

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

FEBRUARY 25, 2024

LUKE 18: 10-14

“TWO TYPES OF PRAYER”

It was the evening before Thanksgiving and a priest needed to get some gas. He pulled into his local gas station and it was real, real busy. Every pump taken, even some lines forming--- because everyone was filling up for the trips they planned on taking to go see relatives on the holiday. After he filled up and went to pay, the cashier said to him, “Father, sorry you had to wait. This happens all the time---people know they will need to get gas for the holiday trip, but they don’t get ready for the trip until the last moment.” The priest replied, “It’s similar in my job. Everyone knows they will take a big trip when they die, but lots of people put off getting ready until the last moment!”

Ready or not, we will all go on a very big trip one day—the trip into the life to come. A big question---where will that last trip take us---to heaven or hell? And another big question---are we ready to go? Are we ready to stand one day before the Judgment Seat of God. And one more question---how should we get ready for that final trip?

Today we begin the three week period we sometimes call pre-Lent---the three weeks before Lent itself begins 3 weeks from tomorrow. Every year, on this particular Sunday, the gospel lesson we just heard is read---Luke 18:10-14. It’s a parable Jesus taught about 2 different ways to get ready for the trip at the end of our lives. It has to do with two different types of prayer that can be used to prepare. Two ways to pray—but the Lord says only one way pleases God.

The Lord says two men went to the temple to pray. One of the men went home justified before God that day—he was on the way to heaven. The other man went home that day *not* justified---he was on the way to hell.

The first man in the story was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a religious group within the Jewish religion at that time. They were very strict about following each rule in the Old Testament. And they even made up some more rules! Because they were so strict, so religious, they were sure that God was pleased with them. Hear the words of the prayer of the Pharisee in the parable 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 I possess.’”

The Pharisee thought he would be saved by his own goodness. No hint in his prayer of needing God to save him. It’s almost like he is congratulating God for making him so perfect! It’s a prayer centered on pride---he is proud that he is so good, better than others including the tax collector.

We know from history that this was the common attitude among the Pharisees. A well known one was Rabbi Simeon Ben Jochai----He said, "If there are only 2 righteous people in the world, they are me and my son. If it turns out there is only one righteous person in the world---it's me!" (Adolf Edersheim, The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Volume II, p. 291)

The Pharisees' pride was based on how religious they were. As the Pharisee prayed in verse 12-----"I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all I get." Fasting, tithing---very good things. God wants us to do them. But the problem was that the Pharisee thought such things would save his soul.

Thinking similar to that is still common today. Often people think the way to be saved is to be religious and good. Many think they will go to heaven because they belong to a church and follow some rules. We often hear words like these---"I know that fellow will go to heaven---he is such a good man!". But there is a problem here. God says none of us, on our own, are good---whether we are religious or not. St. Paul wrote in Romans 3---"There is no one righteous, no, not one.....all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." No one can be saved by being good, because by God's standards none of us are good enough.

The Pharisee thought he could earn heaven by being good and religious. But salvation can't be earned. It is a gift as St. Paul tells us in Romans 6:23---"the wages of sin is death, but the free *gift* of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The second man in the parable was a publican or tax collector. I'll just use the term "tax collector" so as to avoid confusion. (I remember when, as a little boy, hearing this passage in church and wondering how the Republicans snuck into the Bible!) Tax collectors were considered the scum of the earth in Israel 2000 years ago. They collected taxes for the hated Roman Empire who had conquered the Jews. So they were traitors---helping the enemy. And most of them were corrupt crooks, too. They skimmed lots off the top of what they collected. So they were rich but despised. (*We all here have a strong connection with one tax collector. Of course, our parish's patron Saint, St. Matthew, was a tax collector until Jesus came to his house and he became one of the 12 Disciples.*) Everyone hated tax collectors. And Pharisees would never for any reason set foot in one's home.

The tax collector in today's parable knows how wicked he is. He makes no excuses. He doesn't point the finger of blame at anyone else. He is so aware of how sinful he is, that Jesus said in verse 13 that he was standing "afar off" in the temple---he didn't think he deserved to be near other worshippers. He hung his head in shame. As the Lord said in verse 13---"he would not so much lift up his eyes to heaven." In those days, to beat upon one's breast was a sign of sorrow and repentance. Jesus said "he beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me a sinner.'"

The tax collector was very aware of what an evil person he was. He knew he could only approach God as an admitted sinner. His prayer was shorter than the Pharisee's self-congratulation prayer. It was just seven words long----"God, have mercy on me a sinner."

In our passage, Jesus says that this man, not the Pharisee, was justified by his prayer that day. That's because the tax collector did not rely on any goodness of his own to be saved. He relied only on God's mercy....and that put him on the road to heaven that day. On the other hand, the Pharisee relied on how good he himself was in his prayer----and that put him on the road to hell that day.

And now back to a question I asked earlier in the sermon----are you, am I, ready for the trip we will take on our last day on earth? And how do we get ready to stand before what our worship service prayers call "the dread judgment seat of Christ"?

Should we prepare by relying on how good we think we are? Like the Pharisee did. Or by humbly acknowledging how *not* good we are----and repenting like the tax collector did.

Jesus Christ makes the answer very clear in this parable. The way to get ready for death and the life beyond is by admitting we are sinners deserving hell. And then plead for God's mercy. And then live fully for our Lord Jesus Christ while we await our final day here.

This is why the most common prayer in our Orthodox worship is that little prayer---"Lord, have mercy"---that we pray over and over and over. We've already prayed it a lot this morning and we will pray it many more times before the liturgy is over. God's mercy is our only hope. So we prepare for the trip on our day of death by continually repenting and calling to God for forgiveness.

In the early centuries of Christianity there were many who went out into the wilderness areas of Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and other areas to devote themselves totally to Christ in prayer, fasting, and poverty. They lived as monks and nuns and sometimes hermits. One of these ancient Saints was known as Abba Dioscoros. He went out to the Egyptian deserts to live alone in constant prayer. But he couldn't live alone for long because others moved out to be with him and live under his spiritual guidance---they saw his intense holiness and wanted to learn from him.

One day one of his followers heard the sound of loud weeping coming from Abba Dioscoros' little hut. Afraid something was wrong, worried that the old man was sick, he entered the hut and saw that Dioscoros was the one loudly crying. He said, "Father, what is wrong?" And Dioscoros replied---"I am weeping for all my sins!" The follower said, "But, Father, how can that be? You are so holy that I doubt you have any sins left!". Dioscoros replied, "If you knew how sinful I am, you would go find three or four other people to come here and help me weep for

my sins". (Themes From The Philokalia, Ionnikios, Volume 1).

We should not follow the example of the Pharisee in today's gospel reading. We should not be like him and expect to be saved because we think we are good. Instead, follow the example of the St. Dioscoros and of the tax collector in today's gospel reading. Let us make our main prayer----"God, have mercy on me a sinner!"