SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE
February 13

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

This Gospel passage is always read at the beginning of the Triodion – the three-week period before the beginning of Great Lent to Holy Saturday. A period of preparation for our spiritual journey to Pascha (Easter) where we draw closer to God through greater worship, deeper prayer, additional 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.) 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 of religious sacrifice (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, and they represent two op-
posites in the eyes of the world, and two opposites in the eyes of God – but for different reasons. These two men are the Pharisee and the tax collector. They were, first of all, opposite in how people perceived them. The Pharisees were one of the most influential religious groups of that time, and were known to follow the Law of Moses to the letter. They thought that they were morally pure and loved showing their piety in order to receive recognition for their righteousness from others.

The tax collectors (or “publicans,” as they were also called) 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. The Roman government required them to collect a certain amount of taxes in each district. They were not paid by the Romans but were expected to charge additional fees (or exaggerate the tax rate) in order to provide for themselves and their families. Some, however, demanded far more money for themselves than they needed, and became rich at the expense of their fellow Jews. Given all this, the Pharisee seems morally superior to the tax collector – at least in the eyes of society. However, God sees things differently.

The Lord teaches through parables. He teaches us with 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 our Faith’s most important and fundamental principles: 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 own righteousness, listing the bad things he did not do. He said, “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 Great Lent. However, the Pharisee thought he was better than others, and practiced these things only in an external way, 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 neighbor. He was fasting from food but feeding his pride, and he was giving alms just 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 up 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 that
are in opposite states, in the states 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 into a right relationship with God – that 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 superficial righteousness, even 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). The theme of this parable is humility and repentance, and it teaches us that God sees the heart, not external appearances. It teaches us that humility means recognizing our own brokenness and sinfulness, and that judging others is not our purpose. As Saint Basil says, “Never place yourself above anyone, not even great sinners. Humility often saves a sinner who has committed many terrible transgressions.” The right faith, righteousness, and piety, by themselves, cannot save us but combined with constant practice in humility and love, can.

Humility is what justifies us before God, and repentance is the door through which we enter Great Lent, the starting point of the journey to Pascha. 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 are what caused Nicodemus, the Pharisee, to follow Jesus (see John 3, 7:50-51, 19:39) and the Holy Apostle Paul (see Acts 23:6), who was brought up as a Pharisee, to give his entire life to the Lord. Also, by repentance and humility, a “chief tax collector,” Zacchaeus followed Christ (Luke 19:1-10), as did Matthew the Apostle and Evangelist (Matthew 9:9).

Jesus taught us not to be like the Pharisees but instead to understand the spirit of the Law, have it inscribed in our hearts, love, and live a humble spiritual life – a life of true virtue, not of pride. 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, are guided to greater spiritual heights. God is patient, kind, and 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 be humble towards others as well, knowing our own failures and sins, and trust in the great mercy and love of God for all humanity. We are all blessed by God’s mercy and love, 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.