



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

**306 W. Main Street
Emmitsburg, MD 21727**

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<http://EntranceMission.org>

The Righteousness of God's Mercy
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men-extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. (Luke 18: 11)

It is the case, is it not, that people in general, find satisfaction in comparing themselves to others who have not done as well in life as they have. There are those who have succeeded in their goals – whether those goals have to do with wealth or family or status or some other measure of success; and there are those who have not succeeded. Those who have succeeded according to their own measures of success not only experience a type of self-satisfaction at their achievements, but often a sense of self-righteousness as well. This tendency of our fallenness as sinful human beings is especially ugly when it is applied to those who have broken some sort of legal or moral law. People who have managed to live without public recognition of their deficiencies or faults tend to look down on those who have fallen into public legal or moral failure, never considering the truth of what one 16th century cleric meant when he said, *There but for the Grace of God go !!*

The ugly comparison and self-righteousness of one man who considers the plight of another is

the setting of the *Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican* that we will hear in our Gospel lesson this Sunday. The Pharisee is the very model of religious success. He is outwardly righteous, a religious success story of his time. He tithes and fasts far above the requirements of the religious rules. He prays in thanksgiving for the grace God has shown him in the development and achievement of his success. But his prayers turn ugly when he points the finger at a publican, a tax collector, who enters the place of prayer with him. Not only does the Pharisee thank God for the grace of God's blessing on him, but he dares to do so with pride. In essence, he assumes that he is better than the publican, and he wholeheartedly accepts the delusion that he is better, allowing his own egocentric self-righteousness to display its ugly head.

The publican, on the other hand, has no such delusions about himself. He knows he is a sinner, and furthermore, he also knows also that he cannot repent according to the requirements of his religion. Repentance would have required the loss of his family income, restoration of the gains he had collected immorally, and furthermore, restoration of an additional fifth of those gains over and above what he already could never hope to give back. He was lost in the hopelessness of his situation and could not even expect mercy from God as a result. Still, he stands in the back of the place of prayer, head bowed, hands over his heart, and recites the only prayer possible to him, *God be merciful to me the sinner*.

So far, this parable would have been understandable to all who heard it. The people then would have known what Pharisees were and what publicans were as well. Pharisees were at the very top of the hierarchy of respect, and publicans at the very bottom. But as He often does in the telling of His parables, Jesus concludes with a shocking ending: *I tell you, this man [the publican!] went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted*. It is this last word, this revelation of the Incarnate God, that would have been shocking to His hearers.

The question that every parable told by our Lord answers is, *What is God like?* The answer proclaimed in this parable as in so many others that Jesus told is that God is like this: He shows mercy above and beyond all expectation, and that it is for those who are sinners, despised and truly guilty, that He came. It is the sinner who comes to Him seeking mercy who is righteous, justified, before the other one who is ugly in his self-righteousness.

The Lord calls each of us to be like Him, like the Lord God Himself, in our attitude and behavior toward others. Rather than allowing ourselves to be self-satisfied in our own salvation, we are to be the kind of people who seek the salvation of others, who refuse to be satisfied until all human beings are brought into union with the Lord of mercy. We are to be the kind of people who see those who have fallen in any way as unfortunate ones, sick of heart, in need of the care of the Great Physician, even as we are in need of that care ourselves. The Pharisee, spiritually advanced though he thought himself to be, lapsed into the ugly sin of comparing himself with someone else whom he considered to be lost, when in reality he was just as lost in himself, sick with self-righteousness.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ: As we approach the Great Fast, let us look within ourselves with the piercing gaze of honesty. Let us cast aside any vestige of Pharisaic attitudes or behavior that we find in ourselves and let us acknowledge the truth that each of us is in the same position before God as was the publican in our Lord's parable. None of us can repent sufficiently to justify ourselves before God. We must all rely on the mercy of God, for apart from Him, the Lord God, none of us have any hope at all. May each of us pray the prayer of the publican from the heart: *God be merciful to me the sinner!*

Fr. Elias

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