

THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE: IRONY AND CONTRAST

The period of Great Lent is provided to us by the Church for intensified introspection, self-examination, augmented acts of self-denial through heightened fasting, and increased focus on prayer, which brings the soul into a cleansing state of prostration, repentance and renewal. This prepares us for the reception of the feast of Feasts, our Lord's Resurrection in the flesh, which opens the door to our own eternal resurrection from death and enslavement. For Orthodox Christians who are genuinely interested in the salvation of their souls, this annual "exercise" is an indispensable period for recalibrating our spiritual compasses, revitalizing of our faith, and acquiring soul-strengthening virtues.

Just as we look forward to any serious endeavor in life that is focused on the improvement of one's circumstances and fate, a certain amount of preparation is generally required. Such effort help to prepare one's mindset and attitude for the upcoming labors and (spiritually therapeutic) sacrifices. In that regard, the holy Church, the God-provided vehicle for our salvation, in her wisdom, provides for the faithful specific edifying and preparatory readings from the Holy Gospel, in specific sequence, during the weeks that precede Great Lent, the Triodion period. Prior to the plunge into Great Lent, the soul is provided with important lessons that are designed to fertilize the soil of the heart, preparing it for the cultivation of the necessary "fruits of repentance".

On the first Sunday of the Triodion period, our attention is directed towards the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, which draws us to the important lesson of humility vs. pride. The second Sunday of preparation brings us to the wonderful story of the Prodigal Son, reminding us of the joy experienced by the entire heavenly Kingdom at the repentance of one sinner, and God's infinite mercy. On the following Sunday, we are brought to the dreaded Judgment seat of Christ, the eventual inescapable fate for each and every one of us. Finally, on Forgiveness Sunday, we prostrate ourselves before all, shedding the baggage of blame and ill feeling, showing the mercy towards others that we beseech from our Lord. Such is the "multi-step" preparation that the holy Church provides, readying our souls for the "spiritual boot camp" of Holy Lent.

In our current step into this annual Triodion journey, we are directed towards the story of the Publican and the Pharisee, in the Gospel according to St. Luke (18: 10-14):

Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon 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 every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

The Church provides us with a striking contrast between two individuals whose backgrounds are poles apart. The Pharisee, who was a respected and educated religious man esteemed by the Jews, is presented alongside a publican, a heartless criminal, who selfishly and brazenly deceived and stole from his own people. The Pharisee comes into the temple to pray, something he has done many, many times.

His prayer is presented in a manner that reveals serious deficiencies, which become unfortunate obstacles to accessing God's mercy. The Pharisee's prayer was corrupted by pride, which became the fatal source of self-justification, belittling of others, and a satisfaction in the adequacy of his own efforts and accomplishments... ultimately rendered his prayer, according to the Holy Fathers, never reaching the ear of God. The Publican, on the other hand, despite his history of heinous and cruel sins, prays in the spirit of sincere repentance, maintaining an inward focus of self-abasement, giving no attention to the sins of anyone else, **humbly** pleading for mercy. His prayer, (not the Pharisee's), was heard, and blessed!

Each and every one of us, without exception, is plagued with the infection of sin, and is in perpetual need of healing. St. Nikolai (Velimirovic) offers an interesting perspective on this parable:

The proud, whose eyes are constantly raised heavenward while their hearts cleave to the earth, are not pleasing to God; it is the humble and meek, whose eyes are cast down earthward while their hearts are filled with heaven, who please Him. The Creator of mankind prefers men to count over their sins to Him rather than their good works. For God is a physician, who comes up to the bed on which each one of us is lying, and asks: "Where is the pain?" The man who makes use of a physician's presence to tell him about all his pain and weakness is wise, and the man who, concealing his pain, boasts of his health to the physician, is a fool. As though a physician visits men because of their health, and not their sickness! "It is evil to sin", says St. John Chrysostom, "though here help can be given; but to sin, and not to admit it – there is no help here."

So let us be wise, and, when we stand in prayer to God, let us feel that we are standing before the best and most merciful of physicians, who, with care and love, asks each of us: "Where is the pain?" Let us not delay, in any way, to tell Him of our sickness, our wounds and our sins.

Clearly, the Pharisee considered himself well and in no need of healing. His pride blinded him to his need of healing. May our Lord guard us from such blindness!

The posture and arrogance of the Pharisee may seem a bit extreme; lulling us into thinking that such behavior is beyond us. But the Holy Fathers teach that pride can creep into our hearts and souls in a most insidious and deceptive manner, gaining a foothold in our souls like the quiet entry of an indolent infection. Blessed Theophylact offers us another perspective that can help us gauge if we are indeed infected and weighed down by pride:

The Lord ceaselessly purges the passion of pride in many ways. This passion, more than any other, disturbs our thoughts, and for this reason the Lord always and everywhere teaches on this subject. Here He is purging the worst form of pride. For there are many offshoots of self-love. Presumption, arrogance, and vainglory all stem from this root. But the most destructive of all these kinds of self-love is pride, for pride is contempt of God. When a man ascribes his accomplishments to himself, and not to God, this is nothing less than denial of God and opposition to Him. Therefore, like enemy to enemy, the Lord opposes this passion which is opposed to Him, and through this parable He promises to heal it. **He directs this parable towards those who trust in themselves and who do not attribute everything to God.**

If we begin to feel that the Pharisee is well beyond where our own hearts are, the critical questions should be asked, do we trust ourselves? If so, then we have work to do. Do we truly attribute everything (good) to God? If not, then we have work to do. Our feet are thus planted in the camp of the Pharisee and not in the camp of the [humble and repentant] Publican.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we take our first steps into the soul-cleansing Triodion period, may we take stock of our souls and see our deficiencies and spiritual weaknesses. May we work zealously to avoid the poison of self-justification, remaining totally blind to the sins and faults of others, and acquire the soul-saving spirit of the downward gazing and repentant Publican , crying out, "God be merciful to me a sinner!"

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.