

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee (Lk 18:9-14)
BB29.3 Spring 2017 from Homily 2/5/17
Most Recent Revision: 1/28/18
(need hard copy for some missing lines)

Today we begin, what is called in the Church, the Triodion. During this three-week period we start our preparation for Great Lent, which in turn is our preparation for Great and Holy Pascha. We have the same familiar Gospel readings that are so profoundly incisive for the direction we need to point our lives in moving toward Great and Holy Pascha.

Today, we read the parable of the Publican, or the Tax-collector, and the Pharisee. Think of how the parable ends: this man, the Tax-collector, “went down to his own home justified, rather than the other” (Lk. 18:14). This word, ‘justified,’ in many other contexts, is normally translated ‘to be made righteous.’ This would be a better way to understand it, in this particular scenario. This parable is about how it is that a person, you or I, become righteous, or are made righteous. It was not included in today’s reading, but our Lord introduced the parable by directing it “to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Lk 18:9). So this is really a parable about where our righteousness comes from. Does it come from ourselves? Or does it come from Christ? When the parable concludes by saying that this man went down to his home made righteous, it is very clearly communicating that his righteousness was not based in himself. He was not the source of his righteousness, but rather, as we sang so frequently during the Nativity Season, it was the ‘Sun of Righteousness’ Who came to inhabit him.

The role of a human being in this world, the purpose, the reason we exist, is for that ‘Sun of Righteousness’ to come take up His residence in our lives. So this man went down to his home in a sense, you could say, made a true human being; becoming what a human being is supposed to be; becoming what he was created for. He was made a vessel to hold the ‘Sun of Righteousness,’ so that what shone forth from him was the Light that came from a different source than himself. It came from the source of the One Who is described by St. John as, “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1Jn. 1:5).

As we consider this parable, we need to keep in mind that the focus really is the question: Are we going to become true human beings? Are we going to become what we were created to be? Vessels of this Sun of Righteousness. This inner light that is placed within us is Christ Himself.

It is a very common image of Christianity in the world at large, that it is all very dreary and, you know, beating-your-breast and crying, and ‘Oh, woe is me!’ There is something misleading about this because the focus of this parable is the “to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others outcome—where we are going, where we are headed, what we were created to be. It tells us how to get there. The goal is: to be made righteous; that Christ, the ‘Sun of Righteousness’, would come and live in us. He would be the One to cleanse our soul.

The parable itself begins like this: “Two men went into the Temple to pray” (Lk. 18:10). So it is really a parable about prayer; how we pray, which is very appropriate for getting us ready for Great Lent because we are going to intensify our life of prayer. Immediately before this, Jesus told another parable about prayer: the ‘Widow and the Unjust Judge’, in order to illustrate that we should pray at all times and not lose heart. Through this instruction, the Church is trying to direct us, to remind us, to guide us, to guard us, to warn us, about this life of prayer that we are going to enter into and intensify in the coming weeks. And the danger is just this: The Pharisee, goes up to the temple and he says, “God, I thank You that I am not like other men” (Lk. 18:11). In our case, the danger is to say, ‘Lord, I thank You that I am not like that Pharisee;’ this is the real danger. We do it all the time by saying, “O Lord, I am glad I am not like the Democrats, or, like the Republicans,’ or whatever else we want to distance ourselves from. It is so woven into our fallen being to have this attitude, this disposition: I am glad I am not like that other person.

Then the Pharisee lists these horrendous sins that he does not commit: extortion, and adultery, saying rather that he fasts twice a week, and he gives tithes of whatever he receives. All he is saying is that he kept the fast. That is what we often say. (Or sometimes we say that we do not keep the fast, and excuse it by saying, ‘oh, it is not that important anyways; it is just food’). We still evaluate ourselves in the same ways that this Pharisee did. The contrast of this attitude is, of course, the Publican’s behavior, who comes to pray, standing afar off, not being bold enough to go forward in the temple. He stands at a distance, and he has his eyes downcast; again, as a sign of his humility, and he says: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13).

Reflect with me for a moment on the series of Gospel texts that we are going to have in the next three weeks. You will notice three pairs of people: the ‘Publican and the Pharisee,’ the ‘Prodigal Son’ and the Older Brother’, and the ‘Sheep and the Goats.’ Besides these, there is always a third person in each parable: God Who justifies the Publican, the loving Father who receives back the Prodigal Son, and finally Christ Himself, the Judge, Who divides the Sheep from the Goats. What is interesting about these pairs is that they reveal to us a kind of duality in our life by the characteristics that are associated with each. Notice that the Pharisee, the Elder Brother, and the Goats all share a one besetting characteristic: they are not able to see their own sins. They are totally blind to their own sins, but conversely, they are very good at seeing other people’s sins. We just saw this in the case of the Pharisee, but what does the Elder Brother say to his father?

‘Why would you ever take that guy back? He wasted all of your money. His sins are very easy to see.’

Another besetting characteristic, that is given in the first parable, is that the Pharisee is very good at seeing his own good deeds, but he is not so good at seeing the good deeds of other people. He does not seem to notice, that the Tax-collector is there praying in a very humble way. He only notices that he is a Tax-collector and sinner. Yet he notices his own good deeds. It is very clear that we are supposed to do what the Pharisee did: keep the fast and tithe. We are supposed to have the virtues of the Pharisee, but not in the way in which the Pharisee has them.

The Pharisee can only see his goodness, but he cannot see the goodness of others. He can see the evil of others, but not the evil in himself. The same thing happens with the elder brother of the Prodigal Son. He says to his father, “Lo, these many years I have been serving you, I never transgressed your commandments at any time...” (Lk. 15:29). He can see his own goodness very clearly, but he cannot see any goodness in his brother. He cannot see the humility that it took for his brother to return.

With the Sheep and the Goats it will be the same way. The Goats were not able to see that they had a calloused indifference to the hungry, the thirsty, those in prison, the sick. They were not able to see their own sins.

Conversely, the Publican, the Prodigal, and the Sheep are blind to their own goodness. When the Sheep are told, “for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in” (Matt. 25:35), they say, “Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?” (Matt. 25:37) They are blind to their own goodness, but they can see the goodness in others. The Prodigal Son, when he is out eating with the pigs remembers the goodness of his father, how good things were in his home; how it was really this place of righteousness and joy. He could see, remember, the goodness in others even though, in his own life he could only see his sins.

So there are these characteristics of two different types of people with which we can examine ourselves. Do we see our own sins, and not the sins of others? Are we blind to our own good acts, but see the goodness in others? Or, on the other hand, do we see the sins of others, and are blind to our own? Do we see our own goodness, but are blind to the goodness in others? I think it is an amazing thing when we are able to see in other people, their strengths, their joy, their offering, and not their weaknesses, and failures, and have that be our focus.

These are the two streams, as it were, that run side by side through these next three weeks. We are always pulled in one direction or the other, in one way or the other in life, and our calling is

to follow the path of the Publican, and of the Prodigal, and of the Sheep. It is the path that we are given today that focuses on the contrast between humility and pride. Humility is trusting in someone else for our righteousness. Pride is trusting in ourselves for righteousness. And each week, we will see a different unfolding of this duality, a different way in which these binary options before us are described and explained to us.

I want to close by saying that we often think about this notion of humility in a negative way: that God wants us to be humble, that He wants us to say, “have mercy on me a sinner”, that He wants us to grovel; that He is not going to transform us until we beat up on ourselves. This is sort of a taskmaster view of God; that God, somehow, wants to beat us up before He raises us up.

In actuality, this calling to a life of humility is really a calling to a life of being like God. Our Lord came into the world to show us what God is like, and He showed us what God is like by being humble. He says, “I did not come to be served, but to serve and to give My life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Everything He did in His earthly life, was for others; the Incarnation itself is a great condescension. In order to enter in, and be with us, He empties Himself as St. Paul tells the Philippians. He empties Himself so that He can make room for our human nature, to be given to Him by the holy Theotokos. He is constantly in a state of humbling Himself, we are told, even to the point of death, death on a cross: “... made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death on the cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

So when our Lord gives us a parable like this, and tells us that we are called to be humble, we are called to beat our breasts and say, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner”, it is not as if He is exacting a pound of flesh from us, getting out of us a little bit of pain before He raises us up. He is showing us, and telling us what it is to live the Divine Life. The Divine Life is the humble life. It is the life of dependence on Another. This is illustrated most perfectly through our belief in the Trinity; we do not believe in a Single-Person Divinity, but a Triune God. The Trinity has an inter-dependence on one another, an inter-love for one another, an inter-sacrifice, an offering of themselves to one another. These qualities are to be manifested in our own lives as well. This is what it is to be truly human; to be made righteous. This is the Divine Life: not relying on ourselves, not living our life for ourselves, but offering ourselves to another. It is not a life that we ourselves can produce, so we begin by saying, ‘Lord, I cannot do this on my own. Apart from You, I can do nothing, but You have mercy on me. You come and clean up my soul. You come and take up residence in me. You battle and for me.’ This is the path of humility. Thus, in due time, as Jesus Himself said, explaining this parable,

we are exalted;

will be exalted” (Lk.18:14). It happens this way because, to exalt oneself is not what a human being truly is. So when, through being humble, we are exalted by God, we are exalted not for our own sake, or for our own glory, but as a part of a community, as a part of the divine community in which the Son of God inhabits as the body of Christ. So this calling to humility is not an exception to Who God is, but a calling into His very presence and life, the way in which God exists from all eternity. It is the way of the cross on which hang “... the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8).

And when we pray let us keep in mind to keep our prayers simple; to keep them humble; simply to keep asking God to show us our sins. Numerous times during Great Lent we are going to say the prayer of St. Ephraim, so let us recall how it ends: “Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see my own transgressions and not to judge my brother.” You see, it says the very same thing. There will always be this duality: do I see my own sins? or do I see the sins of others? So may we start right now, entering into this period of the Triodion, to ask God to show us our own sins, and to keep us blind to the sins of others.

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