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THE SUNDAY OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

"EVERYONE WHO EXALTS HIMSELF WILL BE PUT DOWN AND EVERYONE WHO HUMBLER HIMSELF SHALL BE EXALTED" (LUKE 18:14)

Thus ends the gospel of the Publican and the Pharisee, the first of the three pre Lenten Sundays of preparation in the Orthodox Christian tradition. As if to drive home the point that it is not "works" which save us (fasting, tithing, keeping the externals of the law) the Church actually 'outlaws' fasting during the week which follows the reading of this gospel. Unfortunately too many of us see this as an excuse for a pre Lenten binge and not as a call to reflect on the true spiritual nature of this "fast from fasting"!

The Pharisee was by every standard, a righteous man. He fasted twice a week. He gave tithes of all his possessions. He thanked God that he had been given the grace not to be an extortioner, unjust, an adulterer, or had the desperation to fall into collaboration with the hated Romans and collect their taxes like the Publican. Note that the Pharisee did not say his prayer out loud. The gospel makes it clear that he was praying "within himself"; that is, silently. The tax collector (Publican) couldn't hear him. The prayer was private, between himself and God. *But that still wasn't enough to get him off the hook.*

And this ought to scare the most devout among us. In fact, it ought to especially scare the most devout among us because we are those ones who are most tempted to utter the Pharisee's prayer "within ourselves"--piously, with all due respect, with true gratitude to God, and *with the greatest danger of being cast into the fires of hell for having done so!* The danger we so called "good Christians" face when we compare ourselves to the sin struck world around us is mortal. The temptation to "judge softly"; that is with the *pretense* of giving thanks for our own blessings is so vast that we may not even see what we are doing. The ability to deny what we are doing can come so easily and smoothly that we may never see the lie in it. But, like the Pharisee in the gospel, we shall nevertheless be "put down". God will bring us down hard for having exalted ourselves at the expense of another.

When we look at "poor Bill" the alcoholic, who can't hold down a job and who has driven away his family and secretly say (within ourselves), "thank you God for not giving me that problem", or at the woman down the street who has four kids by four different men and who may have had a couple of abortions in between and say, "thank you for helping me stay faithful to my husband even when it wasn't easy", *we have committed the sin of the Pharisee!* As difficult as it may be to see, our gratitude has been *at the expense of someone else*. We have placed "poor Bill" and the woman down the street beneath us and have presumed that God has, too. Such presumption carries terrible consequences--at least according to Jesus (and according to the Prophets of the Old Testament, for that matter, as well).

Making comparisons between our (presumably better) spiritual condition and that of our neighbor is supremely offensive to God--even when it is disguised as gratitude; perhaps especially when it is disguised as gratitude. It carries the stench of hypocrisy. Looked at from the perspective of heaven it has all the appearances of a gymnast showing off in front of a paraplegic and feeling smug about himself! To call such a thing gratitude would be stretching the term beyond its normal meaning to say the very least. Why pretend we're not doing the same thing when we compare ourselves to the worlds so called moral failures?

To the Publican, on the other hand, his personal limitations and failings are self evident. Like the physical paraplegic, he does not need to be reminded that he cannot compete with the 'gymnasts'. He wastes no time comparing himself to the Pharisee. He does not say, "Lord, if only you made me like the Pharisee, I would be able to tithe and keep the law better!" He simply says, "God, be merciful to me a sinner". In other words, "God, help me. Give me the grace I need to be who You would have me be." And that is what saves him.

The Pharisee misunderstood the means for the end. Fasting, tithing, the whole of the Law, is given to us as a means to an end and not as the end in itself and that is to bring us closer to God. With the establishment of the New Covenant in Christ the vast majority of the Ancient Law was superceded. We are no longer bound by it as Orthodox Christians. Indeed the priest says a prayer at the Preparation of the Gifts (the Bread and Wine) before every Divine Liturgy which begins:

"Thou hast redeemed us from the curse of the Law....."

The 'curse' is not that the Law was evil, but that it was impossible to keep; it was too hard, too complicated, beyond our capacity to fulfill and ultimately unable to provide salvation in and of itself because in and of itself it could not overcome sin and death.

In the week following the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee the Church wisely refuses to let us fast. It is not so that we may have a Pre Lenten final fling--a mindless descent into gluttony. That would be contrary to the spirit of Orthodoxy at any time (even during the greatest Feast). Rather, it is exactly the opposite. We fast from fasting in order to become conscious of the true nature of fasting--which has nothing to do with food per se. The true nature of fasting has to do with the disciplining of the spirit, the raising of our consciousness and conscience to a higher level. If we remain conscious of the nature of the food alone--what is allowed and what isn't, then we remain spiritual infants and we have missed the point. Worse still, if we judge others for not fasting or for fasting incompletely then we have turned our fast into a weapon of the devil.

True fasting is not about the Law, it is about Love. That is a paradox that was beyond the Pharisee; he would not have been able to comprehend it because for him everything was about the Law. There are more than a few Orthodox who are sometimes tempted to become stuck with the Pharisee and see only the legal prescriptions of the Church. This week is meant to be a cure for that. In the coming weeks the Church will reassert why it is necessary to fast; not because of the Law, but because it will prepare us for something beautiful, for something lovely. But that's another story.