

SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE
Luke 18:10-14

By Archpriest Peter Olsen
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Today is the first of the four preparatory Sundays which the Church offers to us before we begin Great Lent. On each of these Sundays we are taught a lesson which will help prepare us for the time when we will more deeply look within ourselves, into our hearts, and examine our consciences, so that we may see our sins, weaknesses, passions and evil tendencies, bring all of them to God for repentance, and follow the path of correction and spiritual healing.

Today we see two people enter the temple in order to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a publican, a tax collector. The differences between these two people are obvious. The Pharisee stands towards the front of the temple. His chest is puffed up, and his eyes are raised. His prayer consists of praising himself for keeping all of the external rules and practices of the law of God. The thanksgiving that he offers to God is his gratitude for not being a sinner "like other men": "extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector" (Luke 18:11). Our Savior has this to say about the attitude of the Pharisee: "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; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" (Matt. 23:23-24).

Certainly we have rules, boundaries, liturgical practices, traditions, and even canon law as part of the Christian faith. And certainly we should not neglect these things, but should try to keep them to the best of our ability and personal circumstances. However, we should *never* forget that the external practices of our faith are meant as helpful guides in order to facilitate the penetration of the light of Christ into our hearts. The key is the *heart*. Our Savior says to us, "Son, give me your heart" (Proverbs 23:26). Our goal is to come to compunction and to repent, based on love, hope, faith and mercy. The fundamental mistake of the Pharisee is that he has a cold heart full of pride and he judges his neighbor. The Pharisee is spiritually blind. Others see him as he really is, but he sees himself as he imagines himself to be, two opposite extremes, as far as the east is from the west.

On the other hand we have a publican who is praying in the rear of the temple. His eyes are cast down to the ground and he is beating his breast with his fists. He is tearfully expressing remorse for his sins while crying out "My God! Be merciful to me a sinner!" (Lk. 18:10-13).

The Pharisee, by his calling, was supposed to be an interpreter and follower of the law of God. He was respected and had authority and a leadership role. As such, he should have been an example and role model of what it means to live a godly life. We obviously do not see this exemplified by the Pharisee, who instead has proven himself to be an example of egotistical pride, judgment of others, and hard-heartedness.

The publican fulfilled a role that was despised by the people — he collected the taxes for the Roman Empire. The publicans were known to be extortioners who cheated the people, overtaxed them, and pocketed the difference.

The paradox here is that the Pharisee turns out to be the man who is not saved, despite fulfilling the externals of the law, and the publican, who is an evil sinner, finds salvation for his soul. The Lord does not want us to be liars or hypocrites. He does not want us to pretend to be something that we are not. He wants us to be real and sincere. God loves the sinner, which is what we all are, and he loves us even more when we have remorse for our sins, struggle with them, and turn to Him for help and mercy. If all of us are honest with ourselves, then we all realize that none of us have a leg to stand on before the truth and justice of God — we are all unworthy. The blessings and the forgiveness that God bestows upon us is always a gift. Our only hope is in God's mercy, which has no boundaries and no limits. Ironically, the publican could not even look at the Pharisee, who was praying only a few feet away from him, because he was certain that the Pharisee was a much better person than he was, because the publican

considered himself to be the chief of sinners. It was for this reason that the publican was justified before God. Orthodoxy is incompatible with an offensive, derogatory attitude towards other people. And let not those who manifest themselves in this way think that they are Orthodox. A truly Orthodox person is one who, like the publican, when entering the temple of God, does not dare to raise his eyes to heaven, because he is aware that if there exists the most sinful person in the world, it is he himself. Amen.

