

Sunday of the Tax Collector and Pharisee 2012

Today's Reading: Luke 18:0-14

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"

Thoughts on the Gospel

"Let us not pray like the Pharisee, brothers and sisters, for those who exalt themselves will be humbled. Let us be humbled before God through fasting like the Tax Collector, as we cry aloud, 'God, have mercy on us and forgive us, sinners.'"

With this hymn, our Church begins the *Triodion* season by focusing on the subject of *prayer*. It is something that is very important for all Christians, as this is the way we communicate with our Father in Heaven. Yet, in this discussion on prayer, Christ speaks to us of a subject that many don't like to hear about: *Hypocrisy*.

Although unfortunate, we live in a world where those who preach peace are the first who start wars. We live in a world where the so-called "religious" are the first to condemn others, instead of embracing the lost as God's creation. We say we care for the poor, but we always condemn them as 'lazy' and 'weak'. Yet, this sin (along with the greater subject of prayer) is one of the things our Lord points to in today's parable, as we begin the *Triodion* and our walk towards Pascha.

The parable is well-known to us all: two men went up to the temple to pray. The first mentioned is the Pharisee. At that time, Pharisees were seen as "religious" and "pious" by their fellow citizens. While the Jews only had to fast one day during the year, Pharisees fasted twice a week. Yet, Christ mentions them in a different light to teach us all something about prayer and pseudo-prayer.

The Pharisee begins his "prayer" with words that one would not expect from a person of God: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men: extortionists, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get."

The tax collector, on the other hand, was someone who was reviled by his countrymen. The fact these people had to collect taxes to give to the Romans was something the other Jews saw as treason. Worse, they were seen as "sinners" because of their attitude and outlook on life. In short, they were never accepted, always pushed to the side, and seen by their fellow citizens as the first people who would be judged severely by God.

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So, it was quite a surprise when Jesus continued the parable: "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!'"

After hearing these two different prayers, I believe we can all see the difference between them. The "prayer" of the Pharisee was self-glorification: it was a way for him to feel better about himself, justifying his attitude to God and – in a sense – completely 'missing the mark' on what true prayer is. And so, this "prayer" was filled with hypocrisy.

In contrast, the prayer of the tax collector is the prayer that was acceptable before God. It was the prayer of a person who *acknowledged* him being a sinner; yet, it was also the prayer of a person who wanted to change, who wanted to *repent*. Christ calls us all to repentance, and we should daily ask for His forgiveness. That call of repentance is so much more than just saying "I'm sorry" to Christ for our sins. It is to acknowledge our sin, to make a decision to 'change our mind', and try to never go off the Road that leads us to salvation. The tax collector, when he sat in the corner, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner," was begging God to help him on his road to recovery, on his road from death to life, and from the earth to heaven.

My beloved brothers and sisters in the Lord: As we begin our journey today towards the Passion and Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we are all called to repentance. We are called to forgive one another. We are all called to acknowledge that we are sinners and need Christ's help in our road to recovery, in our journey to the Kingdom. It is my fervent prayer that we all experience this 'changing of our minds', so that we may grow spiritually, never falling into the temptation to pray as the Pharisee (but always remembering to pray as the humble tax collector), and realizing that our God is a God of love, who will have us in His embrace unto the ages of ages.

A Blessed Triodion to all!

Discussion Questions:

For Children

1. How would you define the words "prayer" and "hypocrisy"?
2. Why is the Triodion important?
3. What types of people today would be compared to the "tax collectors" and "Pharisees" of Jesus' time? Why?

For Youth/Young Adults

1. Which person of the parable do *you* compare to? Why?
2. With what words would you describe your prayer life?
3. Why do you believe this Parable is tied into the Triodion and how Orthodox Christians prepare for Pascha?
4. The Pharisee is seen as 'unjustified' not because of his deeds but because of his approach to the blessings God gave him. When do we fall into the same trap in our lives?