

Homily

“Marks of Humility”

The Publican and the Pharisee

Pre-Lent February 20, 2000

Father Josiah Trenham – St. Andrew Orthodox Church

The Marvel of Forgiveness. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen. The reading of this morning’s Gospel text should strike you like a clanging bell. This bell rings throughout the world in Holy Orthodox Churches today notifying everyone that Great and Holy Lent is fast approaching. For this Sunday is the first of three preparatory Sundays readying the faithful for the Great Fast. These three preparatory Sundays are very important. They set us in a right frame of mind for the holy days before us. Particularly, this Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee brings our attention to several very important spiritual truths at the heart of our salvation. The themes for today are the direct connection between humility and salvation as exemplified in the Publican’s life, and conversely the direct connection between pride and damnation as exemplified in the Pharisee’s life. Last year at this time I preached to you a homily entitled *The Danger of Pride*. I showed you numerous Scriptural examples of how pride led to the downfall of even great men. How dangerous pride is. Now I would like to meditate upon blessed humility and offer some marks, some practical measuring sticks if you will, that you can utilize to evaluate your humility and increase it.

There is an aspect of today’s Gospel text that is extremely encouraging, and before we walk through some practical reflections on humility I would like to note this encouragement. It is a characteristic of our God that shines with beauty. And that is forgiveness. What a forgiving God we serve. Here is this publican whose life has been filled with injustice. He has by virtue of his office participated in the plundering of God’s people and the enriching of a pagan nation. He has no doubt practiced extortion, and probably has become rich on other’s backs. These are very serious sins. Yet here is the Publican in the temple genuinely repenting of his sins. He feels the grief of his sin. He is broken hearted and contrite. And, here is the wonder, he leaves his confession justified. What a marvel. God asks nothing else of Him. God does not exact justice. God does not recount to the Publican all the times he neglected repentance. God does not rub his face in it. No. God receives the Publican’s repentance and justifies him. He walks home forgiven. There is no justice in this, thank God. It is far beyond any search for justice. This is mercy, and this is our God. No matter who you are, how you are feeling about yourself, what sin you have been captured by, it does not matter if you approach God with a humble and contrite heart. Forgiveness is possible for you. Because we serve a merciful and man-loving God, Who is not interested in punishing you but in saving you through humility.

Marks of Humility. If humility is so blessed and calls down upon us even salvation itself we ought spare no effort to obtain it, and to be increasing in it until the day of our last breath. From this Gospel I set before you certain sure marks of humility.

1. **The humble man is always mindful of his particular sins.** The proud man is blind to his sins. What was first in the mind of the Publican as he came into the temple? His sins. Is this our mind in Church? Do we stand here piercingly mindful of our sins and supplicating the Lord for forgiveness?

2. **The humble man forgets his good deeds and does not think on them.** The proud man never ceases recounting them to himself and to others. We hear nothing of the Publican searching his mind before God for some of his good deeds which might offset his sins. He doesn't say, "Well God, I have sinned, but I am doing pretty well here God. Remember that!" The humble man attempts rather to forget his good deeds trusting that if there is anything truly good in them God will keep the record. Never tell others of your good deeds, and try not to even think about them! This is pure pride, and it is sure to lose you your heavenly reward. If you, in fact, have any good deeds labor to conceal them from the eyes of men. Remember that the proud Pharisee was a zealot for the Lord and a strict tither and faster! He tithed on every piece of income and fasted diligently twice a week! We contemporary Orthodox, who are often so spiritually lazy, if we are proud, become even worse than this Pharisee since we are proud over nothing!

Here is a great test for your humility. How do you feel when you are overlooked? How do you feel when no one notices your spiritual labors or your service to the church? The humble man, since he is laboring to not notice them himself, rejoices if others don't notice! The proud man, since he is mentally recording every pathetic little action he can call good, is inflamed if he is snubbed, and his deeds aren't appreciated. This is pride.

3. **The humble man expresses his inner humility bodily.** Look at the Publican's demeanor. We see eyes cast down not haughtiness. We see standing in the back not attention seeking. We see beating of the breast not luxury. We see a loving of the last spot not clamor for the best things. This is the language of humility. The humble man humbles his body. He bows low. He prostrates. He fasts and prays as an expression of and help to inward humility not to show off.

4. **The humble man does not compare himself with others or think on others'sins.** The Publican makes no mention of the hypocrisy of the Pharisee. He is not concerned about the Pharisees' sins, he is concerned about his own. He knows God doesn't grade on a curve. Such is the humble man. He refuses to meditate on other's sins, and if he sees another's sins he assumes he taught them this sin. The proud man notices the sins of others, and gives himself a demonic sense of self-satisfaction by comparing himself to another. If you are critical of others you are proud. Are you often bothered by the actions of others? Why are you thinking about them and so little about your own? If you are critical of others God will be critical of you on the Great Day of Judgment. "For by the standard of measure you use it will be measured unto you" (St. Matt. 7:2). If you are critical of yourself- now you are on the right path. Now you are using your power of criticism for its God-given purpose. This is what St. John of the Ladder teaches, "Increasing self-criticism is the sign of increasing humility...Indeed, there is no clear sign" (The Ladder of Divine Ascent, Step Four, *On Obedience*).

In conclusion I leave you with a question to encourage your zeal. St. John Chrysostom set this question before his flock when he was preaching on the Pharisee and the Publican. "If humility and sin does so far how much more will righteousness and humility?" To our humility loving God be all glory forever. Amen.