



Orthodox Church of the Entrance of the Theotokos into the Temple

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A Greater Righteousness September 17, 2023

Sunday, September 17. Pentecost 15. Entrance Church

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:18, 20)

The lesson we heard today from Matthew chapter 22 takes us right into the center of a controversy that continued throughout the course of the entire earthly life of our Lord. A group of rabbis, priests and lawyers that were suspicious of the teaching of Jesus were the Pharisees. They preached a strict adherence to every tidbit, every jot and tiddle, of the Law. They advocated what must seem to us to be an almost unreasonably radical and unbending path to righteousness: strict kosher rules, absolute separation from any outside taint, and complete literal adherence to the Law of Moses and the interpretations of those Laws in the book of Leviticus. At the beginning of the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus says that He too supports the Law, that no part of it will pass away in His Kingdom, and that he who does them and teaches them will be called "great" in the Kingdom of Heaven! But then, He adds

the mysterious observation that unless our righteousness “exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees” we cannot ever enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is this observation, that our righteousness must exceed that of the Pharisees, that is the center of today’s Gospel lesson. One of the Pharisees, a lawyer, comes before Jesus to test Him. “So, tell us, Rabbi, what IS the essence of the Law, what is the greatest commandment!” Perhaps expecting Jesus to say something that they might be able to criticize, Jesus recites the basic confession of Jewish faith, the Shema: Hear, oh Israel, the Lord God is ONE; and thou shalt love the Lord God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind.” Nothing there to criticize! Jesus says that it is the first and basic commandment! But then He adds an explanation of how we go about loving God. Is it a radical, adherence to the details, to every literal action, every kosher restriction? Or is it something else? Jesus says that there a second, command, like it, that is, of equal importance, “And you must love your neighbor as yourself!”

This explanation, short and simple though it is, is the key to our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ! For the Pharisees, you see, adherence to every little detail of canonical rules and regulations was the way to righteousness. I have met Christians within the Church like them. Once, someone ran out of a coffee hour we were sharing in one of the churches I used to attend, because there was a bit of milk solids in the powdered creamer someone was using. Another person I knew in one of my congregations refused to eat soy burgers during a period of fasting because they looked like hamburgers, even though they contained no meat. Such radical adherence to the rules of a fasting tradition betrayed their misunderstanding of what our Holy Catholic and Apostolic Faith is all about!

If we would travel along the path of righteousness in our practice of the faith, they we must love God. And we can only love Him by knowing His love for us. St. John, the beloved apostle, makes this very clear! And he too, reflecting the teaching of Jesus in today’s lesson, said that the way we show our love for God is through our love of neighbor. Our faith is not about obedience to this or that canonical rule or regulation. It is about the love of our neighbor in need. If we come to church and obey every little rule and regulation that exceeds the strict observance shown even by the Pharisees, it will mean nothing, if we do not show charity, love, acceptance and aid to our neighbor in need.

How could our righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees? By the love we show to our neighbor, by our refusal to judge, by our attempt always to do for them what is ultimately best for them. This according to our Lord is the path to a greater righteousness that each of us must follow!

To Jesus Christ alone be all honor and glory forever! Amen.

Fr. Elias

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