

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

One of the Sundays that prepares us for Lent is called the Publican and the Pharisee. It takes its name from the Gospel that is read on this day. In order for you and I to better understand who this Gospel parable is about, we need to go back to one verse before this parable when Jesus said, "He...told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" (Luke 18:9). At the time when Christ came out with the good news to the Jews, there were many among them who considered themselves righteous, and therefore, because of their "false righteousness," thought they had the right to condemn their neighbors who led their lives in sin.

Today's Gospel story shows us that not everyone comes to the Temple to pray. Many tourists visit the architectural monuments, which are ancient churches, in order to learn the history of the city, country, and people. Even more people go to the Temple out of habit or established tradition. And only a very small number of people visit the Sanctuary to have closer communion with God and to enjoy spiritual food.

The Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee is a perfect illustration of what prayer should be like. We are all well aware of the negative attitude of the Jewish people towards the tax collectors, who collected taxes from their brothers and sisters, while falsely enriching themselves.

Those who fall into false obedience sometimes forget the consequences of their actions, that even unconscious moral harm to others will one day return against them. They will suddenly feel the painful consequences of their thoughtless words and deeds, and thus the fulfillment of Christ's words, "I tell you, on the day of judgment men will render account for every careless word they utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (Matt. 12:36-37).

The best way to test the signs of our soul's openness to God - obedience and sincerity - is our attitude toward others. Here is what the Apostle Paul says about this, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (Eph. 4:29).

Without prayer, visiting the Temple loses all meaning. Every place of God's special presence, in the Old Testament, was called a "holy place" - a place that God had appointed for himself. Just as a sick person who comes to the hospital and does not go to the doctor, will leave without being healthy. So, a Christian who comes to the temple and does not enter into a dialogue with the Lord God, is doomed to leave the Temple as spiritually wounded as he is when he went in.

A glorious priest was to speak in an English port city. Many people gathered in the Temple. The expected priest came to the preacher and began his sermon with the following story: "Fifteen years ago, three brawlers entered the church to prevent the

priest from preaching. When the priest began to speak, the first boy said, "Let's throw a stone at him." But one of the boys stopped him, saying, "Wait a minute." When the second boy advised to throw a stone at the priest and run away, the third one objected again and said, "Why make a mutiny in the Church, it is not necessary to do so." Finally, they quarreled with each other. Two of the boys left the Church, and the third remained until the end of the sermon. Years had passed. The first was hanged for counterfeiting money. The other is in prison for murder. And the third is a priest and speaks to you." At these words, tears flowed from the priest's eyes.

The behavior of the Pharisee reminds us that we can do harm to our neighbors, hurt them not only physically but also spiritually, with a morally inappropriate word or way of addressing, inappropriate criticism or condemnation. An inappropriate way of addressing one's neighbor, even a close person, is not just a violation of the principles of ethics and morality, a diminution of his honor and dignity, but disrespect for him as a person, and a person as a whole. By such inappropriate behavior, we erase the person himself and his whole life, erase him from the book of life, or in other words, make him dead while still alive. Disrespect and moral wrongdoing inflict a much deeper emotional wound on another person, causes much stronger emotional pain than the pain a person feels from the physical trauma inflicted on him.

Such failures always come out of pride. Never think of yourself higher than we really are. Therefore, we Christians who love the Lord with a sincere heart, follow the example of the sincere prayer of the Publican, try to ensure that our outward deeds of piety are in harmony with our inner holiness and the need of our heart. Let us not forget the words of Jesus Christ, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

Dear believers, I wish you all a beautiful and blessed day!

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