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The Miracle of Me

Our son has lately taken up a new prayer. At first I found it jarring, but gradually it has come to ring a deep chord within me. Seth has been regularly thanking God for *himself*.

Such a prayer is unprecedented in my experience. At the end of a long litany of thanksgiving for everything from soccer to cinnamon rolls, he will conclude simply, "...and thank you God for *me!*"

Nothing fancy. Just a straightforward expression of satisfaction at his own existence. And yet I've come to view it as nothing short of revolutionary. What possesses my son to thank God each night for himself? Where does he get the nerve? Until Seth uttered those words, it had never occurred to me that anyone could—or should!

Such words had certainly never escaped my own lips. Growing up, I'd have been afraid to pray such a prayer. I'd have thought it more than a shade arrogant. My generation was chastened to resist all urges of self-adulation. Don't fish for compliments, we were taught; let them come to you. Don't act like you're anything special. No one likes a show-off. Isn't this what landed Jacob's son, Joseph, in so much trouble with his brothers?¹ He claimed God's special favor and almost got himself killed in the process.

Indeed, there is no lack of biblical support for such advice. "I say...not to think of yourself more highly than you ought," Paul tells us, "but to think with sober judgment."²

¹ Genesis 37

² Romans 12:3

Jesus says, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host...may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place...’.”³

Or take Isaiah: “Woe is me. I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips...”⁴ Or again Paul: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.”⁵ Or Job, even, wishing he had never been born.⁶

Our real mandate for modest prayer, though, comes from Jesus's story of the Pharisee, who extols his own virtuous life while denouncing a tax collector.⁷ The Pharisee is a braggart, pure and simple, his prayer directed more at himself than God. The chastened tax collector, meanwhile, is busy driving his worth into the earth like a tent stake. He beats his breast and cries to God for mercy. Jesus may well be reminding us that our prayers should not be uttered at another's expense. He may be instructing us in the merit of a penitent spirit. But isn't prayer more than a glorified grief session? Even a righteous God must tire of too much hand ringing. Surely self-deprecation is not the soul standard for personal prayer.

Enter my son, who brings to prayer the audacity to assert his own intrinsic worth before God. He dares to value himself, just as he assumes God does. He affirms this without diminishing the worth of anyone else. After all, isn't each one of us of monumental importance to God? Why not say so at least once a day?

Most of us certainly tell ourselves regularly all that is wrong with us. We whisper our faults and shortcomings, let them seep down into us 'til they pool like a cancer in the

³ Luke 14:7–11

⁴ Isaiah 6:5

⁵ I Timothy 1:15

⁶ Job 3:3

⁷ Luke 18:9–14

soul. As we pray to the one who cherishes us, why not let echo there as well our own sweet words of approbation: “Thank you, God, for me!”

That my son, Seth, imagines he is lovable, that my son loves himself, that he presumes that God loves him—all this is itself cause for grateful prayer. Indeed, these affirmations may be the truest prerequisites for all prayer.

It has taken me some time, but gradually I’ve come to see my son’s prayer as the most natural act in the world. In fact, lately I’ve been finding the courage to speak those simple words to God, too! “And thank you,” I’ve been praying, “thank you also, God, for *me!*”