

A Prayer about Damnably Moral

God of all grace,

Like the urgent voice of Will Robinson's robot, I hear an alarm sounding "Danger!" in my heart. And you know exactly what it is, Lord. But first, you know what it's not. My great danger isn't giving in to a moment of lust and clicking on some internet porn site. It's not "losing" it with my children or painting the air blue with profanity when I've reached the end of my rope. The prominent dangers to my soul's health aren't skipping church or letting my Bible collect dust or distancing myself from a circle of close, Christian friends. I'm not in danger of adultery or murder or thievery or deception. These are not the areas of ethical thin ice from which the Spirit most cries to my soul, "Get back!" Then what is?

Morality. My morality. My clean-cut, respectable, commendable morality which inspires others to join me in living a good, up-standing life. My danger, Lord, is reducing the life you've called me to live down to a list of moral commands found in Scripture (and, perhaps, some of our own that we've added in order to make ourselves feel even more spiritually secure and morally superior).

Please don't misunderstand me. I'll be the first to uphold your holy law and defend its righteousness. In fact, I wish my heart always beat with the upright passion voiced in Psalm 119:1-2, "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the LORD. Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart." You know I love how Paul clarifies your will in a pointedly moral tone when writing to his friends in Thessalonica, "This is God's will: your sanctification....For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." (1 Thessalonians 4:3 & 7) Because you hate any vestige of moral sin, so do I. But, again, that's not the front on which I am most assaulted by the enemy in the war for my soul. Satan has chosen a much more subtle weapon with which to try to pierce my spiritual armor. The moral high ground. My victory over temptation. My righteous living.

"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'" (Luke 18:9-12) So proud. So righteous. Damnably so. "I tell you that the tax collector, rather than the Pharisee, went home justified before God." (v. 14) But why? The Pharisee did everything right. He was probably a model child who got gold stars in Sabbath School, was compliant at home, got straight A's, followed the rules, kept his nose clean, and was a model citizen. He was a good person. No one in town believed in you more than he did. Why, then, would you reject him? "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'...I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (vv. 13 & 17)

O Father, engrave that parable on my heart, because I am so naturally the Pharisee, not the tax collector. I'm so quickly the proud moralist, not the humble penitent. I'm so automatically the judge of those who don't seem to be making the moral grade like I am. Honestly, what's their problem? Why don't they just change? Merciless me. God help me. God save me from my damnably morality which, too often, I hide behind in a futile attempt to avoid looking with eyes wide open at my ugly self-righteousness. That is my true enemy. That is the greatest danger to my soul.

And, Lord, I know I'm not alone. In our increasingly divided culture where so many of the battle lines are drawn in moral terms, how tempting is it for my Christian friends to join me in equating "being raised right" with godliness, or to believe that as long as we adhere to a list of moral do's and avoid a list of moral don'ts - unlike "those" people - that we're on the "winning side" - your side. All the time we're blind to the fact that "conservative morality" is just the latest of Satan's shell game tricks, convincing us that our moral choices equal true worship when, in fact, we've erected morality as just a very sanitized and respectable idol of our own making. And it makes perfect sense. After all, when our moral choices become the focus, WE become the focus - our goodness, our obedience, our righteousness. But you will brook no competitor for your throne. "I am the LORD. That is my name. I will not give my glory to another." (Isaiah 42:8)

So give me and my friends the broken heart of that tax collector, Lord. Remind us daily, hourly that any good we do and any commands we obey must be the thankful response to your grace, not the basis for it. I must not begin with my morality. I must begin with my repentance. So help me, God.

Amen.