

## **SERMON ON THE SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE - January 28, 2018**

It is an awesome blessing and gift to stand before the Lord in prayer. Although we can't see the Lord with our physical eyes, He stands right in front of us and listens attentively when we call upon His sacred name. We should approach our Lord with the deepest humility and self-reproach. The prayer which we say most often in our Divine Services is probably the prayer "Lord have mercy," κύριε ἐλέησον, господи помилуй. The Jesus Prayer is basically the same prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." Every prayer, no matter what the words or phraseology might be, basically has the underlying meaning that we are asking the Lord that His will be done. In doing so, we are struggling through prayer, to unite our will with God's will, that our personal wants or desires slowly, over time, lessen and lessen until our only want and desire is to do and fulfill the will of God. There is a common expression in Russian: воля Божья. God's will. Russians say it all the time. God's will. When our will is strong, we suffer internal torment and anxiety with every event: illness, accident, death, and every kind of human strife and sorrow. But when our will has diminished, we can face every crisis with peace: God's will. This is ultimate faith and trust in God in everything that happens in our lives. It takes much effort and struggle in prayer on a continual basis, but eventually we find peace when we reach the point of complete acceptance of God's will. This is why prayer is so important.

We are not alone in our lives. Even if we live alone, we will be surrounded by people and have contact with people all the time. We humans like to judge other people. We are always judging, judging, judging. This is the worst thing that we can do. The only person that we are not only permitted to judge but are expected to judge on a daily basis is ourselves. It is peculiar and odd that we are inclined to spend our time judging others but are inclined to never judge ourselves. Who do we know better than ourselves? So if we like to judge people, why not judge the person that we know the best and who has the most things to be judged for, and that is ourselves? As a rule of thumb, if we have nothing good to say about someone else, then we should say nothing at all. The dictionary definition of gossip is: "casual or unconstrained conversation or reports about other people, typically involving details that are not confirmed as being true." Our prayers will be futile and worthless if we simultaneously engage in judging others and gossip. And even worse than that, our prayers will not be to our salvation but to our condemnation.

The Great Fast is approaching. Soon we will be fasting on a daily basis and increasing our prayers as we prepare for Holy Week and Pascha. This week is a fast free week. The reason we don't fast this week is because we should remember every day that when we do fast during Great Lent we will pray and fast like the Publican, and not like the Pharisee. We should imprint in our minds and hearts the image of the publican who beat his breast and was so ashamed of his sins that he couldn't even lift up his eyes to heaven. The Publican judged no one but himself. The Pharisee did the opposite. His so-called prayer was a panegyric to himself, about how great he thought he was. And while he sat there with his proud chin pointed up, he sat in judgement of the publican. His blasphemy was self praise and judgement and condemnation of others.

So remember, brothers and sisters, and beware, when you are inclined to judge another man or woman or think a bad thought about someone else, flee from such thoughts as if from fire. And never utter the blasphemous judgmental thoughts that come into your head to another person. If you have nothing good to say about someone else, then say nothing at all. And if someone else should utter judgmental words or gossip to you, stop the conversation immediately and take no part in it, for even if you are only the listener, you are just as guilty as the person who is doing the speaking and saying the words. May the Lord help us so that we

may truly understand and take to heart the lesson of the Publican and the Pharisee, and may the Lord help us so that henceforth we will practice what we have learned. Amen.