

## THE TAX COLLECTOR'S PRAYER

The traditional translation of the tax collector's prayer (Luke 18:13) is, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." According to these words, he thought of himself as unworthy to be in the presence of His holy God. As part of the rest of humanity, a sinner, he belonged to that mass of mankind ever since Adam who were sinful, and who deserved God's condemnation and eternal death. However, he did not compare himself with other people. He thought only about his own unworthiness. His request, "Be merciful" appealed to the special qualities in God that God wanted people to trust, His grace, His mercy, His faithfulness, His kindness, His pity, and His love. In these two respects, he was different from the Pharisee, who was so full of his own righteousness that he expected reward and praise from God. God required Israelites to "afflict themselves" on only one day each year, the Day of Atonement. The Pharisee thought he did better than that. He fasted twice a week! Israelites expected to give to God a tenth of their corn, wine, and olive oil. The Pharisee, together with others like him, picked over his garden herbs to give a tenth of them to God. The Pharisee compared himself with other people, and despised the tax collector in particular. For Pharisees called people who had questionable occupations "sinners." They called themselves "the righteous."

A strict translation of the tax collector's prayer, however, is "God, be propitiated to me, the sinner." "**The sinner**" goes further than comparison with other people. He did not merely put himself in the same lump with others. He went even further than St Paul, who referred to himself as "the **chief of sinners**", for even that statement kept Paul within the group of sinners. Paul thought of his degree of sinfulness within that group. The tax collector dispensed with comparisons altogether. In his own eyes, he was "the sinner." That is how all God's people should approach Him when they make confession.

The translation "Have mercy" would be the translation of the much more common verb *eleeō*. We are familiar with the Greek *eleēson* from the liturgy, *Kyrie, eleēson*. Later Greeks pronounced the second e, an ēta, as an i. That is the reason for the spelling *eleison*. The word that the tax collector is actually a rarer verb, *hilaskomai*. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) the word was used only twelve times. A compound of this verb was more frequent, and translated two Hebrew words that mean, "make atonement" and "pardon." The Greek word in the Septuagint for the Hebrew word for the golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant, *hilastērion*, the propitiatory cover, or the atonement cover (in the KJV, "mercy seat") came from the same stem as the verb that the tax collector used. Some English words that end in "ery" come from Greek words ending in *ērion*. A **cemetery**, is, literally, a place where people sleep. The *hilastērion* was the place where propitiation was made.

The tax collector had come to the temple with the conviction that only here on earth there was the possibility of propitiation for him. For here the blood of sacrificial victims was sprinkled, daubed on the horns of the altar, and poured out against the sides of the altar. In this way the priest nullified, purged, or expiated sin before God. Here, he ardently hoped, the stain of his sin and guilt could be cleansed and purged away. He did not think any moral achievement of his own could deserve God's favour. He knew that the only possible remedy for his sin was propitiation through sacrifices where blood was shed for him.

He stood far off in the temple court. Yet he could not have failed to notice that the predominant colours of the curtains in the temple were maroon and purple. There was special reason why they were made like that. Blood was sprinkled on the curtain between the holy place and the holy of holies. He would have known also that once each year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest went inside the curtain, always with sacrificial blood, and sprinkled it particularly on the propitiatory cover (or atonement cover) of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark was no longer present in the temple, for the last reference to it in the Scriptures had been before Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the temple built by Solomon in 586 BC. It had contained the two copies of God's Law, written on stone, the one God's copy, and the other the people's copy. God's Covenant of the Law, contained in the Ten Commandments, required holiness from all His people. His Law cried out for redress because of the sins of priests and people. However, the sprinkling of blood on the *hilastērion*, the propitiatory cover, which was screened by the figures of two cherubim, and which was thought of the place where God dwelt, made atonement for their sin, to still God's accusing voice. He would also have known about the strange ritual on the Day of Atonement when the priest took one of two goats, the scapegoat, and confessed over its head the sins of priests and people. After that, the goat was driven off into the wilderness, bearing that sin on its own head. The central point in this was the **substitution**. The same principle of substitution was a central part in the sacrifices at the temple, where life was given for life. The blood of animals, which was sprinkled, daubed, and poured out, meant that through the lives of those animals, which were forfeited, sinners might be forgiven and live.

Those Old Testament practices have their fulfilment in the work of Jesus Christ, and Old Testament people, such as those Israelite tax collectors still were before Jesus' work was completed, looked forward to the fulfilment of God's promises in the Messiah. When Jesus spoke these words to those who were confident that they were righteous and despised others, He knew that He would be the means of atonement and propitiation, with His blood, His life, as the cost. He in His own person was the fulfilment of the Old Testament shadow of the propitiatory cover on the Ark of the Covenant.

In Romans 3, where Paul wrote about the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Jesus Christ, he spoke about **the cost** of God's grace. "They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God has publicly displayed Him as **the atonement cover** through faith in **His blood**, to show His righteousness, because the sins that had been committed in the past He had let go unpunished, in His patience" (3:24-26). The word for "atonement cover" was the Greek word *hilastērion*, the word that had been so prominent in the detail for the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, for the propitiatory cover of the Ark of the Covenant, at the middle point of the book of Leviticus. Paul's point in this section is that the righteousness that is valid before God is not a righteousness of works in relation to God's Law. It is righteousness that comes freely by God's grace, through Jesus Christ. The apostle John used another noun for Jesus, which was also connected with the verb *hilaskomai*, which the tax collector used. He wrote, "If anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus

Christ, the Righteous One. He is the **propitiation** for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2). Here the Greek word is *hilasmos*. All the same associations of atonement or expiation through the use of blood are here again in this word.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament there was always a cost to pay to make appeasement. Jacob tried to ward off destruction at the hands of Esau by making costly presents. “He thought, ‘I shall **appease** him with the gift that that is going ahead of me (Genesis 32:20). The gift, he hoped, would make Esau friendly to him, and remove the hostility. Because the enemies of Israel had defiled the land by shedding blood in it, the Lord cleansed the land by destroying these enemies. That slaying expiated their slaying (Deuteronomy 32:43). Their blood gave assurance of expiation, at great cost, and by substitution. At David’s time a drought came for three years because blood guiltiness rested on Saul’s family, because of Saul’s “ethnic cleansing” of the Gibeonites. Since no payment was possible to the survivors, David had seven men from Saul’s family slain to “make atonement” or “propitiation.”

The tax collector went back home justified. We make the tax collector’s prayer our own by believing that Jesus’ blood has made propitiation. His life has been given for our life. That averts destruction from God, and brings God’s forgiveness. Our prayer, is, therefore, “God, be propitiated to me, the sinner, for Jesus’ sake.”