

FEBRUARY 5, 2017

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

Luke 18: 10-14

“PRIDE OR HUMILITY?”

We hear about the early Pilgrims to America mostly at Thanksgiving time, being that they invented it! They are usually thought of as paragons of virtue---and there were lots of good things about them. But many of them did have a problem with pride and arrogance. This problem manifested itself whenever they would have town meetings in the various parts of Massachusetts. They could hardly get any business done because of frequent bickering about which official should sit where in the meeting. Who got the number one place of honor? Number two? Etc..... One town in particular had gone into governmental chaos because of this problem. So at one town meeting, the officials came up with an idea to fix the problem. They appointed a “Seating Committee” which would meet before every town officer meeting to decide who should be assigned which seat at the upcoming town meeting. It didn’t work too well. At every “Seating Committee”, the members of the Seating Committee would fight about who should sit where in the Seating Committee meetings! (The Witches, Stacy Shiff, Back Bay Books, 2015, p. 260)

How absurd! But pride can really be damaging. Today’s gospel reading, from Luke 18, shows how pride can spiritually destroy us. Our Lord Jesus Christ, in Luke 18: 10-14, tells a parable about two men going to the temple to pray.

The first man is a Pharisee. He was a proud and smart and strict religious leader of the people. His prayer in this parable isn’t really a prayer, but an announcement to God about how good he himself, the Pharisee, really was. Hear his prayer in verses 11-12: “God, I thank Thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all I get.”

What a great and holy fellow the Pharisee thought he was---he had to tell God about it! Was God impressed? No, not at all. In fact, at the end of the parable we see that the Pharisee went to hell.

The second man in the parable that goes to pray at the temple is a tax collector or “publican”. (*Not “Republican”! I remember when I was a child and heard this passage in church, I wondered how the Republicans managed to get into the Bible.*) This tax collector was not a good man at all. The tax collectors then were corrupt---they skimmed off the top of what they collected people so as to get money for themselves. In other words, they were thieves. And they were traitors because they were collecting taxes for the hated Roman Empire. There was nothing good about this man---and he knew it. So when he went to the temple he went to repent of his sins and ask God’s forgiveness. We hear his prayer in verse 13---“God, be merciful to me a sinner.”

This prayer got answered. And at the end of the parable we see that this man’s wickedness was forgiven---and he was saved.

Which man should we imitate? The proud, religious Pharisee? He did seem, at least on the surface, to be a holy man. Or the second man, the humble, repentant tax collector.

Sure, he was sinful. But he asked for mercy and forgiveness.

We should imitate the 2nd man, the tax collector. Of course, we shouldn't imitate his sins. But we should imitate his repentance and humility.

A good way to imitate the tax collector is by going to the sacrament of Confession. He went to the temple to ask forgiveness from God. We come to the temple, too---in Confession---to ask God's forgiveness.

Of course, we can ask God to forgive us anytime and anywhere. And we should do that every day.

But more is needed than just privately asking forgiveness---because our sins are not private. Our sins---when we do something we shouldn't and when we don't do something we should do---hurt others, not just God. Our sins hurt our brothers and sisters in Christ. Our sins hinder the work of God's Kingdom, God's Church. And so we come to the church to ask forgiveness of our sins.

In confession, the priest stands for both Christ and for Christ's Church because when we sin, we sin against both Christ and against His Church. In the sacrament, God's forgiving grace flows through the words of the priest as he declares our absolution. The words of absolution come through the priest's mouth, but they are really words of forgiveness from the Lord.

So how do *priests* then receive absolution from their sins? They can't perform the sacrament on themselves, after all! And priests have lots of sins to confess! What we do is go to another priest for the sacrament. I'll be doing that sometime in the next few weeks myself.

So---clergy or laity: we all should go to Confession.

But some don't go. Why not? Several reasons are commonly given:
---One reason---"I don't really have anything to confess." Really? Are you sure? If you look deeply into your soul, into your heart, do you conclude that you are without sin?

Really? When I was an "apprentice" priest years ago in Indianapolis, my mentor priest, Father Joe Olas, had a little spiel about confession he would always go through at the beginning of Lent. He would speak about how everyone should go to Confession during Lent. And then he would say, "For those who believe they have no need to go to Confession, please see me after liturgy today so I can set up an appointment for you to pose for an icon to be painted of you---because we would like to have your picture up here on the iconostas along with the other Saints." He never got any takers on that!

The Saints tell us that to see our sins, to be aware of them, is a good thing. One of the Desert Fathers said, "Happy is he who always sees his sins." (The Word In The Desert, Douglas Burton-Christie, Oxford University Press, 1993, p. 239)

See your sins, admit to yourself your sins. Then come to Confession! And you will be happier.

---A second reason---Fear of Confession. Don't be afraid! After all, how can you be afraid of your loving Heavenly Father? If you confess your sins to Him, will He beat you? Will He punish you? Will He send you to hell? No, He will forgive you!

---A third reason---not being sure how to go about it. Well, I'll explain that in next Sunday's sermon!

If we don't go to Confession, we may be falling into the sin of the pride of the Pharisee in today's gospel. That means putting ourselves up high like he did. That leads to getting knocked down.

You might remember Sen. Bill Bradley. He was a star pro basketball player and then went on to be a U. S. Senator. He was a great basketball player and, as far as I know, a fine senator. But he did have a problem with arrogance and pride. He thought very highly of himself. One day he was eating lunch in a restaurant in Washington, D. C. He was quite bossy with the waiter from the very start and the waiter was offended. And his service to the senator got slower and slower..... The senator wanted more butter for his bread. He asked for it and didn't get it..... He asked again and the waiter still didn't bring the butter..... Finally, Bradley, angrily and arrogantly, got up and walked over to where the waiter was and said to him, "You still haven't brought my butter! Don't you know who I am? I am Senator William Bradley---and I want butter!" The waiter replied, "And don't you know who I am? I am Joe, the guy in charge of the butter. And you sure ain't going to get any!" (The Alexandrian Link, Steve Berry, Ballantine Books, 2007, p. 213)

Senator Bradley's pride kept him from getting more butter. The Pharisee's pride kept him from going to heaven. Let us be very careful if pride keeps us from Confession. Before we get knocked down due to pride, may we all lower ourselves and go to Confession.

How to go to Confession? That will be the focus of next Sunday's confession. Just one more matter about Confession today.....

How often should we go?

There is no simple and hard rule on that. But we should be sure it's not too rare a thing. Quarterly (4 times a year) seems to be a good discipline for many. Others regularly go once a month. Some prefer to go every week and that's fine, too. If you can't figure out often would be best for you, let's talk about it next time you're at Confession.

Some "signs" that it is a good time to go, whether or not it's time on your personal Confession "schedule"-----

If you are struggling with some really disruptive sin that is messing up your life (and maybe someone else's)---get to Confession.

If you are continually dragged down by some nagging sin you can't move beyond---get to Confession.

If you just think you're doing great spiritually---no reason at all to go to Confession, no sins to confess..... Get to confession really fast! Because you have become too spiritually blind to see your own sins.

Don't get too hung up on what is the perfect frequency---just make sure you go!

And Lent will be here in 3 weeks---and we are all supposed to go during that season.

As I mentioned, next Sunday I will speak about how to prepare for Confession, and how it takes place.

To close for today-----be like the tax collector in today's gospel reading. Do not be like the Pharisee. Be humble, not proud.

For a stretch of time in the early 1800s, Sir Walter Scott was considered the greatest English writer. His novels and poems were the most popular of that time. And then the poetry of Lord Byron started to get known. And people began to think he was a greater writer than Scott. One month, an anonymous article appeared in one of the British literary journals. This article analyzed both Scott's and Byron's writings and made the argument that Byron was indeed a better writer than Scott. Later, it leaked out who had written that anonymous article---Sir Walter Scott himself! (in "Our Daily Bread", 1/13/83)

Be like Sir Walter Scott. Be like the tax collector. Be humble. And God will bless you for it.