



A GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED:
THE PUBLICAN AND THE PHARISEE

St Mary Byzantine Catholic Church
Hillsborough NJ

Adult Education Series
By Rev. Deacon Mark Koscinski CPA, D.Litt.

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We are all very familiar with the parable of the Publican and the Pharisee. Using the journalistic technique of the “5Ws and 1H” we will examine this parable a little more closely.



Who were the Pharisees and the Publicans?

The Pharisees were a Jewish religious sect who believed in the efficacy of tradition and the need to for everyone to conduct themselves as if you were a Temple priest The latter requirement included the use of ritual washing and prayer as if one were in the

Temple. While the concept is good, Jesus criticized the Pharisees for imposing man-made tradition on the Jewish populace instead of Tradition as we know it—handed down from God himself. ¹

Publicans were collaborators with the Roman rule. Romans valued two things from their province: peace and taxpaying. They were most notorious for collecting taxes for the Roman. As if this weren't bad enough, the Publicans would also take a share for themselves. ² Publicans were roundly criticized by the population as a whole and became caricatures for sinners.

What was wrong with the prayer of the Pharisee?

The perfect prayer has the ACTS components---adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication. The Pharisees prayer was notable for not having any contrition, deficient thanksgiving, and a lack of supplication. The Pharisee did not ask for strength or ability to end a sinful life. Indeed, he did not even recognize he had a sinful life.

The prayer of the Publican was sincere and carried all of the elements required for a good prayer: Oh

¹ This description is limited to the more germane aspects of the question. The history and practices of the Pharisees is indeed a very complex and worthwhile topic for which we do not have the space here.

² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12553d.htm>

God, be merciful to me, a sinner. The Publican admitted he was a sinner (contrition); he asked God for mercy and forgiveness (supplication); he implicitly performed adoration by acknowledging the power of God to forgive sins (adoration); and implicitly thanked God for His mercy and grace (thanksgiving). The Prayer of the Publican is part of our prayer before Holy Communion and the Jesus Prayer, both notable features of Byzantine worship.



The canon of matins for the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee points out the Pharisee was wretched in his self-sufficiency.³ In the history of the Catholic Church, this became known as the heresy of Pelagianism, or the belief salvation was attainable by our own hands, without the help of

³ Lenten Triodion. Order of the Sisters of St. Basil. Canon for the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee.

God.⁴ This heresy was combated by St. Augustine, one of the great Fathers of the Church and the author of *The City of God*. The Pharisee may be forgiven a little since the Jewish religion is a religion of action rather than faith.⁵ Nevertheless, the Pharisee failed to realize that salvation is only possible through the assistance of the almighty.

Where can I find the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee?

Most of the wonderful parables we know, such as the Prodigal Son and the Publican and the Pharisee are found in the Gospel of St. Luke. This parable is found in Luke 18:9-14. It immediately follows the Parable of the Unjust Judge⁶, also a parable about praying. In the Parable of the Unjust Judge, the widow continues to approach the judge persistently until the he relents and grants her justice. In the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee, the Publican is also persistent as he asks the Lord for mercy. This is one reason why we say “Lord have mercy!” more and more insistently throughout the Divine Liturgy.

⁴ For instance, see

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11604a.htm>

⁵ For instance, see

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/judaism/beliefs/beliefs_1.shtml

⁶ Luke 18:1-8

When did the Pharisee fast?

The Pharisees fasted two days a week: generally, Monday and Thursday.⁷ Note the contrast with the days Eastern monastics fast: Wednesday and Friday. It is possible the fast days were changed to distinguish the Christians from the Pharisees. We fast on Wednesday, the day Judas agreed to betray Jesus, and Friday, the day Jesus was crucified.

How did the Pharisee and Publican pray?

We are used to praying silently. This was not the practice of the ancients. Prayers were read out loud. In II Kings 1:12-16, Hannah the mother of Samuel was praying silently. The priest Eli assumed she was drunk because she did not pray out loud.

This adds a whole new dimension to the parable. The Pharisee was probably praying out loud, so it is entirely possible the Publican heard the Pharisee deride him⁸. Even though they stood at a distance from each other, voices do carry. This is yet another way the prayer of the Pharisee could have been deficient. Certainly God does not want us to compare ourselves to others in prayer, let alone do it verbally with the other person in the room!

⁷ <http://www.breadforbeggars.com/2013/02/09/twice-a-week-by-pastor-nathaniel-biebert/>

⁸ Luke 18:11

Why is the Parable of the Publican and the Pharisee a trap?

Wait a second. What do you mean this parable is a trap? Jesus constructed this parable very subtly. Certainly there is nothing wrong with someone who fasts twice a week and tithes to the church. If we knew of someone like that we would probably say he was a model church member. Yet, the Pharisee takes pride in his practice, demonstrating the Biblical saying pride goes before the fall.

Today, we read this parable and we say of course we are the Publican. We are humble and not prideful. Yet, isn't this action itself one of pride? The Byzantine Catholic Church purposely does not fast during the week of the Publican and the Pharisee. It is one way to remind us of our sinfulness and our pride.

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