

ST. GREGORY PALAMAS ON THE LORD'S PARABLE OF THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

1. THE unseen patron of evil is full of evil ingenuity. Right at the beginning he can drag away, by means of hopelessness and lack of faith, the foundations of virtue already laid in the soul. Again, by means of indifference and laziness, he can make an attempt on the walls of virtue's house just when they are being built up. Or he can bring down the roof of good works after its construction, by means of pride and madness. But stand firm, do not be alarmed, for a diligent man is even more ingenious in good things, and virtue has superior forces to deploy against evil. It has at its disposal supplies and support in battle from Him Who is all-powerful, Who in His goodness strengthens all lovers of virtue. So not only can virtue remain unshaken by the various wicked devices prepared by the enemy, but it can also lift up and restore those fallen into the depths of evil, and easily lead them to God by repentance and humility.

2. Here is an example and a clear proof. The Publican, as a publican, dwells in the depths of sin. All he has in common with those who live virtuously is one short utterance, but he finds relief, is lifted up and rises above every evil. He is numbered with the company of the righteous, justified by the impartial Judge Himself. If the Pharisee is condemned by his speech, it is because, as a Pharisee, he thinks himself somebody, although he is not really righteous, and utters many arrogant words which provoke God's anger with their every syllable.

3. Why does humility lead up to the heights of righteousness, whereas self-conceit leads down to the depths of sin? Because anybody who thinks he is something great, even before God, is rightly abandoned by God, as one who thinks that he does not need His help. Anybody who despises himself, on the other hand, and relies on mercy from above, wins God's sympathy, help and grace. As it says, "The Lord resisteth the proud: but he giveth grace unto the lowly" (Prov. 3:34 LXX).

4. The Lord demonstrates this in a parable, saying. "Two men went up into the temple to pray, the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican" (Luke 18:10). Wanting to set clearly before us the gain that comes from humility and the loss from pride, he divided into two groups all who went to the Temple, or, rather, those who went up into the Temple, who are the ones who go there to pray. This is the nature of prayer, it brings a man up from the earth into heaven and, rising above every heavenly name, height and honor, sets him before the God Who is over all (cf. Rom. 9:5). The ancient Temple was set in a high place, on a hill above the city. Once when a deadly epidemic was destroying Jerusalem, David saw the Angel of Death on this hill, stretching out his sword against the city. He went up there and built an altar to the Lord, on which he offered a sacrifice to God, and the destruction ceased (2 Sam. 24:15-25). All these things are an image of the saving ascent of the spirit during holy prayer and of the forgiveness it brings - for these things all

foreshadowed our salvation. They can also be an image of this holy church of ours, which is indeed set in a high place, in another angelic country above the world, where the great, bloodless sacrifice, acceptable to God, is offered for the forgiveness of the whole world, the destruction of death and abundance of eternal life.

5. So the Lord did not say, “Two men went to the temple”, but “went up” into the Temple. Even now there are some who come to the holy church without going up. Instead they bring down the church, the image of heaven. They come for the sake of meeting each other and talking, or to buy and sell goods, and they resemble each other, for the latter offer goods, the former words, and all receive a fair exchange. As in those days the Lord drove them completely out of the Temple saying, “My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves” (Matt. 21:13), so He also drove them away from their conversations as they did not really go up into the Temple at all, even if they came there every day.

6. The Pharisee and the Publican went up into the Temple, both with the aim of praying. But the Pharisee brought himself down after going up, defeating his aim by the way he prayed. Both had the same aim in going up, both went up to pray, but they prayed in opposite ways. One made the ascent broken and contrite, for he had learned from the Psalmist and Prophet that “a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Ps. 51:17). The Prophet says of himself, with the knowledge of experience, “I was brought low and the Lord helped me” (Ps. 118:6). But why am I talking about the Prophet, when the God of the prophets, Who for our sake became like us, humbled himself. “Wherefore”, as the Apostle says, “God hath highly exalted him” (Phil. 2:9). The Pharisee, by contrast, goes up bloated with pretensions to justify himself in the presence of God, although all our righteousness is like a filthy rag before Him (cf. Is. 64:6). He had not heard the saying, “Everyone that is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord” (Prov. 16:5), or, “God resisteth the proud” (Prov. 3:34 LXX), or, “Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight” (Isa. 5:21).

7. The two were different not only in their manner and way of praying but also in their type of prayer, for there are two kinds. Prayer is not only a matter of entreaty but also of thanksgiving. Of those who pray, one goes up to the Temple of God praising and thanking God for what he has received from him. Another asks for what he has not yet received, including, in the case of those of us who sin all the time, remission of sins. When we piously promise to offer something to God, that is not called prayer but a vow, as shown by the one who said, “Vow, and pay unto the Lord your God” (Ps. 76: 11), and the other who said, “Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay” (Eccles. 5:4).

8. However, these two kinds of prayer can both be unprofitable for the unwary. Faith and contrition make prayer and supplication for the remission of sins effective, once evil deeds have been renounced, but despair and hardness of heart make it ineffectual. Thanksgiving for the benefits received from God is made acceptable by humility and not looking down on those who lack them. It is rendered unacceptable, however, by being conceited, as if those benefits resulted from our own efforts and knowledge, and by condemning those who have not received them. The Pharisee’s behavior and words prove he was afflicted with both these diseases. He went up to the Temple to give thanks, not to

make supplication and, like a wretched fool, mingled conceit and condemnation of others with his thanksgiving. For he stood and prayed thus with himself: “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers” (Luke 18:11).

9. Instead of the attitude of a servant, the Pharisee’s stance displays shameless self-exaltation, the opposite of that other man who, in his humility, did not dare to lift up his eyes to heaven. It stands to reason that the Pharisee prayed to himself, for his prayer did not ascend to God, although it did not escape the notice of Him Who sits upon the Cherubim and observes the lowest depths of the abyss. When he said “I thank thee”, he did not go on to say, “because in Thy mercy Thou didst freely deliver me, weak and unable to fight as I am, from the snares of the devil”. For he is spiritually courageous who manages to take refuge in repentance when caught in the snares of the enemy and fallen into the nets of sin. The circumstances of our lives are directed by a higher providence and often, with little or no effort on our part, by God’s help we have stayed out of reach of many great passions, delivered by His sympathy for our weakness. We should acknowledge the gift and humble ourselves before the Giver, not be conceited.

10. The Pharisee says, “I thank thee, God”, not because I have received any help from Thee, but “because I am not as other men are”. As though it was from his own resources and through his own ability that he was not an extortioner or unjust or an adulterer - if, indeed, he really was not. He did not pay attention to himself, or he would not have said he was righteous. He was looking more at everyone else than at himself and, in his madness, despised them all. Only one seemed to him to be righteous and chaste: himself. “I am not”, he says, “as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican” (Luke 18:11). Anyone could point out to him how foolish he was, by saying to him, “If all except yourself are unjust and extortioners, then who are the victims of extortion and injustice? What about this Publican, and the extra words you added about him? Since he is one of the rest, surely he was included in your general, your universal, condemnation? Or did he have to be condemned twice over because he was in your sight, even though he was standing far away from you. You knew he was unjust because he was obviously a publican, but how did you know he was an adulterer? Or perhaps you are entitled to treat him unjustly and insult him since he treated others unjustly?” But it is not so. With a humble mind he bears your arrogant accusation and, reproaching himself, he offers supplication to God and is delivered by Him from the condemnation of having treated others unjustly. You, however, will be rightly condemned for having arrogantly made accusations against him and all men, and deemed only yourself righteous. “I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers.”

11. These words show the Pharisee’s disdain for God and for everybody, but also for the standards of his own conscience. He openly despises everybody and ascribes his abstention from evil not to God’s strength but to his own. If he says that he thanks God, it is only because he considers all men apart from himself to be licentious, unjust and extortioners, as though God saw fit to grant virtue to him alone. However, if everyone were like that, all the Pharisee’s goods would be in their possession as loot. But this is not so, for he adds, “I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I gain” (Luke 18:12). He does not say that he gives tithes of all that he possesses, but of all that he gains, meaning the additions and increases to his fortune. So he kept what he possessed and also took

without hindrance as much as he could over and above that. How could all except himself be extortioners and unjust? This is how self-confuting and self-deceiving evil is! Madness is always mixed with lies.

12. He put forward the fact that he gave tithes of his wealth to prove his righteousness; for if someone gives tithes of his own wealth how can he be an extortioner of other people's? He put forward fasting to show off his chastity because fasting gives rise to purity. For argument's sake, then, let us say you are chaste, righteous, wise, sensible, brave, and whatever else you wish. If this has come from yourself and not from God, why do you deceitfully pretend to pray? Why do you go up into the Temple and give thanks in vain? But if it has come from God, you did not receive it so as to boast but for the edification of others to the glory of the Giver. You should have humbly rejoiced and given thanks both to Him Who gave and to those for whose sake the gifts were given. The lamp receives light for those who see it, not for itself. For "week" the Pharisee uses the word "Sabbath", but he means not the seventh day but the seven days, on two of which he brags that he fasts. He is unaware that such fasts are mere human virtues, whereas pride is demonic. When pride is linked with fasting, however genuine, it annuls and destroys the virtues, and how much more so if the fasting is a sham.

13. These are the words of the Pharisee. By contrast, the Publican "standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (Luke 18:13). See the extent of his humility, faith and self-reproach. See the utter abasement of his thoughts and feelings, and, at the same time, contrition of heart mingled with this publican's prayer. When he went up into the Temple to pray for the remission of his sins, he brought with him good advocates before God: unashamed faith, un-condemned self-reproach, contrition of heart that is not despised and humility that exalts. He linked attention to prayer most excellently. It says, "The publican standing afar off". Not "stood", as in the case of the Pharisee, but "standing", to show that he was standing for a long time continuously praying and asking for mercy. Without any other intention or thought he paid attention only to himself and God, turning over and repeating the supplication of a single thought, the most effective of all prayers.

14. "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven" (Luke 18:13). As he stood he bowed down, and his bearing was not only that of a lowly servant, but also of a condemned man. It also proclaims a soul delivered from sin. Although still far from God, without the boldness towards Him that comes from good works, it hopes to draw near to him because it has already renounced evil and is intent on good. "Standing afar off the publican would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven", showing his self-condemnation and self-reproach by his manner and appearance. He saw himself as unworthy either of heaven or of the earthly Temple, so he stood on the threshold of the Temple, not daring even to turn his gaze towards heaven, still less towards the God of heaven. In his intense contrition he smote upon his breast to show he was worthy of punishment. He sighed in deepest mourning, bowing his head like a condemned man, calling himself a sinner and begging with faith for forgiveness, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner". For he believed Him Who said, "Turn ye unto me, and I will turn unto you" (Zech. 1:3), and the Prophet who bore witness, "I said, I will confess

my transgressions unto the Lord, and thou forgavest the iniquity of my heart” (cf. Ps. 32:5).

15. What happened then? “This man”, says the Lord, “went down to his house justified rather than the other, for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:14). As the devil is conceit itself and pride is his own particular evil, it defeats and swallows up any human virtue with which it is mixed. Whereas humility is the virtue of the good angels, and defeats any human evil that comes upon fallen mankind. Humility is the chariot by which we ascend to God, like those clouds which are to carry up to God those who would dwell for endless ages with Him, as foretold by the Apostle: “We shall be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (I Thess. 4:17). Humility is the same as such a cloud. It is formed by repentance, releases streams of tears; brings out the worthy from among the unworthy and leads them up to unite them with God, justified by His free gift for the gratitude of their free disposition.

16. At first the Publican evilly appropriated other people’s goods; later he renounced dishonesty and by not justifying himself, was justified. The Pharisee did not lay claim to other people’s possessions, but by justifying himself he was condemned. What will befall those who do lay claim to other people’s possessions and attempt to justify themselves?

17. Let us leave them, as the Lord does, for words will not convince such people. Sometimes it happens that we humble ourselves when we pray, and we may imagine that we shall be rewarded with the same justification as the Publican. But it is not so. We must consider the fact that the Publican was despised by the Pharisee to his face, even after he had abandoned sin, and he condemned himself with contempt, not only not contradicting the Pharisee but joining in with his accusations against him.

18. When you abandon your evil-doing, do not contradict those who despise or reproach you because of it. Join them in condemning yourself for what you are like and, through contrite prayer, take refuge in the forgiveness of God alone, realizing that you are a rescued publican. Many have called themselves sinners, and so do we, but dishonor tests the heart. The great Paul is far removed from pharisaic boasting, but he wrote to those in Corinth who were speaking in tongues, “I thank my God, I speak with tongues more than ye all” (1 Cor. 14:18). (He who elsewhere calls himself the off-scouring of all things, writes these words to restrain those who look down on those who did not have this gift, cf. 1 Cor. 4:13). If therefore Paul, who is far removed from pharisaic boasting, can write such words, it is also possible for someone to say the same words as the Publican and be humble in speech like him, but not to be justified as he was. To the Publican’s words must be added his renunciation of evil, his soul’s disposition, his contrition and his patience. David shows us by his actions that anyone who considers himself guilty before God and repents must believe that the reproach and contempt of others towards him is just and to be endured. After he had sinned, when he heard Shimei speaking ill of him, he said to those who wanted to retaliate, “Let him curse, because the Lord hath said unto him, Curse David” (2 Sam. 16:10). According to him, God’s forgiveness of David’s sin against him had posted the man there. Yet David was struggling at that time with a great and terrible calamity, as Absalom had just risen up in revolt against him (2 Sam. 15:7ff).

19. Leaving Jerusalem against his will and with unbearable grief, he fled as far as the foot of the Mount of Olives. There, to make the calamity worse, he met Shimei throwing stones at him, cursing him mercilessly and insulting him shamelessly (2 Sam. 16:5ff). He called him a bloodthirsty man and a criminal, as if to remind the King, to his disgrace, of the incident with Bathsheba and Uriah (2 Sam. 11:3-15). He did not stop after cursing him once or twice and throwing a few stones, and words that strike harder than stones. It says the King with all his men went on with Shimei going along the mountainside following the King, cursing him, throwing stones from the side and spattering him with mud. The King did not lack men to stop him. Abishai, his commander, unable to endure it, said to the King, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord and king? let me go over, I pray thee, and take off his head” (2 Sam. 16:9). But David restrained him and all his servants, saying to them, “Let him curse. It may be that the Lord will look on my affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day” (2 Sam. 16:12).

20. The happenings which took place in those days are shown in the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, fulfilled for ever by righteousness. If someone really accounts himself guilty of eternal punishment, he will courageously endure not just dishonor but also harm, disease and, in fact, every kind of misfortune and ill-treatment. He who shows such patience, as though in debt and guilty, is delivered by a very light condemnation, temporary and ephemeral, saved from truly grievous, unbearable and unending punishment.¹⁶ Sometimes he may even be delivered from dangers threatening him now, because God’s kindness begins from that point, due to his patience. Someone chastened by God said, “I will bear the chastening of the Lord, because I have sinned against him” (cf. Micah 7:9 LXX).¹⁷

21. May we, chastened not by the Lord’s wrath and anger but by His mercy, not be cast down by God’s punishment, but like the Psalmist may we be raised up at the end by the grace and love towards mankind of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory, might, honor and worship, together with the Father and the life-giving Spirit, now and for ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.