

Luke 18: 10-14

“ The Publican and the Pharisee ”

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise *his* eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified *rather* than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

If you look at Great Lent as a journey the Church is setting before us to embark upon, and simply read the assigned Gospels for the last several weeks it is just about impossible to miss the reality that the Church is using these to prepare us for the journey. That it has been a building up and a preparation for this journey – using examples so we have a clearer picture rather than teaching principles as He did on the Sermon on the Mount with the beatitudes. Jesus gives us these examples so we can ‘see’ the truths.

St. John Chrysostom says, regarding these examples the Lord has given us, that they communicate the two things in this life we are responsible for: **an earnest desire for God** *and* expressing that desire by **doing the best we can**. What we call faith – and the act of faith. God wants us to want Him and He wants us to do our best, not because He needs to be wanted and He needs our best, but because He loves us and that is what is best for us. Desiring Him only and doing our best is the way we will be healed of the passions and be able to draw ever closer in our relationship to Him.

And while this is a very simple thing to understand, it is very hard to do – and in fact requires great practice and a great struggle throughout our lives. To go through each moment of each day remembering as we do our best at whatever He has placed before us to do, that if we are not doing it *for* Him and *with* Him and *through* Him then we are doing it *for* ourselves and *of* ourselves and it is not faith and will not only be of no value – it will actually harm our souls. It would be better if we not even tried because at least then we would be ascribing no credit to ourselves because we hadn’t done anything. And if we were honest with ourselves and didn’t make excuses, we would be left to simply repent for not having faith and not doing the best we can in faith.

St. John Chrysostom also teaches that this parable of the Publican and the Pharisee magnifies and clarifies the reality that there are two ways we can know in our minds and hearts if we are in fact truly seeking God and doing our best, that is, acting in faith rather than just fooling ourselves. Firstly, he says **we will have repentance**, and secondly, or as a result of having repentance, **we will not judge others**.

And I must clarify before we go on, that real and true repentance is not judging yourself anymore than it is judging others. It is rather the mental and emotional awareness that our desires, thoughts and actions are focused on ourselves rather than on God. When the saint laments how sinful he or she is, they are not judging themselves, this is not self-hatred. Rather, they are telling us they are but creatures and without God they have nothing and are nothing. We have, by nature, no virtues – neither do we have evil. We were created ‘to become’ through our struggle as St. Athanasius said, ‘by grace what God is by nature. To be, as the Apostle Peter says, *partakers of the divine nature*,’ (2 Pet.1:4).

As Jesus said to the rich young ruler in the same chapter as this parable who called Him 'good teacher,' '*no one is good but One, that is God,*' (Matt. 19:17). When we experience God in the righteous person it is very, very easy to lose sight of the fact that it is not their righteousness – it is God's.

And so we come to the Publican and the Pharisee. All that we said last week of the tax-collector is true of this Publican. They not only ignore the sick and suffering poverty stricken Lazarus's of their communities, but also all those Jesus commanded in Matthew 25 we were *not* to neglect: the prisoners, orphans and widows. St. John Chrysostom says they not only neglect them, they go much farther by creating their suffering. They are the reason many of them are poor and in prison, widowed and orphaned. Let us not be afraid to judge the **vocation** of tax-collector of the ancient world to be a profession of demons. Or as my people would say: a tax-collector is a rat.

And as bad as the profession of the Publican was, this is as good as the life of the Pharisee was. He fasted twice a week and gave sacrificially. St. John Chrysostom says they often gave three separate tithes – a third of the money they had – as well as providing for others at every feast and the normal offerings to the temple that were to be made during the year. In the same way that our lives here in 21<sup>st</sup> century America are mostly closer to the rich of Scripture, so too are we Orthodox closer to the Christian version of the Pharisee of that time – and sadly in some ways, also closer to the Pharisees of the Scripture.

Not only did they have a tradition of asceticism and almsgiving, they also had correct theology and even a history of martyrdom. Some of them became the foundation of the Church - the Apostle Paul principally and Nicodemus. If they weren't the best representative of Judaism, why would they be used by Christ here in opposition to the Publican. But that said, this Pharisee, like Saul (before he was Paul), approached God differently.

Last week we talked about love from God's perspective. That it is our focus and concern, our desire for the other. And that being the case, the opposite of love is not hate but self-love, *philouftia*. He doesn't look at himself, he looks at the other, but he doesn't look to the other with concern, he looks to the other selfishly - for what he can use him for. He doesn't care about him, in fact he doesn't even see him. He see's what he wants to see, what he needs to see – he sees the Publican's sin as way to justify himself.

Instead of looking into himself and seeing nothing good but God, or as the Publican who, without God looked into himself and really didn't see any good, the Pharisee sees the good – and there was good there – but he tragically ascribes the good he sees to *himself*. And then, to justify and confirm that it is HIS GOODNESS, he goes down his 'good list.' And notice how he begins each of his good works or virtues: "I" ...I am not like other men..., I fast..., I tithe..., I... I... I. He has no repentance, he doesn't need repentance – he's good on his own.

The Publican on the other hand has nothing *but* repentance. He looks into himself and sees no good. He can only lower his eyes and beg God for mercy. He knows there's nothing in himself, any hope he has is in God. The Publican sees what the Pharisee cannot see because the Pharisee wrongly ascribes God's goodness as his own. The Publican sees nothing but sin and the darkness of a creature without the light of the creator, but it is in

this darkness, which is the hopeless reality of our lives without God, that the Publican sees what the saints see, and in that darkness he turns to God in repentance ...the darkness has done it's work.

...This is the process and the salvation of repentance – of the Publican. We look into ourselves and see there is nothing but darkness without God. Any goodness, any light is of God. The only thing we can do is repent and earnestly desire God and do our best through faith in Him, looking at our own darkness and never at the darkness of our brother. Just the opposite, always looking for and finding the light of God in our brother. Because God's light, if that is what you want to see rather than his darkness, rather than his sin, you will see even more readily than his sin. Because as assuredly as God will show us our sin, he will show us His light in our brother. This too is what the saints see.

This week as we turn our face to the journey before us of Great Lent, the Church has us reflect on the Publican and Pharisee, and as we do so we are instructed to not fast this week, neither are there extra services as there are during Lent; that by discarding this work of righteousness, we will not be tempted with vainglory (as we surely will be) once the fast is under way if we are striving well. This week we are to focus on the repentance of the Publican. And in so doing prepare ourselves for the journey of Great Lent. ...which first and foremost is a journey of repentance.