

"THE IKON CORNER"
Readings for Orthodox Christian Families
by Archbishop Lazar Puhalo

ASCENDING TOWARD GREAT LENT

Readings for the five Sundays preceding the Great Lent.

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Ascending Toward Great Lent
STEP 1:
Longing for salvation; desiring to know Christ



ZACCHEUS SUNDAY
{Luke 19:1-10/1Tm.4:9-15}

"Behold, He has lifted up my head above my enemies who surround me, and I will enter into His tabernacle and offer sacrifices of joy" (Ps.28:6).

Zaccheus of Jericho was a sinful man. As a tax collector, he was able to cheat and swindle people, especially the poor, who did not have power to defend themselves.

Although he was surrounded at all times by demons who tempted him toward greed, cruelty and every passion, his heart was not completely hardened. Somewhere, deep inside him, a longing gnawed, unfulfilled.

What could this longing be? What was it that the soul of this sinful man hungered for that could not be fulfilled by all his wealth, possessions and authority?

Everyone in Israel had heard something about this new teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. Some said that He was a holy prophet, others, a great teacher and healer. Many people spoke of His gentleness and compassion, while others hated Him and spoke evil of Him.

When Zaccheus heard that Jesus was coming to Jericho, he longed to see Him and discover Who He was. Since Zaccheus was short in stature, the crowd which surrounded him prevented him from seeing Jesus. As a tax collector, the crowd around him despised him and considered him an enemy, thus he was truly "surrounded by enemies."

As Jesus approached, the desire in Zaccheus grew stronger and stronger. Spotting a sycamore tree with a large limb, Zaccheus rushed to it and began to climb above the crowd of human enemies that surrounded him. This was as far as he could go. Little did he know that Jesus was about to do the rest for him.

When Jesus reached the place where Zaccheus was, He looked upon him and called the sinner to Himself. "Come, Zaccheus. I will abide with thee and heal thy soul." Zaccheus had lifted himself above the worldly crowd and sought out Jesus, now Jesus would heal him and lift him above his spiritual enemies – the hoard of demons which also surrounded him. Soon, because Jesus Christ came to him and abode with him, Zaccheus would become a friend to those who hated him. Healed by the co-suffering love of Jesus Christ, Zaccheus would use his own newly found love to help heal the sorrow and want of those whom he had formerly hurt. The co-suffering love of Christ began to take root in the heart of the sinful man and transform him.

By lifting himself up above worldly things, Zaccheus had taken the first step along the path to the Heavenly Kingdom.

Let us, brothers and sister, on this day take our first step also. Putting aside the ideals and limitations of worldly things, let us lift ourselves above the crowd, desiring with all our hearts to see Jesus and fully know in our hearts who He is. As if climbing into the sycamore tree to see Him, let us begin our spiritual ascent toward Great Lent, taking into our heart the Apostle reading for today, "This is a saying worthy of trust: we have put our hope in the living God, Who is the saviour of all.... Be diligent in these matters...so that everyone may see your progress" (1Tm.4:9, 15).

Ascending Toward Great Lent
STEP 2:
Seeking true humility and sincere repentance



**SUNDAY OF THE
PUBLICAN AND PHARISEE**
{Luke 18:10-14/1Tm.3:10-15}

"I humbled myself with fasting and my prayer returned to my own heart...as one in mourning and of sorrowful countenance, so I humbled myself" (Ps.34:16, 17).

How many people enter God's temple thinking themselves to be righteous and without sin. They glance out of the corner of their eye at someone they feel is less righteous than they, and secretly judge that person in their heart.

Do they really believe themselves to be perfect, or are they only trying to hide from their own sins, justifying themselves, so that they will not have to repent?

In today's Gospel reading we hear about another publican, one like Zaccheus whom we read about last Sunday. Perhaps Jesus even had Zaccheus in mind when He told this parable, for on the next day that He entered Jericho and called Zaccheus down from the sycamore tree.

As He was teaching the people what is necessary for them if they wish to enter the Heavenly Kingdom, Jesus told them the following parable.

Two men went into the temple to pray. The first was a Pharisee, a proud, self-righteous man. Not only did he boast of his holiness and sinlessness, but he cast a proud glance at the humble publican, bowed to the floor in tears of repentance

for his sins. "I thank Thee, Lord, that I am not like this wretch, but that I am sinless and nearly perfect."

The Pharisee could not open his soul to God, for God sent the Great Physician to save us. The Pharisee, being convinced that he was not ill, could not seek treatment from the Physician. As in the psalm quoted above, his prayer returned to his own heart, but it returned as a curse and a condemnation, pumping him up with still greater pride.

The publican, humbled by an awareness of his own sins, opened up his soul to God: "God, I know that I sin much. I have no righteousness in me, so I can only hope on Thee and Thy mercy. Lord, have mercy on me a sinner." This man's prayer also returned into his own heart, full of blessing and spiritual sweetness.

The holy prophet-king David, also bowed low with fasting and tears of repentance, once cried out to God, "I know mine iniquity, and my sin is ever before me," but he understood that, "a sacrifice to God is a humbled spirit; a broken and humbled heart, God will not despise" (Ps.50:3, 17).

Brothers and sisters, as we take this second step toward Great Lent, let us think upon this parable. Last week, we learned to direct our desire away from the things of this world and toward our Saviour Jesus Christ. This Sunday, we learned that it is impossible to approach Jesus if we have proud hearts and consider ourselves to be righteous. Remember the verse we read before the Synaxarion today: "If you are like the Pharisee, draw back and do not enter the temple; for Christ is inside and before Him, only the humble are acceptable."

It is a sorrowful thing to be "righteous," for if we are "righteous," all is lost. Jesus Christ did not come for the "righteous," and so the righteous cannot be saved. He came only for sinners; for only sinners could hear the call to repentance and answer, receiving Christ and His redemption (Mt.9:13).

As the holy prophets testify, fasting is an important path toward spiritual humility.

These past two Sunday's have taught us to desire and seek our Saviour with earnest longing and sincere humility, and so we move forward toward the joy and sorrow of Great Lent.

The following is an arrangement of some of the special verses chanted at Vespers and Matins of the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee. They are arranged, not as separate verses, but in narrative form, so they can be read as inspirational reading to help teach us the meaning of the day.

Brethren, let us not pray like the Pharisee, for whoever exalts himself shall be abased. Therefore, let us humble ourselves before God, crying out with fasting, in the words of the publican: "God, forgive us sinners."

When the Pharisee entered with vainglory and the publican humbled himself in repentance, they both stood before Thee alone, O Master. The one, through boasting, lost his reward, and the other, by his humble silence, was made worthy of spiritual gifts. By those same sighs of repentance, uphold me, O Christ God, for Thou art the Friend of mankind.

Almighty Lord, I have learned the effectiveness of repentant tears; for they saved Hezekiah from the doors of death, and they saved the sinful woman from her repeated iniquities; they showed the publican to be more truly righteous than the Pharisee. I implore Thee, O Lord, to number me among those who have wept such tears, and have mercy on me.

Let us turn away from the wicked boasting of the Pharisee and learn the true humility of the publican, that we may rise up crying to God with him, "Forgive us, Thy servants, O Christ our Saviour, Who was born of the Virgin and willingly bore the Cross for our sakes, raising up the world with Thyself."

Open to me the doors of repentance, O Giver of Life; for in the early morn, my soul enters into the temple of Thy holiness, clad in the polluted temple of my body. But since Thou art compassionate, purify me by Thy co-suffering mercy.

Ascending Toward Great Lent

STEP 3:

Turning our lives around; dealing with conceit



SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

{Luke 15:11-32/1Cor.6:12-20}

"By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. Those who had taken us captive demanded of us a song, and those who had led us away asked of us a hymn, saying: Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Psalm 136).

Last Sunday, we learned of humility; not the false, fawning humility which people sometimes display before those of higher rank or greater power, nor that supposed humility which is really cowardice. We learned of that pure humility which comes from self-realization and self-knowledge. We learned of a two-fold humility: that of an offender who is forgiven with tender love by the one he had offended, and the majestic humility of the One Who forgives every offence with tenderhearted mercy. We realized that we were too small of spiritual stature to see God and know Him, and so we lifted ourselves up the best we could to try to see Him. He saw our desire and called us down from our "sycamore tree," so that He Himself could lift us up. As with Zaccheus, He did not offer us judgment or condemnation, but healing.

We saw the awesome humility of God when Christ entered the home of the offender and dined with him. We saw how

Christ bestowed the transforming power of Divine Grace by means of compassionate love.

On the second Sunday, we beheld the beauty of humble repentance. On this third Sunday, the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, we will bring the message of these first two steps together and gain a deeper understanding of God and our relationship with Him.

Today, we hear of a son who grew weary of working in his father's fields and vineyards. "Give me my share of the inheritance," he demanded. "I am weary of you and your house. I am bored and I want to seek the excitement and thrills of the world out there, beyond your domain."

The father, because of his love and righteousness, respected the free choice of his son, though with great sorrow. He had no obligation to give the son a share of the inheritance, but love moved him, for he did not want to see his son go empty and naked into the world. He humbly bestowed gifts upon the rebellious son, desiring to give him the means to survive until, perhaps, he would come to his senses.

Beloved of Christ, we also become rebellious children through our weaknesses, sinful desires and conceit. We turn and depart from our Father's house, for we are weary of the constraint and weak in hope, and desire some excitement from the allure of worldly things. But here is an amazing thing: though we turn away from God because of the conceit of our hearts, He does not allow us to depart empty. Even as we depart from Him, His love accompanies us and humbly urges us to return.

So the prodigal son set out, bearing his share of the inheritance, or rather a gift bestowed upon him by his father. He wandered to a distant land, far from the paradise of his father's love-filled home and well-tended fields. There, still bound by conceit, he squandered his father's wealth on the empty vanity of this world, with debauchery and wild living. At last, he had absolutely nothing, and he stood empty and alone. Only when

he ended up tending swine, an animal unclean to the Jews, and even eating swill from their troughs, did his conceit weaken. He began to realize the true inheritance of his father was not worldly wealth, but love and mercy.

He desired to be saved.

When his conceit was broken and his soul touched by humility, repentance began to take root in his heart. He realized what and who he had become, and he longed to turn his life around, to return to the father's house and be, if possible, at least one of his servants. When repentance started to take hold, he began to hope on his father's mercy.

Behold the wonder of the majesty of God's humble love. The son, seeking mercy that he might become at least a slave, found a joyful forgiveness and was received as a beloved son. He did not even arrive at the father's house and express his repentance with his lips, for the father saw him a long way off and rushed down the road to meet him.

Looking down at the dust of the road, unable even to lift his eyes to meet the eyes of his father, the wretched son stammered, "Father, I...I..." But the father did not wait for him to finish. With tears of joy welling from his eyes, he embraced the son, "O my son, my son, you are alive. My dear, beloved son, you have returned to me. Come, let us celebrate and rejoice together, for this my son was lost and has been found; he was dead and is alive again."

Brethren, behold the wonder of the love and mercy of our God. For, the son was already forgiven in the father's heart the very day he departed in all his conceit. The father did not spend all these days and years in spiteful disdain of the son; he spent them in a daily concern for the son's well-being, a prayerful longing for his return. The father's forgiveness was always there, waiting for him. He had only to desire to turn his life around, go back to the father and partake of that forgiveness and love.

We depart from our Father through our own conceit and spiritual laziness also, and we go away and become exiles from paradise. Following in the footsteps of Adam and Eve, of Cain, of Ham, the sons of Jakob and the people of Israel, we depart from the Father's house, we go off into exile, or are carried away in exile and bondage by Satan, through the conceits and delusions of the world, and of our own hearts. It is for this reason that, on this day, we chant the hymn of the exiles, the 136th Psalm, "By the waters of Babylon."

But our father also waits for us daily. He stands outside the house, daily looking down the road with longing, desiring to see us returning home again, finding our way through repentance.

In the parable, the son came to his resolve to repent and return home when he was brought to an involuntary fasting. The forty day fast of Great Lent is given to us that we might, through voluntary fasting, with prayer, search our hearts and minds and come to a firm desire to return home from exile. Great Lent represents for us that very road upon which the prodigal son walked back home.

Here is the great mystery of our road, of Great Lent: at the end of our road home, we find the crucified and resurrected Christ. You see, God was not content only to stand at the gates of paradise and watch for us to return (which we could not have done by ourselves), but He sent the Only Begotten One out to search for us and lead us home once more. Jesus Christ is the Father's "search party," sent out to seek and to find, and to bring us, lost children, home again. He even gave His life for us so that we might know the greatness and power of His love.

Since we desire to see Christ and to know Him, and having learned of humble repentance, let us now resolve to turn our lives around, and with hope on the love and mercy of God, walk the path of Great Lent back to our Father's house.

Ascending Toward Great Lent

STEP 4:

Choosing our destination; planning the voyage.



SUNDAY OF THE LAST JUDGMENT

(Meatfare Sunday)

{Saturday: 1Ths.4:13-17/Jn5:24-30;

Sunday: 1Cor.8:8-9:2/Mt.25:31-46}

"The day of death is better than the day of birth"
(Eccl.7:1).

"Why rejoice when a ship sets sail upon a perilous journey; rather rejoice when it safely enters its harbour"
(Hebrew commentary on Eccl.7:1).

Brethren, when one is about to take a journey, it is wise to look ahead to the destination, and to plan the voyage well. Many perils and dangers await the one who sets sail on a vast sea. No matter how well we plan, our lives remain an uncharted course, for no one knows what the dawning of each day will bring, nor whether, as dusk falls, he will live to see another dawn. Nevertheless, when a ship sets sail, not only the crew, but each passenger has made his plans and preparations for the end of the journey, when the destination is finally reached.

The Church has ordained that on this Sunday of preparation, as we make ready to sail on the voyage of Great Lent, we look forward to the end of our journey and contemplate our destination.

On Saturday, we celebrated the "great memorial" service, commemorating all those who have fallen asleep in faith, "in the hope of resurrection and life everlasting."

In this service, we not only commemorated those who have already departed this life, but we contemplated the day of our own death. The Holy Church called upon us to remember that each of us must come to that final hour of earthly life, and so prepare ourselves for it.

To bring us through to a complete awareness and contemplation of our destination, we celebrate in advance the Second Coming of Christ and the Last Judgment on this Sunday.

Contemplating the end of our voyage on the sea of this worldly life is by no means morbid, and not altogether sorrowful. It calls upon us to prepare ourselves, through spiritual struggle and repentance, for those rewards which the Lord has promised to the faithful. The verses and readings of the services for both Saturday and this "Sunday of the Last Judgment" call to mind the terrible fate of those who do not take thought for their end, and who do not prepare, through faith, love and spiritual struggle, to come before the judgment seat of Christ.

All this is done to help make us ready for the fast, so that we might understand fully the purpose and meaning of our spiritual and physical fast, and make us aware of the nature of true fasting. Thus, in the Matins service of this Saturday we chant: "Dost thou fast? Do not deal treacherously with thy neighbour. Dost thou decline certain foods? Do not judge thy brother, lest thou thyself be judged and sent to that fire and burned like wax."

As the end of our voyage in this life is death and the last judgment, the end of our journey of Great Lent is the glorious feast of the Resurrection of Christ. The end of both these journeys is summarized in a hymn of Saturday's vespers:

"Thou, O Saviour, didst redeem us with Thine own precious blood. By Thy death, Thou didst deliver us from a bitter death, and by Thy Resurrection, Thou didst grant us life everlasting."

As we read the hymns for this "Soul Saturday" and "Sunday of the Last Judgment," we find instructions for planning our journey, navigational aids to plot the course of our voyage, a guide for making our preparations.

Beloved of Christ, bearing these things in our hearts, let us set forth on the journey of Great Lent with the vision of our destination clearly before us and, seeing the end even as we begin, let us, with joyous sorrow, make ready to depart, to cross the sea of Lent to Holy Pascha, to cross the sea of life to the longed-for harbour of Paradise.

May our Lord, God and Saviour Jesus Christ be the captain and navigator of our vessel, to the glory of His Holy name, and of the Eternal Father and Life-bestowing Spirit, now and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.

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STEP 5:

Seeking forgiveness; Learning to forgive.



FORGIVENESS SUNDAY

(Cheesefare Sunday)

(Mt. 6:14-21/Rm.13:11-14:4)

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (Mt.6:14).

There are **two** unforgivable sins mentioned by Jesus Christ in the Gospels. Everyone remembers that "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is never forgiven" (Mt.12:31), but few recall that failure to forgive others means that they themselves will never be forgiven. Refusal to forgive is just as deadly a sin as blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is very clear about this, and it is urgent enough that He teaches it a number of times and in different ways, and Apostle Paul felt compelled to repeat it, together with many warnings against judging our neighbours.

Why does the Holy Church begin Great Lent precisely with the "Vespers of Forgiveness," wherein we each search our hearts to root out all grudges and malice, and forgive one another? Because Great Lent is a time of intensified repentance, when we seek God's forgiveness. That forgiveness of God, however, is not available to those who have not forgiven everyone **from the heart**. Our lenten journey will be of little use to us if we have not carefully forgiven others.

In the stichera for "Lord I have Cried," in today's Vespers, we chant:

Let us begin the fast with joy! Let us prepare ourselves for spiritual struggle! Let us cleanse both our soul and body. Let us abstain from passions as we abstain from food. Let us rejoice in virtues of the spirit, and fulfil them in love, that we may see the passion of Christ our God, and rejoice in spirit at the holy Pascha.

How could we begin the fast with joy if we are burdened with the fires of malice and hatred? If our souls are unsettled and agitated by judgments against others, we cannot have the spiritual peace necessary to commence the fast with a spirit of joy and hope.

Further in the stichera on "Lord I have Cried," we find a strong prayer of self-condemnation:

When I think of my deeds, O Lord, I am filled with fear, for I know that I am worthy of every torment. I have despised Thy commandments, O Saviour....

Hearing this, many people are tempted by the thought, "Why should I feel this fear when I think of my deeds? I have not committed any crimes and I have not done anything all that wrong. I have not robbed or murdered anyone."

O brothers and sisters, do you not yet understand that our greatest, most deadly sins are the almost silent ones we commit against our neighbours? The judgment, the condemnation, the slanders and gossip with which we assault their souls are dreadful sins in the eyes of God, Who created them and loves them. Do we not realize that in judging a neighbour, we are judging one for whom our Lord Jesus Christ shed His precious blood and laid down His life? Refusal to forgive and malice are, in truth, deeds that can deprive us of forgiveness, and send our own souls into eternal torment.

Thus, by having us accuse ourselves in this manner, the Church is calling us to our senses and teaching us how to

struggle toward a true and sincere, heartfelt forgiveness of others; for it is not enough to only go through a ritual of forgiveness and a form of repentance.

Stop and think, brethren, about whom and what you are judging while you pretend to be repenting. You pretend to be more righteous than your neighbours, whose sins you see and gloat over, but if you were truly righteous, you would see not their transgressions, but their suffering. If you had the spirit of Christ in you, you would see not sin, but grief, and instead of judging, you would hasten to embrace your neighbour with tears of compassion. Instead, wicked souls that we are, we puff ourselves up and heap judgment upon our brothers.

Do you not see how Satan has made you his toy? Do you not realize that you are merely using your brother's weaknesses to mask your own sins, that you are using his transgressions to try to justify and cloak the vileness of your own passions? When you judge your neighbour's fallings, you are really only trying to lie to yourself about your own. If we were to be honest, we would have to confess that what we most despise in others is what we most fear in ourselves.

Let us, therefore, now humble ourselves before our brothers and sisters, so that we may also be able to humble ourselves before God. Thus, seeking forgiveness, let us first offer forgiveness and then, with the sails of our vessel rightly trimmed, we may set forth on our voyage toward Holy Pascha, justly expecting the rich cargo of blessings and grace which have been promised to us.

VERSES FROM HOLY SCRIPTURE ABOUT FORGIVENESS AND JUDGING

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, they have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also (Mt.6:14-21).

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors (Mt.6:12).

Then Peter came to Him and said, Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

Jesus saith unto him, I do not say to thee, until seven times: but, until seventy times seven.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a certain king, who would take account of his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought to him, who owed him ten thousand gold pieces. But since he had nothing with which to pay, his lord commanded that he be sold, and his

wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made.

The servant, however, fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all that I owe. Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and freed him, and forgave him the debt.

But the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, who owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me what thou owest to me. And his fellow servant fell down at his feet, and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all that I owe. And he would not: but rather cast him into prison, till he should pay the debt.

When his fellow servants saw what was done, they were very sorry, and came and told their lord all that had been done. Then his lord, having called for him, said to him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all thy debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest thou not also have had compassion on thy fellow servant, even as I had pity on thee? And his lord was full of wrath, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him.

So likewise shall my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one the trespasses of his brother (Mt.18:21-35).

Do not judge, and ye shall not be judged: do not condemn, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven (Lk.6:37).

Whoever you are, you are inexcusable if you judge others: for, in judging you condemn yourself, for you yourself do the same things that you are judging (Rm.2:1).

Do not judge so that you will not be judged. For you shall be judged by the same judgment you pass against others. The standard you use [against others] is the standard that will be used to judge you with (Mt.7:1-2).

Who are you, O man, that you judge another man's servant? (Rm.14:2).