

SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

Luke 18:10-14

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Today is the second Sunday in the cycle of Sundays which prepare us with moral lessons to help us to enter into Great Lent with the correct mindset and understanding. Last Sunday, the first Sunday in this preparatory cycle of Sundays, we heard the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector. We learned that the first necessity in preparing for the Great Fast is that we must have the *desire* and the volition to repent and to struggle to the best of our ability during Great Lent. Today, the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, we receive our second lesson.

The Pharisees were a social movement and school of thought of the Judaism in the time of our Savior who believed in a very strict and literal interpretation of what they interpreted to be the letter of the law. Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their hypocrisy and for perverting the actual teachings and practices which were the true expression of the will of God, saying to them "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe the 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). Jesus went on to tell them, "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" (Matt. 23:27). Do we all understand what hypocrisy is? Hypocrisy is the practice of claiming to have moral standards or beliefs to which one's own behavior does not correspond. In other words, in public we say one thing and pretend to follow the morals and teachings that we say, but we actually believe in and practice totally something else altogether. Essentially a hypocrite is a phony.. We are like actors pretending and playing roles, but we are not actually the people who we claim to be and we do not actually live according to what we pretend to be. We say one thing but do something else altogether. Some people understand their hypocrisy and are hypocrites by deliberate choice. There are other hypocrites who are spiritually deluded. They are blind to their hypocrisy. They are so full of pride and have such a huge ego that they fail to see and understand that they are hypocrites. The publicans in the time of Jesus were the tax collectors. We heard about one tax collector last week, Zaccheus. The Pharisees had a reputation of being righteous and exemplary representatives and role models in the practice of the Hebrew faith. The Publicans had a reputation of being unscrupulous thieves who robbed the people, overcharging them for the taxes, and stealing a portion for themselves.

In today's Gospel a Pharisee and a Publican enter into the temple. The Pharisee knows and follows all the outward ritual. He stands in the right place, and he lifts his eyes to God as was the practice. He boasts about his deeds and about how he has outwardly fulfilled all the requirements of the law. He speaks about the sins of others and tells God about how he is not like them, how he is better than them, and about how he is not a sinner. He even boldly to God's face judges and condemns the Publican in the temple, telling God how grateful he is not to be like this Publican. The Pharisee cannot see that this speech offered to God is not prayer but blasphemy. He does not see that in reality his heart and his soul are very far away from God. He does not understand that he is guilty of the greatest of all sins ~ pride. He does not see that his huge ego separates him from God and from salvation. In contrast we see the Publican. He does not stand in the correct place according to the ritual, but instead he goes to a corner in the back. He does not lift his eyes to God as is the practice, but instead keeps his eyes lowered to the ground. Instead of boasting to God about how supposedly great he is and instead of judging others, he beats his breast in agony and acknowledges publicly before God what a terrible sinner he is. He is sorry for his sins, and he weeps in repentance because he has fallen short of the virtue and morality that God expects from us. The example of who we should imitate is obvious. The choice of who we should be like, the Pharisee or the Publican,

is obvious. The lesson today is that we must approach Great Lent with humility and deep sorrow for our sins. We must approach God with a strong desire to repent and to truly struggle by prayer and fasting so that God would help us to be cleansed of all sin, especially the sin of pride which has been so demonstrably portrayed in the Gospel today in the person of the Pharisee.

The lesson of today's Gospel by no means implies that it is not important to keep the rituals, practices and traditions of our faith. In fact I have already quoted Jesus that these practices and traditions should be kept, but they must be kept with the right frame of mind and with a heart that is in the right place, full of mercy, love, faith and humility. These traditions and practices have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit as a means to help us to stay on the path of salvation, to be cleansed of the passions and from sin, to learn humility, love, patience and kindness, and to grow closer to Christ and our fellow man. However, our inner disposition must be in the right place in order for us to be profited by keeping the fast and all of the other practices and traditions of our faith, so that they would be unto our salvation, and not unto our condemnation, as we see in the example of the Pharisee in the Gospel today.

This is a fast free week. We do not fast this week so that we will remember and think about the lesson that we learned today. May we be vigilant and not succumb to the temptations of pride and hypocrisy, but may we always practice humility, sincerity, honesty, faith and love. And may we never judge anyone but ourselves. Amen.

