

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 5, 2023**

LUKE 18: 10-14

“HOW TO GET HUMBLE”

Pride is a very strong sin! The Pilgrims came from England to New England in the early 1600's. The governing body of their settlements were town meetings. But there were problems----much of the meeting time was taken up with arguments about seating assignments. Who got to sit where? Who deserved seats of honor and who did not? In one town it got so bad that a decision was made to solve the problem. A “seating” committee was formed and told to meet ahead of time of town meetings. At their meetings, the seating committee would decide who would sit where at the town meetings, so those meetings could go more smoothly. It didn't work well----because the people on the seating committee spent so much time arguing about who got to sit where at the seating committee meetings! (Stacy Schiff, The Witches, Back Bay Books, 2015, p. 260)

Today is the first day of the 3 pre-Lent weeks. And on this Sunday every year we read a gospel lesson from Luke 18 about the danger of pride. And about the need for humility.

In our passage, Luke 18:10-14, Jesus tells a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. One man, the Pharisee, was a man full of pride. The second man, the tax collector, was a man of humility.

The Pharisee, a religious leader, prayed a prayer of pride. He was oh so proud of what a good man he was! Hear what the Lord says about him in verses 11-12: “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men----extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess’”. He was perfect! All good, and never did wrong. Remember Jimmy Hoffa, the famous Teamster leader from decades ago? He said about himself, “I may have some faults, but being wrong ain't one of them!” (Joan Didion, Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Washington Square Press, 1981, p. 141) The Pharisee was even prouder than Hoffa----he thought he had no faults at all!

The tax collector was just the opposite. Tax collectors had the reputation of being very wicked and selfish and cheaters. And this tax collector was well

aware of how bad he was! He prayed about how sinful he was and he begged God for forgiveness. Jesus describes his prayer in verse 13: "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'"

The Lord commented in verse 14 on what happened to these two men----- The tax collector's soul was saved. The Pharisee's soul was lost.

The Pharisee was damned because of how proud he was. The tax collector was saved because he humbly repented of his sins. Humility leads to salvation. Our great Church Father, St. John of the Ladder, put it well about 600 A.D.-----Those who have humility have won the whole battle." (Ladder of Spiritual Perfection, "Step 26", Paulist Press, 1982)

Today, the first day of the 3 pre-Lent weeks, is the start of a long spiritual journey leading up to intense joy as we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord at midnight on April 16th. This is a journey that can greatly change us, that can draw us closer to God. The first step on this journey is in our gospel reading today-----to follow the tax collector's example and get humble. To not be like the self-righteous Pharisee, but to be like tax collector.

That's because being proud like the Pharisee leads to spiritual destruction. Back in 1162 A.D. a man came to Constantinople and caused quite a stir. He had made a special coat (of which he was so proud!) with which he claimed he could fly. It had enormous pockets, like bags really, attached to it. He said that if these pockets were opened up so air filled them and then tied up tightly to keep the air in, they would allow him to float in the air. The people mostly mocked him and challenged him to prove it. So he went to the top of a tall building and made sure all the pockets were properly filled with air. Then he stepped off the side of the building. But instead of soaring majestically over the capital city he fell like a stone and was killed. (John Julius Norwich, Byzantium: The Decline and Fall, Knopf, 1996, p. 125)

In that man's case pride did go before a fall, a very literal fall. For us, pride can go before a spiritual fall, like it did for the Pharisee. The solution for us is to not be like the Pharisee, but to be like the tax collector.....to get rid of our pride and become humble.

The Scriptures, the Saints' writings----they talk about this a lot. There are lots of ways to work on this with God's help. I'll just briefly mention three today----

One----Frequent and serious use of the sacrament of Confession. If we wish to become humble-----well, admitting our sins is definitely a humbling

experience! And we need humbling experiences to get humble. So a serious visit to the confessional is an excellent way to lower our pride level and become more humble.

Two---We should work at accepting criticism graciously and gratefully, not with anger or resentment. Be thankful for criticism---because it brings us down a notch. Just what we need to get more humble!

Three---This is a hard one for many people---maybe especially for priests! #3 is “Don’t talk so much!”. When we speak a lot, our pride is manifesting itself.

Because what’s going on when we talk too much is that we are thinking, “I have lots of important things to say and I’m sure everyone wants to hear them.” Really? Probably not.

So we should learn to speak less. It is hard to do so, but it will help us become more humble.

Therefore, three ways during upcoming Great Lent to get humble: Serious use of Confession; accept criticism graciously and gratefully; don’t talk so much. By doing these things along with asking God’s help, we can become less like the Pharisee and more like the tax collector....so that our souls also may be saved.

Even Saints sometimes struggle with pride. The great modern St. Paisios of Mt. Athos (who fell asleep in Christ in the 1990s) had a problem with it one day. It has always been common for animals to be attracted to Saints. It happened to him when a cat “moved in” with him. One day the cat became very sick---the elder was worried that it might die and so decided to pray for healing. He thought to himself---“God has used me to bring miraculous healings to people before, so healing a cat should be an easy thing!” And so the Saint prayed over the cat, very confident that it would be healed. But it wasn’t! And in his consternation he realized he had fallen into pride about being able to heal. He fell on the ground and begged God’s forgiveness for becoming proud. After his prayer of repentance was finished, the cat got up and walked around, totally healed. Only when the Saint repented of pride would God work through him. An important lesson for us to remember! (Passions & Virtues, Volume 5, St. Paisios, 2016, p. 175)

Do you wish for your soul to be saved like that of the tax collector? Do you wish for God to work through you? Then strive to be humble like the tax collector. May God help us to be humble like the tax collector so that our souls may be saved!

