

## 10. SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

### The Gospel on the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

*A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father: "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said: "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants.'" And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him. And his son said unto him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." But the father said to his servants: "Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet; and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found." And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him: "Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound." And he was angry, and would not go in; therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf." And he said unto him: "Son, thou art ever with me,*

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*and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad; for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."*

The infinite love of God towards mankind is seen in His great patience, His great forgiveness and His great joy. Such love can only find a comparison on earth in maternal love. Who has greater patience towards any creature on earth than a mother towards her child? Whose forgiveness exceeds that of a mother? Who weeps for joy so readily over a converted sinner as a mother does over improvement in her child? From the world's foundation, maternal love has, on earth, been surpassed only by the Lord Jesus Christ in His love for the human race. His patience led Him to terrible sufferings on the Cross; His forgiveness poured forth from His heart and lips, even on the Cross itself; His joy in those who repented was a joy that illumined His suffering soul throughout His earthly life. Divine love alone surpasses maternal love. God alone loves us more than our mother does; He alone forgives us more than our mother does, and He alone rejoices at our improvement more than our mother does.

He who has no patience with us when we sin does not love us. Neither does he love us who does not forgive us when we repent of our sin. And he loves us least of all who does not rejoice at our improvement.

Patience, forgiveness and joy are the three greatest characteristics of divine love. They are characteristic of all real love - if there is such a thing as real love outside divine love. Without these three characteristics, love is not love. If you give the name "love" to anything else, it is as though you were giving the name "sheep" to a goat or a pig.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, The Lord Jesus has given us a picture of real, divine love, painted in such clear colours that it pulsates with life before our eyes, as this world does when, after the darkness of night, the sun shines forth. Two thousand years have not dulled the colours of this picture, and they will never be dulled as long as there are men on earth, and God's love for them. On the contrary, the more sinful men become, the more vivid is this picture: the more vivid and the fresher.

*A certain man had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father: "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." And he divided unto them his living. What is simpler than the dramatic way this parable begins? What depths are concealed beneath this simplicity! Under "a certain man", God is concealed, and under the "two sons", a righteous man and a sinful one - or, all righteous men and all sinners. The righteous man is older than the sinner; for God, in the beginning, created man righteous, man*

himself becoming sinful. The sinner seeks his portion, both from God and from his righteous brother.

Also by the “two sons”, the dual nature that is present in every man is understood: one nature that thirsts for God and another that inclines towards sin. The one nature urges a man to live according to God’s commandments, according to *the law of the mind*, as the Apostle says, and the other to the law of the body (Romans 7:22-23). A spiritual man and a fleshly man - two men in one and the same man. A spiritual man cannot imagine living apart from God, while a fleshly man finds that his life begins only when he is separated from God. The spiritual man is older; the fleshly younger. From his very creation, the spiritual man is older, for we are told that God said in the beginning: “*Let us make man in our image*” (Genesis 1:26), and the image of God is man’s spiritual nature, not his fleshly - and, after that, man’s body was made from dust (Genesis 2:7), into which God inbreathed His already-created image - the spiritual man. Of course, the human body as God created it, even though it was of dust, was in no way sinful, although it was by it that man was led into sin. Also, Eve was younger than Adam. She was created from Adam’s body and, through the desires of her flesh, she violated God’s commandment and fell into temptation - and, by her fall, was separated from God and went off, in her mind, into a far country: the kingdom of Satan.

“*Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.*” Thus the sinner speaks to God. And what, in fact, belongs to man that does not belong to God? Dust, nothing but dust. It is true that God created the dust, but the dust is not part of His being. And so man can only call the dust his own; all else is God’s; all else belongs to Him. While a man is not separated from God, all that is God’s is his. As God says: “*Son, all that I have is thine.*” A man can, in that case, say: “*All things that the Father hath are mine*” (John 16:15). But when a man desires to be separated from God, and when he seeks to have his portion of God’s uncountable possessions, God can give him *nothing*, and still be just. For man without God is nothing, and all that he has is nothing. And when God gives him dust; that is, only a body without a spirit, without a soul and with no spiritual gifts, He has even so given him something more than what is man’s, and He has given him this not out of justice but out of mercy. But, as God’s mercy is immeasurably greater than that of a mother towards her child, God gives His sinful son something more than dust. That is to say: along with a body, He gives him a soul in the body, as is the case with the animals, and in addition leaves him some spiritual gifts: a little understanding, conscience and desire for good - only a little spark, enough to keep him from dropping right down to being an animal among animals.

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*And the father divided unto them his living.* The elder son remained with his father, enjoying all his father's goods, but the younger son, *not many days after, gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.* Is not the mystery of Adam's brief sojourn in Paradise concealed under the words *not many days*? Adam, when he sinned, sought and received his portion from God. He saw his nakedness: that is, he saw that he is nothing without God. And God, in His mercy, did not send him away naked but made him clothes; He clad him, and sent him away (Genesis 3:21). "*Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,*" said God to Adam (v. 19). And this means: at the very best, only the dust is yours. All else is Mine. You have sought what is yours, and I have given it to you; but for you to be able to live and be at least a shadow of what you were, I am giving you more: I am giving you a spark of My divine dignity.

This that happened to Adam is repeated again and again with millions of Adam's sons who, having by their sin separated themselves from God, take their portion and go off into a far country. God will not force anyone to stay with Him, for God created man to be free and, true to His own nature, He never seeks to limit this freedom.

What does the foolish sinner do when he separates himself from God? *He takes his journey into a far country, and there wastes his substance with riotous living.* This was not the action of just one sinner; this was not done just by this younger son of his father. This is done by every man, by everyone who separates himself from God. "*Therefore their days did He consume in vanity ...*" (Psalm 77/78:33).

*In riotous living.* What does this mean? It means spending his days in sin and aimlessness, in drunkenness, quarrelling, anger, wastefulness and, most of all, in immorality - by which the vital forces are most quickly, and most completely, consumed, and the divine spark extinguished. When a man is without love, he gives himself over to the passions. When a man leaves God's path, he finds himself in a maze of paths, and rushes one way and the other. Such a one takes an axe to the roots of his own life, cutting away a root a day until the tree begins to wither.

Living aimlessly, the Prodigal Son wasted all the substance that he had received from his father. *And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want.* In this far country, far away from God, there is always famine, for the land cannot satisfy a hungry man: its food only increases his hunger. The earth can barely satisfy the hunger of the unreasoning animals; it can in no way satisfy man's. In the far country, there is always famine because, for the sinner, who completely forgets God

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and disperses all the vital forces that God had given him with his portion, a great famine arises: a hunger that the whole earth, with all it has to offer, could not satisfy for a moment. Thus it is, to this day, with every sinner who gives himself over entirely to the earth, the body and bodily satisfaction. A moment comes when, for the sinner, these become repulsive filth and stench. He then begins to complain of the whole world and to curse his life. With the life of both body and soul dried up, he feels like a hollow, withered reed through which a cold wind is blowing. All is dark to him; all is foul and disgusting. In such a situation, he does not know what to do with himself. He has stopped believing in this life, and how can he believe in the other? He has forgotten about the other life, and come to hate this one; he has forgotten God, and come to hate this world. What will he do now? Where will he go? The whole universe is pressing in on him, and there is no door marked "exit". The grave is not a way out, but a way in. When he is in such a state of desperation, the devil appears to him, having been with him all the time, leading him on from evil to evil, although secretly and unseen. But now he appears to him, takes him into his service and sends him into his field to keep the swine. For it is written: *He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.* This is what happens to every disobedient son who has turned and gone off, away from his father: taking leave of his father with pride and great plans for his happiness, he lands up as the servant of one worse than himself, becoming a keeper of someone else's pigs. By "a citizen of the far country", it is obvious that the devil is meant. Although he is here called "a man", as the father is called "a man", he is depicted in a way completely opposed to the "father-man" from whom the son so foolishly parted. He is a man, but not a man of the heavenly kingdom, nor a man of the earthly kingdom, but a man of some third kingdom - the kingdom of darkness and horror, decay and fire: the demonic kingdom. With the first, the "father-man", the sinner is called a son, but with this other "devil-man", he is called a hired servant. While he was with the "father-man", he was blessed with all abundance, but with the "devil-man", he is hungry, so hungry that he would eat *the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him.* By "the swine", in a deeper sense, we must understand the evil spirits, the citizens of the demonic kingdom. For the evil spirits are the carriers of every uncleanness, and swine are the visible symbol of uncleanness. When the Lord drove the evil spirits out of the man possessed in Gadara, He sent them into swine (Luke 8:32-33). As swine root about in the earth, so the evil spirits root about in man, until they find in him some uncleanness on which to feed. By the "husks" or "carobs", we must understand every uncleanness of the inner man: evil thoughts, impure

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desires, selfish intentions, sins, lusts and passions - and especially passions. Evil spirits feed and fatten themselves on all that saps the human soul and withers it. All that grows in the darkness of the human soul, unlit by God's direct light, as carobs grow in darkness under the ground, is unclean food for the evil spirits. But the evil spirits do not give this food to a man once he is in their service. They feed him with it until he falls completely under their power, but then, when he is in their hands, they have no need to feed him. Their food is poison, and he has already been thoroughly poisoned. And what is poison to him now serves as food to them! They gnaw at his soul, awaiting only the moment when it will part from his body, so that they can feed on its even greater sufferings in outer darkness. As the royal Prophet said: "*The enemy hath persecuted my soul; he hath smitten my life down to the ground; he hath laid me in the darkness, as the men that have been long dead*" (Psalm 142/143:3). Lo, the Prodigal Son was as one dead before his bodily death!

But, at this moment of the Prodigal Son's greatest despair, hunger and horror, a spark was lit within him; a forgotten, undreamed-of spark. Whence this spark on dead coals? Whence a spark of life in a corpse? It has come from that which we mentioned at the beginning: that the father, in giving His son his portion, gave him something more than his share. He gave him, as well as dust, a spark of conscience and understanding. As though the wise and merciful father said to himself, when he divided a part of his goods for his younger son: "I'll give him this also: something of conscience and understanding; something, in fact, of that from which he wanted to be separated. Why not? - he'll need it. He's going off to a cold and hungry land, and when he is in greatest want, this one spark will be able to light his path back to me. All right: let him take it; he'll need it. This spark will save him."

And lo, this spark glowed in the deepest darkness at the twelfth hour, when the Prodigal Son had descended to the third kingdom and given himself to the devil's service. There glowed within him, like a magic lantern, the long-forgotten light of conscience and understanding. And, in this light, *he came to himself*. It was only by this light that he could see the abyss into which he had fallen, all the stench that he had breathed and in which he had lived, all the vile society with which he had associated. By the light of this mysterious lantern that his father's merciful hand held in his soul, he awoke from his terrible dream and began to make a comparison between the life he had formerly led with his father, and the life he was now leading. *And when he came to himself, he said: "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and*

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*before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants.'*" And he arose, and came to his father.

(Theophylact says: "*And when he came to himself*": from this, it clearly follows that, while he was committing evil, he was out of himself. Indeed, wandering by our senses outside ourselves, we estrange ourselves from ourselves, and leave the Kingdom of God that is within us [Luke 17:21].)

As soon as the spark began to glow in the soul of the Prodigal Son, and as soon as he compared life with his father and life in the far country, he immediately came to the decision: "*I shall arise, and go to my father!*" "I shall arise", he says, because he sees the depths to which he has fallen. There is no third way: either to go downwards to the very depths of the demonic abyss, or to go upwards to his father. And his father is very rich: there is no hunger with him; his hired servants have enough and to spare, and this his son is dying of hunger. By "bread" we must understand "life"; the "hired servants" are beings in God's creation that are lesser than men, such as the animals and other creatures. The Prodigal Son had fallen lower than the animals, and sought to have a life at least equal to theirs. Animals are not free beings, and God governs them exclusively by His power and will. God gives them life according to their need, takes care of them and satisfies their needs. But the Prodigal Son has wasted in immorality those vital forces that God gives to the animals, and that the animals use aright.

*"I have sinned against heaven and before thee."* By "heaven" we must understand, in the first place, the whole host of God's angels, and especially our guardian angels; secondly, the spiritual gifts that God gives to each man, and that represent heaven also in sinful men and *delight in the Law of God after the inner man* (Romans 7:22). And that "heaven" here refers to the angels of God is seen from the Lord's own words: "*I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over a sinner that repenteth*" (Luke 15:7-10). So, when there is joy over a penitent, there is also sorrow over an unrepentant sinner.

That "heaven" also means the spiritual gifts that God has given to men is seen from the words of the Apostle Paul that we have already quoted, and also from the following: "*What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?*" (I Corinthians 6:19). And this is seen even more clearly from the Saviour's words: "*The Kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:21). And so, he who sins against God also sins against the angels of God and the righteous man within himself, being himself of God, and this is what "against heaven" means. And the penitent son therefore says: "*I have sinned against heaven and before thee*".

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*But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.* Such is the love of God - infinite, and yet most gentle! As great as has, up till now, been His patience towards the sinner, so great are now His forgiveness and His joy. As soon as the sinner repents and turns to go back to God, God is already hurrying to meet him, receive him, embrace him and kiss him. A mother's joy is great when she sees improvement in her child; a shepherd's joy is great when he finds his lost sheep; a woman's joy is great when she finds her lost coin - but none of this can compare with God's joy when a sinner repents and turns again to Him. At the first sign of repentance in our hearts, even if we are still far away, God already sees us and, more quickly than sunlight rushing over the dark earth, hurries to meet us: to meet the new man who, through repentance, is conceived in us. "*Lord,*" cries the prophet to the Omniscient: "*Thou understandest my thoughts long before!*" (Psalm 138/139:1). Our heavenly Father hurries to our aid, opening His arms wide, and holds on to us, so that we do not fall back again into the demonic abyss, the field of swine and the land of famine. "***Draw nigh to God, and He will draw nigh to you***" (James 4:8). O Thou swiftest to help! O those most blessed hands! If we have not yet extinguished the last spark of conscience and understanding that is in us, we must be shamed by such love on God's part; we must repent without delay and hasten with lowered eyes and uplifted hearts to the embrace of the Father we had spurned.

When the repentant son comes to his father, he says what he has planned to say to him: "*Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am not worthy to be called thy son.*" But he does not say all that he had intended. He means to continue: "*Make me as one of thy hired servants.*" But his father does not let him finish. He does not let the penitent humiliate himself and seek to be a hired servant, and so he interrupts his son, and begins to embrace him and kiss him. Ragged, filthy, emaciated and wild-looking as he is, his merciful father embraces him, calling to his servants: "*Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.*" The best robe symbolises all the richness and beauty of God's spiritual gifts. This is the robe of holiness and purity in which Adam was clad before he sinned, fell and was driven away from God into a far country. This robe is Christ Himself: this is why it is called the "best". There is no finer robe than this in heaven. The Apostle says: "*As many of you as have been baptised into Christ have put on Christ*" (Galatians 3:27). The soul, that had been stripped of every good thing, is completely re-clothed: its old, filthy

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and ragged robe is thrown away, and it is clothed in a new robe. This new robe for the soul symbolises the new man - repentant, re-born, forgiven and received by God. Without this new robe, no-one can live in the Kingdom of God, as we see clearly from Christ's parable of the marriage of the king's son (Matthew 22:2-14). This robe is composed, according to the Apostle's words, of "*bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering ... and above all these ... charity, which is the bond of perfectness*" (Colossians 3:12-14; cf. Ephesians 4:24, Revelation 7:14, Zechariah 3:4).

The ring on his finger signifies the soul's espousal to Christ. The penitent forsakes all his immoral relations with this world, cleaves to Christ in his soul and remains united to Him in an indissoluble unity. This betrothal is brought about by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit, whose seal is on all heavenly gifts.

Give him "*shoes on his feet*", says the father to his servants. Shoes signify strength of will, by which a man is able to walk firmly in the ways of God, without wandering hither and thither and without looking back.

By the fatted calf that was slaughtered, we must understand Jesus Christ Himself, who gave Himself to be slaughtered for the cleansing of sinners from their sin.

By the servants, we must understand either angels or priests. If we understand the father's house as being heaven itself, then we must see the servants as angels; if - as is also a right reading - we understand it as the Church on earth, then we must see the servants as priests, who are called to celebrate the mystery of Christ's sacrifice and, by it, to nourish men for eternal life. That the Church is here firstly meant is clear from the fact that the Prodigal Son was not yet physically dead and, until a man parts from his body, he belongs to the Kingdom of God in the form of God's Church on earth. But that the servants, as well as symbolising the priests, must also be seen as the angels, is clear firstly from the fact that the angels are present in church at the Holy Mysteries, and secondly from the fact that God uses men's guardian angels to guide them on the path of salvation.

*"For this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."* In the flesh, he was still just alive, but his soul was as dead. The one remaining spark of the divine gift was lit within him, and revived his whole soul. He was already lost at the moment that he sought his portion from his father. *And he came to himself.* This means: he came to himself in the light of God's spark, having been lost. God knew him, and kept him in sight up to the very last moment - the moment of repentance.

*And they began to be merry.* Coming to hear of all that had happened, the elder son was angry, and said to his father: "*Lo, these many years do I*

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*serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf:*" The righteous son speaks thus to his father. Many righteous churchmen speak with anger in such a way, when the Church, with joy and gentleness, receives repentant sinners and brings them to the holy sacrament of Communion. Many righteous men in the Old Testament spoke thus when they saw God bring His only Son as a sacrifice for the younger and more sinful generations of mankind: "'He has never even given us a kid!' Compared with the tremendous sacrifice that You are making for these our sinful and prodigal descendants, You never made the least sacrifice, however insignificant, for us." Then, as a goat generally signifies sin, these same righteous men could say: "You forbade us to commit even the smallest sin - small and insignificant as a kid - and You now reward these sinful generations with the greatest treasure that You have - with the sacrifice of Your Son!" And if we go even further, we shall see that this apparently simple parable penetrates to the very heart of the whole history of the human race, from Adam's fall to the most righteous One, the Lord Jesus, who is to humanity, to Adam and his descendants, like the Elder Son of the heavenly Father - though He is the Only-Begotten Son and not a son by adoption. Were the Lord Jesus Himself to have spoken as an ordinary, mortal man, He could have said to His Father: "Adam sinned and fell away from Thee, and he and all his descendants have blasphemed Thy name, but now Thou preparest for him and his descendants such glory and joy as I and the whole of heaven could scarcely imagine." Of course, the Lord Jesus would never be angry with His heavenly Father, or ever speak to His Father in such a way, unless he were deliberately placing Himself in our hearts, saying this to reprimand or instruct us, so that we should not be puffed up in our own righteousness and, in our pride, scorn repentant sinners. As though He wanted to say to us: when I, the eternally righteous One, who am eternally indivisible from the Father, do not protest at the receiving of repentant Adam once more into the heavenly Kingdom, how can you, righteous only from yesterday and sinners from Adam's first sin, protest against God's love for repentant sinners?

"*Son,*" said the father to him, "*thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad; for this thy brother was dead and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.*"

So God calms the righteous man, reminding him of the immeasurable good things that he, together with Him, governs and dispenses. All that is Mine is thine. With the return of thy repentant brother, thy share is not less-

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ened but thy joy should be the greater, *“for thy brother was dead and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”*

So ends this parable, that is in itself a whole gospel of mystery and instruction. The more a man prayerfully penetrates the depths of this parable, the more will he uncover in it both mysteries and instruction. Glory be to the Lord Jesus, who gave us this parable - this treasury filled with a wealth from which generation after generation gathers for itself knowledge of God and man, learning from it love through longsuffering, forgiveness through God's love for mankind and joy through God's love in receiving repentant sinners. Glory to His Father who is without beginning, and to the life-giving Spirit - the Trinity consubstantial and undivided, now and forever, through all time and all eternity. Amen.