Homily for the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee: A Reflection on Pride and Humility

Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today, as we commemorate the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, the Church presents to us two figures, one exalted and one humbled, as a vivid contrast to reflect upon our own hearts. This parable, recounted in the Gospel of Luke (18:9-14), is a powerful teaching on the struggle against pride and embracing humility.
The Pharisee, standing proudly in the temple, thanks God not for His mercy or goodness, but for his own perceived righteousness. He lists his good deeds—his fasting, his tithing, his piety—hoping to make a public display of his virtuous life. The Publican, on the other hand, remains at a distance, beating his chest and acknowledging his unworthiness, praying simply, "God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Let us begin by examining the Pharisee. His pride is not rooted in a simple recognition of his own virtues but in his comparison with others. He praises himself and makes a mockery of the very purpose of prayer. In his mind, his relationship with God is transactional—he does good deeds to "earn" his place before God. Saint John Chrysostom tells us that "pride is the beginning of every sin" because it blinds the soul to its true condition and makes one self-sufficient. The Pharisee does not see his own sinfulness and, thus, he cannot receive God's mercy.

Saint Isaac the Syrian teaches us that "pride is a root that leads to the destruction of the soul." When we fall into pride, we are no longer seeking God, but rather seeking our own glory. We are so concerned with how others perceive us that we forget that God sees the true state of our hearts. Pride is, therefore, a form of spiritual blindness that separates us from God's grace.

In contrast, the Publican stands before God with a humility that the Pharisee lacks. He does not come to the temple to show off his own righteousness but to mourn his sinfulness. Saint Gregory the Theologian reflects on this humility, saying, "The man who has fallen into sin and knows it is more virtuous than the one who exalts himself in his virtue." This is because humility opens the soul to God's mercy.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria further explains that the Publican's humble prayer reveals the essence of Christian repentance: "Repentance is not a form of despair, but a return to God. It is the turning of the heart towards God, trusting in His grace rather than in one's own strength." The Publican's cry for mercy is an acknowledgement that he cannot save himself but is in desperate need of God's grace. In this, he embodies the core teaching of our faith: that salvation is a gift, not a reward for good behavior.

The Publican's prayer also teaches us that true humility is not about self-deprecation or a lack of self-worth, but about recognizing our need for God. Saint Ambrose of Milan says, "Humility is the mother of all virtues, for it is the soil in which all the gifts of the Spirit are planted and nurtured." When we humble ourselves before God, we make space for His grace to work within us.

Brothers and sisters, the story of the Publican and the Pharisee is not just a tale from the past. It is a mirror reflecting the dynamics of our own spiritual lives. We must ask ourselves: Where do we stand? Do we resemble the Pharisee, proud of our accomplishments, comparing ourselves to others, and placing our trust in our own abilities? Or do we resemble the Publican, acknowledging our faults, seeking God's mercy, and allowing humility to guide our hearts?

Saint John Chrysostom warns us that "we may not be as outwardly sinful as the Publican, but our hearts are often filled with the pride of the Pharisee." Even the smallest seeds of pride—whether in our thoughts, actions, or words—can lead us away from God. The spiritual life is a constant battle against this tendency to elevate ourselves above others, and it is in our moments of self-examination that we recognize our need for God's mercy.

Let us remember that humility does not mean seeing ourselves as worthless; it means understanding our dependence on God. It is not a sign of weakness, but of strength in faith. Saint Symeon the New Theologian reminds us, "The humble soul is the dwelling place of God, for God dwells in humility." The more we humble ourselves, the more we invite God into our lives, and the more His grace transforms us.

The Church, in her wisdom, has placed this Gospel reading at the beginning of the Triodion, marking the start of the Lenten season. This is a time when we are called to examine our hearts, to repent, and to seek God's mercy. The Pharisee's pride leads him to be complacent, but the Publican's humility leads him to repentance and, ultimately, to salvation.

As we prepare for the Lenten journey ahead, let us remember that it is not the outward appearance of righteousness that pleases God, but a broken and contrite heart, as David says in the Psalms, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). It is in humility that we are able to repent sincerely and allow God to work in us.

In conclusion, let us strive to cultivate humility in our own lives. Let us resist the temptation to compare ourselves to others and to boast of our virtues. Instead, let us acknowledge our need for God's mercy and grace. Let us follow the example of the publican, who, despite his sinfulness, humbled himself before God and received the grace of salvation.

May the prayers of the Publican and all the saints intercede for us, that we too may grow in humility, and may the mercy of God be upon us all.

Amen.