



My Beloved Ones,

I greet you with love and joy in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as we are blessed once more to begin our preparations for Great Lent, with that period known as Triodion. Of course, as Orthodox Christians, we know that each week of preparation imparts to us a specific fruit of the Spirit, to help us make the most of the Lenten Fast. With this Sunday's parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the penitent Publican, we understand that *"...everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Luke 18:14). Today, however, I wish to examine this Sunday's Epistle, and the strong way it gives us this same lesson.

In this letter to his disciple Timothy, Paul is instructing him to hold fast to his faith. Remember, of course, that in these times, it was illegal to be a Christian. Persecution was widespread, and many horrible torments caused some to renounce their faith in Christ. St. Paul understands that Timothy, the son of a pagan father and a Christian mother could benefit from this support to stand

firm in his baptism.

How does he do this? St. Paul reminds Timothy that the young man has not only witnessed *"...my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness"* but also, *"my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra..."* (II Timothy 3:10-11). In Antioch, there was of course the discussion of whether Gentiles must submit to circumcision before accepting Christ. In Iconium, Paul and Barnabas's ministry stirred up anger in the hearts of many Jews and Pagans, and they barely escaped death. Traveling to Lystra, they were received with great ceremony by the Pagans—but only because the people saw them as the human incarnations of the Greek Gods. When Paul and Barnabas denounced their false understandings and proclaimed Jesus Christ, Paul *was* stoned, surviving, before returning to Antioch.

Truly, Paul seeks to demonstrate to the reader that being a Christian is not always easy, or even pleasant. To follow Christ means we must risk being seen strange, or even suspicious, by non-believers. Paul confirms this when he next tells Timothy, *"Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived"* (II Timothy 3:12-13). Think of the Pharisee, who despite being boastful and judgmental, was viewed with respect by all the people. Now, think of the tax collector, who, even in his understanding that he was a fallen, sinful human being, was still judged by the hypocritical Pharisee, and by his fellow neighbors.

As we consider the importance of humbling ourselves like the Publican, we cannot lose sight of the fact that the exalting of which our Lord speaks in His Parable is not of this world. The humble will be exalted in the Kingdom of Heaven, but we must first be willing, like St. Paul, to suffer the judgements of this world, with a broken and contrite spirit, clinging forever to our Rock, which is Christ, and the Teachings and Traditions of His Holy Church.

+ALEXIOS

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