



**Orthodox Church of the
Entrance of the Theotokos
into the Temple**

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***Tax Collectors and Sinners
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Sunday of the Prodigal Son. Entrance Church. 3/3/2024

Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes [the Righteous] murmured, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:1-2)

St. Luke prefaces the parable we heard today, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, with this brief summary of why our Lord told the parable in the first place. Two groups of people tended to gather around Jesus: those who were considered to be among the righteous, the Pharisees and the Scribes of the Temple, and those who were considered lost, the unrighteous, tax collectors and sinners. The first group, the so-called Righteous, sought to trap Him; they did not like the way in which He reached out to those whom they considered unworthy of God's love. The second group, tax collectors and sinners, came to Jesus, because He represented a side of God that they had never experienced: mercy, forgiveness, love.

The Parable of the Prodigal or “Extravagant” Son illustrates both groups and challenges us to come to repentance. What is repentance? Honest admission of our thoughts, words and deeds that digress from the Commandments and from the inner meaning of the Commandments: love of God and love of neighbor.

The parable describes how a father deals with the inappropriate actions of his two sons. At first hearing, it seems as if the two sons could not be more different from one another. The elder son is the so-called “good son”. He stays at home and seemingly does the will of his father. He is dutiful; he works every day as directed by his father. The younger son, however, is rebellious. He has a false understanding of “freedom,” as do many people in our time. He wants to be off on his own, doing his own thing, living the way he wants. So, he rebels. He asks for his share of the inheritance, which remarkably, his father gives him. He goes off into a foreign land, spends freely, enjoys himself with all the vices available to him in that day. Finally, after all the money is gone, “he came to himself.” Without any money, tending pigs, he reaches rock bottom, and wisely decides to return home and to beg to be received back as a hired servant. He goes home, admits his sin, and asks to be received back. Once again, remarkably, the father receives him. But not with the status of a servant, but with the status of a true heir; the father bestows upon him the honor of Sonship once again.

Of course, the dutiful, “righteous” brother in the field objects. But his objection is corrected by their father. “My son, you already have everything! All that I have is and has been yours! Do not be resentful or judgmental over the love I show to your brother!” For in his repentance, he that had been dead has returned to us alive!!”

The actions of both brothers demonstrate the actions of both groups that surrounded Jesus in His ministry: First, the so-called righteous, who were dutiful and obedient, but resentful of any mercy or love being shown to those whom they considered unworthy of that love. And, Second, the younger brother, an avid sinner, who came to himself in repentance and sought to be received back. At the center of it is the Father, Who reveals His will to both: Patiently waiting for the younger brother to return, He lovingly receives Him back. Patiently correcting the older brother, He calls him too to repentance, reminding him that there is no reason to be resentful, for all that he, the father has, is given to him as well.

I think that both sons represent the majority of Orthodox believers that I have met in the Church in my priesthood. There are those of us who are among the self-righteous and resentful. And there are those of us who seek mercy in spite of our most terrible sins. So the question each of us should be asking, is where we stand in need of repentance: Are we among the dutiful: keeping the fasts, coming to church, obeying the commandments, at least outwardly? If so, do we judge those whom we consider less worthy than we? Do we seek punishment for those we consider less worthy than we? Or, are we like the younger brother? Not repenting until we come to rock bottom? Taking what God gives and using it only for ourselves?

These and other questions like them are what we should be asking today. And if these

examples are not sufficient to understand our need for repentance, then wait until our Lord's final parable, the parable of the Last Judgment, that we will hear next week. There, it will be made so clear that we cannot possibly misunderstand it.

Brothers and Sisters: we are approaching the season of Repentance. Let each of us look within and see the truth about where we stand! And let us repent.

To Jesus Christ be all honor and glory forever!

Fr. Elias

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