

THE THEOLOGY OF THE PRAYER OF THE HUMBLE IN THE LUKAN CORPUS: A SOTERIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PARADIGMS OF PRAYER IN THE SPECIFIC PARABLES

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ABSTRACT

Among the distinctive literary and theological contributions of the Third Gospel to the New Testament canon, the Lukan parables of prayer occupy a position of particular soteriological significance. Unlike the Synoptic parallels on prayer found in Matthew and Mark, which tend to emphasize the efficacy of persistent petition, Luke's specifically parabolic treatments of prayer — the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8), the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14), and the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8) — consistently foreground the posture, disposition, and self-understanding of the one who prays as the theologically decisive dimension of prayer, rather than its mere persistence or formal correctness. This article argues, on the basis of a sustained redaction-critical and narrative analysis of these three pericopes, supplemented by the patristic exegetical tradition of Cyril of Alexandria and Gregory the Great, that Luke constructs through these parables a coherent soteriological theology of humble prayer, in which the condition of genuine receptivity to divine grace is precisely the abandonment of self-justification before God, and in which prayer functions as the privileged locus of the sinner's recognition of his or her radical dependence on divine mercy. The humble (tapeinoi) of Luke's theological vocabulary are not merely the socially marginalized but those who, in the act of prayer, refuse the pretension of self-sufficiency and open themselves unconditionally to the God who "exalts the humble and humbles the exalted" (Luke 1:52).

Keywords: Gospel of Luke, parables, prayer, humility, soteriology, Pharisee and Tax Collector, Unjust Judge, Friend at Midnight, Lukan theology, patristic exegesis;

INTRODUCTION

It is a well-established observation in Lukan scholarship that the Third Gospel exhibits, among the Synoptics, the most sustained and theologically deliberate interest in prayer as a theological theme. What is less frequently noted, however, is that within Luke's treatment of prayer, the specifically parabolic material — the narrative analogies through which Jesus teaches the disciples *how* and *in what spirit* to pray — carries a soteriological freight that distinguishes it sharply from the corresponding Matthean and Markan treatments. Where Matthew's Sermon on the Mount addresses prayer primarily in terms of sincerity and proper form over against hypocritical display (Matt 6:5–15), and where Mark's scattered references to prayer emphasize faith and forgiveness: "And Jesus answered and said to them,

have faith in God. Verily I say unto you, whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Arise and cast thee into the sea, and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that what he says shall be done, whatever he shall say. Therefore, I say to you: All that you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and will have it". (Mark 11:22–25), Luke constructs through his distinctive parables a theology in which the *posture* of the one who prays — understood in terms of the categories of humility, self-knowledge, and radical openness to divine mercy — becomes the theologically decisive variable upon which the soteriological efficacy of prayer depends.

The three parables that form the primary object of this study — the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5–8), the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8), and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9–14) — are all without Synoptic parallel, belonging to Luke's distinctive material (*Sondergut*), and are all connected by Luke, through narrative framing and placement, to explicit teaching on prayer. Together they form what this article proposes to read as a coherent soteriological grammar of humble prayer: a sustained Lukan argument that genuine prayer is not merely a technique of petition but a mode of existence before God, constituted by the recognition of one's own poverty and the abandonment of every claim upon divine favor based on religious achievement.

This argument will be developed through close exegetical attention to each parable in turn, sustained engagement with the redaction-critical literature on Lukan prayer theology — principally the work of Joseph Fitzmyer, Joel Green, François Bovon, and Kenneth Bailey — and extended dialogue with the patristic exegetical tradition, most substantially Cyril of Alexandria's homilies on Luke and Gregory the Great's *Homiliae in Evangelia*, two resources whose precritical but theologically attentive readings of these parables frequently anticipate conclusions that modern scholarship has only subsequently formalized.¹

1. THE THEOLOGICAL HORIZON: HUMILITY AND REVERSAL IN LUKAN SOTERIOLOGY

Before proceeding to the individual parables, it is necessary to situate the inquiry within the broader soteriological horizon of Luke's theological vision, since the prayer parables do not operate in isolation but within a consistently articulated Lukan pattern of divine reversal in which the humble (*tapeinoi*) receive what the proud (*hyperēphanoi*) are denied. This pattern is announced programmatically in the Magnificat — itself, significantly, a prayer — where Mary declares that God "has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke 1:51–53). Nils Dahl and, more recently, John Carroll in his Luke commentary have both argued that this early programmatic statement functions as a hermeneutical key for the entire Gospel, establishing the divine preference for the humble as a governing soteriological principle that the subsequent narrative, including the prayer parables, will repeatedly

¹ On the patristic sources used in this study, see R. Payne Smith's introduction to his translation of Cyril's Luke commentary, *A Commentary upon the Gospel according to S. Luke by S. Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1859, and the standard treatment of Gregory's homiletical method in Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, p. 1–28.

illustrate and apply.² The Greek term *tapeinoi* — rendered variously as "humble," "lowly," or "those of low degree" — carries in Luke a simultaneously social and spiritual valence. As Halvor Moxnes has demonstrated through careful social-scientific analysis, the Lukan *tapeinoi* are not reducible to the socially destitute, though social marginalization is frequently part of their characterization; they are those who, in their relation to God, embody the posture of radical dependence and non-self-sufficiency that the Magnificat attributes to Mary herself.³ It is precisely this theological-spiritual dimension of *tapeinophrosynē* — humility as a posture of the self before God, characterized by the recognition of one's own poverty and the refusal of self-justification — that the prayer parables will anatomize and commend as the condition of genuine receptivity to divine grace.

Kenneth Bailey, whose extensive work on the cultural background of Lukan parables has become indispensable for their exegesis, observes that all three prayer parables share a common structural feature: they contrast, whether explicitly (the Pharisee and Tax Collector) or implicitly (the Friend at Midnight, the Unjust Judge), two postures of the human self before God, and consistently privilege the posture characterized by acknowledged need over the posture characterized by presumed merit.⁴ This structural commonality, Bailey argues, is not accidental but reflects a deliberate Lukan theological program — one that the present article will trace through the exegesis of each parable.

2. THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT: SHAMELESSNESS AS THEOLOGICAL CATEGORY (LUKE 11:5–8)

The first and in some ways structurally most complex of the three parables, the Friend at Midnight, immediately follows the Lukan version of the Lord's Prayer (Luke 11:1–4) and appears nowhere in the Matthean or Markan tradition. Jesus addresses to the disciples a rhetorical *all wahomer* argument: "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves, for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him,' and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed. I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his *anaideia* he will rise and give him whatever he needs" (Luke 11:5–8).

The crux of this parable's interpretation, and the point at which its contribution to a theology of humble prayer becomes visible, is the translation and interpretation of the key term *anaideia* in verse 8. The traditional rendering, "importunity" or "persistence" (KJV, NRSV), has been standard in English translations and has generated a long history of reading this parable primarily as a commendation of persistent, even importunate, petition — an approach that then reads the subsequent imperatives "ask, seek, knock" (Luke 11:9) as encouragements to persevere in prayer despite apparent non-response.⁵

² Nils Dahl, "The Story of Abraham in Luke-Acts," in Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn (eds.), *Studies in Luke-Acts*, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1966, p. 146–148; John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, p. 47–48

³ Halvor Moxnes, *The Economy of the Kingdom: Social Conflict and Economic Relations in Luke's Gospel*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1988, p. 24–34

⁴ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, combined ed., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983, p. 119–121

⁵ The traditional persistence-reading is associated especially with Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to S. Luke*, International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1896, p. 296–298.

This reading was challenged decisively by Kenneth Bailey, and subsequently developed by Luke Timothy Johnson, David Catchpole, and Alan Culpepper, on lexicographical and cultural-contextual grounds. Bailey argues that *anaideia* is more accurately rendered not as the persistence or shamelessness of the petitioner but as the *avoidance of shame* on the part of the householder who is being asked — the social pressure to act generously so as not to incur the shame of failing hospitality before the wider community.⁶ On this reading, the parable commends not the persistence of the one who prays but the certainty of the divine response, grounded not in the petitioner's merits or tenacity but in the character of the One to whom petition is addressed.

Joel Green finds a mediating position, arguing that while Bailey's social-contextual analysis is compelling, the Lukan redactional context — the immediate sequel to the Lord's Prayer and the introduction to the "ask, seek, knock" sayings — suggests that both dimensions are in view: the parable simultaneously commends the boldness of the one who prays (not the boldness of presumed merit, but the boldness of acknowledged need) and the generosity of the divine response.⁷ Fitzmyer similarly concludes that the parable's primary soteriological thrust is not a doctrine of persistence winning reluctant divine favor, but rather the contrast between a reluctant human friend who must be pressed and the divine Father who *needs* no pressing, being already inclined to generosity toward those who ask in acknowledged need.⁸

This reading has substantial support from the patristic tradition. Cyril of Alexandria, in his homily on this pericope, is explicit that the parable does not teach that God must be persuaded by the human petitioner's persistence, as though the divine will were reluctant and required overcoming: "Far be it from us to suppose that the God of all is like an unwilling friend, who must be wearied into generosity. Rather, the comparison holds in inverse: if even a reluctant human friend will rise and give because of the social pressure of shame, how much more will the heavenly Father, who is never reluctant, give to those who ask with humble confidence, knowing that they have nothing of their own to offer."⁹ This patristic contrast between the reluctant human friend and the never-reluctant divine Father, reading the parable *a fortiori* rather than as a direct analogy, captures precisely what the modern redaction-critical analysis identifies as Luke's theological intention: the parable grounds the confidence of the humble petitioner not in the petitioner's persistence or merit but in the character of the God addressed, who requires no persuasion but only the posture of acknowledged need.

3. THE UNJUST JUDGE AND THE PERSISTENT WIDOW: ESCHATOLOGICAL URGENCY AND THE CRY OF THE VULNERABLE (LUKE 18:1–8)

The second parable directly relevant to this study, the Unjust Judge and the Persistent Widow, is unique to Luke and introduced with an explicit authorial commentary

⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 125–133. Bailey's lexicographical and cultural arguments have been substantially endorsed by David Catchpole, "The Son of Man's Search for Faith (Luke 18:8b)," *Novum Testamentum* 19 (1977), p. 81–104

⁷ Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997, p. 442–445

⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke X–XXIV*, Anchor Bible 28A, New York, Doubleday, 1985, p. 911–913.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 75, in R. Payne Smith (trans.), *A Commentary upon the Gospel according to S. Luke*, p. 333–335.

that is itself exegetically significant: "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Luke's editorial framing of the parable — rare in the Gospel tradition, where the narrator rarely provides such transparent authorial purpose statements — has been noted by several commentators as indicating a particularly deliberate Lukan theological investment in this specific parable.¹⁰

The parable itself presents a widow (*chēra*) who repeatedly approaches an unjust judge (*kritēs adikos*) with the petition "Give me justice against my adversary" (18:3) until he finally relents: "Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming" (18:4–5). The *a fortiori* conclusion follows: "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily" (18:7–8).

John Nolland and I. Howard Marshall both observe that the widow in this parable is, within the social world Luke's readers would have inhabited, among the most vulnerable and powerless figures imaginable: without husband, without advocate, without social capital, approaching a judge explicitly characterized as devoid of either religious or social conscience.¹¹ Her prayer — "give me justice against my adversary" — is not a prayer of the self-sufficient petitioner who believes herself entitled to a favorable verdict; it is the cry of the utterly powerless who has no recourse except continued appeal to the one who holds power over her situation.

This is the soteriological point: the widow's prayer is efficacious not because she possesses merit or social standing or religious achievement, but precisely because she possesses none of these things and knows it. Her prayer is, structurally, the prayer of the *tapeinoi* of the Magnificat: she "cries to God day and night" from a position of radical dependence and vulnerability, and it is precisely this posture — not any quality of her petition, not the persistence in itself, but the acknowledgment of helplessness embedded in the very act of crying out — that Luke presents as the model for the disciples' own prayer.¹²

The concluding verse of the parable, however, introduces what is widely regarded as the most exegetically challenging element of the entire pericope: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b). C. K. Barrett and François Bovon both note that this verse, with its turn to the eschatological question of faith at the Parousia, has the effect of dramatically expanding the horizon of the parable: the disciples' faithful, humble, persistent prayer is not merely a devotional practice but an eschatological stance, a refusal to abandon the posture of acknowledged dependence upon God even in the face of apparent divine delay or silence.¹³ Bovon argues that this eschatological turn is itself a Lukan addition to whatever earlier parabolic tradition Luke is drawing upon, serving to connect the theology of humble prayer developed in the parable to the broader Lukan eschatology of the coming Son of Man — a connection that gives the widow's persistent cry

¹⁰ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, Word Biblical Commentary 35B, Dallas, Word Books, 1993, p. 865.

¹¹ Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, p. 868; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978, p. 671–673

¹² François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28–24:53*, transl. James Crouch, Hermeneia, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2012, p. 185–188 — noting that Bovon's analysis of the widow's posture applies to the parable's characterization of humble dependence regardless of its narrative placement in his volume

¹³ C. K. Barrett, "The Eschatology of the Sermon on the Mount," *New Testament Studies* 9 (1963), p. 114–115; Bovon, *Luke 3*, p. 190–192

its ultimate theological significance: it is the cry of the elect who, in the face of delay, continue to pray precisely because they have no other resource than God.¹⁴

Gregory the Great's homily on this parable develops the widow's vulnerability into a rich allegorical meditation, reading her as the figure of the soul that has lost its spouse — the soul separated from God by sin — and yet continues to cry out to the Judge for restoration: "The soul that has been widowed by its sins ought not to cease from prayer, for if even an unjust judge was moved by persistence, how much more will the just Judge hear the cry of those who, having nothing of their own to offer, offer only their need and their confidence in his mercy?"¹⁵ Gregory's allegorical reading, while employing the conventions of the homiletical tradition rather than the tools of redaction criticism, arrives at an insight convergent with the modern exegetical consensus: the widow's prayer is commended not because of her persistence as such but because of the posture of radical dependence that her persistence enacts.

4. THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR: THE ANATOMY OF SELF-JUSTIFICATION AND ITS REFUSAL (LUKE 18:9–14)

The third and theologically most concentrated of the Lukan prayer parables, the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, immediately follows the Unjust Judge and the Widow and constitutes — as several commentators have noted — the climactic statement of Luke's theology of humble prayer.¹⁶ Luke's editorial introduction is again transparent: "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt" (Luke 18:9). The parable is addressed, in other words, not to outsiders or opponents but to disciples — those within the community who are precisely most susceptible to the temptation of the Pharisee's prayer.

The Pharisee's prayer, while formally addressed to God, is in substance a catalogue of religious achievements: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11–12). Several exegetes, including Bailey and Joachim Jeremias before him, have noted that the Pharisee's religious observances as described here — fasting twice weekly and tithing all possessions — would have been regarded by Luke's contemporaries not as minimum requirements but as expressions of genuine, even exemplary, religious devotion that exceeded what the Torah explicitly required.¹⁷ This is crucial for the parable's soteriological logic: the Pharisee is not a hypocrite in the ordinary sense of performing what he does not believe or claiming what he has not done; he is, on any external measure, a genuinely devout religious observer whose prayer is entirely accurate as a self-description. His failure is of a different and more subtle order.

Joseph Fitzmyer identifies this failure with precision: the Pharisee's prayer, whatever its formal address, is substantively a prayer *to himself* (*pros heauton prosēucheto*, Luke 18:11

¹⁴ François Bovon, *Luke 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 9:51–19:27*, transl. Donald S. Deer, Hermeneia, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2013, p. 536–540

¹⁵ Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, Homily 34, in *Patrologia Latina* 76, 1248C; English translation in David Hurst (trans.), *Gregory the Great: Forty Gospel Homilies*, Kalamazoo MI, Cistercian Publications, 1990, p. 289

¹⁶ Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 142–143; Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV*, p. 1183, who notes the deliberate Lukan placement of this parable as the climactic statement of the prayer-teaching section beginning at Luke 17:20.

¹⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, transl. S. H. Hooke, rev. ed., London, SCM Press, 1963, p. 140–141; Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 145–146

— itself a grammatical ambiguity that Greek patristic interpreters were quick to exploit) in which God functions not as the subject of address but as the audience before whom religious achievement is displayed.¹⁸ The Pharisee does not come before God in acknowledged need; he comes before God as one who has, in his own estimation, already fulfilled what God requires, and whose prayer is therefore less a petition than a presentation of credentials. Luke's narrative has the structure of the Magnificat in reverse: the one who has filled himself is sent away empty; the one who comes in acknowledged emptiness is filled.

The Tax Collector's prayer, by contrast, is formally the simplest utterance in the parable: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (*ho theos, hilasthēti moi tō hamartōlō*, Luke 18:13). The term *hilasthēti* — rendered variously as "be merciful," "have mercy," "be propitious," or "make atonement for" — has generated significant discussion concerning whether Luke intends an expiatory or simply a mercy-seeking connotation.¹⁹ For the soteriological argument of this article, however, the decisive element is not the precise nuance of *hilasthēti* but the structural positioning of the prayer: the tax collector stands "far off" (*makrothen*), refuses to raise his eyes to heaven, beats his breast — all gestures of acute self-awareness before the divine holiness — and identifies himself, without qualification or mitigation, as "the sinner" (*tō hamartōlō*, with the definite article, suggesting not merely that he is *a* sinner but that he acknowledges his sinfulness as the defining reality of his standing before God).

The parable's conclusion is delivered with the characteristic Lukan formula of eschatological reversal: "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified (*dedikaiōmenos*), rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14). The use of the term *dedikaiōmenos* — "justified," a term carrying its full Pauline forensic weight — has been a focus of considerable exegetical attention, particularly in the context of ecumenical discussions of the doctrine of justification.²⁰ James Dunn's analysis is apposite: Luke's use of *dikaioō* here does not import the full Pauline theology of justification by faith, but it does establish, within the parable's own logic, that the tax collector's acceptance before God is entirely a function of divine grace received by one who brings nothing but acknowledged need, rather than of religious achievement presented to a God conceived as a divine auditor of merit.²¹

The patristic tradition read this parable with particular theological penetration. Cyril of Alexandria's homily on the parable extends to several pages and is among the most sustained pieces of exegesis in his entire Luke commentary, suggesting the importance he attached to the passage. Cyril observes that the Pharisee's error is precisely that he treats prayer as an occasion for the display of merit rather than as an acknowledgment of need: "he

¹⁸ Fitzmyer, *Luke X–XXIV*, p. 1186. The grammatical ambiguity of *pros heauton prosēucheto* — whether it modifies the Pharisee's standing ("standing by himself") or the direction of his prayer ("praying to himself") — was noted already in the Greek patristic tradition; Cyril of Alexandria favors the latter reading, as do most modern commentators.

¹⁹ The debate over *hilasthēti* is surveyed in Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed., London, Tyndale Press, 1965, p. 144–213, and more recently in Daniel P. Bailey, "Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul's Use of *Hilasterion* in Romans 3:25," Cambridge PhD dissertation, 1999.

²⁰ See the extended treatment in James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 340–346, and the ecumenical discussion in *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Lutheran World Federation and Roman Catholic Church, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2000, §26–27.

²¹ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, p. 344.

who prays ought to come before God as a beggar before a king, not as a creditor before a debtor; the Pharisee came as a creditor, presenting his bill; the publican came as a beggar, presenting his poverty — and the beggar went home rich, while the creditor went home empty."²² This patristic image of prayer as the posture of the beggar before the king — rather than the creditor before the debtor — captures with remarkable precision the soteriological logic that modern redaction criticism traces through the parable's structure and vocabulary.

Gregory the Great's homily on the same passage adds the pastoral dimension: noting that the parable is addressed to those "who trusted in themselves that they were righteous," Gregory warns that the spiritual danger it diagnoses is not the possession of genuine virtue but the conversion of virtue into grounds of self-justification: "It is not the fasting and tithing that condemn the Pharisee — these are praiseworthy — but his trust in them as constituting a claim upon God, a trust that closed his heart to the one thing prayer is designed to open: the recognition that before God we stand always as the prodigal son, not as the elder brother."²³ Gregory's unexpected introduction of the Prodigal Son parable as a hermeneutical parallel is illuminating: within Luke's own narrative, the paradigmatic movement of the prodigal — "he came to himself" and returned to the father in acknowledged need — functions as an implicit structural analogy to the tax collector's posture in prayer, suggesting that for Luke the theology of humble prayer and the theology of repentance are aspects of a single soteriological vision.

5. THE STRUCTURAL GRAMMAR OF LUKAN PRAYER THEOLOGY: A SYNTHESIS

Having examined the three parables individually, it is now possible to articulate the structural grammar that underlies them as a theological unity and to situate this grammar within the broader Lukan soteriological vision traced in the preceding sections.

The three parables share, beneath their narrative diversity, a common soteriological structure: in each, the one who approaches God in prayer is characterized by radical insufficiency before the addressee, and in each, this insufficiency — acknowledged rather than concealed — is precisely the condition of genuine receptivity to the divine response. The friend asking for bread at midnight has "nothing to set before" the unexpected guest; the widow has no social standing or legal advocate before the unjust judge; the tax collector has no religious achievement to present to the God of Israel. In each case, the acknowledged insufficiency is not an incidental biographical detail but the theologically decisive feature of the paradigmatic prayer that Luke is commending.²⁴

This pattern maps precisely onto the broader Lukan theology of the *tapeinoi* established in the Magnificat and sustained throughout the Gospel's treatment of the poor, the outcasts, the sinners, and the Gentiles who receive what the self-sufficient refuse or are refused. The humble prayer commended in these parables is not the prayer of those who happen to lack material or social resources; it is the prayer of those who have arrived, whether through necessity or through self-knowledge, at the recognition that before God they possess nothing that constitutes a claim — that prayer is, in its most authentic form, the

²² Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Luke*, Homily 120, in R. Payne Smith (trans.), p. 533–535

²³ Gregory the Great, *Homiliae in Evangelia*, Homily 34, in Hurst (trans.), *Forty Gospel Homilies*, p. 292

²⁴ This structural observation is developed at length in Steven F. Plymale, *The Prayer Texts of Luke-Acts*, New York, Peter Lang, 1991, p. 67–82.

abandonment of every posture of self-sufficiency before the One who alone is the source of all that the human person receives.

Max Turner, synthesizing the Lukan theology of prayer in connection with the Spirit, observes that this consistent commendation of humble prayer is inseparable from Luke's broader pneumatological vision: it is the humble community — the community that prays in acknowledged dependence — that becomes the fit recipient of the Spirit's gift, just as it is the humble tax collector rather than the self-sufficient Pharisee who "goes home justified."²⁵ The connection Turner draws here is not arbitrary: for Luke, the God who exalts the humble and humbles the exalted in the Magnificat is the same God who pours out the Spirit upon the praying community of Acts 1–2 and renews that outpouring upon the community crying out in Acts 4 — and the continuity is precisely the posture of humble, acknowledged dependence that characterizes each receiving community.

CONCLUSION

The cumulative analysis of this article supports a conclusion of considerable soteriological weight: the Lukan prayer parables do not constitute a miscellaneous collection of teachings on the mechanics of petition but a coherent and deliberately structured theological argument in which the posture of the one who prays — specifically, the posture of acknowledged insufficiency, radical dependence upon divine mercy, and refusal of self-justification — is identified as the condition of genuine receptivity to the grace that prayer seeks.

This argument, developed through the Friend at Midnight's illustration of bold petition grounded in acknowledged need, the Persistent Widow's enactment of the cry of the utterly vulnerable, and the Tax Collector's paradigmatic abandonment of every religious claim before the God of mercy, constitutes what may properly be called a Lukan soteriology of humble prayer: a vision of the human person before God in which salvation is received precisely by those who bring nothing but their poverty to the One who alone can fill it.

The patristic tradition — Cyril of Alexandria reading these parables within the framework of Alexandrian Christology and Gregory the Great reading them within the framework of Latin pastoral theology — arrived, through different conceptual routes, at the same fundamental insight: prayer is not the presentation of credentials but the acknowledgment of beggary; and it is precisely to the beggar, in Luke's consistent and deliberate theological grammar, that the divine largesse is given without reservation.

²⁵ Max Turner, *Power from on High: The Spirit in Israel's Restoration and Witness in Luke-Acts*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996, p. 271–273

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