

The Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In last week's Epistle reading from St. Paul to Timothy, the Apostle Paul encourages his young disciple Timothy, who served as Bishop in the city of Ephesus, with the following words. He says,

"Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, conduct, love, spirit, faith, and purity. Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine."

And in today's Epistle reading the Apostle Paul encourages Timothy to continue in the assurance of the Holy Scriptures, for he says, these sacred texts are able to make you wise for salvation through the faith which is in Christ Jesus.

In these short excerpts from St. Paul's writing to Timothy we see great emphasis laid upon two things: 1) the importance of reading, studying, and digesting the contents of the Holy Scriptures, and 2) the importance of basing one's words, conduct, and entire life upon the faith and doctrine contained therein – a faith and doctrine which will bring salvation according to Christ Jesus.

Even in the early Church, before the Gospels and Epistles were written and compiled into the New Testament as we have it today – which by the way did not happen until the 4th century – the Christians devoted themselves to the study of the Holy Scriptures. For these early Christians, the sacred texts were the writings of Moses, the Law, the Prophets – what we today refer to as the Old Testament.

These are the texts which St. Paul urges Timothy to study and apply himself to, for the Apostle says, "by doing so you will save both yourself and those who hear you".

Now we must ask ourselves, if St. Paul speaks thus of the Old Testament – and basically he is saying here that our very salvation depends upon our study of the Word of God – what would he say of the necessity to understand and live the content of our New Testament faith – a faith based not upon the teachings of Moses and the Prophets but upon the teachings of the Incarnate Word of God Himself?

Certainly, St. Paul would say that the greater the revelation – the greater our attention to study should be. He would undoubtedly say to the contemporary Christian, that is to each and every one of us, that we should apply ourselves to studying the Scriptures even more than the early Christians because while they only had the Old Testament, where Christ was revealed in types and shadows, we have the New Testament, where the Lord is revealed fully, clearly, and directly through His words and actions, through His teachings, parables, and miracles.

And so, each day we as Christians make it a priority to study the Word of God – the Word of God which today comes to us in the form of a parable, an illustrative teaching about the way to salvation from the lips of Jesus Christ Himself.

The parable begins, “Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a publican.”

Now before we speak about these two men and the type of prayer they offered, we should first say something about the Temple to which they went.

St. Gregory Palamas, in his sermon on this very Gospel, recalls that:

“The ancient Temple was set in a high place, on a hill above the city [a hill called Mount Zion]. And once when a deadly epidemic was destroying Jerusalem, King David saw the Angel of Death on this hill, stretching out his sword against the city. And so, King David went up on Mount Zion and built an altar to the Lord, on which he offered sacrifice to God, and the destruction ceased.”

St. Gregory explains that this event recorded in the second Book of Samuel, is for us an image of the saving ascent of the spirit during holy prayer, for the nature of prayer is to lead men up from earth to heaven and to set them at the very throne of God from Whom they will receive deliverance from the deadly epidemic of sin.

The Jews knew and recalled this ascent of King David, each time they themselves made the ascent to the Temple. And likewise, when we Christians come to the church each Sunday, we come ready to make an ascent in our hearts and minds, to leave the ways of the world behind and to stand before the throne of God – the only One who can help us overcome sin.

And so, the Publican and the Pharisee went up to the Temple to pray. But as the parable explains each made the ascent in a different frame of mind.

The Publican made the ascent in humility recalling the words of the Prophet David who said, “a broken and contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise”. While the Pharisee made the ascent in order to justify himself in the sight of God, forgetting the fact that “God resists the proud” and that “everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord”.

And as the parable continues we see that not only did the Publican and Pharisee make the ascent to the Temple in different frames of mind and with different spiritual dispositions, but they each offered different types of prayer as well.

Now the Fathers identify four main types of prayer which are acceptable to God: praise, petition, thanksgiving, and contrition. Of these four, two were offered; the Publican offered repentance and contrition for his sins, and the Pharisee offered words of thanksgiving.

Yet, as the parable explains, the prayer offered by the Publican was accepted, while the prayer of the Pharisee was rejected. And why was this, if both contrition and thanksgiving are supposed to be acceptable in the sight of God?

Brothers and sisters, the reason why the Publican's prayer was acceptable to God while the Pharisee's was not, is because the Lord is, as the Scriptures say, "the discerner of minds and hearts of men". For He not only hears the words which we utter in prayer, but He also sees with perfect clarity the spiritual disposition of the person offering the prayer.

In other words, when we pray to the Lord, we stand before Him completely naked, as Adam and Eve in Paradise. If we have sinned the Lord knows it, if we have not sinned, the Lord knows this too because He Himself has preserved us for sin.

If we approach Him in pride, thinking ourselves righteous and looking down on our neighbor as did the Pharisee, the Lord sees this and withdraws His grace from us, for He gives His grace only to the humble.

Similarly, if we stubbornly and willfully harbor evil thoughts or animosity toward our neighbor, the Lord sees this too, and He will not hear our prayer, nor forgive us our trespasses for we haven't forgiven those who trespass against us.

On the other hand though, if we approach the Lord in humility and contrition, as did the Publican, no matter how many sins we may have committed the Lord will forgive us, and no matter how far we have fallen, He with His divine hand will raise us up again.

And so, brothers and sisters, the lesson for us today, from the Scriptures which are able to make us wise unto salvation, is to offer our prayer in humility – to make not only the words of our prayer acceptable to the Lord, but indeed our very minds and hearts.

There is no tricking the Lord, if we want to offer up prayer before His throne, whether it be the prayer of praise, petition, thanksgiving, or contrition, then we first have to make a spiritual ascent in our minds and hearts, we have to leave the ways of the world behind – pride, jealousy, envy, anger, resentment, etc. – and we need to approach the Lord in humility.

For only then can we go back down to our house justified, for as the Lord says, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Glory to Jesus Christ!