SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE
(TRIODION BEGINS)
February 25

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 prayer times were observed in the morning and evening, coinciding with the times of sacrifice. In this passage, we see two men — a Pharisee and a Publican — going to the Temple to pray. As such, they represent two opposites in the eyes of the world and two opposites in the eyes of God. A Pharisee and a Publican were on opposite sides of that society and were perceived by the people as such.

The Pharisees were one of the two influential religious groups in ancient Israel (the
other being the Sadducees), and they were known for being the strictest group in matters of ritual purity in the Law of Moses, focusing on the letter of the Law. They believed that they were clean from sin and that they were chosen people of God. They loved showing their piety and looked for recognition of their righteousness from the people.

On the other hand, the Publicans were the tax collectors and were perceived by the people as corrupt and dishonest men. They were Jewish people who worked as representatives of the Roman Empire, and they collected taxes for the Roman governors. The Roman government required them to collect a certain amount of taxes in each district, and if that quota was met, they were free to charge more for their keeping if they so desired. As a result, many of them had become extortioners, enriching themselves as they collected more taxes from the people than was necessary for their profit.

From a human standpoint, the Pharisee is contrasted with the tax collector — the Pharisee is righteous, and the tax collector is a sinner. However, God saw things differently. The Lord teaches through parables; that is, He teaches us with stories from the everyday life of His time that we can apply to our lives in our time. 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 our Faith: God sees the heart, not merely external appearances. It is with our hearts that we choose either pride or humility. Here, we learn the value of humility and repentance and how that opens the door to God’s mercy and love. It is so important that the Church brings this parable to our attention right before we enter this period of preparation for our journey to Pascha (Easter).

As both men went into the Temple to pray, the Pharisee stood and boasted to God about his own righteousness, listing the bad things he did not do. He says, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” He also listed the good things he did, saying, “I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.” The irony in the passage is that fasting and giving alms are not only good things but necessary to our spiritual growth, and we emphasize these practices during this Lenten season. However, the Pharisee thought he was better than others and practiced those things only externally, as a show. As a result, his asceticism and his charity were of no profit to him because they were done to receive admiration from people — not out of his love for God and his neighbor. In this way, he was fasting from food but feeding his pride and giving alms to receive honor from people.

The tax collector, in contrast, stood far off and, in humility and repentance, did not even lift his eyes to heaven. He beat his chest, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector asks God for mercy for his own failures. These are opposite approaches because they reflect hearts in opposite states, that is, of pride and humility. The results, of course, are also opposite. 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 an honest relationship with God, 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, the tax collector 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, through fasting and giving alms, because pride kept him from being justified, that is, from communion with God, who “resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). The lesson of this parable is humility and repentance, and it teaches us that God sees the heart, not external appearances. It teaches us that humility makes us see others as better than ourselves, which is what God values. As 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.” From an external perspective, the right faith, outward righteousness, and piety, alone do not make us automatically better than others.

Humility justifies us before God, and repentance is the door through which we enter the Triodion, the pre-Lenten period, — the starting point of our journey to Pascha. The Pharisee had no desire to change his heart because he was pleased only with himself, thinking he was fulfilling the Law — but, as Saint Gregory Palamas says, “Humility is the chariot by which we ascend to God.” Jesus taught us to be the opposite of the Pharisees, that is, to understand the spirit of the Law, to have it inscribed in our hearts, to love, and to live a modest spiritual life — a life of genuine virtue, not pride.

Today marks the beginning of the Triodion (in Greek, Τριώδιον), which always begins on the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee — to remind us about the importance of humility and true repentance. A liturgical book called “The Triodion” is used by our clergy and chanters in church services throughout the Triodion (pre-Lenten period), Great Lent, Holy Week, and up to Holy Saturday night. “The Triodion” book contains hymns, prayers, and readings specific to the various Church services during this entire period.

Our preparation toward Great Lent begins with humility, the beginning of true repentance. In this way, we can attain deeper communion with God as we receive His forgiveness, and so He blesses us by guiding us to greater spiritual heights. God is patient, God is kind, and He loves the humble heart. Let us humble ourselves before God and imitate Him who “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Philippians 2:8). Let us extend humility to others as well, being merciful to one another.