is accomplished, why spend more time fluffing it up? Jesus instructed His followers to "*not use vain repetitions as the heathen do, for they think they will be heard for their many words*" (Matthew 6:7). Every model prayer we have recorded for us from Jesus and His disciples were straight to the point, with no emphasis put on the beauty of the speech. Yet, how many times have we prayed a 30 minute prayer with four minutes of substance, hoping that God will give us "style points" based on the eloquence? Go to God with your concerns, requests, supplications and praise to Him, not with your overused cliches and phrases overheard by Mr. Fluff. These things are not beneficial, and not edifying to anyone. It is the sincere, contrite heart that humbles self before God and focuses on serving Him through the task at hand that is acceptable and good. "*But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers*" (1 Peter 4:7).

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