

A Voice in the Wilderness

The Newsletter of St. George Orthodox Christian Church

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Glory be to Jesus Christ! Glory be Forever!



Volume 12 Issue 552

34th Sunday after Pentecost-Sunday of the Publican & Pharisee

February 5, 2023



Today's Gospel parable talks about the prayer of only two men—the Pharisee and the publican. Why have they drawn the attention of the All-Seeing Eye? How did they distinguish themselves? It would seem that they had nothing in common with each other. One stood in the foremost ranks of those praying—he was in others' opinion the first, a righteous man, as well. The second stood by the doors of the temple as the last man before God, and in the opinion of those around him he was an outrageous sinner.

The Pharisee lifted his gaze with the prayer: "O God! I praise Thee, for I am not as other men." But the publican looked down to the ground beneath his feet, and beating his chest, whispered, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Two prayers to God, two states of soul, two manners of life.

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Our church, the house of our Heavenly Father, is a house of prayer. He calls His children to it, so that in prayerful communion they would more acutely feel His nearness, His love; so that the warmth of His Fatherly instruction and its power would carry away the difficulties of human life. He sees everyone; the light of His Gospel Truth illumines those gathered there to their innermost

++ 34th Sunday after Pentecost ++
+ Presentation of the Lord +

Epistle: 2 Timothy 3: 10-15

Gospel: Luke 18: 10-14

St. George Orthodox Christian Church is a community of believers who strive to live a life according to the Gospel of Christ and teachings of the Church.

We worship God in Trinity - Father+Son+Holy Spirit.

We are dedicated to living out Christ's commandment to, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, ad with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.*

A Talk on the Divine Liturgy, Metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol (part 17)

Think about what a great misfortune it would be for us to live without churches, or to live in a house where there are no icons of the Savior or Mother of God. Such a house would be a true wasteland, wild and abandoned.

Take icons of Christ and the Mother of God, hang them in some dark cave, and immediately it will be transformed, ennobled. And the most magnificent palace in the whole world, if God isn't present there, turns into a wilderness. And the peo-

ple living there also become savages.

Sometimes you see someone living in such a mansion, with fifteen servants who bring everything their master wants, even before he orders it... You see how he yells, swears, with no spiritual calmness or peace. What's wrong with you? Why are you fighting with your servants? What do you lack? You have everything you can imagine...

And yet, this man lacks something: the presence of God in his heart and

soul. Without God, everything else is nothing. But with God, even if a man lives in a miserable shack or under the open sky, he's calm, peaceful, full of love for everyone, and glorifies God: "Glory to Thee, O God!"

Thus, we pray for the church that hospitably receives us, that gives us abundant blessings—the presence of God within its walls, the holy Sacraments, the Body and Blood of Christ. We were baptized in church, and they will carry us out of

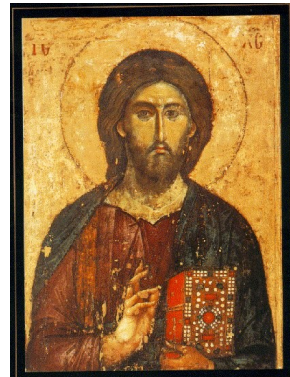
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We invite all to worship in our services. Sunday Divine Liturgy begins at 9:30 AM

If you have any questions about the church or would like to speak with our pastor, please call

Fr. Matthew at 607-280-1586

Glory be to Jesus Christ.
Glory be Forever.





As the deliverer
of captives
and defender
of the poor,
healer of the infirm
and champion of kings,
victorious great
martyr George
intercede with Christ
our God that our souls
may be saved.

News and Notes

We welcome all who are worshiping with us today. We invite you to join us at our coffee social following the Divine Liturgy. Please note that our yearly meeting will be on Sunday, February 5, 2023, during the coffee social.

Pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5.17)

Please keep the following in your prayers: Mother Onufria, Fr. Michael, Meg, Larissa, Jack, Stephen, Evan, Ryan, Anatoly, Alexey, Heidi, Mackenzie, Mike, Jessica, Lisa, Jeff, Bonnalee, Joanne, Skip, Georgia, Colleen, Stan, David, Carol, the homeless, the hungry, victims of abuse and violence, & those persecuted for their faith in Christ

Words of Wisdom from the Church

People of God, who've been convinced in their heart that God exists, fear nothing and nobody. This peace of God has enormous social repercussions. When we no longer feel envy, suspicion or fear, what reason is there for us not to be loving and united in our family and in our daily life? But when there's not this peace of God,

then we all envy and fear each other; we act with spiritual suspicion and lose our peace. The wickedness within us pressurizes us, because we haven't God's grace to emerge from the pall of evil of this world. (*Metropolitan Athanasios of Limassol*)

Passions arise in all of us from time to time. Their appearance confirms our uncleanness, but doesn't make us guilty. We're guilty only if we give in willingly to any passion, in other words if we don't consider it an enemy and don't fight it determinedly; we're guilty if we welcome it whenever it comes and find pleasure in the stimulation it causes. This attitude indicates a willingness to be reconciled to the passion and, therefore, to be at odds with God. (St. Theophan the Recluse).

When we talk about repentance, we don't mean regretting our sins. Nor do we mean the sacrament of confession, at which we reveal our sins and thoughts to our confessor. For the most part we mean that state in which the whole human being - intellect, soul and body- is inspired and turns towards God. (*Elder Ephrem*)

A Talk on the Divine Liturgy, cont'd from p.1

the church when our earthly life ends. I often think while serving funerals: What an amazing thing the church of God is! Through it we come into this world, and through it we leave this world.

The most significant events of our lives are directly connected with church. There people are married, they bring their babies there on the eighth and fortieth days, they baptize them there, they come there with their petitions, they celebrate the feasts there, and they're carried out from there after their funerals. How we should love our churches and treat them with reverence! Let us thank God for giving us this blessed opportunity to be in the house of God. As the Prophet David said: *I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness* (Ps. 83:11). It's better, David says, to lie on the floor in the corner of God's house than to live in the palaces of sinners. A corner of a church is better than the palaces of those who are far from God.

How should we enter a church? This is spoken about in the fourth petition of the Litany of Peace, which we're analyzing today: "... *for them that with faith, reverence, and fear of God enter herein, let us pray to the Lord.*"



We pray for those who come to pray "with faith," who believe in God and seek Him, who believe that God is present in church, in the assembly of the faithful. We pray for those who enter "with reverence," which includes not only their outward appearance, but their internal state, the dis-

position of their heart.

When we have a genuine awareness that we are in the holiest of places, where God is present, where the Divine Sacraments are celebrated, where a multitude of Christians have prayed and continue to pray, then we feel that we can't behave in some inappropriate, irreverent way.

You may ask: Does external behavior really matter? Undoubtedly it does. Otherwise, you pray lying on a bed, or sitting on a chair, or standing up straight, or kneeling. Man isn't just a soul, or just a mind, but also a body. The body participates in prayer and service to God.

For example, when you pray while kneeling, then your soul conforms to the humble position of the body. Is it hard for you to kneel? Stand up straight. One thing's for sure: We benefit when our whole being is in a state of attention and reverence. Therefore, we must be very attentive in church, and not just during the Divine Liturgy.

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(Homily on the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee, cont'd from p.1)

Both men are in the temple, both have prayers on their lips, but are both covered by God's mercy and good will? And do we hear the voice of God, saying, *I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalts himself shall be abased; and he that humbles himself shall be exalted* (Lk. 18:14).

The Pharisee speaks madness in his prayer as he stands before God in the temple: *I am not as other men are* (Lk. 18:11). In these brief words his soul is poured out, laid bare to the fullest and in all its unseemliness; here is self-satisfaction and self-love, degradation and criticism of others, and self-exaltation over everyone. In these minutes, standing before the holy place, he has forgotten God Who loves the righteous and has mercy upon sinners, He forgot that man's judgment is one thing, but God's judgment is another.

Wouldn't it be more worthy for him to look into his own heart and whisper aloud to the Lord, "From my sins cleanse me, and from those of others save Thy servant"? The narcissistic, self-satisfied Pharisee does not pronounce these saving words. After all, he is not like other men, not like that publican; he's not an extortioner or an adulterer. And what is his righteousness? *I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.* And for that God owes him something. God is supposedly indebted to him. While from the doors of the temple, from a man who does not dare to raise his eyes from the ground, God hears the silent "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." It is so brief, but with such contrition of heart. And, "A heart that is broken and humbled, God will not despise." The prayer is accepted, the sinner is justified.

Today's story is short but succinct, and it is no coincidence that this word of God sounds forth to us today. The danger of falling into pharisaical self-satisfaction, self-exaltation, and judgment and criticism of other lies in wait for everyone. Only true righteous ones are alien to such temptations, but even they stand on stern watch over their souls so that the enemy of mankind would not be able to find an opening to crawl through there.



No doubt there are good and true Christian qualities in us. We love God's church, strive to honor every feast day with prayer at the services; but when we see those who have forgotten about church, doesn't the self-satisfied thought sometimes begin to stir in our souls: "Thank God that I am not like other men"? We console ourselves with prayer, but we can be resentful, irritated, idly curious, self-loving, and can be intemperate in food, or careless about our words. We are industrious but cheap and unsympathetic to the needs of others, and if we are charitable, then we do not preserve purity of heart while giving. We have to see our moral state, and be frightened by what we see; then our hearts will definitely be rent by the cry of the publican: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

To be freed from the sin of self-aggrandizement, we must compare our own lives not with others like us, but

with those who have achieved perfection. Many people with passions like us have conquered sin in themselves, uprooted all sinful passions, and prepared an abode in themselves for the Holy Spirit. But even they bore on their lips throughout their lives the prayer: "God, have mercy on me a sinner." And we sinners rightfully bow down before them. So let us try to compare their pure, virtuous lives with our own.

For example, someone is pleased in his soul with his peaceful, yielding character; but what is our yielding character in comparison with the humility of St. Sergius? The abbot of a monastery, he did not disdain to earn his daily bread

by building a log cell for one of the monastery residents. And he gave thanks to God when the latter paid his spiritual father for his labors with a handful of moldy, dried bread.

The publican, a sinner, and the Pharisee, a false righteous one—both of them teach us: "Do not hope in your righteousness, but place all your hope for salvation on God's boundless mercy, crying out, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" And when a man is departing from this earthly veil onto the threshold of eternity, only one prayer will be important and needed: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Amen.

In the Old Testament health, and life in general in all its manifestations, presuppose life force. It's rare for natural causes to be sought for illnesses, and medical observations are exceptionally limited. Everything depends on God and sickness is no exception. So there are a great many references to God allowing illnesses which usually involve the mediation of spiritual forces such as an avenging angel, or, as in the case of Job, the devil.

In the Biblical narrative, the connection between sin and sickness is so close as to be almost automatic. Sickness isn't to be found in the intent of the creative force through which God made the cosmos and humankind. It came as the consequence of sin. At the same time, it appears as a one of the signs of God's wrath which will strike sinful people, sinful Israel and the sinful world.

There's also an instructive aspect to the experience of sin, however, in that its purpose is to sharpen the awareness of our conscience to sin. It's indicative that in the psalms, a request for a cure is always accompanied by a confession of sins before God: 'there is no healing in my body... for my sins have risen over my head... for in you have I hoped, Lord' (Ps. 37).

There's also sickness which strikes the people of God collectively, without the recipients necessarily being guilty. Here the great and perplexing issue of God's judgement is posed: *Unde malum?* Where does evil come from?

Who's to blame? Please retain this reflection for later. The predicament it creates in today's rationalistic era is greater than that which existed in the times of ancient Israel. And the pastoral challenge of dealing with it is equally great.

We have a different case when the righteous fall sick and suffer, as happened with Job and Tobias. In these instances, the answer is provided by scripture itself: the purpose is to show the faithfulness of the righteous person and for the name of God to be glorified: 'Blessed be the name of the Lord.'

There is also the prophetic- or, we might say, eschatological- version of sickness. The Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah bears the ills of the people of God and takes upon himself their pain with the aim of atoning for the sins of this people (Is. 53, 4). It must be said that in the Old Testament, recourse to the art of medicine is nowhere

forbidden, as regards the treatment of sickness. On the contrary, in the *Wisdom of Sirach* the doctor is an honored personage, not only as regards their usefulness but also as holders of an office favored by God himself ('for the Lord made him'). Having said that, there is a clear preference for addressing God and seeking a cure from him, who is acknowledge as the lord of life. We humbly confess our errors, bemoan the wretched state into which we've fallen because of sickness, and await grace and mercy from God. In this way, the cure is a sign of God's presence.

Despite its constructive character, sickness is always thought of as something bad and its total abolition can only be conceived of from an eschatological point of view. At the end of time, when God renews the world, the cause and consequence, sin and sickness, will be erased.



At the time of the New Testament, Jews by and large lived in the same state as we've described. The case of the paralytic at the sheep's gate and the question of the disciples concerning the blind man ('Lord, who sinned?') confirm that the triptych of sickness/sin/divine intervention was more or less still in place.

Christ's presence, however, marked a shift towards a different practice and a different prospect. Christ responds directly to the sick. He feels sorry for them and cures them by setting them free of their bonds to sickness. It's important to note that there are instances which involve mala-

dies of the body, of the soul (such as demonic possession), and yet others which combine the two, such as the woman who was bent double. The combination of sin and sickness seems to have been present in the healings of Christ and is demonstrated by the Lord himself.

But there's another factor which we can't overlook. Christ first heals, but then says 'Sin no more'. His prime concern isn't regret but faith and trust in him. Once he's given his grace and his gift, He requires repentance as a shift away from a life of sin towards real life. He wants this as the result of sharing in his love. As an inspired state, not as a necessary imposition. For Christ, the sick have already been subjected to enough difficulties. He had no wish to add more. He wanted to give them wings, fill their soul with hope and vigor, so that repentance would be the product of freedom.

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