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THE PRODIGAL SON

Arthur W. Pink (1886-1952)

Luke 15:11-32

¹¹ And he said, A certain man had two sons: ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. ¹⁷ 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! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, ¹⁹ And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. ²⁰ 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. ²¹ And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. ²² 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: ²³ And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill *it*; and let us eat, and be merry: ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. ²⁵ Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. ²⁹ 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: ³⁰ But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. ³¹ And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. ³² 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.

I. Introduction

Before we attempt to expound this portion of Scripture in detail, let us first make a few general observations. Who does the “prodigal son” represent? Is it an unregenerate sinner, or a backslidden believer that is in view? There is a division of sentiment upon this point. Personally, we have no doubt whatever that in this part of the parable of the Salvation of the Lost, the Lord Jesus pictures an unregenerate sinner. Our interpretation will proceed along this line, but before we give it, let us first present some proofs that it is *not* a backslidden believer that is before us.

First, the whole context shows plainly the class that is portrayed throughout the entire chapter. In the first two verses of Luke 15 we are told, “Then drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.” Here, then, Christ is seen in connection with the lost. It was in answer to this criticism of the Pharisees and scribes that our Savior proceeded to utter the parable which has brought life and peace to countless souls since then. And in this parable the

Lord is not warning His disciples against the danger of backsliding, but is vindicating Himself for “receiving sinners.”

That part of the parable which treats of what has been termed “the prodigal son” begins at the eleventh verse, but what we have here and in the verses that follow is only a continuation of what the Lord said as recorded in the previous verses. In these previous verses He depicts a man going after a lost sheep until he finds it; and also a woman who loses one piece of silver, and who sweeps the house and seeks diligently until she finds it. Surely there can be no doubt whatever as to who is figured by the “lost sheep,” and the “lost piece of silver.” Surely it is obvious that these picture an unregenerate soul and not a backslidden believer.

In the third place, the words which the “father” spoke when the wandering son returned furnish another proof that it is a sinner and not an erring saint who is before us. Said he, “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him” (:22). The “best robe” here speaks of the Robe of Righteousness which each sinner receives when he first comes to Christ. Had it been a backslidden believer, his need would be to have his feet “washed” (John 13).

Finally, the “father’s” statement concerning his son is proof positive that it is no erring Christian that is here in view. The father said, “For this my son was *dead*, and is alive again; he was *lost*, and is found” (:24). This is conclusive to all who believe that “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Rom 11:29). Every believer is in present possession of eternal life, which he has received from God as his “gift” (Rom 6:23); and this “gift” is never recalled. If then the believer is in present possession of eternal life he can never die. (See John 8:51). That the father spoke of the returning prodigal as one who “was dead,” and who “was lost” is proof positive that an unregenerate sinner is here in view.

There is only one argument that is of any force against what we have said above, and that we will briefly consider. We are asked to explain how Christ could speak of this wanderer as a *son* if he represented an unregenerate sinner. Insuperable as the difficulty appears at first sight it is, nevertheless, capable of simple solution. We answer in a word that this wanderer who came to the “father” was a son by election. He was a son in the purpose of God. If we should be asked to point to a Scripture which justifies such an assertion, where those of God’s elect are termed “sons” before they are actually regenerated, we would at once refer to John 11:51,52: “He prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; and not for that nation only, but that also He should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.” Here we are told that the ones who were to definitely benefit from the death of Christ, and who should “be gathered together in one” (that is, into one family), were, at that time “scattered abroad,” nevertheless, they were denominated “the children of God!” Another Scripture which enunciates the same principle is John 10:16 where we find the Savior declaring “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring:” even before they were brought to Himself the Good Shepherd terms them His sheep.

Before giving a detailed exposition of the closing verses of Luke 15, we would point out that this chapter does not contain three parables, as is commonly supposed, but instead, one parable, in three parts. In verse 3 we are told, “He spake this parable unto them, saying, What man of you having an hundred sheep,” etc. Again, in verse 8 we read how that the Savior continued to say, without any break, “Either what woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lost one piece,” etc. Then in verse 11 it is recorded, “And He said, A certain man had two sons,” etc. This parable as a whole has to do with the salvation of a lost sinner, and much of its beauty is missed by failing to discern its unbroken unity. It gives a beautiful and marvelous picture of the concern of each of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity in the salvation of the lost. In the third part of this parable we are shown a sinner coming into the presence of the father. But in order to appreciate the preciousness of this we must pay careful attention to what precedes.

In the second part of this one parable, we have brought before us, in figurative form, the work of the Holy Spirit, and this, we know, is what precedes the coming of any sinner into the presence of the father. And on what is the work of the Holy Spirit based? The answer is, upon the work of Christ; and that is what we have portrayed in the first part of the parable, where the Shepherd is in view. We pause to notice very briefly a few details in connection with these two things.

In verses 4 to 7 we see the work of Christ as the Good Shepherd. *First*, He is the One “having an hundred sheep;” He is the One to whom the “sheep” belong—they belong to Him because they were given to Him by the Father. *Second*, He is the One that is said to “go after that which is lost:” this pictures Christ leaving His home on high and coming down to this earth where His lost sheep were. *Third*, next we are told that He goes after the lost “until He find it:” this brings us to the Cross—the place of death, for it was there the “sheep” were, and only there could they be found.

Fourth, “And when He hath found it, He layeth it on His shoulders:” this tells of the tender care of the Savior for His own, and also assures us of the safe place which we now have in Him. It is blessed to note that in Isaiah 9:6 where Christ’s future kingship is in view, we are told “The government shall be upon His shoulder,” the singular

number being used; whereas it is the plural number when the place which the sheep has is mentioned—*shoulder* upholds the government of the world, *shoulders* give double guarantee to our preservation.

Fifth, “He layeth it on His shoulders, rejoicing.” How wondrous is this! We can understand that the sheep should find abundant cause to rejoice over the Shepherd, but that the Savior (the Self-Sufficient One) should have occasion to rejoice in the salvation of poor hell-deserving sinners “passeth knowledge.” *Sixth*, “And when He cometh home:” this tells of the blessed issue of the Savior’s work and the happy success of the Shepherd’s quest. Notice that Heaven is here termed “home”—a figure that will well repay prolonged meditation. *Seventh*, “And when He cometh home, He calleth together His friends and neighbors, saying unto them, Rejoice with Me; for I have found My sheep which was lost;” how this reveals to us the heart of Christ! Not only does He rejoice over the salvation of the lost, but He will call upon the angels to share His joy.

In verses 8 to 10 we see the work of the Holy Spirit. Notice three things. First, that the “woman” who here pre-figures Him, lights a candle, ere she sweeps the house and seeks diligently for that which was lost. How accurate the figure! This is precisely what the Spirit of God does in His operations. He uses a light, and that light is the Lamp of Life, the Word of God—the entrances of the very words of which “giveth light.” In the second place, unlike the work of the Shepherd, which was on the outside, the sphere of the woman’s operation was on the inside: “the house.” So, the external Work of Christ was done for us, but the Work of the Spirit is done in us. In the third place, the gracious patience and blessed perseverance of the Holy Spirit in His divine work within those who by nature are rebels, is here portrayed in the fact that we are told the woman will “seek diligently till she find.” The result of the first part of this parable which portrays the Work of Christ, and of the second part of the parable which depicts the Work of the Holy Spirit, is brought before us in the third part of the parable which shows us the poor sinner actually coming into the presence of the Father.

This parable then tells us three things about the Godhead: the Shepherd’s toil, the Spirit’s search, and the hearty welcome which the Father gives to the sinner that comes back to Himself. But this is not all: the striking thing is that we have here a marvelous representation of the mystery of the Holy Trinity. As already pointed out, Luke 15 does not give us three parables, but instead one parable in three parts, and each one of these three parts brings before us separately, each of the three Persons in the Godhead: so that we have here one in three, and three in one.

We are also taught three outstanding things in connection with the sinner. In the first part of the parable he is seen under the figure of a sheep that is lost; this intimates the stupidity of the sinner who, like a lost sheep, is unable to find his way home, and who if he is to be restored must be sought. In the second part of the parable he is seen under the figure of a coin and is lost: here we have an inanimate object, in other words, that which accurately portrays the solemn fact that the sinner is spiritually dead. In the third part of the parable he is seen under the figure of a dissolute son, away in the far country: this gives us a representation of the natural man’s moral condition: alienated from God and wayward at heart.

It is the third part of this parable which is now to engage our attention, that part of the parable which views the sinner coming into the presence of God. It is the *human* side that is now made prominent. Here we are shown the sinner’s consciousness of his need: he “began to be in want.” Here we are shown the sinner exercising his will: “I will arise.” Here we are shown the sinner repenting: “I ... will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.” But let it be borne in mind that before the sinner does any of these three things God has previously been at work upon him. Let us not forget that in this wonderful and blessed parable the Lord Jesus gives us the divine side first, before He makes mention of the human side. Therefore, let those who desire to “follow His steps” give careful heed to this principle. We shall now consider...

II. The Prodigal Himself

1. He had a “substance” or “portion.”

“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” (:11, 12). In addition to our natural endowments or talents, and our time and strength, God has given to every one of His creatures a soul. This soul may be regarded as capital in hand with which to do our trading both for time and eternity. It is a most valuable portion, for it is worth more than “the whole world;” it is worth more than the whole world because it will endure after the world and all its works have been burnt up.

This parable begins by bringing into view the sinner *before* he goes out into the “far country,” or to use the language of the parable, before he “took his journey into a far country.” It was while in his father’s house that he received his “portion of goods,” and that “he (the father) divided unto them (his) living,” so that the portion received

was a living portion. This can only refer to the creature, prior to his birth into this world, receiving from “the Father of spirits” (Heb 12:9) a “living soul.”

2. He “took his journey into a far country” (:13).

The “far country” is the world which is away from God, so far away that “the whole world lieth in the wicked one” (1 John 5:19). As the result of Adam’s sin man was separated from God, and all of Adam’s descendants enter this world “alienated from the life of God” (Eph 4:18). There is a great gulf between the thrice holy God and the sinful creature which none but Christ can bridge. The sinner is away from God in his heart, in his thoughts, in his ways. How much this explains!

It explains Atheism. Atheism is simply man’s attempt to hide from the discomfiture of God’s acknowledged presence. Men will give you many reasons as to why they are infidels, agnostics, and atheists, but these reasons are, in reality, only so many “excuses” (Luk 14:18): the real reason is that men are determined to get away from the avowed acknowledgment of God.

This explains the general neglect among men of the Bible. They will give you many reasons as to why they do not read it—they cannot find the time, there is much in it they cannot understand, and there are so many conflicting interpretations of its contents, and so they leave it alone. Men esteem the holy Word of God less highly than they do the writings of their fellow sinners. And yet the Scriptures treat of many subjects of profound importance and vital moment: they furnish the only reliable information concerning the origin of man, the nature of man, the purpose of man’s existence, and the life beyond the grave, etc. Impelled by an uneasy conscience many will read a chapter in the Bible now and again, but that is all, and the real reason for this is because the Bible brings man into the presence of God, and that is the very last thing the natural man desires. What a proof is this, then, that he is in “the far country;” that at heart he is away from the Father!

This explains why it is that sinners, as such, have no delight in prayer. Real prayer is a direct speaking to God through the mediation of Christ. It is that which brings us into contact and communion with the Great Invisible. But the sinner has no heart for this. He finds no enjoyment in pouring out his soul to God. If he prays at all, prayer is an irksome task and a mere repetition of words. He had rather do almost anything than pray, and the reason for this is because he wants to keep away from God.

This explains why it is that the sinner has no real delight in the public worship of God. It is true that he may go to church: a vague sense of duty may take him there, or it may be from force of habit acquired through a Christian upbringing, or it may be an uneasy conscience which renders him a punctual attendant. Nor is he always an uninterested hearer. When the preacher delivers his message with oratorical fire and with rhetorical embellishments that are pleasing to the ear, he is not only interested but gratified. But let the preacher forget his rhetoric, let him leave his generalizations—let him address himself directly to the sinner’s conscience, and say, “Thou art the man;” let him be brought into the presence of God and the poor unsaved listener will at once be rendered uneasy, and it is more than doubtful whether he will return any more to hear that preacher.

3. He “wasted his substance with riotous living” (:13).

As pointed out above, “the substance” is the living soul which every man receives from his Creator, and which is to be regarded as capital in hand with which to do his trading both for time and eternity. And here is how the sinner, every sinner, uses the “portion” that he has received from the Father of spirits. He squanders it.

Let it be said emphatically that this “prodigal son” is not merely a representation of some particular class of sinners who are more wicked than their fellows, whose offences against God are more flagrant than the general run of sinners; but instead, the “prodigal son” pictures the course that is followed by *every* descendant of Adam.

“And there wasted his substance with riotous living.” From the hour of his birth the natural man has never cherished a single feeling, exercised a single thought, or performed a single deed that is acceptable to God. So far as eternity is concerned he is spiritually barren: his life is fruitless. But not only has he ignored the claims of God, not only has he neglected the things of God, not only has he failed to love the Lord his God with all his heart, but he has squandered his time, misused his talents, and lived *entirely for himself*.

4. He encountered “a mighty famine” (:14).

“And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land” (verse 14). “That land” is the “far country.” It is the world, that world which is away from God, and which, in consequence, “lieth in the wicked one.” And in that land there is “a mighty famine” all the while. It is to be noted, however, that we are told, “there arose a mighty famine in that land.” It was not so there, always. The famine “arose” when man became separated from God, i.e. at the Fall. The “famine” has reference to the fact that there is nothing whatever in this world that can minister to man’s soul.

5. *He “began to be in want” (:14).*

Here, in the history of a sinner who is saved eventually, is where hope begins. There are many living in this “far country” today where there is “a mighty famine” but, the tragic thing is, that they are unconscious of it. They are satisfied with what they find here. They are sensible of no need which this world fails to meet. It is only after God begins His work upon the soul that the sinner discovers that everything here is only “vanity and vexation of spirit.” Happy the one who has reached this point. Happy the one who has begun “to be in want.” Happy the one who is conscious of an aching void in his heart, of a yearning in his soul, of a need in his spirit, which the things of this world and the pleasures of sin have failed to satisfy. Such an one is “not far from the kingdom.” Nevertheless, the beginning to be “in want” is but the initial experience. There are other experiences, painful ones, to be passed through before the sinner actually comes to God. Let us follow further the history of “the prodigal son” which so accurately traces the course pursued by each of us.

6. *He “went and joined himself to a citizen of that country” (:15).*

How true to life! Notice he did not decide at once to return to his father—that did not come until later. Instead of returning to the father, he turned to man for relief, and went to work, for as we read, “he (the citizen of that country) sent ... him into his field to feed swine.” Does the Christian reader need an interpreter here? Does not his own past experience supply the key to the meaning of verse 15? The beginning to be “in want” finds its counterpart in the first awakening of the soul, or to use other terms, it corresponds to conviction of sin. And when a soul has been awakened, when it has been convicted of sin, when it has been made conscious of a “want” not yet supplied, what does such an one, invariably, do?

Did you, dear reader, turn *at once* to the Savior? Not if your experience was anything like that of the writer and the vast majority of other Christians he has talked with. If your experience corresponds in anywise with his and theirs, after you were first awakened you began to attempt to work out a righteousness of your own. You betook yourself to the work of reformation, and to aid you in this you turned to man for counsel and help.

And unless the sovereign grace of God overruled it, instead of seeking help from a real Christian who (if he had intelligence in the things of God) would at once have urged you to “search the Scripture” to discover God’s remedy, you turned to some professing Christian, who in reality was only a “citizen of that country”—the world. And if you turned to such an one, he did for you precisely what we read here in the parable—he sent you “to feed swine.” Allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, the “swine” here represents professing Christians, who ultimately apostatize. (See 2 Peter 2:20-22). The one for whom you went for advice told you that what you needed to do was to “engage in Christian service;” “work for the Lord;” “get busy in helping others”—and this while you were still dead in trespasses and sins! Perhaps you were asked to teach a class of unsaved children in the Sunday School, or to be an officer of a young people’s society (the majority of whom were, probably, like yourself—unsaved), and thus “feed the swine.”

7. *He “came to himself” (:17).*

“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,” etc. (verses 16,17). And again we say, How true to life! What did this joining of himself to a citizen of that country, and this working in the field amount to? What relief did it bring to his hungry soul? Just nothing. All there was for him there were “the husks that the swine did eat.” And what did all your labors as an awakened but unregenerate sinner amount to? What relief did they afford your poor heart? None whatever. All your zeal and sacrifices in your so-called “Christian service” provided you with nothing but “husks,” the same husks that the swine “did eat.” And how pathetic are the words that follow next—“And no man gave unto him!” Ah! the need of the awakened sinner lies deeper than any “man” can reach unto. It is this lesson that the sinner must next be taught. He must learn to turn away from man and look unto Christ Himself. It is not until he does this that there will be any relief.

“And when he *came to himself*.” This means that he had recovered his sanity, for previously he was “beside himself”—out of his mind. The Scriptures represent the sinner as suffering from spiritual insanity, and regeneration as the bestowment of a right mind. In Ephesians 4:17-18, the saints of God are exhorted to “walk not as other Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.” Again, in Mark 5 we have in the demoniac a type of the sinner in bondage to Satan, who, when delivered by our Lord, is seen “sitting, and clothed, and in his right mind.” Finally, in 2 Timothy 1:7 the change which the new birth produces is described in the following terms: “For God has not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.”

Insanity is the lack of capacity to think correctly, and to form proper estimates of ourselves and others. It is a suffering from various forms of hallucination. An unmistakable evidence of insanity is, that the one whose mind is

deranged is quite ignorant of the fact, and supposes himself to be all right. What is true in the natural realm has its counterpart in the spiritual. The sinner's understanding is darkened; his mind is full of strange delusions; he is unable to arrive at correct conclusions; and what is the saddest part of it all is, that he is totally unconscious of his spiritual disease. But when the Holy Spirit of God has worked upon a man, these hallucinations are removed, the darkness is taken away from his understanding and, like the "prodigal," he "comes to himself."

8. *He said, "I will arise and go to my father" (:18).*

It is not until after the sinner has been made to feel "the mighty famine" that exists in the far country, it is not until he has discovered that "no man" can give unto him, and it is not until he has "come to himself," that he begins to reason aright and remind himself that in his father's house there is "bread enough and to spare." And it is only then that he declares "I will arise and go to my father," which means, it is only then that the will begins to move Godwards. And what is the next thing that we read? Why, that the prodigal not only determines to arise and go to his father, but he announces that he will "say unto him, Father I have sinned against heaven and before thee." In other words, he is now willing to take the place of a lost sinner before God. That is what repentance is.

9. *He is still legalistic.*

I will say, "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" (verses 18,19). Applying the language of this to the history of the sinner coming to God, we here reach the point where, though the Holy Spirit has done much for the awakened one—discovering his need, and enlightening his mind, directing his will, and producing conviction—the work of grace is not yet complete. The sinner is now deeply conscious of his own utter unworthiness, but not yet has he learned of the marvelous grace of God which more than meets his deep need. This comes out in the fact that the highest conception that the mind of the returning "prodigal" rose to was that of being made one of the "hired servants." How legalistic the mind of man is! How tenaciously he clings to his own performances! How strenuously he will contend for the need of bringing in his own works! A "hired servant" is one who has to work for all he gets.

10. *He "arose and came to his father" (:20).*

Blessed be His name, God does not cease His patient work within us until this point has been reached. Dull of comprehension though we are, our minds at enmity against Him, our wills essentially opposed to Him, He graciously perseveres with us until our understandings have been enlightened, our enmity has been removed, our wills so subdued that we arise and come to Him.

And what was the reception the prodigal met with? Do you know what portion was meted out to a "prodigal son" under the Law? Read with me the following passage: "If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die" (Deut 21:18-21). How then did the father receive this "prodigal"? And this brings us to consider:

III. The Prodigal's Reception

How many an exercised heart has wondered what sort of a reception he would meet with if he came to God. Blessed it is to ponder the closing portion of the third part of this matchless parable. In expounding the significance of what is recorded of this "prodigal son" as he departed from the "father," we have seen portrayed the representative experiences of the sinner. As we turn now to the happy sequel, we shall see that what happened to him as he returned to the "father" also pictures the representative experiences of the believer.

1. *The Hearty Welcome He Received*

"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" (verse 20). How inexpressibly blessed this is! Five things (the number of grace) are here predicated of "his father." First, when he was yet a great way off his father "saw him." And what does this tell us? Why, that the father was looking out for him! The father was eagerly waiting for him. And how keen are love's eyes! Even while he was yet a "great way off" his father saw him. But how solemnly this brings out the distance in which by nature we were from God! Even after the sinner has "come to himself," and turned his back upon the "far country," and has set his face homewards, he is "yet a great way off!" Nevertheless, all praise to His sovereign grace, "But now, in Christ Jesus, ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:13).

Second, his father “had compassion.” The “prodigal” must have presented a miserable appearance: he had devoured his living with harlots (:30)—the illicit love for the things of the world, instead of loving God with “all our hearts”—he had suffered the effects of the “mighty famine” (:14), and he had gone out into the fields to “feed swine” (:15). What a pitiable object he must have been! Yet did his father have “compassion” on him! And O dear Christian reader, how did you and I look just before the Father received us? Understandings darkened, hearts desperately wicked, wills rebellious, minds at enmity against Him, with “no good thing” in us! Nevertheless, “God, who is rich in mercy, for His great love wherewith He loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ” (Eph 2:4, 5).

Third, his father “ran” to meet him. We do not read of the “prodigal” running as he set out to return to his “father.” All that is said of him is that “he arose, and came to his father.” But of the “father” it is said that he “ran!” Do you know dear reader, that this is the only verse in all the Bible which represents God as being in a hurry! In the restoration of the ruined earth He acted orderly, we might say leisurely. In everything else but this, God is viewed as acting with calmness and deliberation, as befits One who has all eternity at His disposal. But here is what we term the impatience of divine Love.

Fourth, his father “fell on his neck.” He not only “saw him” while a great way off, he not only had “compassion” on this woe-begone prodigal, he not only “ran” to meet him, but he “fell on his neck.” He embraced him; he flung around him the welcoming arms of love.

Fifth, his father “kissed him.” Once more we would point out that nothing is said here of the son kissing the father. It is the “father” that takes the lead at every stage! He “kissed” him, not rebuffed him. He “kissed” him, not bade him depart. He “kissed” him, not chided him for his wanderings. What marvelous grace! How all this reveals the Father’s heart! The “kiss” speaks of love, of reconciliation, of intimate relationship.

2. *The Prodigal’s Response*

Notice now the “prodigal’s” response. “And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son” (:21). Notice three things. First, he is deeply conscious of his *sinful condition*, and he hesitates not to confess it. And the nearer we approach the thrice holy God the clearer shall we perceive our vileness. Second, he was profoundly convinced of his *unworthiness*, and delayed not to own it. It is a discovery of the marvelous grace of God which brings us to a deeper realization of how thoroughly undeserving we are, for grace and merit are as much opposed to each other as light and darkness. Third, observe that he says nothing now about being made a “*hired servant!*” No; the wondrous grace of the “father” had taught him better.

3. *The Robe Which Was Put upon Him*

“But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him” (:22). There are four things to be noted here. First, the position the “son” yet occupied. We cannot but admire the marvelous accuracy and beauty of every line in this divinely drawn picture. The previous verses have shown us the happy meeting between the father and the son, the father’s hearty welcome, the son’s broken-hearted confession. And this, be it remembered, is viewed as occurring some distance away from the father’s house, for he “ran” out to meet him. Now, as the father and son draw near to the house, the father calls to his servants, and says, “Bring forth the best robe.” Ah! the “father” could not have the prodigal at his table in his filthy rags. No; that would be setting aside the righteous requirements of His House: “Grace reigns through righteousness” (Rom 5:21), and never at the expense of it. Beautiful it is, then, to behold grace which ran out to meet the “prodigal,” and now the righteousness which makes provision for the covering of his filthy rags!

Second, we behold with thankful hearts the provision that is made for the poor wanderer. Note it carefully that the prodigal did not bring his “robe” with him out of the far country, nor did he procure it on his homeward journey. No indeed; it was provided for him, was furnished by the father. It was there ready for him, waiting for him!

Third, admire the quality of the clothing provided for him. Said the father, “Bring forth the best robe.” What marvelous grace was this! The “best robe” in the father’s house was reserved for the prodigal! And what can this signify, but that the sinner saved by grace shall be robed in a garment more glorious than that worn by the unfallen angels! But, we exclaim, Can such a thing be? Is that possible? Ah! dear readers, what is this “best robe”? Why it is the imputed righteousness of Christ Himself which shall cover the filthy rags of our righteousness—that “imputed righteousness” which was wrought out for us in the perfect obedience and vicarious death of our Savior. Read with me Isaiah 61:10: “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, He hath covered me with the robe of righteousness.” How remarkable it is to notice that this “best robe” was the first thing which the “prodigal” received at the hands of his father! Right here is the answer

to the objection made by those who reject the evangelical interpretation of this parable, for in the “best robe” we have that which speaks of the life and death of Christ.

Fourth, notice that the “best robe” was placed upon him: “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on Him” (:22). Everything was done for him. Not only was the “best robe” provided for him, it was also placed upon him. How this reminds us of what we read in Genesis 3:21: “Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them.” The Lord God not only Himself supplied the “coats of skins,” but He “clothed” our first parents! We find the same thing again in Zechariah 3:4: “Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment.” Oh to grace how great a debtor!

4. The Ring Placed upon His Hand

“And put a ring on his hand” (:22). Again we notice that the ring was not supplied by him, but provided for him. And, too, it was not handed to him, but put on him—not a thing did he do for himself! And of what does the “ring,” put “on his hand,” speak? The “ring” is the seal of love, of plighted troth. Later it becomes the symbol of wedded union. And, is it not true that the returning sinner receives not only the “best robe” of Christ’s imputed righteousness, but also God’s seal, which “seal” is the Holy Spirit Himself: “Who hath also sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts” (2Co 1:22)? Yes, the Holy Spirit is the Seal of God’s love, the evidence of a plighted troth, for, “grieve not the Holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30). And, again, it is the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ: “But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit” (1Co 6:17). The “ring” also speaks of ownership: the woman who wears my ring does so as a sign that she is mine—my wife. So, too, the Holy Spirit in us tells us that we belong to Christ: “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (Rom 8:9). And once more, in Scripture the “ring” is given as a mark of high honor and esteem: “And Pharaoh took off his ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph’s hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain around his neck...and they cried before him, Bow the knee” (Gen 41:42, 43). This “ring” which the “father” gave to the “prodigal” was put on his hand. Now the hand speaks of labor. As then the “ring” is here the emblem of the Holy Spirit, does not this signify that henceforth, all our works should be performed in the power of that same Spirit?

5. The Shoes Provided for His Feet

“And shoes on his feet” (:22). Once more we are constrained to say how marvelously complete is this lovely parabolic picture. Here we see every need of the believer met. The “kiss” of reconciliation to assure him of a hearty welcome; the “best robe” to cover his filthy rags; the “ring” put on his hand, to show that he belongs to God, and to denote that his labors henceforth must be in the power of the Spirit. And now the “shoes” for his “feet” speak of God’s provision for the daily walk.

In giving instructions to Moses concerning the observance of the Passover, the Lord said, “And thus shall ye eat it: with your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand” (Exo 12:11). They were not prepared to go forth on their pilgrimage until “shoes” were on their feet. And how blessed is the sequel: forty years later Moses reminded them, that though the Lord had led them for forty years in the wilderness, “Your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and thy shoe is not waxen old upon thy foot!” So, again, when the Lord sent forth the twelve, he said to them, “be shod with sandals” (Mar 6:9). And in Ephesians 6 where believers are exhorted to “put on the whole armor of God,” one of the specifications is, “And your feet shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace.” Not until our feet are thus shod are we prepared to go forth with the Gospel of God’s grace to a perishing world. It is exceedingly blessed to contrast these two passages: “Their feet (the wicked) run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood” (Isa 59:7); “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation!” (Isa 52:7).

6. The Fatted Calf Killed and Eaten

“And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it: and let us eat, and be merry” (:23). First, note the contrast between the words of the father in connection with the “best robe,” and here with the fatted calf. In the former it was “bring forth,” which indicated that the “prodigal” was on the outside. But now that he has been clothed, now that he has had put on him the “best robe,” now that he has been suitably adorned for the “father’s” presence—“Made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col 1:12)—he is now inside the “father’s” house, hence the “bring hither.” How marvelously and minutely accurate!

The “fatted calf” speaks of Christ Himself in all His excellency, provided, too, by the Father. The killing of the “calf” tells of the Savior’s death for us, thus making it possible for sinners to be reconciled to a holy God. But the “fatted calf” was not only killed, it was, like the Passover “lamb,” to be eaten, and eating here speaks of communion. And observe the word of the “father” here: it was not, “and let him eat,” but “let us eat.” It is the father with the

now reconciled sinner, coming together, and they communing together over that which speaks of Christ. It is the sacrifice of Christ which is the ground of our fellowship with the Father.

7. *The Resultant Joy*

“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” (:23, 24). How inexpressibly blessed is this! What a glorious climax! Here is the “prodigal,” now a son at the Father’s table, a place—not among the “hired servants,” but—in the Father’s family is now His. Together they commune over that which tells of Christ, the perfect One, slain for us. And what is the fruit of “communion”? Is it not joy, such merriment of heart of which this poor world knows nothing? And note again the plural number: it is not only that “he,” the son, was “merry,” but “they began to be merry.” The Father finds His delight, together with His children, feeding upon Christ the Son.

It is indeed striking to contrast what is before us here in Luke 15 with another scene presented in the Old Testament Scriptures. In 1 Samuel 28 we have brought before us the apostate Saul and the witch of Endor—a greater contrast could not be imagined! And here, too, we read of a fatted calf being killed, but how great the difference! “And the woman had a fat calf in the house; and she hasted, and killed it, and took flour, and kneaded it, and did bake unleavened bread thereof: And she brought it before Saul, and before his servants; and they did eat. Then they rose up, and went away that night” (1Sa 28:24, 25). Yes, they did “eat,” but notice that nothing was said of them being “merry.” No indeed. They represented that large company found among the professed people of God who take the name of Christ on their lips, and even go through the form of communing with Him as they come to His “table.” But after all, it is only a pretense, a mechanical performance. Their hearts are not in it. Their souls do not feed upon Christ.

And note, too, another striking contrast. Of Saul and his servants it is said, “They did eat. Then they rose up, and went away that night” (1Sa 28:25). Ah! solemn thought, unspeakably solemn. The formal professor rises from the “table,” and goes away—leaves that which speaks of Christ; goes away as joyless and empty as he came; goes away into that dark “night” which shall never end.

But how entirely different is what we read of concerning the reconciled “prodigal!” He, together with his father, sits down to eat of the fatted calf and “they began to be merry.” And there the picture leaves them! Nothing is said about going “away,” still less is there any reference to the “night.” And “they began to be merry,” and that merriment is only just begun. Blessed be God, it shall know no ending. Together with the Father, finding our joy in Christ, we shall be “merry” forever and ever.

And now perhaps a closing word should be said upon the “elder son.” It seems strange to us that so many have experienced difficulty here. Who is represented by the “elder son”? Almost endless are the answers given. Personally, we are satisfied that the elder son represents the same class as do the “ninety and nine sheep,” and the nine pieces of silver. These picture the “Pharisees and scribes” who murmured against the Savior because He received and ate with sinners (verse 2). The one parable in three parts was designed by Christ to show how that God did go after that which was lost, and what was the blessed portion which they received from Him. Then He contrasts the lot of those who, because they deem themselves righteous, refuse to take the place of sinners before Him. He meets them on the ground of their own profession, and therefore does He speak of them as “sheep” and the “elder son.” But oh, what a portion is theirs!

In the first part of the parable the self-righteous formalists who despise the grace of God are represented as being left in the wilderness (see verse 4), while in the last part of the parable he is seen outside the father’s house. How accurate and yet how tragic is the picture Christ here draws of the Pharisee. “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” (:25, 26). Ah! he is a stranger to the merriment of those in fellowship with God. He knows not why they should be so supremely happy, and therefore does he have to ask “what these things meant.” And when explanation is made to him we are told, “he was angry, and would not go in” (:28). But more, “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 make merry with my friends” (:28, 29). He speaks of “serving” his father for this is all he knows. He boasts of his obedience, and then he confesses his lack of that which speaks of communion. And how he betrayed himself when he said, “Yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends,” not “with thee!” The closing verses of the chapter must be interpreted in the light of the whole context: “Thou art ever with me.” Here Christ puts into the mouth of this elder son that which was the boast of the proud Pharisee, but it should be carefully noted that throughout he is carefully pictured as being on the outside, see especially verse 28.

But let our final word be upon the “prodigal.” By comparing carefully six clauses it will be found they are arranged in couplets, and each couplet points a striking contrast. First, we read “There arose a mighty famine in the

land” (:14): now contrast what we read in verse 20, “And he arose, and came to his father.” Second, “He came to himself” (:17): now contrast what is said in verse 20, he “Came to his father.” Third, “He began to be in want” (:14): now contrast what we have in verse 24, “And they began to be merry.” And how striking is the order of these.

Now dear reader, is this intelligible to you, or have I been speaking in an unknown tongue? Have you felt the “famine” of this world? Have you been “in want”—your soul crying out for a satisfying portion? Have you “come to yourself,” come to your senses, and discovered the “exceeding sinfulness of sin”? If so, have you come to God and taken the place of a lost sinner before Him? Have you cast yourself upon His sovereign grace and received as your own this wondrous Provision He has made for hell-deserving sinners? If you have, then you know the blessedness of belonging to God’s family. If you have not, and will come to God now, just as you are, confessing your utter sinfulness and unworthiness, and casting yourself on His free grace, you too shall receive a hearty welcome, the kiss of reconciliation, the robe of righteousness, and a place in communion with God Himself. “Come, for all things are now ready.”



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