**Publican and the Pharisee**

**Luke 18:10-14**

**February 14, 2022**

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Today’s gospel lesson is one that is recognizable to all us because it signals that the Lenten season is approaching. It is starting on this particular Sunday that we shake the dust off the Triodion, one of the liturgical books used in the Orthodox Church during the Lenten season and begin to use troparia, stichera and readings that reflect on our fallen nature and instruct us on how to prepare ourselves during the coming Great Fast.

Today is first of three preparatory Sunday’s that carries a particular theme for us to think about so that we can gradually focus on building a foundation prior to entering the Great fast. As we know, whenever we try to change our lives abruptly, the likelihood that it will last is doubtful. How many of us fail when we try to make a resolution to lose weight starting on January 2nd. The chances of it failing outweigh success. Therefore the church in her infinite wisdom has set a course for us to follow so that failure is set to a minimum.

This Sunday’s theme addresses humility. Humility can best be described as an attitude. It is a type of attitude that we don’t hear too much of today because it is often viewed by most as a sign of human weakness--as if it something unbecoming of modern man. All of us want to be noticed, we enjoy praise and we are proud of our accomplishments in life. We enjoy this self-indulgence because it makes us feel good inside. Just as any addict whether it be drugs, food or material goods requires his or her fix, the modern ego needs a constant fix of affirmation in order to live.

Christ illustrates humility through today’s lesson by contrasting two different personalities who go to the synagogue—the Pharisee and the tax collector. The personality of the Pharisee is one who goes to the synagogue to show off. He is one who takes great delight in how pure his life is and that he is obedient to all of the laws. He also likes it when people see how good he is and he relishes comments from his peers on what a great Jew he is.

The other character in this parable is that of a publican. As a tax collector he is known for collecting money for the state and even stealing money for his own pocket. They were known to be ruthless and resorted to extreme means of violence to get money from the people. Yet in this parable, we see a different side of a man than his exterior. The publican resorts to a place in the temple where he cannot be seen. He doesn’t make gestures that will call attention to other people and he prays intimately with God asking for his forgiveness.

The irony of this parable is that we would expect the opposite personality types to be present in each of these men—normally we would expect the Pharisee be a humble man because he attends the synagogue religiously, whereas, we would expect the publican to be the boastful man who is looking for attention. What this gospel lesson tells us is that we must go beyond what we see in a person on the outside. Even though a man may be notorious, there is always the possibility for a meek and humble heart deep inside that is not apparent to us all that loves God with all their might. Remember the old adage, you cannot judge a book by its cover.

Likewise, just because a person who enters the church and acts very religious like they love God, may actually be completely devoid of such love and in reality their lives are worse than a notorious tax collector. I remember Fr. Alexander Schmemann said in one of his lectures that a bishop told him to always be suspicious of anyone that makes the sign of the cross from the top of their head. What Fr. Alexander was trying to illustrate to us seminarians that there are some in the church that want to be seen as super pious. True piety is not something that is not expressed by external arm and body movements, but it is an internal connection that needs to be heard by God alone.

Remember this when you attend the Lenten services. We tend to increase our piety during Lent by making extra bows, prostrations, and dramatic crossings, but if it is not balanced with a genuine repentant heart, it is better that you do not do it at all because you might be fooling us with feigned piety but you are not fooling God who sees through all us.

The question we might ask then what is the remedy for us to have a humble heart. The remedy is that it requires a mental re-conditioning that will allow us to reflect on our state of being. The remedy is clearly expressed in the words of our Savior Himself: “Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.”. The quest for us is to contemplate on the image of Christ and the actions we hear in the gospels. It’s a very simple process if we want to change our ways, but we need to be committed like anything else, we want to do it. Keep in mind the gospel reading last week with Zaccheus as we approach Lent. If we don’t have the desire like Zaccheus then what gain will there be.

In a few weeks the entire Lenten season with its many services will be upon us. This will give us the opportunity to reflect on our lives and listen intently to the scriptures that are filled with wisdom on the theme of humility. The time of the year has come for each of us to change our hearts—may God grant us the ability to do it. Amen.