

The Sunday of the Publican & the Pharisee

Luke 18: 10-19

February 24, 2013

Today's Gospel lesson continues the work of the Church in helping to prepare us for a truly heart cleansing Lenten labor. This Lenten labor has been proven over hundreds of years to be very effective in sensitizing Christians to the deep meaning and significance of Our Lord's Passion and Resurrection, which we commemorate through the beautiful and poignant services of Holy Week and Pascha.

This labor, however, is not primarily a labor of fasting. Although, it is certainly that, also. For a beginner, someone who has not yet adjusted to Orthodoxy's practice of fasting, just keeping the fast may dominate their experience of Lent. Even veterans must steel themselves to the rigors of this most difficult of our many fasting periods. Yet, as we see in the example of today's Pharisee, who strictly keeps the fasts of Israel, it is possible to keep the fast but lose the blessing.

Metropolitan Kallistos Ware has written that it takes seven years for western converts (who are really trying) to accustom themselves to Orthodox fasting. I have, also, observed the phenomenon of initial zeal, especially in converts, followed by a sort of deflation which sometimes results in an almost complete abandonment of the ascetic practice of the Church. Then there are those who keep the fasts out of an admirable sense of religious duty but do not really understand the Church fasts or perhaps even understand them wrongly. The Pharisee is certainly an example of the latter case. Yet regardless of how well we do or do not fast, who among us is safe from the all too human tendency to be self congratulating and to find ourselves, in our own eyes, superior to others?

The Gospel tells us that Jesus spoke of this parable to "those who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous and despised others". St. Theophan comments, "People rarely speak like the Pharisee in words, but in the feelings of their heart they are rarely unlike him." Here we hear the saint referring to the state of the heart.

I might add that a person need not necessarily be religious in order to cherish in himself or herself such an attitude. It is not at all uncommon to encounter blatantly irreligious people who, with a sort of anti-religious self righteousness, view themselves as more real and genuine than religious people whom they mock and degenerate as hypocrites and phonys. Real religious hypocrites and phonys, who always seem to be plentiful, may make this attitude easy to have; but it is still an evil thought in the heart.

Clearly, this Gospel is directed not just at the religiously self righteous but at a ubiquitous human failing. St. Theophan goes on to show one huge result of this failing when he writes, “For why is it that people pray poorly? It is because they feel as though they are just fine in the sight of God, even without praying.” Isn’t this really the heart of the difficulty so many of us have in praying deeply?

Do we see how evil this attitude really is? It’s not just stupid , or wrong, or an innocent mistake of some kind. The presence of this attitude, this thought/feeling, in the heart actively prevents any kind of effective prayer or communion with God. This thought is enthroned as absolute despot behind the modern philosophy of life that insists and teaches that even if there is a God, people do not need God or a religion to be good and happy; that those who think otherwise are just psychologically weak, mentally ill or phonys or all three.

This mentality is fast becoming the dominant philosophy of our culture to the degree that this thought lives unchallenged in our hearts. We accept as true the very same lie that the evil one told Adam and Eve – with the same result.

To find the cure for this disease of our hearts, Jesus directs our attention to the Publican. His attitude is the exact opposite of that of the Pharisee. He should become our poster child for successful repentance. Although our Orthodox services and prayer books are filled with thoughts and images that are harmonious with the Publican’s attitude I’m sure we have all experienced the rather uncomfortable feeling of hearing or saying these hymns and prayers and all the while knowing that our hearts are unmoved.

Our first job, as we approach Great Lent, is to strengthen our minds with such a clear, 'either/or' picture as today's Gospel gives us. We have faced this decision before, perhaps, many times. But we all have a natural tendency to slack off.

One problem that we may have here is that neither of the images presented by the Pharisee and Publican are particularly appealing in and of themselves. Yet there is a great blessing in this. For when neither option presented to us for decision has attractive power over us it may actually be easier to decide, not on the basis of our passions but as an obedience to the Truth of God's Kingdom. The decision of next week's Prodigal Son is certainly aided by the fact that all of his self-willed efforts to be happy his own way have come to naught.

The fact that most of us are not in some sort of crisis makes all this a bit more difficult for us. We must decide to afflict our own comfort rather than wait for circumstances to do so. Father Seraphim Rose used to say that modern Americans were, in fact, persecuted by comfort. Orthodoxy has long known that for spiritual growth to occur people must repeatedly break out of their religious 'comfort zones'. Thus, the absolutely necessary 'ascetic' component of Orthodox Christian life.

To forgive, to fast, to increase prayer and almsgiving. These are the means by which a Christian afflicts the comfort of the sins nestling in his or her heart.

May Holy God give us both the humility and the courage to challenge the evils in our hearts and help us to acquire the Life-giving Repentance of the Publican.

Amen.