

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C  
Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18  
Psalm 34: 2-3, 17-18, 19, 23  
2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18  
Luke 18: 9-14  
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I am a big fan of English detective fiction. There are few things I'd rather read than a mystery story from the 1920's or 30's. My all-time favorites are the Father Brown stories of G. K. Chesterton. Father Brown is the first, and greatest, of the priest-detectives. To outsiders, Father Brown seems far too innocent of the ways of the world to solve a crime. But in fact, he has spent so long in the confessional, that he has a profound knowledge of the evil of which people are capable.

Father Brown has a unique method of unraveling mysteries. His faith has given him deep self-knowledge. He knows that given the right circumstances, he is perfectly capable of personally committing even the most serious of crimes. It's a case of "there but for the grace of God go I." This self-knowledge gives him a unique ability to get inside a criminal's mind. He imagines what might have motivated *him* to commit a particular crime. Once he has discovered the motive, he considers the suspects, and determines who is guilty.

Father Brown's profound self-knowledge must be a result of his life of prayer. And while we may not choose to apply it to solving crimes, prayer can give each of us this kind of self-knowledge and humility. Chesterton believed that if human beings were able to understand the extent to which they were capable of evil, and if they could control their predilection for evil, they would have accomplished a great deal.

It has been claimed that ignorance is bliss, but ignorance of our own capacity for sin gives rise to a bliss rooted in a destructive delusion. It is the bliss of the Pharisee in the Gospel who, with unbowed head, gives thanks that he is not like the rest of grasping, crooked, adulterous humanity -- not like the tax collector who prays humbly at the fringe of the temple: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

For the Pharisee, prayer serves as a kind of prop. It shores up his wrong-headed estimate of his own righteousness. True prayer, on the contrary, should have a corrosive effect. It should persistently and progressively undermine our complacency -- and reveal to us our complete dependence on God's mercy.

If we, like the Pharisee, exalt ourselves, we are bound, in time, to be humiliated. Eventually it will become apparent, even, by God's grace, to us, that our pretensions to righteousness and self-sufficiency are delusions. But if we humble ourselves, we will be exalted, in Christ, whose love for us is the ultimate mystery.