

Cowboys are known, to have a way of their own,
to sort out a sense of fair play.
You ride for the brand, or a shake of the hand,
that's always been "The Cowboy Way".

"The Cowboy Way" is not a phrase,
to be abused and miss-construed.
It's a way of life, a reason to fight,
it's a lifestyle through and through.

In the days of old, in the Montana cold,
wild broncs were topped out each day.
Sometimes you get paid, with dang broken leg,
and there's no one to spread out the hay.

Word spreads pretty fast, when you might need a hand,
to water, do chores and spread hay.
You never need ask, for help with those tasks,
it's surely "The Cowboy Way".

Don't treat it like something you get for nothing,
because you wear hat, boots and spurs.
You have to earn it, and folks will return it,
it's respect, and the paths that we choose.

Doing the right thing, without any coaxing,
and giving, with no thought of why.
It's the way of the west, it's the ultimate test,
to liven' life, in the cowboys eye.

The fellow that taught us, is always among us,
our Father in Heaven is he.
A great book was written, so we won't be forgetin',
who taught us, "The Cowboy Way".

There certainly is a lot to admire about “The Cowboy Way”... and perhaps much of it **is** derived from Scripture. ... Pitching-in to help another person who has a need... not even waiting to be asked... looks very Christ-like to me. Commitment to hard work... integrity... no-nonsense what-you-see-is-what-you-get ... are also characteristics which God’s Word calls every believer to be known for.

But Cowboys... and followers of Christ... (Christians)... in general... have **one** tendency... that perhaps should be evaluated by Scripture to see if it should be part of our character. You will see it abounding at any round-up or rodeo throughout the West... ... as well as... in church after church across America... and the world. ... It is this matter of having a proud self-esteem... that is sourced in **oneself**.

It is in the church... it is out on the prairie... in the stock yards... big city... rural areas... Wall Street... Main Street... East Coast... West Coast... and everywhere in between... an excessive self-esteem spills over and saturates American culture. It is not just a Cowboy Way!

We're an overconfident species," contends New York Times columnist David Brooks. Brooks calls it a "magnification of the self," and he believes this glut of self-esteem is especially rampant in the United States. To back up these claims, Brooks cites an array of statistics, studies, and observations:

- When pollsters ask people from around the world to rate themselves on different traits, Americans usually supply the most positive self-ratings.

- Although American students do not perform well on global math tests, they are among the world leaders in having self-confidence about their math abilities.
- Compared to college students from 30 years ago, today's college students are much more likely to agree with statements such as "I am easy to like."
- 94 percent of college professors believe they have above-average teaching skills.
- 70 percent of high school students surveyed claim they have above-average leadership skills, and only 2 percent are below average.
- Brooks observes that a few decades ago it would have been unthinkable for a baseball player to celebrate *himself* in the batter's box after hitting a home run. Today it is routine.
- Similarly, pop singers wouldn't have composed songs about their own greatness; now those songs dominate the charts.
- The number of high school seniors who believed that they were "a very important person": in the 1950s—12 percent; in the 1990s—80 percent.
- According to Brooks, American men are especially susceptible to the perils of overconfidence. Men unintentionally drown twice as often as women (because men have great faith in their swimming ability, especially after drinking).

"In short," Brooks concludes, "there's abundant evidence to suggest that we have shifted a bit from a culture that emphasized self-effacement—I'm not better than anybody else, but nobody is better than me—to a culture that emphasizes self-expansion."

Our study... this morning... is found in the eighteenth chapter of Luke. It follows where we left off last week... the passage on the parable of the

persistent widow. (Cowboy's could probably learn persistence from that widow.)

Before Luke presents that parable... we are told its main point...as though it is vital that we do not miss it. ... It concerns itself with the need of prayer.... But is what is needed in our prayer-life... a persistence like this widow... or in the character that cowboys are known for...? (I will return to this thought in just a moment...)

Using the phraseology of King James... Luke puts it very bluntly... Men must either pray or faint... there is no other choice. ... If we are praying... then we are not fainting. ... If we are fainting... then no matter how much we may think otherwise... we are not praying... for the Lord puts it on an either/or basis.

Let me show you how this word “fainting” is being used here... (By-the-way... the reason I am using this King James term here... is because it is very picturesque.) It is important that we understand it's meaning... and implications... and that we ask ourselves... “Am I fainting?” ... “Am I losing my spiritual hearing... my ability to discern the Holy Spirit's work in my life...? - Where He is at work and calling me to join Him...?” ... “Is life to me dull... lusterless... and shallow... all surface and no depth? ... Am I bored... unchallenged... defeated? Because if I am... the point of the parable we studied last week is... I am not praying.

But... you say... I am praying. ... I pray thirty minutes every morning and ten minutes every night... and I am even one of the few who faithfully come out whenever the church holds a prayer meeting... like we did last Sunday

evening... .. But still... life is not satisfying to me... I am **not** really living.

Or perhaps you might be one of those who simply hangs your head low with a terrific sense of guilt... whenever the subject of prayer is brought up. In good cowboy honesty... you'd have to say there is very little prayer in your life.

My purpose today is not to leave anyone... agonizing in a wallow of bloody conviction. ... If that were to happen... perhaps you might go away... assume the position of the "Cowboy Way"... buck-up... and resolve to try harder and to put more prayer into your life. ... And if you did... I am sure it would not be long before you would be aware... that this is not the answer... because nothing has really changed. ... A determined scheduling of more time for prayer... is not necessarily the answer.

The problem is not that we need **more** of the same kind of prayer... that we have been practicing all along! ... (LISTEN) ... If our life is one of dullness and drabness... it is **not** that we need to schedule into our busy lives **more** time for a rigorous disciplined kind of praying. (In *some* cases this might be a need... I am by no means discounting disciplined prayer... But Luke 18 points us to an entirely different matter... which often gets overlooked... and needs to be our **primary** focus...) ... We need desperately to discover the true nature of prayer... because doing **more** of the wrong thing is not the answer.

In the parable we studied last week... It goes to great lengths to point out that God is **not** like the unjust judge of whom it presents. ... God does **not**

delay in answering prayer... until we cajole Him enough... or prove our sincerity... or get our words just right. He is not like the judge who had to be embarrassed enough until he finally acted. He does not need to be persuaded by pressure... some form of picketing the throne of God... We don't have to engage in any kind of manipulation... bargaining... or bribery with God. He is **NOT** like the unjust judge. He does not drag His heels and turn a deaf ear. The point of last week's parable is that "Cowboy persistence" ... or the widow's persistence ... is not the condition by which He hears us.

But true prayer is... nevertheless... the channel we have been given... as our access to the **eagerness** of God to help and bless us. ... Therefore Jesus moves right on from this discussion of the need for prayer... in the parable of the unrelenting widow... to our parable **this** week... of the Pharisee and the publican... where Christ teaches the nature of authentic prayer. ... These two parables must be taken together. ... So Let's begin part two... of what we started last week...

Luke 18:9-14

This parable seems so simple that we often misread it. ... Ironically many who read it... draw a wrongful comfort to their soul... instead of the gracious **dis**comfort that God intended. That is because they do not slow down... but rush right on by... telling themselves... *"Boy! Isn't just awful how some people who consider themselves Christians are such hypocrites... But not me! I am not at all like the Pharisee in this parable. Thank You God that I am not like this awful sinful creature that this parable speaks of... I am better than him..."* And with the same blindness... they

do the very thing to the Pharisee... that he does to the tax gatherer... “*At least I am not like him!... T-H-A-N-K Y-O-U Lord!!!*” ... Do you see the irony here...? Let’s be careful that we don’t get caught up in that...

The intended contrast is evident. ... The structure of this parable... like the other... is one of contrast. ... Our Lord is teaching truth... by setting it alongside error... and as we **see** the error... we can... by contrast... understand and grasp the truth.

Tax collectors were the **scum** of Jewish society. ... Rome imposed taxes on its conquered peoples... but the collection of those taxes was delegated to private Roman contractors (tax farmers). These “tax farmers” would... in turn... employ Jewish underlings... to do the dirty work. Of course... whatever extra they could extort from their fellow Jews.... They kept as payment for themselves. (So not only were these tax collectors keeping the hated Roman occupiers in control... they were also profiting greatly – personally – and making their fellow countrymen suffer – greatly. ... Such tax collectors were considered monsters... and in fact some were. They were religious and political traitors to Hebrew society— utterly despicable. They were disallowed from public office... and were barred from giving testimony in court. ... They were outcasts... untouchables. ... In today's culture... the closest social equivalent... **might** be an American-born citizen who has been radicalized by Islam... and now attempts in every way to help al Quaida ... from right here in our own country. ... Despicable for us to even consider... right...?

In contrast to him... we have the Pharisee. ... Pharisees had justly earned the reputation as... in Josephus' words... "a body of Jews known for

surpassing the others in the observance of piety and exact interpretation of the laws". ... They were the most highly esteemed group in Jewish society. ... What a contrast these two made when they went up the temple mount to pray. The mere thought of a publican (tax collector) praying was jarring in itself.

To read the parable properly... through first-century Jewish eyes... it will require us to have a positive image and expectation for the Pharisee (he was the "good guy")... and a negative expectation for the tax collector (the crook).

But in watching the Pharisee we learn what prayer is not. ...We learn there is a form of praying which is not prayer... and what we are not simply to add more of... to our life's schedule.

This man assumed the correct posture for prayer. ... He stood... Jesus said... with his arms spread and his eyes uplifted unto heaven. ...Among the Jews of the 1st century... this was the prescribed posture for prayer.

Then... he was appropriately grateful for what God had kept him from. ... He had stolen from no one. ... He had been faithful to his wife. ... It is appropriate to thank God for being able to avoid serious sin. ...To Jewish ears... the inclusion of "or even like this tax collector" ... seemed appropriate. ... "God... thanks for keeping me from being radicalized into Islam... and becoming a hater of our Nation... as many are today... "

Today we might word this prayer a little differently, though... "God, I thank you that I haven't fallen to what so many of my contemporaries have yielded to — (and then name whatever sin is not one of your regulars,

here) ... internet porn... income tax evasion... homosexuality... dishonest business practices — "... I thank You, Lord that I have not fallen into the gutter life of so many of my unchurched friends."

We ought to be thankful for God's grace in our lives. "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

Now what is this negative teaching about prayer?

First, it is clear that it is not prayer when we approach God impressed with our own virtues. This man stood and prayed,

Luke 18:11 (ESV)

'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

He was obviously well impressed with what he felt were his claims upon God's attention. ... It is as though he felt that God ought to be thanked for having made such a remarkable specimen of humanity... that such an unusual man should not be left unacknowledged on the face of the earth.

His prayer was so self-absorbed. ... After his initial nod to God... his was essentially a self-congratulatory monologue... disguised as a prayer. ... But then our discomfort with his prayer peaks... when he drags in the sleazy tax collector... to draw attention to his own "mister-cleanness." ... His self-estimate rides on the exposure of the moral failures of others.

Many professing Christians today... make the same error as the self-righteous Pharisee. ... They thank God they are not living sinful lives. ... Such prayers begin well enough... thanking God for His saving grace that has changed their lives... ... but they regard the **living out** of their lifestyle

as due to their own discipline and effort. ... It is an independent... self-confident... (dare I say it...?) “Coyboy persistence and self-sufficiency...” (Again... there is a lot of the Cowboy way to be admired... but in regards to prayer... the point that is being made in this parable... is that an independent self-sufficiency is out of place.) We must NEVER cheapen the grace of God... by trying to make it into our own personal accomplishment.

The simple truth is... that we have no virtues of our own... none whatsoever. ...We have absolutely nothing to contribute to God's cause. Whenever we pray... we must do so out of utter bankruptcy. ... But all too often... if we are honest with ourselves... we forget that these very talents with which we identify ourselves... these abilities that we have for leadership... or teaching... or singing... are in themselves gifts of God.

When a Christian sees prostitutes... alcoholics... prisoners... drug addicts... unwed mothers... the homeless... refugees... he knows that he is looking in a mirror. ... Even though the Believer may have spent all of his life as a respectable middle-class person... no matter! ... He thinks... *Spiritually I was just like these people, though physically and socially I never was where they are now. They are still are outcasts. (Spiritually speaking) I was once every bit of an outcast.*

There is so much that we forget. ... We forget God's shielding grace that has saved us from some of the terrible things... others have fallen into... for which we look down our nose at them. ... We forget that the only reason we are not standing in that poor rascal's shoes... who has been guilty of these vile and repulsive things... is simply because we have never been

exposed to them... in the same way they were. ... Are we sure we would not have fallen too... had we been there? ... And then we also forget some of the (less virtuous) things that are actually present in our lives. ... We forget our clever manipulations... our deliberate deceits... our phoney sympathies... our dubious business arrangements. ... We are so careful to remember our values... our virtues... our good points.

How do we get so well impressed with ourselves? ... Like this Pharisee we look downward **from** ourselves. ... The wording of this parable is very picturesque. ... He stood at the front... an area of prominence. He claimed for himself a position reserved only for an important person... and saw... out of the corner of his eye... this tax collector standing over yonder... just barely inside the courtyard of the temple. It was almost as if he was barely in this area of worship. ... *"Lord, I thank You that I am not like that man back there... who has to crouch at the back gate. I don't do any of those things that brings him such shame!..."* ... He had clawed his way to a vantage point which permitted him to look down on someone else.

It is always possible to find someone who is lower down on the scale of human status or morals than we are... and what a comfort they are to our hearts!

A life that finds security by way of comparison... is deluded. ...It is utterly un-Biblical in its understanding... so un-Paul-like... who concluded about himself while contemplating God's saving grace, *"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature"* (Romans 7:18).

This is the terrible point Jesus is making in describing the Pharisee. He says when we pray from the basis that the Pharisee prayed... when we approach God on the level of our perceived qualities and merits... as we do so frequently... we are praying with ourselves. ...There is no real prayer... our pious words... our properly phrased sentences... our completely scriptural... orthodox approach is of no value whatsoever. ... We are praying out of obsession with our own virtues.

Jesus says, it is **not prayer**... when we ask God's help because of our own accomplishments. This Pharisee said he fasted twice a week. That was twice more than was required by the Law. He gave tithes of all he got... and that again was more than the Law required. ... But this Pharisee expected God to act... because he felt God could hardly do otherwise in view of the fine record of faithful service he lay before Him.

And do **we** not continually pray as though God owes **us** something? Listen to yourself pray:

- "Lord, I have been faithfully teaching this Sunday School class for ten years. Surely now, Lord, you can do something for me."
- "Lord, I have been trying to be a good Christian parent and have done my best, now please keep my children from going astray now that they have come into these difficult teen years."
- "Lord, I have given up so much for you, now give me this one little thing that I ask of you."

Jesus says when a man stands and lists his accomplishments before God he is not praying. ... Is it any wonder, then, that we have been fainting? ...

Is it not possible that... after years of praying... we must now realize we have never prayed at all?

Let us take a look at the tax collector now... to see what prayer **is**. ... Jesus said the tax collector stands afar off... he doesn't even lift up his eyes... he fails to assume the proper position of prayer... he does it all wrong. ... How totally unimportant are these externals of prayer!

Is it not obvious that real prayer... authentic prayer... is an awareness of our helpless need? ... This man saw himself on the lowest possible level... a sinner. ... In fact... the original language is even stronger. ... He says, "God, be merciful to me **the** sinner." ... The sinner... the very lowest kind... the worst kind. ... He is expressing that without God... he could do absolutely nothing to help his position. ... I'm a sinner, Lord, that's all I can say. I have nothing else to add to it.

And notice something else that is very remarkable... He does not even try to add anything by way of merit? ... He does not say... "*God be merciful to me a penitent sinner... Look at my honesty here... I admit... I am a sinner!...*" He **was** penitent... but he does not urge that... as any basis for God's blessing. ... He does not say, "*God be merciful to me a reformed sinner. I'm going to be different from now on.*" ... He does not even say, "*God be merciful to me an honest sinner. Here I am, Lord, willing to tell you the whole thing. Surely you can't pass by honesty like that.*" In fact, he does not even say, "*God be merciful to me a praying sinner.*" He casts it all away. He says, "*Lord, I haven't a thing to lean on but You.*"

What opposites stood in the temple at the hour of prayer! ... Both the scum... and the cream... of Hebrew society. ... One infamous for his sins... the other famous for his righteous lifestyle. ... One lowly... the other self-assured.

Two men went to pray; or rather say,
One went to brag, the other to pray;
One stands up close, and treads on high,
Where th' other dare not send his eye.
One nearer to the altar trod,
The other to the altar's God.

Jesus declared the meaning of this unusual scene by saying, "*I tell you that this man, (the Publican) rather than the other, went home justified before God*" (Luke 18:14a). The excellent Pharisee, with his wide phylacteries, strode from the temple confident in his righteousness — such a dramatic contrast with the spiritual unworthiness of the publican. ... He felt great! ... But having taken his stand on his own merits... the Pharisee left the temple unaccepted... unjustified... and under God's wrath.

(LISTEN)... The spiritual posture with which we pray in our heart of hearts will actually **reveal** whether we have been made righteous by God.

Though the unrighteous heart may never clearly articulate such thoughts publicly... its prayers reveal to God that it is really depending upon **itself** for eternal life. ... Though lip-service may be given to humility and repentance... the unrighteous heart subtly sees itself as a **partner** in one's own salvation. ... One's own goodness (due perhaps to God's grace and one's use of it) is held dear as the real source of salvation.

In contrast... the righteous heart is a heart that... whether just made righteous or having been justified decades earlier... says, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner"

So let me ask you now... "Does the spiritual posture with which you pray in your heart of hearts... testify solidly... that you have been made righteous by God...?"