



The Publican and the Pharisee

Fire & Light

St. Symeon Orthodox Church

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✠ February 13, 2011 ✠

Sunday of the

Publican and Pharisee

St. Martinian of Caesarea of Palestine (422) St. Timothy of Alexandria (385)

St. Symeon the Myrrhstreaming, Prince of Serbia (1200)

*** Fast-Free Week ***

⇒ No Services – The clergy are at the Diocesan Conference in Jackson, MS.

✠ **This Saturday, Feb. 19 - 3:00pm ~ Holy Baptism:**

Macrina Wells, Seraphim & Martha Preston, Caterina Wesson and her children
John and Michelle, Theodore Reese & Mary Potts

✠ **Sun. Feb. 20 – 2:00pm ~ Marriage Blessing * Nicholas and Macrina Wells ***

✠ **Feb. 25 & 26 – Fr. Thomas Hopko Pre-Lenten Retreat – Holy Trinity Cathedral**

✠ **Feb. 27 ~ Meatfare Sunday – Dinner & Special Parish Meeting**

✠ **March 6 ~ Cheesefare/Forgiveness Sunday**

⇒ Great Lent begins Monday, March 7

Pride is a lack of knowledge; a lack of knowledge of man's need for God. Therefore pride is ignorance.

~ St. Maximus the Confessor

That which is done with a blessing is greatly pleasing to God, so let us live so that every small step of ours is blessed.

~ St. Anthony of Optina

St. Gregory the Theologian: On the Publican and Pharisee

Two men, I am taught, went up to the temple, a Pharisee who considered himself before all with God, and a Publican whose heart within him was heavy because of unholy gains. The Pharisee recounted in detail his fasts, his tithing according to the Law, comparing himself with the men of old, and making light of the Publican in his words. The Publican, however, wept, beat his breast with his hands, and, afraid to raise his eyes to the broad Heaven, throne of almighty God, he turned his humble gaze to the pavement. Standing afar off, he prayed thus:

“Be merciful, be merciful to Thy servant who is weighed down with evil. Not the Law, not tithing, nor good works will save me, nor is my assailant mistaken. I am ashamed to touch the temple with my unholy feet. Let Thy grace and Thy pity flow upon my unworthiness, for this is the one hope. O King, Thou hast provided for miserable sinners.”

So they spoke. God heard both, and had pity on the one He saw afflicted, whereas the haughty one He rejected.

“My God, I draw courage from the fact that thus Thou hast seen and straightway judged. I am that Publican in Thy sight, all deep in sin. The help I hope for is measured by the depth of my groans. If ever my father and my dear mother did honor Thee with tears, and groans, and prayers, or devote to Thee even a tiny portion of their possessions, or made Thee a gift of pleasing and holy sacrifices, remember them and help. I myself have never accomplished anything worthy of Thee. Drive off evil anxieties. Let me not be strangled by the thicket of thorns, or impeded, as I hasten on the heavenly road. O my Strength, escort me without mishap! I am Thy worshipper and Thy portion.”

Instructions of St. Theophan the Recluse (+1894)

On Baptism

Baptism gives us what nothing on earth can give us. It unites and combines with our natural Divine Grace. Thus, a person comes away from the baptismal font like an article from some workshop. As an example, take a bell in which silver has been added to copper. A similar copper bell without silver may outwardly resemble the bell with silver, but their composition is different, their sound is different, and they are regarded differently with respect to quality and value. That is the difference between a person who had been baptized, and one who has not.

The difference is that the Grace of the Holy Spirit combines with the Baptism, since the person receiving Baptism is being baptized with water and, along with it, the Holy Spirit. By appearance, he is the same person as the unbaptized person, but in actual fact, in their composition, they are quite different.

Thus, during Holy Baptism, some new element, a supernatural one, is added to our composition, And it will remain inside us hidden and secretly acting. Baptismal Grace is renewed within us by Confession and by Communion of the Holy Mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ.

On the 3 Stages of Prayer

The first stage is bodily prayer, with reading, standing and prostrations. If the attention wanders, the heart does not feel and there is no eagerness; this means there is no patience, toil or sweat. Regardless of this, set your limits and pray. This is active prayer.

The second stage is attentive prayer: the mind gets use to collecting itself at the hour of prayer, and says with all awareness, without being stolen away. The attention blends with the written words and repeats them as its own.

The third stage is prayer with feelings — the attention warms the heart, and what was thought with attention becomes feeling in the heart. In the mind was a compunctionate word, in the heart is compunction; in the mind — forgiveness, in the heart — a feeling of its necessity and importance. This is the summit of prayer's development: while standing in prayer, to go from feeling to feeling.

Prepared to Accept

✘ "We must be prepared to accept the will of God. The Lord permits all sorts of things to happen to us, contrary to our will; for if we always have it our way, we will not be prepared for the Kingdom of Heaven. Neither heaven nor earth will receive those who are self-willed. God has a Divine plan for each one of us, and we must submit to His plan. We must accept life as it is given to us, without asking, "Why me?"

Elder Thaddeus

Love God First

✘ "We must give our heart to someone; and if we give it to anyone on this planet, this person can harm us. We all seek boundless and unchangeable love, and infinite peace; but who can give it to us? ... Divine love is boundless and all-encompassing, whereas we are attached to [people] and the lifeless things of this world; and if those things are taken from us, our hearts are saddened and they suffer. One must love God first, and only then can one love one's closest of kin and neighbors. We must not be as idols to one another, for such is not the will of God."

Elder Thaddeus

✘ Gratitude in a Christian is such a great thing that, along with love, it accompanies him into the future life, where he will celebrate with them the eternal Pascha. **St. Ambrose of Optina**

“For Perverse Thoughts Separate Men from God” (Wisdom 1:3)

From “Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain, pp. 29-34. {Conclusion}

Looking at this subject from a different point of view, Elder Paisios stressed and greatly emphasized the specific characteristics of love, that is, that love is not irritable or resentful (1Cor 13:4). He used to say that “we should never, even under the worst circumstances, allow a negative thought to penetrate our soul. The person, who, under all circumstances, is inclined to have positive thoughts, will always be a winner; his life will be a constant festivity, since it is constantly based on his positive thinking. Our acts depend on and are determined by the ‘machine’ we digest, or the environment we live in. I will give you an example, so you can better understand what I am trying to say: If one has a machine that produces bullets and feeds it with the highest quality material, let’s say gold, the machine will still convert gold into bullets, golden but destructive bullets; if he feeds it with silver, then it will produce silver bullets; if he feeds it with iron, it will produce iron bullets, or if he feed it with clay, it will produce clay bullets. In other words, no matter what material he feeds his machine, it still produces bullets, because it was made to manufacture these destructive products. If someone converts the machine into one that produces holy chalices instead of bullets, then whatever material he feeds it, it will always produce holy chalices. If he puts in the machine clay or iron, it will manufacture clay or iron chalices respectively.”

“I will now tell you a story regarding a very old Father from Kapsala. The old Father’s ‘machine’ was the kind that produced only positive thoughts. He only saw the good things in life and he was blind to every evil. Once, a group of people visited him and brought him a small radio as a present. The old Father took it in his hands and examined it with lots of admiration. He asked where it was manufactured and the visitors told him in Japan. As he was looking at it, suddenly he was filled with joy and started kissing the radio saying: ‘Glory to God!’ The visitors asked him why he was glorifying God and he explained to them: ‘You see, I am very pleased that the Japanese Christians put the sign of the Holy Cross on the products they manufacture.’ ”

“The old Father had noticed the positive and negative pole (+, -) of the batteries and thought it was the sign of the Cross. His mind produced a simplistic and positive thought for the radio the visitors brought him. Considering he was an ascetic, he could have developed negative thoughts and got angry at them for bringing him such an unsuitable present. Someone asked the same old Father why he was making the sign of the Cross when he saw an airplane. And he simply answered: “Don’t you see, my child that its shape looks like the sign of our Holy Cross? The old Father ignored the negative thoughts associated with the sight of an airplane, such as wars and bombing. His mind was attracted by the similarity of its shape to the sign of the Holy Cross; the sight and noise of the airplane made him think of the Crucifixion of Christ.”

“A few years ago, I went to Athens for business and I stayed at the house of a fellow Christian. The area was very noisy as the house was located near a central road. My friend told me that he had trouble sleeping at night due to the noise, so he ended up taking sleeping pills. After we had dinner, they took me to my room and told me:

-Elder, this is your room and I hope you will be able to sleep, despite the noise and the traffic.

Next morning, when I got out of my room, my friend said:

-I couldn't sleep all night due to the terrible noise. How about you?

-I have never slept so well, not even on Mount Athos.

-How is this possible, Father Paisios?

Then I told him what had happened since the moment I entered into my room. (At the time, the Vietnam War was taking place, and everyday we heard sad stories in the news and I used to pray to God to help the people in Vietnam).”

“When I went into my room, I knelt in front of the bed. I put my head and hands on the bed and started praying for all the soldiers who were fighting and getting killed in Vietnam. I could hear the noise of the traffic, but as my mind was concentrated on the Vietnam War, I converted the traffic noise into the noise of the war tanks that were destroying buildings and killing people. Once in a while, a motorcycle was passing by making a very loud noise that made the windows creak; I immediately associated this noise with the one of the airplanes bombing Vietnam, and I could see helpless children and old people getting killed. I felt a sweet grief inside me, and I was crying for the situation in Vietnam, and I despised myself for enjoying the luxury of a nice meal and a clean room and for not having any problems. As I was crying, I was filled with a peaceful spiritual calmness, and finally fell asleep kneeling in front of my bed. The traffic noise did not interrupt my sleep at all, as my thoughts were directed to those suffering in Vietnam.”

“You can do the same thing: Think about wars, the people who are being killed or dying of hunger, the houses that are being bombed; and also think about yourself living in a luxurious home, eating plenty of food, having a job, being safe and sound. Then, the association of the traffic noise with the noise of the war will become a very good reason for you to glorify God and will prevent you from taking sleeping pills. There is only one solution: to have positive thoughts.”

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What is "Prelest"?

The term prelest is a Russian word which has come into English usage for lack of a precise equivalent, although it is often translated as "spiritual delusion," "spiritual deception," or "illusion," accepting a delusion for reality in contrast to spiritual sobriety. Prelest carries a connotation of allurement in the sense that the serpent beguiled Eve by means of the forbidden fruit. (Apart from its spiritual context, the word in Russian is often used in a positive sense of something charming, "lovely.") Here, two Holy Fathers of recent times define prelest in greater depth, and explain the two ways in which it is applied.

St. Ignatius Brianchaninov (+1867)

Spiritual deception is the wounding of human nature by falsehood. Spiritual deception is the state of all men without exception, and it has been made possible by the fall of our original parents. All of us are subject to spiritual deception. Awareness of this fact is the greatest protection against it. Likewise, the greatest spiritual deception of all is to consider oneself free from it. We are all deceived, all deluded; we all find ourselves in a condition of falsehood; we all need to be liberated by the Truth. The Truth is our Lord Jesus Christ (John 8:32-14:6). Let us assimilate that Truth by faith in it; Let us cry out in prayer to this Truth, and it will draw us out of the abyss of demonic deception and self-delusion. Bitter is our state! It is that prison from which we beseech that our souls be led out, that we may confess the name of the Lord (Ps. 141:8). It is that gloomy land into which our life has been cast by the enemy that hates and pursues us. It is that carnal-mindedness (Rom. 8:6) and knowledge falsely so-called (I Tim. 6:20) wherewith the entire world is infected, refusing to acknowledge its illness, insisting, rather, that it is in the bloom of health. It is that "flesh and blood" which "cannot inherit the Kingdom of God" (I Cor. 15:50). It is that eternal death which is healed and destroyed by the Lord Jesus, Who is "the Resurrection and the Life" (John 11:25). Such is our state. And the perception thereof is a new reason to weep. With tears let us cry out to the Lord Jesus to bring us out of prison, to draw us forth from the depths of the earth, and to wrest us from the jaws of death! "For this cause did our Lord Jesus Christ descent to us," says the venerable Symeon the New Theologian, "because He wanted to rescue us from captivity and from most wicked spiritual deception."

The means whereby the fallen angel brought ruin upon the human race was falsehood (Gen. 3:13). For this reason did the Lord call the devil "*a liar, and the father of lies... a murderer from the beginning*" (John 8:44). We see that the Lord closely associated the notion of falsehood with the notion of murder; for the latter is the inevitable consequence of the former. The words "from the beginning" indicate that from the very start the devil has used falsehood as a weapon in murdering men, for the ruination of men. The beginning of evil is in the false thought.

Casting down imagination and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ. (II Cor. 10:5)

The source of self-delusion and demonic deception is the false thought. By means of falsehood, the devil infected mankind at its very root, our first parents, with eternal death. For our first parents were deceived, i.e., they acknowledged falsehood as the truth, and having accepted falsehood in the guise of truth, they wounded themselves incurably with mortal sin, as is attested by our ancestor Eve, when she said: "*The serpent deceived me, and I ate*" (Gen. 3:13). Thenceforth, our nature, infected with the poison of evil, has, voluntarily or involuntarily, inclined toward evil which, to our perverted will, distorted reason, and debauched heart,

presents itself as good. I say voluntarily because there still remains within us a remnant of the freedom to choose between good and evil. And I say involuntarily because that remnant of freedom does not function as complete freedom, but rather under the unavoidable influence of the wound of sin. Thus is every human born and cannot be otherwise; and for this reason we all, without exception, find ourselves in a state of self-delusion and demonic deception. From this view of man's state with regard to good and evil, the state which is necessarily characteristic of each human being, we arrive at the following definition of spiritual deception which explains it satisfactorily: spiritual deception is man's assimilation of a falsehood which he accepts as truth...

From the time of man's fall, the devil has had free access to him. The devil is entitled to this access, for, through disobedience to him man has voluntarily submitted to his authority and rejected obedience to God. However, God has redeemed man. To the redeemed man He has given the freedom to submit either to God or to the devil; and that this freedom may manifest itself without any compulsion, the devil has been permitted access to man. It is quite natural that the devil makes every effort to keep man in his former subjection to him, or yet to enslave him even more thoroughly. To achieve this, he implements his primordial and customary weapon--falsehood. He strives to deceive and delude us, counting on our state of self-delusion. He stimulates our passions, our sick inclinations. He invests their pernicious demands with an attractive appearance and strives to entice us to indulge them. However, he that is faithful to the Word of God will not permit himself to do so; he will restrain the passions and thus repulse the enemy's assaults (see James 4:7); struggling against his own self-deception under the guidance of the Gospel, subduing his passions, and thus gradually destroying the influence of the fallen spirits on himself, he will by stages pass from the state of deception to the realm of truth and freedom (see John 8:32), the fullness of which will be given through the overshadowing of divine grace. He that is not faithful to Christ's teaching, who follows his own will and knowledge, will submit to the enemy, and will pass from a state of self-deception into a state of demonic deception, will lose the remnant of his freedom, and in the end he will become totally enslaved to the devil...

(Excerpted from a longer article in *Orthodox Life*, July-August, 1980, which was translated by S. Karganovic from the Serbian edition of Bishop Ignatius' writings.)

What does it mean to say "We are all in prelest"?

Letters of Blessed Archbp. Theophan of Poltava (+Feb. 6, 1940)

You write, "When I was reading the writings of Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, the following questions came to mind: On page 230 it is written that we are all in prelest; why then, when someone speaks of 'a man in prelest', is this attributed a special meaning? and how should one treat such a person?"

In order to understand the expression "we are all in prelest," it is necessary to consider the following. The ancient ascetics regarded "repentance or lamentation of one's sins" as their primary ascetic labor. Many of their sayings concerning this have come down to us. I will cite a few of these in confirmation of [Bishop Ignatius'] writings.

"A brother said to Abba Sisoës: I perceive that the remembrance of God (mental prayer) ever abides in me. The Elder said: It is not so extraordinary that your mind is constantly turned toward God; what is extraordinary is when a person considers himself the worst of all creatures" (St. Ignatius Brianchaninov, *Patericon*, 4).

"When Abba Arsenios the Great passed away, and St. Poemen heard of his repose, he shed abundant tears and said: Blessed are you, Abba Arsenios, because you wept over yourself during this life! One cannot help but weep, either here according to his own will, or against his will in the torments of hell" (Patericon, 29).

The more advanced a man is in holiness, the deeper is his awareness of his own sinfulness. Conversely, the less refined a man is, the weaker is his awareness of his own sinfulness. In the majority of people such an awareness is altogether absent. This is why they do not understand the ascetic labor of repentance and do not feel any need for it. Because they do not understand this labor and feel no need to repent, one may say that all such people are in prelest. And inasmuch as we have but a limited awareness of our sinfulness, one may say that we are all in prelest!

Sophia, Bulgaria 11/23/1927

What constitutes "prelest proper"?

What we call prelest proper exists when a man starts trying to live above his capabilities. Without having cleansed himself of passions, he strives for a life of contemplation and dreams of the delights of spiritual grace. Thus the wrath of God befalls a man, because he thinks too highly of himself. God's grace is withdrawn from him and he falls under the influence of the evil one who actively begins to tickle his vainglory with lofty contemplation and spiritual] delights...

Briefly, the difference between "general prelest" and prelest in the particular sense of the word can, on the basis of the above, be expressed thus. General prelest is forgetting and not noticing one's sinfulness. That which we call prelest proper is attributing to oneself righteousness when it does not actually exist. If a man thinks he is righteous, then his righteousness is not divine, but diabolical, foreign to the grace of God and to humility. One should recall the famous saying of Abba Poemen the Great: "I prefer a man who sins and repents to one who does not sin and does not repent. The first has good thoughts, for he admits that he is sinful. But the second has false, soul-destroying thoughts, for he imagines himself to be righteous" (St. Ignatius, Patericon, 75).

Sophia, 11/24/1927

On Humility ~ Blessed Elder Paisios of Mt. Athos (+1994)

✘ "Blessed are those who manage to imitate the humble earth, which - while it is stepped on by everyone - lifts everyone with its love and nurtures them with affection like a good mother --- which has also provided the material for our flesh. It accepts with joy anything we throw away, good fruits as well as dirty trash, converts them quietly to vitamins and - with its fruits - offers them back plentifully to both good and evil people, without discrimination."

✘ "He who is proud, apart from being darkened, is always unsettled inwardly as well as outwardly. Due to the flightiness of his egotism, he always stands on the surface of things and cannot proceed to the depths - where the divine pearls are found - so as to be spiritually enriched."

✘ "More often than not, we ourselves create most temptations when we put our ego within our collaborations with others; that is, when we wish to exalt ourselves. No one climbs to heaven through worldly ascent, but through spiritual descent. He who walks lowly, always walks with surety and never falls."

Grace is the Soul of the Struggle

✠ Whoever finds grace finds it by means of faith and zeal, says St. Gregory of Sinai, and not by zeal alone. However painstaking our work, so long as we omit to surrender ourselves to God while performing it, we fail to attract God's grace, and our efforts build up within us not so much a true spirit of grace but the spirit of a Pharisee. Grace is the soul of the struggle. Our efforts will be rightly directed so long as we preserve self-abasement, contrition, fear of God, devotion to Him, and the realization of our dependence on divine help. If we are self-satisfied and contented with our efforts, it is a sign that they are not performed in the right way or that we lack wisdom. ~ St. Theophan the Recluse (1894)

Passion is Like a Snake

People become captives. Passion is like a snake that has poison within it. There are said to be big snakes with poisonous breath that poisons any living thing in the area so that they can devour it. The same holds true for the snake of sin: it spreads poison---pleasure---from afar, and the nous is paralyzed; its powers are paralyzed. The person is captured by the passion and involuntarily is carried toward evil.

When people are in this state of captivity, they protest and say, "But I am unable to resist; at that time I am unable to do anything." The answer is: they must take the proper measures, so that the mind and heart will not reach the point of being captured and disarmed. By experience, as soon as the spiritual serpent spreads its poison, while it is still far off and before it reaches us and poisons our mind and soul, we must take measures to escape the danger. For once we are poisoned, we are no longer able to act at all.

When a person yields to fantasies and is overcome by sinful thoughts, it is from there, from the imagination, that all evil comes! And when he has suffered many spiritual shipwrecks mentally and has been wounded repeatedly by hedonistic fantasies, then as soon as Satan comes back again with similar fantasies and shows them to the mind, immediately the person is captured. This is why one must not yield to them, so that passions and fantasies do not become firm and strong.

Elder Ephraim

About the Kingdom of God which is within ~ St. Nikolai of Serbia (1956)

"The Kingdom of God is within you." (St. Luke 17:21)

All that belongs to God carries the seal of immortality. And, the Kingdom of God is immortal. If we desire to breathe the air of immortality, we must enter within ourselves, within our hearts, within the Kingdom of God. Outside of ourselves is the air of time, the air of transitoriness and decay in which the soul breathes with difficulty.

Why do men love to reside for a long, long time in a foreign land? Why do they rarely and reluctantly enter into their own home? Whenever we think about the world, we think about that which is foreign land. Whenever we converse about the sensual world, we converse about a foreign land. Living by the senses, we are similar to a man who rushes around all day to the homes of strangers, and only at night, returns to his own home to sleep. And so, we dedicate our vigilance to death and our sleep to immortality! We come to ourselves; we return to ourselves only in sleep. But, even our sleep is dreaming of our reality, i.e., even when we are in our own home, in an unconscious state, we dream of foreign homes: Our dreams are sensual, for our consciousness is sensual. And so, we are in a foreign land; we are strangers in reality and in dreams. We are constantly outside ourselves.

The Lord wants to return us to ourselves, in His home and to His homeland. For us, the Kingdom of God is within us: outside of ourselves is a foreign land. In order to escape from a foreign land and find our true home, in which we directly encounter God, we must enter within ourselves, into our hearts. There is the King, there also is the Kingdom. ✠ ✠ ✠