My Beloved Ones,

I greet you with love and joy in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as we are blessed once more to begin our preparations for Great Lent, with the first Sunday of Triodion, the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee. The Pharisee was a Doctor of the Law honored by his fellow Israelites, but the Publican was hated, because as a tax collector the stole from his neighbors to pay the enslaving Roman Empire.

Therefore, it was not surprising to hear the Pharisee pray in the Temple: “God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.” (Luke 18:11-12) We know that the Publican was “...standing far off”, and that he “would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13) Comparing this to an earlier passage from Luke where our Lord instructs His Disciples, we can see how important humility is to prayer: “And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Luke 6:5-6). As the Pharisee, boasted, judging the thieves, rogues, adulterers, and this tax collector, he could not hear the tax collector’s quiet prayer—but the tax collector could hear him. Even as he continued to pray for forgiveness, the Pharisee judged him.

Later, in the passage from Luke, our Lord encourages us not to pray empty phrases, but to offer the Lord’s Prayer; because, as He says, “…if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Luke 6:14-15) Surely, the Pharisee understood the letter of the Law, but he did not truly keep its spirit; for in failing to love his neighbor, he did not show his love for God.

When we read the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee this Sunday, we may think we are the sinful Publican, and not the hypocritical Pharisee. However, an important thing to remember is that we are called, not only to confess our sins, but also never to stand in judgement of another human being. We all fall into sin, but our journey toward theosis will continue until we are called to stand before the Judgement Seat. As we begin this preparatory period before our Great Lenten journey, may we not only ask our Father to forgive us, but to try our best to love our neighbors, to understand them, and to forgive them, as we know He does for us.

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