

uscclI know a priest who came to a new parish and found that sections of the Church were roped off so the congregation would be forced into the front and middle sections of the Church. It took 3 weeks to convince the ushers to stop doing this.

He hated it when people are confronted with do's and don't's the as soon as they walk into Church. Some people need to be in the back for health reasons. But the main reason for getting rid of the ropes was something a man said to him: "Father, I just recently returned to Church. I've made the big step to walk through the door, but you've got to let me ease my way up into being in the middle of the congregation. I have a lot of things that the Lord and I need to deal with first."

That's why the tax collector was in the back of the Temple. He made the big step to enter the Temple. He didn't feel that it was right for him to come any closer. It is not that he didn't want to participate in the service. He and God had things he needed to work out. Namely, he needed God's mercy.

The prayers of the tax collector and the Pharisee were very different. The Pharisee was fulfilling an obligation in the Law to worship. He made sure that God remembered what a great person he was and would give him the reward he felt he deserved. To emphasize this, he pointed to the tax collector, "I certainly am a lot better than that guy over there."

The tax collector didn't make any comparisons, nor did he try to remind God of any of the good things he had done in his life. He didn't say, "I know I've done wrong, collecting taxes for the Romans from my own people and making a profit on it for myself, but I also fed my neighbor's family when he died suddenly, and I routinely give alms to beggars." Nor did he say, "Lord, I am not an arrogant man, like that Pharisee." His prayer was simply, "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner."

The parable reaches to the core of our relationship with God. God chooses us. He establishes the relationship. We haven't won this relationship with our prayers, or our actions. God has chosen us, & this has not been easy. It has taken an infinite struggle on his part. This struggle included the struggle for people in general, necessitating his becoming one of his people and showing them the extent of his love for them through the sacrificial love of the cross. The struggle also includes the Lord's continual effort to win each of us into his love as individuals.

God is determined to form a relationship with each of us. So often we have run from Him. When we realize that God has chosen us as individuals, that He loves each of us, and when we consider how we have resisted Him, we realize that our prayer must begin with, "Have mercy on me a sinner."

The relationship with God flows through the Church, yet it is unique since we are individuals. No one is better or worse than another person in the eyes of God. We are all unique. God sees us as individuals. He loves each of us as unique individuals. He forgives each of us for the times we have not returned his love. We all live under his mercy.

Catholicism is often accused of putting people on guilt trips. This is not true. Catholicism puts people on reality trips. Catholicism dares to speak about unpopular topics like sin. Catholicism dares to invite people to consider their own participation in sin and seek forgiveness. It recognizes that our salvation is a process we are engaged in. We are not saved yet, we are being saved. We recognize that we are human beings and that we can give in to temptation to sin. The Lord was one of us. He experienced what temptation was and he understands our need for mercy. He gives the sacrament of mercy, penance, because he wants his mercy, not our guilt directing our lives.

Catholicism is not concerned with guilt, it is concerned with mercy. People are continually telling their priests how much they need the Mercy of God. They are realists. We all need the mercy of God. As we come to a deeper understanding of all that God has done for us, we also come to a deeper understanding of how much we need his mercy and forgiveness. The greatest saints are people who see themselves as great sinners because they have a profound realization of the extent of God's love for them and the many times they have not returned His love.

A pharisee and a tax collector come into the Temple. Both are there to pray. Only one is humble enough to recognize his need for the healing hand of God. Only one prays because only one realizes that he really needs God. And that one leaves in the embrace of the Lord's love.