



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 the 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 can see how simply asking for God's mercy can open a path forward.

The Pharisee, as a Doctor of the Law is honored by his fellow Israelites—but the Publican is hated, because he extorts from his neighbors to pay their oppressors, the Roman Empire. Knowing this, it is not surprising to hear the Pharisee's high opinion of himself when he prays: *"God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income."* (Luke 18:11-12)

What is surprising, however, is the Publican's humility before God in the same Temple. Jesus tells us that, *"...the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"* (Luke 18:13) My beloved, I recently encountered a beautiful story from the teachings of Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain that illustrates the importance of such humility before God.

Speaking to the Geronda, a visitor man confessed to St. Paisios that, because he lived in the world instead of in a monastery, he felt he could not be saved. The Geronda corrected him, *"Listen to me. You are living a far harder life than us. You have to look after the family, work, sometimes in extreme situations and conditions. You have to put up with a lot of people... who are against your beliefs. We [the monastics] have our pressure; but not like you have. The devil not only attacks us but you as well. We could be saying a thousand "Κύριε ελέησον/Lord, have mercy" and... nothing. You could say one "Κύριε ελέησον/Lord, have mercy" from the depths of your heart, and you will be saved! My son, God takes everything into consideration. He knows what you are going through knows you are all trying, with all the pressures of life."*

As we prepare to enter this time that calls us deeper into prayer and contemplation of the Scriptures, I ask us to consider the words of this beloved Saint. Our Lord, who in His perfection, created us in His Image and Likeness, knows that we fall short of that image. All that Almighty God wants from us as human beings, is to be with Him, and speak to Him honestly, from our hearts. If we cry out to Him, in a spirit of sincere change, and if we do so understanding that we need His mercy, we will be better able to live in this world, not during the coming days of the Fast, but for all the days of our lives.

+ALEXIOS
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