

PRAYER



Author: Ruth B. Greiner
Artist: Frances H. Hertzler
Proofreaders: Audrey Brubaker, Sharon Neal, Dr. Charles Piepgrass, Elinor Rogers
PowerPoint Presentation, Interface and Download: LaRue and Mark Bowser
Typesetting and Layout: Patricia Pope

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 Phone: (717) 859-1131 Web: www.biblevisuals.org

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NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Display each illustration where indicated in text, laying volume aside when the story line continues beyond the picture.

Lesson #1

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

Scripture to be studied: Matthew 23:1-30; Luke 18:9-14; Isaiah 40:19; 44:14-19

The aim of the lesson: To answer the questions: (1) What is prayer? (2) To whom should we pray? (3) Who can pray?

What your students should know: The true and living God hears and answers the prayers of those who have been forgiven of their sins.

What your students should feel: A desire to pray to God.

What your students should do: Pray, confessing their sins to God and asking His forgiveness.

Lesson outline (for the teacher's and students' notebooks):

1. Many people pray to idols (Isaiah 40:19; 44:14-19).
2. The Pharisee spoke proudly of himself (Matthew 23:1-30; Luke 18:9-12).
3. The tax collector prayed humbly to God (Luke 18:13).
4. God hears the prayers of those who confess their sins and seek forgiveness (Luke 18:14).

The verse to be memorized:

For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers. (1 Peter 3:12a)

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

The Word of God has much to say about prayer. It is important to study and teach the blessed truths concerning prayer. We must experience these truths in our daily lives. Prayer is a priceless privilege. If the power of prayer is a reality to you, teacher, these lessons will live to your class.

The main reason for teaching these four lessons is to help each of your students to learn to pray.

THE LESSON

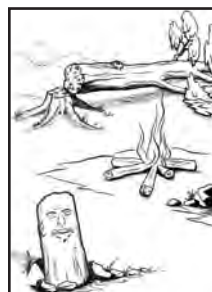
Who can tell me the name of the ruler of this country? How many of you have ever seen him in person? Have you ever talked to him? Suppose you desire to speak to the ruler of this land. Can you walk right into his home at any time and say

whatever you wish? Of course not. He is a busy person. You would have to have a very important reason for wanting to talk to him. And even then you probably would not be allowed into his presence without special permission.

There is Someone who is higher and much greater than any ruler on earth. Who is this One? He is the living God, the Creator of Heaven and earth. He is great and wise and almighty. Does He allow people to come into His presence at any time to talk with Him? And even better than *allowing* people to come, He actually *invites* them to come! The very One who made the world—the trees, grass, flowers, mountains, animals and people—wants people to talk to Him. God, who knows everything and can do everything is always ready to listen to those who talk to Him. Talking to God seems simple enough. Yet numbers of people in the world know little or nothing about true prayer. Others do not know that God has set certain rules that must be followed if prayer is to be answered.

1. MANY PEOPLE PRAY TO IDOLS Isaiah 40:19; 44:14-19

Many pray but not to the true and living God. Why? Because they do not know Him. The Bible says that some people pray to idols which they themselves have made and trimmed with gold and silver. (See Isaiah 40:19.)



Show Illustration #1

If a man is too poor to buy an expensive gold idol, he may cut down a tree—perhaps a tree which he himself had planted. He will use some of the wood to make a fire to warm himself. He may burn some of that same wood to bake his bread. And he will use the rest of the wood to have a face carved on it. Then, falling down before it, he worships and prays to it saying, “Help me, for you are my god.”

(See Isaiah 44:14-19.)

He will not stop to think: *This is only a piece of wood. I have burned part of it to keep me warm. I have used some of it to bake*

my bread. How can the rest of it be a god? Why should I pray to a piece of wood? Can my wooden god hear me? No, he does not ask such questions. He simply prays to his piece of wood as if it really were a god who could hear and answer prayer. How foolish!

Some men and women climb the steps of temples on their hands and knees. They think that by doing this, their god (it may be a gold one) will hear their prayers. Others write their prayers on paper and fasten them to prayer wheels. They expect that each time the prayer wheel turns, the words of their prayer will be repeated.

Hosts of people believe that if they offer sacrifices to their gods, their gods will answer their prayers. In fact, there have been some who suppose that the true God of Heaven demands a sacrifice before He will hear prayer. But hundreds of years ago a prophet of God (Isaiah) told the people of God (Israel) that no sacrifice which man could make would be great enough for the living God. He explained that if the people were to cut down all the trees in the entire land (of Lebanon) and offer all their animals to God, their offering would not be sufficient. (See Isaiah 40:16.)

2. THE PHARISEE SPOKE PROUDLY OF HIMSELF

Matthew 23:1-30; Luke 18:9-12

There are those who think that if a person is good enough, his prayers will be answered. Long, long ago, when the Lord Jesus lived on earth, there was a group of men considered to be good. They were important rulers of the Jewish people, called Pharisees.

The Pharisees did not worship idols of wood, or stone, or silver, or gold. No! They worshiped the true and living God. The Pharisees wore long robes with wide hems so the people would recognize them as they walked down the street or passed through the marketplace. They liked to have people notice them and call out, "Hail, Rabbi!"

Everyone knew that the Pharisees were supposed to be loyal to God and that they studied the laws of God carefully—even adding extra laws of their own. They kept every law strictly. This meant they gave a tenth of their money regularly to God. They refused to touch dead animals. They would not go near a sick person. They believed these things to be against their laws.

The Pharisees studied the Scriptures so they could answer questions that people might ask about the Word of God. They wore, strapped on their foreheads and arms, little leather cases in which were copied parts of Scripture. Oh, they were very religious!

Because these men lived such strict lives, they were given important seats at feasts and in the synagogue. How they liked all the attention the people gave them!

Often these rulers went to the temple to pray. They did not say short prayers and then hurry home. No indeed! Often they said long prayers. (See Matthew 23:1-30.) The Pharisees thought that their prayers pleased God. The people who heard the Pharisees wished they too could utter such prayers. But what did God think of their praying? A story the Lord Jesus told gives the answer.



Show Illustration #2

Jesus said two men went up into the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other was a publican (a tax collector). When the Pharisee walked proudly into the temple to a spot where everyone could see him, he saw the tax collector. Shaking his head he thought to himself, *What a cheater he is! Why does he come into this temple of God? God will never hear his prayer!*

Then, thinking of his own goodness and despising those around him, the Pharisee lifted his head and prayed with himself, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men. I am not greedy, dishonest, impure, or even like that tax collector! I fast twice a week. (That was more than the law required!) I give a tenth part of all that I have."

The Pharisee had finished praying. Had he asked for anything? Did he receive anything? No! He was not really praying to God but only talking proudly with himself.

3. THE TAX COLLECTOR PRAYED HUMBLY TO GOD

Luke 18:13



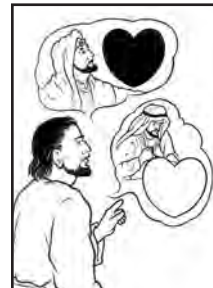
Show Illustration #3

The Lord Jesus continued the story. He said that the tax collector stepped to a place where he was not noticed. He did not even lift up his head. Rather, he bowed his head low and beat upon his chest, praying, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He thought himself to be the chief sinner in the world.

Compared to the prayer of the Pharisee, the tax collector uttered a short prayer. But which prayer do you think was better? Which one did God hear?

4. GOD HEARS THE PRAYERS OF THOSE WHO CONFESS THEIR SINS AND SEEK FORGIVENESS

Luke 18:14



Show Illustration #4

Jesus told the people: "The tax collector went home forgiven by God. (His sinful heart was cleansed.) The Pharisee was not forgiven. (His sin-darkened heart was *not* cleansed.) Everyone who is proud shall be humbled, but the humble (lowly) shall be honored." The Lord Jesus had finished His short story. But the people understood what He was teaching them.

Fine sounding, long prayers are not always the right prayers. It is what is in the heart that matters. The Pharisee was like a cup that was clean on the outside but dirty on the inside. (See Matthew 23:25.) The tax collector, however, cared about the inside. He called on God to clean his heart. Then, because his prayer was answered, his heart was cleansed as a cup that is clean on the inside. This cleansing of the heart is extremely important to God. The Bible says: "If I regard [approve] iniquity [sin] in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18).

The Pharisee had sin in his heart. He was proud. And the Lord did not hear his prayer. The tax collector confessed his sin to God. His prayer was heard and his sin was forgiven. First Peter 3:12 says: "For the eyes of the Lord are over the righteous, and His ears are open unto their prayers; but the face of the Lord is against them that do evil." God, who sees the heart, knew that the seemingly good man, the Pharisee, had great sin: pride. The tax collector, admitting his sin and asking for mercy, is the one God looked upon as "righteous."

What about your prayers? Do you pray to the true God who alone can hear and answer prayer? Have you confessed your sin to God as the tax collector did? Have you asked Him to forgive

your sin? If so your sin is forgiven. And you may talk to God about everything, knowing He will hear you.

To be sure you remember these four truths, please write them in your notebook:

1. Prayer is talking to God.

2. Only the true and living God hears and answers prayer.
3. God will hear the prayer of anyone who confesses his sin and seeks forgiveness.
4. When you have been forgiven of your sin, you can talk to God about everything.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

When our Lord told the parable of the Pharisee and the publican, there was more teaching than we have included here. Depending on the ability of your students, you may wish to mention two other elements of prayer.

1. The Word of God clearly teaches that prayer is to be made with thanksgiving. (Read Philippians 4:6.)

Was the Pharisee mindful of this truth when he prayed, “I thank Thee that I am not as other men?” No, he was not. He was simply telling God about his own goodness. This is not thanksgiving. When we thank God for Himself and thank Him for what He has done for us, we offer true thanksgiving.

2. Believing prayer is answered today because the Lord Jesus Christ gave His blood as a sacrifice for sin. (See Hebrews 10:11-22.)

The publican was an instructed Jew. When he prayed, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner,” he was calling to mind that sin must be judged. That judgment is death. From the beginning God, who requires a sacrifice for sin, has accepted a substitute sacrifice (a bird or an animal). It died in place of the sinner. The mercy seat in the Holy of Holies was the place where sin was judged. When the blood of the slain sacrifice was placed on the mercy seat, rather than its being a place of judgment, it became a place of mercy. Instead of being separated from God by his sin, the sinner—because of the substitute sacrifice—could have communion with God. (You should read all about this in Leviticus 16.)

The publican had this in mind when he asked for mercy. He recognized that he needed a sacrifice for his sin and he actually asked God to be his sacrifice! He knew he did not deserve such grace. But God, who is rich in mercy, and who knew the heart of the man, forgave him.