



SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND PHARISEE

February 5

THE GOSPEL READING

Luke 18:10-14

[The Pharisee and the Publican]

The Lord said this parable, "Two men went up into 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, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up 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, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

THE SERMON

The Temple in Jerusalem was the center of worship in ancient Israel, where prayers were offered in the morning and evening, coinciding with the times when animals were sacrificed to make reparation for the sins of the people. In this passage, we see two men going to the Temple to pray, representing two opposites in the eyes of the world. For a different reason, they also represent two opposites in the eyes of God.

This Gospel passage is always read at the beginning of the Triodion – the three-week period before the start of Great Lent to Holy Saturday. This is a preparation period for our spiritual journey to Pascha (Easter), where we draw closer to God through worship, prayer, fasting, and increased acts of charity. The term Triodion is also used to describe the service book containing the prayers and hymns used during this time.



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The two men who go to the Temple to pray are the Pharisee and the tax collector. They were, first of all, opposites in how people perceived them. The Pharisees were one of the most influential religious groups of that time, and they were known for following the Law of Moses to the smallest detail, as they understood it. They thought they were morally pure and loved showing their piety to receive recognition from others for their perceived righteousness.

The tax collectors – or “publicans,” as they were also called – on the other hand, were perceived by the people as dishonest and immoral. They were Jews who worked as representatives of the Roman empire and collected taxes for the governors. They often demanded more money for themselves than needed, and they became rich at the expense of their fellow Jews. In the people’s eyes, the Pharisee seems morally superior to the tax collector. However, God sees things differently because He knows *all* things.

The Lord Jesus teaches through parables, instructing us through stories from everyday life that we can apply to our lives today. He shows us how to live and how not to live. He teaches us how to love and how to pray. In this parable, the Lord teaches us one of the most important and fundamental principles of the Christian Faith: God sees the heart, not merely external appearances.

It is with our hearts that we choose either pride or humility. In this parable, we learn the value of humility, repentance, and how these virtues open the door to God’s mercy and love. This is why the Church brings this parable to our attention right before we enter the period of Great Lent when our focus is on spiritual renewal and preparation in our journey to Pascha.

When the Pharisee and tax collector went into the Temple to pray, the Pharisee stood and boasted to God about his righteousness, listing the bad things he did not do. He thanked God that He was not like other men who were extortioners, unjust, and adulterers. He even thanked God that he was not like the tax collector there praying. The Pharisee also listed the good things he did, saying he fasted twice a week and gave tithes of all he got.

The irony is that fasting and giving alms are not only good things but *necessary* to our spiritual growth, and we emphasize these practices during Great Lent. The Lord tells the parable this way to help us think about these things with *spiritual* eyes. The Pharisee thought he was better than others and practiced these things only externally, that is, as a show. His asceticism and charity were of no profit to him because they were done as a display to receive admiration from others, not out of love for God and his neighbor. He was fasting from food but feeding his pride, and he was giving alms to receive honor from people.

The tax collector, by contrast, stood at a distance from the Altar of God and, in humility and repentance, would not even lift his eyes to heaven. He beat his chest, saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” He does not boast of anything but asks God for mercy for his failures.

These are opposite approaches because they reflect hearts in opposite states – the states of pride and humility. The results, of course, are also contrasting. Jesus tells us that

the tax collector, a repentant sinner, went home justified, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted. The term “justified” means that the repentant man entered into a right relationship with God – he left the path of sin and turned to God. It means that by his humility before God and by repenting from his sins and asking for God’s mercy, he was restored, and his life was reoriented to the path of eternal life.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, did not profit from his external righteousness. He did not benefit from fasting and giving alms because his pride kept him from being in communion with God, who “resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). Pride causes us to seek honor from others, and to seek power over people to satisfy our ego. It causes us to manipulate things and others for our gain and to dispose of people as means to our profit. It dehumanizes us as we dehumanize others.

On the other hand, in this parable, the Lord teaches us the meaning of humility and repentance. It teaches us that God sees the heart, not external appearances. It teaches us that humility means recognizing our brokenness and sinfulness and that judging others is not our purpose. Saint Basil the Great says, “Never place yourself above anyone, not even great sinners. Humility often saves a sinner who has committed many terrible transgressions.” The true faith, righteousness, and piety alone cannot save us. When *combined* with constant practice in humility and love, however, they can.

Humility justifies us before God, and repentance is the door through which we enter Great Lent. The Pharisee had no desire to change his heart because he was pleased with himself, thinking he was righteous – but, as Saint Gregory Palamas says, “Humility is the chariot by which we ascend to God.” Repentance and humility caused the Holy Apostle Paul, who was brought up as a Pharisee, to give his entire life to the Lord. Encountering Christ empowers us to repent and grow in humility.

Jesus taught us not to be like the proud Pharisee but instead to understand the *spirit* of the Law and to have it inscribed in our *hearts*. Humility allows for love, and a humble spiritual life produces *true* virtue. Our preparation for Great Lent begins with humility, the beginning of sincere repentance. In this way, we can attain deeper communion with God as we receive His forgiveness and, through His blessings, we are guided to greater spiritual heights.

God is patient, kind, and loves the humble heart. As we encounter Him, we also encounter others from His perspective, not the world’s superficial point of view. We recognize our failures and sins, and we trust in God’s great mercy and love for all humanity. God’s mercy and love bless us, and as Christians, we have the blessed responsibility of extending that same mercy and love to all – not out of mere duty but out of joy because God has been so merciful to us.