



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

306 W. Main Street Emmitsburg,  
MD 21727

<http://EntranceMission.org>

717-817-0084

The V. Rev. Elias Yelovich,  
Rector

The Rev. Anthony Duvall,  
Assistant

***The Justification of the Sinful Publican***  
**February 25, 2025 n.s.**

**Glory to Jesus Christ! Glory forever!**

**Brothers and Sisters in Christ:**

In today's gospel lesson, a righteous pharisee and a sinful publican came to the temple to pray. The publican knew he was a sinner. Publicans were traitors, collecting taxes from their fellow Jews on behalf of the Roman government. They were known to steal by requiring a higher tax than what the Romans required, so that they could keep the surplus as their profit. This made the publicans rich at the expense of their fellow Jews. There was nothing righteous about being a publican.

The pharisee was a righteous man. As he stated, he wasn't an extortioner, unjust, or adulterous. He fasted twice a week, more than the Jewish law required. He was only required by Jewish law to tithe what he produced, but he gave a tithe for everything he possessed. He had every reason to be proud because he was outwardly a righteous man.

And yet, it wasn't the pharisee that left the temple justified, but the publican. What is

the key to the publican's justification? Humility. The publican knew where he stood with God. There was nothing of his own efforts that he could cling to to justify himself before God. All he could cling to, all he could hope for, was God's mercy. Therefore, he stood far off in the temple in recognition of his unworthiness, kept his eyes lowered, beat his breast, and prayed "God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

The pharisee was a righteous man, but his righteousness was tainted with pride, making it worthless. He thought of his good works as coming from himself. He didn't have to rely on God's mercy; he was already righteous. He didn't need a savior; he saved himself by his good works. He didn't need to stand far off in the temple; he wasn't a sinner like the publican. Essentially, he didn't need God; he was already godlike, or so he thought. Thus, the text of the gospel states that when he was in the temple praying, he was praying with himself, not to God.

There is nothing good we can do solely with our own efforts. We are made in the image and likeness of God, a God who is the source of every good thing. If we are doing something that can be deemed good, it is only because He who made us in His image and likeness is good. There is nothing of ourselves that we can cling to to grant us salvation; we only have God's mercy to rely on.

In the Orthodox Church, today is known as the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee. This is the first Sunday of three preparatory weeks that lead to Great Lent, Lent being a time where we increase our prayer, fasting, and charity. While we should do our best to keep these Lenten disciplines, we must do so in the same spirit that the publican had. These disciplines are not something we do to earn our salvation; these disciplines do not make us righteous. We shouldn't come to God proud like the pharisee for keeping the fast better than others. And we shouldn't be careless with the fast, thinking that since we only have God's mercy to rely on, there's no real point to keeping the fast, which is just another form of pride. Rather, we must approach Great Lent with the humility of the Publican by lowering our eyes, beating our breast, and praying "God, be merciful to me, the sinner."

Fr. Anthony

[FatherAnthonyDuvall@outlook.com](mailto:FatherAnthonyDuvall@outlook.com)

240-285-4802

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