



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Jump Start # 2167

Luke 18:9 "And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt"

Luke 18 is the chapter about prayer. There are two back-to-back parables about prayer. The persistent widow and the two men who went up to the temple to pray. Our verse today introduces the parable about the temple praying.

It's good that both men went to pray. That's more than some do. Some can go through an entire day, even a week, sadly, even a lifetime with little or no thoughts about God. Both of these men went to pray.

However, not all prayers are good. This parable illustrates that very well. One man thanked God that he was not like others and then he bragged to God. One doesn't brag to God. First, He already knows. And, second, you are not going to impress God by what you do. The only thing that catches the eye of God is our faith. The Pharisee never praised God. He never truly thanked God. He didn't really even talk to God. He needed nothing. He had to confess nothing. All he could do was look down from his mountain top and be glad he wasn't like others. Arrogant, self-righteous and definitely in need of God's grace, this guy missed it all together.

Now, this leads into a very sensitive subject, elitism in the church. It would be wonderful if it never existed, but it does. It hurts. It pushes some away. It's ugly. It's not necessary. I have seen it. I have tasted it. I have fought it. I have tried to steer clear of it. I want it to go away.

Elitism is demonstrated in several ways. Some will talk about all the Gospel Meetings that they go to. Some will talk about special Bible camps and classes that they go to. For some, it's a certain college. For some, it can even be a certain congregation. Now, are any of these things wrong? No. Never. When the Bible is taught and honest and good hearts intersect, great things will happen. These things are good. Helping young people get closer to God through a study of the Bible is a wonderful thing. It's life changing.

Very similar to our passage today and the parable about prayer. Praying in the temple was not wrong. It's how one did it and what it did to them.

Elitism is driven by judging others. And, it is developed when you go to a spiritual event and I don't. It is easily concluded that you are more spiritual than I am, simply because you are there and I am not. It's just a step from that to think, you are better than I am. And, from that, you want to only associate with strong Christians, like you, and not like me. So, a club or clique forms. I've seen it in a congregation where only certain ones will talk to certain ones. If you are one who is on the inside, you are included, invited and welcomed. If you are on the outside, you feel like you are on the outside.

(OVER)

Now, here's some problems with elitism in the church.

First, it stinks. It's nothing like Jesus. I remember years ago a dad talking to me about his college son. He's so spiritual now the father proudly said. The son walked in, passed right by me, and a few others, without saying a word. He went right to his buddies and you could see him laughing and enjoying his time with them. I turned to this father and said, "Spiritual? Even Jesus spent time with Samaritans." My take-away from that was this college kid didn't think I was in his spiritual circle. Samaritans- do you have any in your life? Would you even stop by a well in Samaria as Jesus did?

Second, so you are better than me. That's probably true. Shouldn't the big ones help the little ones? Should we work on helping each other mature and get stronger in the Lord? Share what you have learned. Invite and include others so they can see. Looking down our noses at others, doesn't make one right nor is it the spirit of Christ. It's like driving down the highway. Certainly there are people behind you and beside you, but there are also people ahead of you. That's life. That doesn't mean one is better than the other.

Third, we must be careful about judging someone's spirituality and strength solely upon attendance, especially at special events. So a guy doesn't attend all the area meetings. We can conclude that he is not very interested in the Gospel or that he is simply weak. However, he may be out teaching or helping someone and doing more good than we are. Maybe a congregation decides to have one Sunday service rather than two. Does that mean they are weak and not very spiritual? Maybe there are reasons you don't know. Maybe we are hopelessly stuck in our traditions. Maybe we ought to mind our own business. A young person doesn't go to a Bible camp. He's not spiritual. Be careful. You don't know that. That young man may be a great encouragement to his congregation. He may be a huge influence in his school. Because someone doesn't come to our event doesn't mean they are weak and uninterested.

Fourth, elitism stands directly in the shadows of the disciples who argued about which one was the greatest in the kingdom. That's nothing more than judging and elitism. Jesus wouldn't have any part with that. Serve is what the Lord said. Going to a college that teaches the Bible is nice if one can afford it. But long before any of those colleges existed, folks were faithfully serving the Lord and making a difference in their world. Before the colleges existed, people knew the word of God and could please the Lord. The schools serve a purpose, but they are not the church nor are we crushed without them. If someone wants to go, that's fine. If they don't, that's fine.

Fifth, the way to make elitism go away is to include all, invite all, and learn from all. Don't be too big in your britches, as my grandma used to say, to learn from others. Don't mock a guy because he doesn't use the "in" translation these days. Don't think someone can teach you a thing or two even though he hasn't been to all the things you have. Truth is truth, no matter who speaks it. The disciples wanted to run the children off. Jesus invited them and then used them to teach the disciples. Preachers need to remember this point as well. We can sit pretty tall up on the mountain top, thinking that we know the Bible more than anyone else. False. Not only that, but in many congregations, the preacher isn't even the best public speaker. He just happens to be the one who gets paid to do that job. Learn from the little old widow who has studied her Bible all of her life. Listen to the teen whose curious eyes see something in a text that you have overlooked for years. Consider the perspective of others. Listen to their questions. Love all. Include all. Stop declaring that some are less spiritual than you are. Your assessment may not be right.

The Pharisee who prayed certainly thought he was better than the publican. He wasn't. In fact, the prayer of the publican justified him. It did more good than the words of the Pharisee. If you must look down your nose, look down into a mirror and take a long, deep look at yourself. Are you doing what you can? Are you where you ought to be spiritually? Are you using your talents? Are you making a difference?

Elitism drives some away. It simply drives me crazy. It's time to end it. It's time to stop acting like a private county club and open the doors of our hearts to all. To the one who still has one foot in the world. To the one who is mixed up doctrinally. To the one who talks faster than he thinks. To the one who has been in trouble. To the one who is lukewarm. To the one who needs so much help and attention. Include. Invite. Welcome. Help. If we don't, we tend to shun. And, it is here where the spirit of elitism starts all over again.

God so loved the world...that includes you and that includes me.

Roger Shouse
