

## **Homily on the Sunday of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 16)**

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**Sunday, February 22, 2021**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One God. Amen.

Today, at the beginning of the Tridion, we listened to Saint Luke's Gospel reading for the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee.

In today's passage, Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ gives us a glimpse into the Temple as some people are gathered there to worship. In this parable, we will see that one man came to church that day to worship himself. The other man came to church that day to worship the Lord.

First, we have the Pharisee. Among the Jews, he was a spiritual leader and respected as a true man of God. He knew many passages of the scriptures and he wore a phylactery, a small leather pouch containing passages of Scripture worn on the arm or forehead. The idea was to keep God's Law always in mind, but the Pharisees had used them as a show of false piety, making them increasingly larger and more noticeable (Matt. 23:5).

He would have prayed at least three times every day. The Pharisees made much of prayer. They loved to pray loud, long, and public prayers. The Jews fasted on Mondays and Thursdays, which also happened to be the same days the Jews sold and bought wares in the markets. The practice of the Pharisees was to make their fasting very public.

A Pharisee would tithe on everything he possessed, often giving 20 to 30% to the needs of the Temple, and were noted for making a public show in their tithing.

So, what do we have here? Here, we have a very religious man, considered to be holy by everyone who saw him, and who loved the adoration that came his way from the common people around him.

Recognise anyone? This man is quite representative of many people coming to church. Everyone who sees them thinks they are pure, holy, and righteous. They have convinced everyone that they are the embodiment of righteousness, holiness, and virtue. They have even convinced themselves that they are right and everyone around them who is not exactly like them is wrong. They love to judge others.

As was the case for Zaccheus Sunday, three weeks ago, the other main character is a Publican—a despised class among the Jews. He was a spiritual outcast. While he was welcome to enter the Temple to pray in the Court of the Jews, he would not have been allowed to attend the meetings at the synagogue. The other Jews hated him and looked down on him.

He was a tax collector. He worked for Rome, the nation that dominated and ruled Israel at the time. Rome collected three kinds of taxes from the people she conquered. They collected a land tax, a head tax, and a custom tax. They were collected by tax collectors who were working under the orders of a chief tax collector, such as Zachaeus.

As a tax collector, this man would have been known for his greed and his dishonesty. He would have been viewed as a traitor to Israel and not even worthy of any compassion or concern from the Jews around him.

This man represents the other type of people we find in the church. These are the people who do not act in a way that we think they should. They might not dress like we think they should. They might not do things and say things like we think they should. Like the Publican, they are often looked down on by others who think they are more spiritual and think themselves to be better Christians.

When the Pharisee begins to pray, he is very quick to tell Our Lord and Saviour how things really are. He brags about his righteousness and watches the Publican praying nearby and talks about how much better he is than that man. He brags about his religious works. He brags about his giving. He tells the Lord how great he is and how well he is doing.

As he compares himself to others, he feels that he has made it in the eyes of the Lord. The Pharisee feels like he is talking to the Lord directly. In truth, he is only talking to himself. Hopefully, God will help us and have mercy on us, so that we would never turn into this type of man!

The publican on the other hand does not offer any grand words of self-glorification. He knows that he has nothing at all to offer to the Lord. He knows he is a wicked sinner. When he prays, there is no pride, no pretentiousness, no hint of self-righteousness and there are no attempts to justify himself or his lifestyle in the eyes of the Lord.

He just tells the truth, humbles himself before God, and asks for mercy. He does not even lift his eyes toward heaven. He beats himself on the breast, knowing that his real problems are problems of the heart. The Pharisee, on the other hand, is blissfully unaware that anything is wrong in his heart.

His prayer is short, simple, and to the point: "God, be merciful to me a sinner!" We could learn a lot from this man and his prayer, which is the foundation of the Jesus Prayer!

Throughout the forty days fast, at all Church services, the prayer, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" will be repeated aloud to all who are present. Why is the same prayer repeated so often? It is done so that we would learn to repeat it often. The short prayer, "Lord have mercy", is also repeated often, and for the same reason.

To stand like the publican before God (but not to stand there trying to convince ourselves we're something we're not) is the hardest thing we will ever do in our lives.

And what should we say when we stand before God? We should say what the prophets of the Old Testament always said to God: "Here I am, Lord!"

One man went to church and left with nothing. He went through the rituals. He judged others by his standards. He prayed his self-serving prayers. He worshiped himself. This man went home feeling good about himself, but He received nothing from God for his efforts.

The other man went to church and left with everything. He didn't make a spiritual show. He prayed a simple prayer. He offered God honesty, confession, and worship. He left that church with the Lord in his heart.

What was the difference between the two men? The difference was in the attitude and condition of their hearts. One was full of himself and thought he needed nothing more. The other knew he was nothing and possessed nothing. He humbled himself before God and he was blessed.

How do we come to church? How do we see others around us who do not do things to our level of standards? How is our praying? When we leave church, do we feel better about ourselves? If this is all we get from our visit to church, then we have missed everything and gained nothing.

Or, when we leave, do we feel as though we have been overwhelmed by a spiritual tsunami? Do we feel as though we have bathed in the Word and that the Holy Spirit has washed us? Do we feel as though we have been honest before the Lord, open about our sins, and have been willing to call on Him by faith? Instead of judging others, are we content to leave them to be dealt with by the Lord? If that is the case, then we leave here with everything.

As we look toward the start of the Lenten Fast, we do well to keep ourselves from judging those around us for how they fast or what they do. We must keep our focus on Christ and our own need for growth in humility.

We must purge ourselves of our own sins, and we must refuse to be a party to the evil that is going on around us in our society, preferring instead to be a living witness of Christ's love, power, healing, and glory. So, that others too may come and join us in our repentance, that they may learn to die to the world, and live for Christ.

We are only three Sundays away from Great Lent. We will soon be saying the prayer of St. Ephraim, which ends with "grant me to see my own transgressions, and not to judge my brother."

Let us begin to prepare, then, by trying to completely set aside the comparing of ourselves to others. Let us focus on the true reference point, our Lord Jesus Christ. The more we do this, the more we will be able to pray the prayer of the tax collector with sincerity, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" AMEN!