

Homily

Beware of PRIDE!

Pre-Lent '99, Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee,
St. Andrew Orthodox Church, Riverside, Ca. 1/31/99
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Introduction: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. Few things are more torturous to me than laying ill on my back in bed knowing that the flock is praying to the Lord in the Divine Liturgy without me. Few things are more difficult to bear than to miss an opportunity to nourish you with the Word of God. This is the sixth year of my priesthood, and I have never had to endure that until last Sunday! It was awful, and I missed you terribly. I thank you for your kind reception of my brother priest who filled in for me last Sunday. So warm and fervent have been your expressions of consolation and care during this bout with this virus that I am almost tempted to get sick periodically just to ensure that I will be able to hear from so many of you. I did say “almost”. I am glad to be on the road of recovery thanks to your prayers, and I trust with God’s help I will have the strength now to speak to you about this most important Gospel lesson.

The Danger of Pride: I want you to imagine an honorable man with me. He is a devout man who greatly loves God. His pedigree in Holy Orthodoxy is beautiful. He was born to a pious Orthodox family, and was baptized on the “eighth day” so to speak- that is, he

was baptized as a very young child. He never knew a day of not belonging to and living for God. He was raised in and around the Church and her bishops and priests, and even as a young child showed zeal for the truth of the faith. As a man he proved himself most conscientious about keeping the laws of the Lord and of the Church. Few were more faithful to the Church, or served Her more. His reputation as a pillar of the community and a man of God was firmly established in his parish. He also was successful in admonishing others to embrace and live the Orthodox way of life in and outside of the Church. He, and faithful Orthodox like him, were a scourge to the heretics and a model to all believers through their zealous adherence to the Scriptures and teachings of Holy Church. What more can be said of this honorable man? We should conclude by noting that he is a zealous attender of the divine services, offering his fervent oblations, a strict faster keeping the requirements of the Church throughout all the feasts and fasts, and a “tither”. He gave to the Church in an exceedingly generous way. This is the portrait of this honorable man, this model Churchman, that I want you to have in your mind. And now I want you to contemplate one more thing about him which will be very shocking to you. I want you to know that this man has found no favor in the sight of the Lord, and is himself on his way to hell. In fact, in God’s sight, prostitutes, thieves, and common criminals are far closer to the Kingdom than he!

What a pitiful sight! He had worked so hard! He was so pious! He labored to keep the commandments of the Lord! All to naught! All of his fidelity, all of his piety and self-sacrifice and righteous deeds were completely and instantly brought to nothing because they all were covered with a scent absolutely repugnant to God’s nostrils: the scent of pride! The man we have meditated upon, this righteous and model Churchman, is, in truth, a description of a common Pharisee such as we see in our Gospel lesson this morning. This Pharisee stood in God’s presence covered in the stench of pride without even knowing it because he was too consumed in recounting his righteous deeds and comparing himself to less pious people. His prayer is, “God, I thank thee that I am not like other men: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer” (St. Lk. 18:11). How easy is it dear people to be taken by pride! Beware! Pride is a hideous passion, unlike all the other passions! St. John Cassian teaches that while all the other

passions seek to fight against their corresponding virtue (anger against patient kindness, greed against generosity, lust against fidelity and reserve, etc.) pride seeks to attack and darken the entire soul. It infects everything and like no other passion can offset and ruin deeds of piety completely (Philokalia, Vol. 1, p. 92). Whoever lifts himself before God will be cast down!

It was pride which led to the angelic catastrophe when the shining cherub grew discontent with his most privileged position and raised himself up in rebellion against God, and as a result was violently cast out of heaven and confined to the lower regions. Detailing Lucifer's fall the Holy Prophet Isaiah recounts the devil's thoughts, "But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit" (Isa. 14:13-15). He lifted up his head in pride thinking to dwell in the 'recesses of the north', and because of his pride was cast down into the 'recesses of the pit' where he will spend eternity buried and tortured in the bottom of the lake of fire! (Rev. 20:10).

It was this hideous pride which entangled our first parents in a web of deceit and lost for all of the human race the glory of the Paradise of delights. Our first parents raised themselves up against the Word of God, and found themselves naked in shame, cast out and barred from the Garden (Gen. 3:24).

In pride Pharaoh resisted the Word of God and God's messenger of deliverance, the Holy Prophet Moses. Pharaoh lifted himself up against God and found himself permanently swimming beneath the waters of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:23-31).

In pride Miriam spoke against her brother Moses before the Israelites on their march to the promised land, and having spoken against God's servant with whom he spoke face to face she found herself a leper, as white as snow (Numbers 12:1-16).

In pride the Israelites murmured against God and the faithful spies on the edge of the land of Canaan flowing with milk and honey. In pride they witnessed the cluster of grapes so large that it could only be carried on a pole between two men's shoulders, and for their pride they were kept from the promised land and confined to wander in the wilderness for forty years! (Numbers 14:28-31).

The Holy Prophet Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth (Nu. 12:3). Yet in one (very 'understandable') act of pride, in which he struck a rock with his staff in frustration and self-exaltation to draw forth water miraculously instead of merely speaking to the rock as God directed, he lost the right of access to the promised land and was destined to die just outside in the land of Moab (Dt. 34:5).

The Philistine giant, Goliath, was seething with pride as he exalted himself and mocked the forces of Israel under the command of King Saul. Goliath exalted himself, and proclaimed that he would give David's flesh to the beasts of the field and the birds of the air. Goliath exalted himself, and found himself cast down to the ground in humiliation, struck dead by the stone pebbles of an Israelite shepherd boy, David (1 Samuel 17).

In pride the King of Assyria, Sennacherib, attacked King Hezekiah and the Nation of Israel, and mocked Hezekiah and boasted of his great strength. He threatened all the people that if they remained true to Hezekiah they would condemn themselves to eat their own dung and drink their own urine! As a result the Lord sent a destroying angel who killed 185,000 of the Assyrian troops in the night, and caused Sennacherib to return to Assyria where he was soon murdered in a political coup (2 Kings 18:1-19:37).

In pride King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon fell in love with himself and his power, and had a large golden statue of himself made before which he required all to fall down in worship (Daniel 3). Sometime later Nebuchadnezzar was walking around on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. He reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and the glory of my majesty? While the word was still in the king's mouth, a voice came from heaven, saying, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place will be with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you, until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whomever he wishes'' (Daniel 4:30ff). The record says that King Nebuchadnezzar's hair grew like eagle's feathers and his nails like birds' claws. He lifted himself up as a god, and God cast him down by taking his reason away from him for 7 years until he learned humility.

Such is the great evil of pride! May it always be far from us! Let us all imitate what we can from the Pharisee and Publican. Let us keep the commandments of the Lord like the Pharisee and avoid the lawlessness of the Publican, and most importantly let us cover ourselves in the humility of Publican and avoid the soul-destroying pride of the Pharisee, and so attain to the Kingdom of the Holy Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is possessed by the humble. For he is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.