

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee



Many are the faults of the Pharisee: first of all he is boastful, and without sense, for he praises himself, even though the sacred Scripture cries aloud,

***“Let a neighbor praise you, and not your own mouth:
a stranger and not your own lips.” (Proverbs 27:202)***

Our virtue, therefore, must not be contaminated with fault, but must be single-minded and blameless and free from all that can bring reproach. For what profit is there in fasting twice a week, if you so doing serve only as a pretext for ignorance and vanity, and if it makes you arrogant, haughty and selfish? You tithe your possessions and make boast of it; but in another way you provoke God’s anger, by condemning men generally on this account and accusing others. And you yourself are puffed up, though

not crowned by the divine decree for righteousness, but on the contrary, heap praises upon yourself. For I am not, he says, as the rest of mankind. Moderate yourself, O Pharisee: “Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth, and a strong door about my lips.” (*Psalms 140:3*)

You speak to God Who knows all things. Await the decree of the Judge. None of those skilled in the practice of wrestling ever crowns himself; nor does any man receive the crown for himself but awaits the summons of the arbiter. Lower your pride, for arrogance is both accursed and hated by God. Although, therefore, you fast with puffed up mind, your so doing will not avail you; your labor will be unrewarded; for you have mingled dung with your perfume. Even according to the law of Moses a sacrifice that had a blemish was not capable of being offered for sacrifice, “there must be no blemish therein.” (*Leviticus 22:21*) Since, therefore, your fasting is accompanied by pride, you must expect to hear God saying, “This is not the fast I have chosen.” (*Isaiah 58:5*)... You offer tithes, but you wrong in another way Him Who is honored by you, in that you condemn men generally. This is an act foreign to the mind that fears God.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria (5th Century)

Keeping the word of the publican

An old man much given to simplicity questioned Father Ammonas: “Three thoughts occupy me, either, should I wander in the deserts, or should I go to a foreign land where no one knows me, or should I shut myself up in a cell without opening the door to anyone, eating only every second day?” Father Ammonas replied, “It is not right for you to do any of these three things. Rather, sit in your cell and eat a little every day, keeping the word of the publican always in your heart, and you may be saved.”

The Most Important Virtues

Repentance and humility are more important and higher than all of the other virtues, continuing until the end of our life. Referring to the words of the Prophet David, Saint John Climacus writes, “I did not fast, I did not keep vigil, I did not sleep on the bare earth, but I humbled myself and the Lord saved me.” --Elder Ambrose of Optina

Imitate the Publican

Mother Syncretica said: "Imitate the Publican and you will not be condemned with the Pharisee. Choose the meekness of Moses and you will find your heart which is a rock changed into a spring of water."

Counting our sins instead of our good works

When the foolish thought of counting up any of your good works enters into your head, immediately correct your fault and rather count up your sins, your continual and innumerable offences against the All-merciful and Righteous Master, and you will find that their number is as the sand of the sea, whilst your virtues in comparison with them are as nothing. --Saint John of Kronstadt

If Repentance is too much...

If repentance is too much for you, and you sin out of habit even when you do not want to, show humility like the publican; this is enough to ensure your salvation. --Saint Peter of Damascus

LITURGICAL HYMNS from the TRIODION SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN & PHARISEE ~ SATURDAY EVENING VESPERS

"LORD I CALL..." (7 Stikhera of the Resurrection followed by)

Tone 1

Brothers, let us not pray like the Pharisee:
He who exalts himself will be humbled!
Let us prepare to abase ourselves by fasting;
Let us cry aloud with the voice of the Publican://
O god, forgive us sinners!

The Pharisee went up to the temple with a proud and empty heart;
The Publican bowed himself in repentance.
They both stood before you, O master:
The one, through boasting, lost his reward,
But the other, with tears and sighs, won your blessing:
Strengthen me, O Christ our god, as I weep in your presence, //
Since you are the lover of mankind!

"GLORY ... NOW AND EVER. AMEN."

Tone 8

I know the value of tears, almighty lord:
They delivered Hezekiah from the gates of death,
And rescued the harlot from repeated sins.
Tears justified the Publican instead of the Pharisee://
I pray you, Lord: number me with the former, and have mercy on me!



Sometime back someone said to me, “Whenever I’ve sinned I never feel like praying. I feel unworthy and I just can’t pray.”

The statement sounded correct - I’ve had the same feeling often enough. But I kept thinking about it until the question came to me, “What am I waiting to feel before I pray?”

In the case at hand, I would suppose one would be waiting not to feel like such a sinner. And then I understood.

There is the story in Scripture of two men who went to pray, one a Pharisee and one a Publican (bad tax-collector for Rome) (Luke 18:10-14). We are told that the Pharisee prayed easily, lifting his eyes to heaven, and thanking God that “he was not like other men.”

The publican did not even lift his eyes to heaven but smote his breast and prayed, “Lord, be merciful to me a sinner.” Jesus said it was the publican who “returned home justified” not the Pharisee. What struck me on reflection, however, was the puzzle of not wanting to pray when I feel guilty of sin. Having sinned, I do not wish to pray, I do not feel worthy of prayer. What am I waiting on? I think, upon reflection, I’m waiting until I feel righteous, like a Pharisee, so I can pray, without realizing that such prayer is almost useless. Indeed, strangely, I pray, “Lord, Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” with greater ease when I feel like a righteous man than when I feel like a sinner. And this is part of the disease of religion - for make no mistake - religion is frequently a disease. Religious feelings (the Pharisees were masters of them) a deceptive in the extreme. I think I feel like praying, I am in fact feeling “pious.” And it’s a deep tragedy. I am not ready to pray - I’m eaten up with myself as a pious man.

When you feel like a Publican, then you can pray like a Publican. Many times people will tell me, “Father, I can’t serve in the altar today, I don’t feel worthy.” No doubt. But you’re in much greater danger when you do feel worthy.

Come in and approach God’s altar knowing you are not worthy and you will find grace and forgiveness.

None of this is to say don’t go to confession. But it’s good for us to say, sometimes, “Father, forgive me, I’ve been so good this week I haven’t felt in the least like a sinner, and this is a great sin and deception.” Now we would be getting somewhere.

To see the truth of ourselves is a very hard thing. And to love God precisely in the truth of ourselves is harder still. But this He wants from us. Pray like a publican. There are so many more times available for prayer if you do. And while you’re there, pray for those who are praying like a pharisee. May God free us from delusion.

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