

PHARISAISM AS AN IDEOLOGY
Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

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Two men enter the temple, one — a pharisee, the other — a publican. The first one stands in the middle of the temple and says to God: “Lord, I do everything as You have commanded: I fast, I tithe, I fulfill everything that is written in the Law. I thank you that I am not like other people, like this publican who is standing in the corner.” But the publican during this time, unable to lift his eyes to heaven, said only: *God! Be merciful to me, a sinner!*” (Luke 18:10-13).

What is the difference between these two people? One does everything correctly and the other does everything incorrectly. The pharisee stood in the correct place and in the correct position, with his eyes piously lifted on high. He knew how to conduct himself in the temple and how to pray using the correct words, phrases of thanksgiving and praise. Furthermore, he used self-praise as a way of thanking God. But the publican, on the other hand, did not stand where he was supposed to, looked down at the ground instead of looking up to Heaven, did not use graceful and well-composed words of thanksgiving, but instead only sighs and sobs escaped from his chest.

The difference between the pharisee and the publican is obvious. One came to God to tell Him how good he is, that he does everything as it should be done and therefore has earned his reward from God. But the other one came in order to pray to God for forgiveness. Really they lived completely different lives. The publican did not fulfill everything that was written in the Law, which the pharisee had fulfilled. However, the cardinal difference between the two of them consisted of the feelings and thoughts that each of them had when they approached God. The publican recognized the great chasm which existed between how he was and how he should be. The pharisee did not acknowledge this about himself.

The essence of pharisaism consists of self-praise and pride which blinds a man so much that he ceases to see the difference between how he should be and how he really is. He no longer sees his sins, he only sees his worthiness. And with this worthiness he proudly lifted his head and came to God.

Pharisaism existed and exists in various forms and on various levels — at the level of a specific person, of a family, of a group of people, or of a whole country. Pharisaism can become an ideology. It exists both within and outside of the Church. It is especially horrible and ugly when pharisaism appears among people who regularly hear the word of God as it applies to them but don't see the correlation between what the Lord said and their own personal lives.

Here is a typical scene in many of our churches. The service is in progress, the worshippers are standing, each in his own place; everyone is doing everything correctly as they are supposed to. When they are supposed to, they cross themselves, when they are supposed to, they bow. Then all of a sudden someone appears in church who is unfamiliar to them, perhaps led to the church by some sorrow or in order to repent, because of a grief or perhaps simply out of curiosity. This person has never been to church before and having come, doesn't know the proper way to conduct himself. Immediately he receives indignant glances and hears whispering in his direction: why is he standing like that, why doesn't he cross himself, why does he light the candle with the wrong hand? And if, God forbid, a young lady comes into the church in pants and without a head covering, then she will have to drink a full cup of “righteous anger” from today's pharisees — those who fulfill everything as they should but who have no love in their hearts, no humility and no genuine repentance.

It is to people such as these that our Savior turned to when He said: *“Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the*

weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith....You blind guides, straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel! Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites! for you cleanse the outside of the cup and of the plate, but inside they are full of extortion and rapacity....Woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites! for you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Matthew 23:23-28).

St. Anthony the Great, one of the greatest Egyptian ascetics, once had the thought: "Is there anyone today who has surpassed me in ascetical struggles?" The Lord said to him: "Go to Alexandria, to such and such a street and such and such a house; a man dwells there who has surpassed you in ascetical labors." Anthony was very surprised, but he went to this place and there he discovered a tanner. This tanner had a large family and labored from morning till night, seemingly not distinguished in any way from most other people. Anthony observed the tanner for a long time but could not discover the nature of the spiritual struggles of this man. Finally, Anthony implored the tanner to reveal to him how it was that he pleased God. "I don't know, Father," answered the tanner, "I don't perform any ascetical labors. Every morning as I go to work, and every evening when I return home, I say to myself, 'Everyone in this city is being saved and inheriting the Kingdom of Heaven, but I alone, because of my sins, will be cast into the fires of Gehenna.'" Anthony then understood that because of his humility this man pleased God more than many of the great ascetics with their asceticism.

When we approach the Holy Chalice, we confess before God that the Lord came to save sinners, "of whom I am the first." How is it then, that with this, we can possibly say that we are being saved but that some other person is not being saved? If I want to have the hope to be saved, then I must be the last to enter into the Kingdom of God after everyone else, because I am the first of sinners. And if I think about eternal torments and for whom they are prepared, then I must think that above all, because of my sins, it is I who am worthy of eternal torments, and not think that others will suffer torment while I will inherit the blessings of Paradise.

The publican understood that in the face of God's righteousness and Divine justice, he didn't have a chance. The only hope for him was the limitless mercy of God which has no boundaries. The publican could not even look at the pharisee, who was praying only a few feet away from him, because he was sure that the pharisee was so much better than he was, because the publican considered himself to be the first of sinners. It was for this reason that he was justified by God.

Pharisaism is prelest, plani, spiritual self-deception, self-exaltation and spiritual blindness. It is the opposite of repentance, humility and self-judgement, which were the characteristics of the publican. Orthodoxy is incompatible with an offensive derogatory attitude towards other people. And let not those who themselves behave this way think that they are Orthodox. The true Orthodox person is someone who, like the publican, when entering into the church, cannot lift their eyes to Heaven, because they recognize that there exists on this earth the most sinful person, and that person is ourselves.

Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen