



DIAKONIA

A National Ministry of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America

REFLECTIONS FROM TODAY'S READING - *Luke 18:10-14*

What did the Pharisee Do Wrong?

Fr. George Parsenios



The teachings of Jesus always contain several levels of meaning, as Jesus offers different levels of instruction for people at different levels of spiritual insight. The parable of the Pharisee and

the Tax Collector, therefore, delivers various messages to various people. To the beginner in the Christian life, the parable announces a call to repentance. Many of us imagine that if we avoid grave sins like murder or theft, we have accomplished all that God desires for us. Being good citizens, we imagine that we are also good Christians. This ignores the call to repentance completely; we pretend that our sins do not exist. As Metropolitan Anthony Bloom said so well, "God can save the sinner that we are, but he cannot save the saint we pretend to be." Great Lent is coming fast upon us, with its annual call to examine our habits and relationships, and this parable urges us to prepare for the Lenten season. That is the message for the beginner: a call to begin the spiritual journey and not to be deluded about our spiritual condition.

A more advanced level of teaching comes from the way that Jesus reverses common expectations in this parable. To the Jews of the first century, the Pharisees were models of piety and purity. They followed the Law of Moses strictly and urged others to do the same. Tax collectors, on the other hand, were the most hated members of society. They gathered taxes

under the authority of the state and often used that power to collect more than they were due. They were extortionists. Pharisees were pious and tax collectors were hated. By urging people to imitate the tax collector and to reject the example of the Pharisee, however, Jesus reverses the common judgement. What did the Pharisee do wrong? He judged others and he forgot to examine himself. His first words in the parable are, "I thank God that I am not like other men." A pious Orthodox Christian may fall into the same trap. By keeping the fast, by attending the services of the Church, the pious Orthodox Christian might begin to exalt himself and to condemn those around him who are less committed. But our spiritual exercises are designed to soften our hearts and to humble us, so that we love our neighbors, not despise them. The Lenten prayer of St. Ephrem says, "Lord, grant me to see my own faults and not to judge my brother." And finally, a higher level of instruction unfolds in the knowledge that the Pharisee and the Tax Collector are not two totally different people, but two halves of every human heart. Christians with experience in the spiritual life know that every one of us can become the Pharisee, and it is precisely the knowledge that we are Pharisees that drives us to repent like we are tax collectors.

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Diakonia is made possible by a generous grant from **Leadership 100**

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FROM THE ORIGINAL GREEK: *Presveia* (Πρεσβεΐα) What is “Intercession?”

Fr. George Parsenios



In every Divine Liturgy, we pray that God will save us through the “intercessions” or through the “prayers” of the Theotokos. The Greek word for intercession, *presveia* (πρεσβεΐα), has an interesting nuance, and if we understand this Greek term better, we will understand better what it means to ask for the intercessions of the Theotokos and of all the saints. *Presveia* shares a root with the Greek word for “old man,” *presvys* (πρέσβης). Any old man in a Greek city was a *presvys*. But this term

took on a technical meaning which referred specifically to the ambassadors that one city would send to another to engage in diplomacy. When people wanted to negotiate difficult treaties with their neighbors, they would send a seasoned member of the community. The work of these ambassadors came to be called *presveia*. A person would do the work of *presveia* by going to a foreign city and pleading on behalf of his home city. This is what the Theotokos and the Saints do on our behalf before God. They are human beings, born on earth like us, but they stand like emissaries in heaven where they serve as our ambassadors before God. They plead on our behalf and work for our salvation. By their intercessions may we be saved!

THIS WEEK IN CHURCH HISTORY

Fr. Raphael Morgan



Fr. Raphael Morgan (c. 1866–1922) is widely recognized as the first Black Orthodox Christian priest in the United States. Born in Jamaica, he journeyed through several Christian traditions before discovering the ancient Orthodox faith. His sincere search for Apostolic Christianity led him to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, where Metropolitan Joachim of Pelagonia ordained him in Constantinople in 1907 and appointed him “Missionary to America and the West Indies.”

Serving primarily at Annunciation (*Evangelismos*) Greek Orthodox Church in Philadelphia under Fr. Demetrios Petrides, Fr. Raphael ministered to Black Americans, West Indians, and immigrants at a time of profound racial hardship. He conducted services largely in English—remarkable for that era—and worked to introduce Orthodoxy to communities who had rarely encountered it. He also traveled widely, engaging clergy and laypeople with a bold vision for evangelizing the African diaspora.

Like many historic figures, Fr. Raphael’s life was undeniably complex; however, his place in the life of the Church remains important—especially during Black History Month. He stands as an early bridge between the Black American religious experience and the Orthodox Christian Church. His life also reminds us of the Ecumenical Patriarchate’s strong missionary spirit for America at the dawn of the 20th century and that Orthodoxy in America has always included believers of many cultures and backgrounds, united in the Apostolic faith.

THE WORD AND THE IMAGE

Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee

The Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee is the first Sunday of a three-week period prior to the commencement of Great Lent. It marks the beginning of a time of preparation for the spiritual journey of Lent, a time for Orthodox Christians to draw closer to God through worship, prayer, fasting, and acts of charity. The Church invites us to prepare our hearts for Great Lent through humility, repentance, and renewed dedication to God. It is also on this day that the Triodion is introduced, a liturgical book that contains the services from this Sunday, the tenth before Pascha (Easter), to Great and Holy Saturday.

The Biblical Story (Luke 18:10–14)

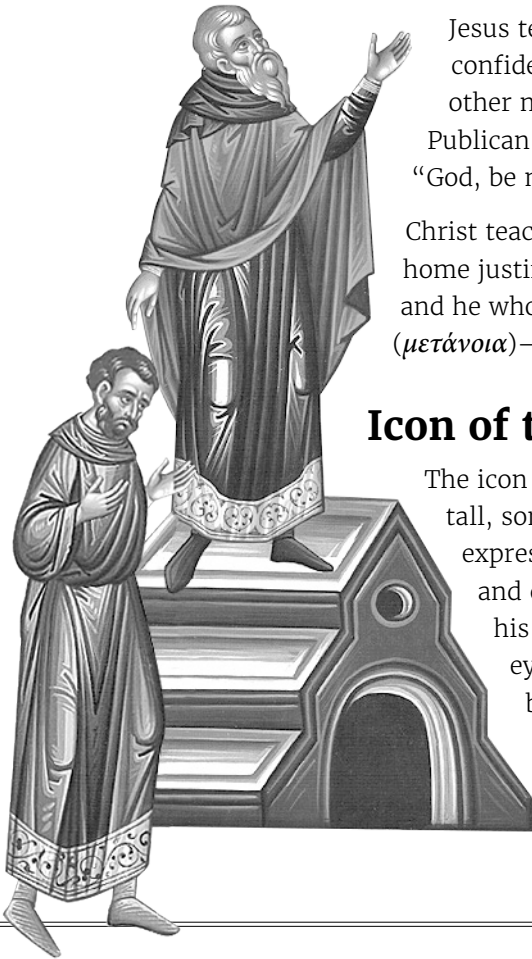
Jesus tells of two men who enter the Temple to pray. The Pharisee, confident in his religious achievements, thanks God that he is “not like other men,” listing his fasting and tithing as proof of his righteousness. The Publican, a tax collector, stands at a distance, beats his breast, and prays simply: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

Christ teaches that it is the humble Publican—not the proud Pharisee—who returns home justified. The Lord concludes, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” At the heart of this parable is *Metanoia* (μετάνοια)—a true change of mind and heart that opens us to God’s grace.

Icon of the Parable

The icon visually reveals what the parable proclaims. The Pharisee stands tall, sometimes on a small platform, with open arms and a self-satisfied expression. His posture shows that he measures holiness by external deeds and comparisons with others. The Publican, stands lower, often bowed with his hand on his chest in repentance. His humble posture and downcast eyes reveal an honest heart seeking God’s mercy. In some icons, Christ’s blessing extends toward the Publican, affirming that humility—not pride—draws us closer to God. The icon functions as a spiritual mirror.

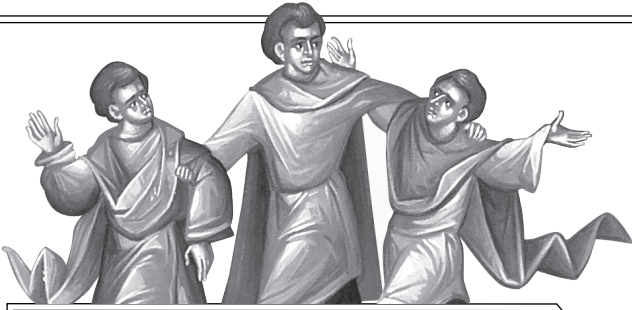
It does not merely illustrate a story; it asks us to examine our own posture before God.



A Personal Challenge for the Week

ASK YOURSELF: *Where in my life do I resemble the Pharisee, and where do I resemble the Publican?*

This week, choose one concrete act of humility—perhaps offering a sincere apology, listening without defending yourself, or praying the Publican’s prayer daily: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” Allow this simple practice to open your heart to the grace of true metanoia. As we enter the Triodion, may the humility of the Publican shape our journey toward Lent and draw us nearer to Christ.



Just For Kids!

(...and the young at heart)

Complete the maze to help people from around the world hear the Good News—The Gospel—of Jesus. When you are done, start with the “N” at the top, and go around the circle to read the verse that is found in the Gospel of Saint John, Chapter 3, verse 16.

