

## Modern Pharisees

Today we would like to discuss the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector. This parable is found in Luke 18:9-14. This is an important parable that teaches us the meaning of true righteousness and humility, and how to have a real loving relationship with Christ. The parable is given as follows:

“Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:” “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, ‘God be merciful to me the sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

What is a pharisee? The pharisees of the New Testament were people who were strict obeyers of the laws of God. They were very knowledgeable about the scriptures and knew all of the rites and laws of God. However, they lacked the most important thing: love. Their hearts were hardened towards God and they were hypocrites. Externally, they seemed perfect, but internally they were most imperfect. They had reduced religion to a set of rules and regulations, without any love in their hearts. They made religion mechanical and they did not value a real personal relationship with God. The pharisees prayed, fasted, read and memorized scriptures, and obeyed the commandments of God, and they made sure that these practices became visible to everyone around them. They separated themselves from others, especially the poor and the sinners. They felt that such people were not fit for the kingdom of God. They were very judgemental of others.

We want to discuss the notion of a Modern Pharisee. We begin with the following story from the cartoon characters in Charlie Brown:

“Linus had his security blanket in place with his thumb resting securely in his mouth, but he was very troubled. And turning to Lucy who was sitting next to him, he said, ‘Why are you always so anxious to criticize me?’ And her response was very typical. She said, ‘I just think

I have a knack for seeing other people's faults.' An exasperated Linus threw up his hands and asked, 'What about your own faults?' And without hesitation Lucy explained, 'I have a knack for overlooking them'."

This is exactly what the pharisees did. They had a knack for seeing other peoples faults and overlooking their own.

In the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector, we read that the pharisee went to the temple to pray. But instead of praying, he criticized and bragged, as he said, "God, I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess" (Luke 18:11). This pharisee had a knack for seeing other people's faults and overlooking his own, seeing only his so-called virtues and bragging about them. The tax collector by contrast who went to the same temple to pray, "would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, 'God be merciful to me the sinner!'" Jesus tells us in this parable that the pharisee that said, "I thank You that I am not like other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector," that pharisee went to hell, whereas the tax collector who prayed "God be merciful to me the sinner!," was justified and went to heaven. This is like saying in today's language that the Archbishop went to hell and the murderer went to heaven. Pretty tough language. No wonder the pharisees were out to get Jesus.

A monk once wrote, "Everyone who gets to heaven will be surprised by three things. First he will be surprised to see many he did not think would be there. Secondly, he will be surprised that some are not there whom he expected to see there. And finally, he will be surprised that he himself is there." Now that's humility!

Part of what Jesus is telling us in this parable is that you can be in church all your life; you can be a Sunday School servant, you can be a deacon, you can be involved in all kinds of church services and activities, and still end up like the pharisee in hell. Often times in life, we Christians often wind up looking like the pharisee rather than the tax collector. We often look like the elder son that stayed home rather than the prodigal son who left but came back only to be criticized by his elder brother (Luke 15:11-32). We sometimes look like those who pick up stones to throw at sinners (John 8:1-11) rather than the ones who reach out to touch Jesus's robe (Luke 8:43-45). We look more like the high priests who sat in judgment (Luke 23:1-25) rather than the lepers who call upon the name of Jesus for healing (Mark 1:40). We assume the

prideful mental illusion that we're better than other people. That we're right and everybody else is wrong!

Today we see plenty of modern pharisees in our midst and we need not go far to find them. We may well find one in our own heart! What is a modern pharisee? We give some characteristics.

1. Generally speaking, a modern pharisee is a person who substitutes religious practices and rituals for an *authentic loving* relationship with God. These are the people who do the external things and do them well, and they make sure that they are noticed by others. They kiss icons, they light candles, they fast, they make the sign of the cross, and so forth. But they do them with no love in their hearts. Of course, these are beautiful disciplines and practices, and we should do them, but we should do them with love in our heart since this is the main test for a Christian.
2. The modern pharisee performs these outward religious practices to foster in themselves the delusion that they are better than others. These outward religious practices become a substitute for confronting the reality of what they really are on the inside. As St. Paul says so beautifully of the pharisees, "They have a form of religion, but they deny the power thereof" (2 Timothy 3:5). That is, they have an external form of religion, but they deny the spiritual (internal) aspect of it. And in Matthew 23:23, Jesus says so eloquently of the pharisees, "They have neglected the weightier matters of the law; justice, mercy, and faith" (Matthew 23:23).
3. The modern pharisee is one who is addicted to religion. We use the word addicted here very carefully. When Jesus called the pharisees hypocrites, He could of just as well called them religious addicts. Why? Notice that when the pharisee went to the temple to pray in this parable, he actually got "high" on his belief that he was better than the tax collector. Religion had become the drug of his choice. He was addicted to his own self-righteousness!

We need to ask ourselves some very serious questions to test out the sincerity of our faith to see that we too are not "high" on pride and self-righteousness. Here are some questions that we should always ask ourselves:

1. Do I use external rituals as a smokescreen or a distraction so that I won't have to look

inside to confront the reality of my sinfulness? Recall what Jesus said about the pharisees. He said that they were “whitewashed tombs, clean on the outside and full of dead men’s bones on the inside” (Matthew 23:27).

2. Do I feel that I am more religious, more Christian, and more Coptic Orthodox than others? Do I point the finger at others, criticize them for not fasting enough, not praying enough, or criticize them for not doing other external things well enough?
3. Do I see my way as the only way to interpret what is truly Christian or Orthodox, and other ways as leading to condemnation?
4. Do I insist that my way be accepted without questions or discussion?
5. Do I entertain illusions of grandeur and see myself as the savior of many?
6. Do I insist on oppressive rules and regulations with my family, friends, or in my church service, regardless of how irrational they might be?
7. Do I look down on others in a judgemental way, and thereby indirectly hold myself up as a paragon of virtue?
8. Am I a heresy hunter, always on the look out for new errors so as to expose them?
9. Am I developing a messiah complex in which I see myself as the guardian of truth?
10. Am I playing God by judging others?

The pharisee was precisely this kind of religious addict, who used religion as a smokescreen to prevent him from confronting the reality of the true sinner he was on the inside. He also used religion as a club, as a weapon, to attack and bash others. So the pharisee’s religion can be characterized as unbalanced, demonic, and insane! There is such thing as a healthy religion and an insane religion. The religion of Jesus is healthy, and the religion of Satan is insane.

So after reading this parable, we see that there is indeed something very unreligious about this “religious” pharisee who comes to the temple to pray. We cannot help but wonder what cruel act he will perpetrate on others next in the name of his high moral code. For you see, the pharisee is really a moral person whose morality has gone sour! And our morality goes sour when it makes us self-righteous. And our morality goes sour when it makes us judgemental.

And our morality goes sour when it separates us from other people. And our morality goes sour when it kills love in our hearts, fosters enmity, divisiveness, and a holier than thou attitude.

The great danger in reading this parable of the pharisee and the tax collector is that we may look elsewhere sometimes to find the pharisee. We do not realize that something of the pharisee may be abiding in each and every one of us. There is a story of a Sunday School servant who taught her class this parable once, and as she expounded on it at length, she closed her lesson by saying to the Sunday School kids, "Now children, let's thank God that we're not like that nasty pharisee!" When we begin to feel that the pharisee is in other people and not in us, then we in fact are the pharisees.

Now Jesus gives us the corrective to the pharisee in the vignette of the tax collector, who hides in a lonely corner of the temple. He does not even lift up his eyes to heaven. He does not compare himself to anyone else. He judges *only himself*. He does *not* say "God I thank You that I am not like other men, like that pharisee over there." Rather he beats his breast and prays humbly, "Lord be merciful to me the sinner." And he says this as if there was no other sinner as sinful as he was. And this is why Jesus says, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other."

The prayer of the tax collector is a very well known prayer, and it is called the Jesus prayer. It goes like this: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner." Many books have been written about the Jesus prayer. We should recite this prayer everyday, as did the tax collector in this parable and the Russian peasant in the book titled "The Way of a Pilgrim." Reciting this prayer daily will truly build our spiritual life.