

**SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE**  
**Luke 18:10-14**

**By Archpriest Peter Olsen**  
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When I watched the biographical movie of the life of St. Nektarios of Pentapolis, "Man of God," I was struck by the fact that during his entire life he constantly faced derision, judgment, slander and condemnation, all false, and not once did he ever become angry or express any desire for retribution. He patiently endured all for the sake of Christ. In fact, there was one particular episode where he took his humility to a level that is way beyond the comprehension of most. When some of his students at the Rizarios School who had misbehaved were brought before him for discipline and correction, he amazingly replied: "You leave me no choice but there is only one thing I must do. I must punish myself." And he began a strict fast. Instead of punishing the guilty students, he imitated the humble redemptive self-sacrificial love of our Savior and took *their* sins upon himself. This was the most effective and powerful form of correction and instruction possible. The hunger strike of St. Nektarios undertaken out of love for his students brought them to repentance. While he was fasting because of their sins, they sat in the dining hall with tears and guilt and could hardly touch the food which was placed before them.

When we are judged, don't we usually become self-defensive? Aren't there times when we share in at least some of the guilt in the accusations brought against us, but don't we usually react by trying to justify ourselves instead of honestly acknowledging our mistakes and repenting for them? When the light of Christ begins to penetrate the darkness of our souls, don't we quickly reflect the light by judging others instead and refuse to see the darkness within? Don't we compound this deflection by changing our thoughts and instead concentrate on what we perceive to be the supposedly good deeds that we have performed? Don't we deliberately choose to ignore the truth of our mistakes and our faults instead of honestly acknowledging them and then work on correcting them? If we did not have sins that we needed to fix in our lives, then there would be no Great Lent, because there would have been no need for our Savior to suffer and die on the Cross, to conquer death, and to rise from the dead. Who does not like to receive Holy Communion on a frequent basis? How many of us, however, like to go to Confession on a frequent basis?

Everything that I have spoken about is illustrated in today's parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. The Pharisee stood in the front in the Temple with a puffed up chest and recounted how he kept all of the externals of the Law. Not a word of was uttered concerning the inward filth in his heart, because he didn't think that he had any sins. He even went so far as to thank God that he was not a sinner like the Publican who was praying in the back of the Temple. During Great Lent we are supposed to increase the rigor of our fasting, prayer and almsgiving. Ideally these practices are good for us and help us to learn to be humble. They offer us ways to increase our kindness to others and to repent for our sins. However, religious practices, when performed with pride and with the wrong attitude, have the potential to become a form of idolatry, which instead of saving us actually contribute to our condemnation. The so-called prayer offered by the Pharisee was no prayer at all. it was instead a form of blasphemy, because the essence of his prayer was a proud recitation of how good he thought he was, topped off by judging and condemning his neighbor. On the other hand, the Publican, who was probably guilty, as were most of the tax collectors, of a multitude of sins, including cheating others by overtaxing folks and stealing the surplus, wept for his sins, beat his chest in repentance, and could not even lift his eyes up to God.

Let us heed the warning of this parable as we are preparing to enter into Great Lent. The lessons of today's parable can be summed up by saying that humility is absolutely essential in order for us to be able to open our souls to the healing mercy of our Savior Jesus Christ. Without such humility, pride will destroy the virtue of everything that we do. With humility, there

is hope for all of us, no matter what our sins may be. This week is fast free. This is to teach us that when we do fast, we will fast with the humility and repentance of the Publican instead of with the pride and arrogance of the Pharisee. If by the end of Great Lent we see ourselves as clearly before God as did the tax collector and ask only for mercy from the depths of our souls, then with God's mercy and help we will have benefitted spiritually by our participation in the fast, and we will have grown closer to spiritual healing, closer to God, and closer to salvation. Amen.

