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 that period known as the Triodion. Each week shall provide us with the spiritual nourishment needed to complete the 40-day journey that is Great Lent. This Sunday’s parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the repentant Publican, we see how asking for God’s mercy can give us a path forward.

The Pharisee, a Doctor of the Law, is honored by his fellow Israelites as someone who carefully upholds God’s Law. Indeed, the word Pharisee means “to be separate from”, which shows how serious the Pharisees were in their devotion. The Publican, however, is hated, because he takes from his neighbors to pay their oppressors, the Roman Empire. Knowing these things, it is not surprising to hear the Pharisee’s high opinion of himself when he prays: “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) What is surprising, however, is the Publican’s humility before God. Jesus tells us that, “…the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13) Clearly, the Lord uses this parable to twist people’s understanding of true righteousness.

Israelites would have expected that the teacher would be full of humility, and the tax collector full of greed, but Jesus knew that the ways of the world are not the ways of God. The Pharisee had become so accustomed to his special treatment, that he fed his ego, rather than his soul. In the opposite way, the publican felt the unkind words of his neighbors, and in his sorrow, was moved to become humble. Our Lord, of course, summarizes it perfectly, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:14)

As we prepare to enter this time that calls us deeper into prayer and contemplation of the Scriptures, I ask us to consider the words of our Father among the Saints, John Chrysostom: “Truly, who is worse than the tax collector? He took advantage of others’ misfortune, embezzled in others’ hard work, and shared in others’ earnings; he was a ruthless extortioner, a courteous crook, a lawful sinner. If, therefore, such a person received this great gift solely because he displayed humility, how much more will be given to a virtuous person who is humble? Therefore, if you confess your sins and you become humble, you will be justified and reconciled with God.” Our Lord, who created us in His Image and Likeness, knows that we fall short of His image. If we cry out to Him, understanding, like the Publican, that we need His mercy, we will be better able to live in this world, not only during the coming days of the Fast, but all our lives.

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