

THE PRODIGAL SON AND HIS BROTHER

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the more familiar parables that the Lord told during His life on earth. It is a story of repentance and forgiveness. It is, in fact, the third of three parables in the same chapter in the Gospel of Luke with this same theme. The first of these ends with the statement, “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.” And the second ends, “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

This third parable, of the prodigal son, is, however, longer and more elaborate. It is not only a tale of repentance and forgiveness; it has also something to say about envy and jealousy.

It features three figures: a certain man—apparently, in the context of the story, a landowner—and his two sons. And the younger son goes to his father and demands his inheritance. “Give me the portion of goods that falls to me,” he says.

Already we suspect some dishonor in the son, for an inheritance is a gift freely given. It is not something to be demanded. We also begin to suspect that the father may be a wealthy man, for he gives the younger son what he asks. But it is not land that he gives. It is an inheritance that can be spent on wastrel living. If the father has that to give, having a value equivalent to that of half his land, without parting with any of his land, then surely we are to understand him to be a wealthy man.

The younger son, then, does not invest what he has been given, either in land or in anything else of value, but instead pursues a hedonistic life of pleasure. And when he has spent all that he was given, he hires himself out to a pig farmer. There is, however, a famine in the land, suggesting that the farmer has little to give him in the way of wages, and the son ends up hungering for the slop fed to the pigs.

There is a lesson in this: that a hedonistic pursuit of pleasure does not bring happiness. And happiness is what everyone seeks. That is universally true. Everyone wants to be happy, and everyone forms some idea as to what will make him or her happy. Perhaps the right spouse. Perhaps the right job. For some, wealth. For others, social status, influence, even power. Perhaps unending physical pleasure in drugs or alcohol, or in sexual promiscuity.

But there is no sense of self-fulfillment in any of these external conditions and pursuits, and so no happiness. Certainly no lasting happiness. Happiness is a state and condition of the spirit, not of the body. It results from loving and serving others and from being loved and appreciated by them. Without that, life is joyless and empty of meaning.

This is the joyless and empty state to which the younger son was reduced. So, having wasted his inheritance, he determines to return to his father and to become one of his workers. And when he does, “Father,” he says. “I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”

Thus the younger son expresses his repentance. He has, as we say, learned the hard way.

In this there is a second lesson, that whatever the sin, there is a pathway back to the fold through genuine repentance. There is only one unforgivable sin, namely sin against the Holy

Spirit, which is only possible if one first embraces the Lord and religion in faith and love and subsequently rejects them. This is not easy to do, for no one is admitted more interiorly into truths of faith and goods of charity than the extent to which he can be maintained in them to the end of his life (*Divine Providence* nos. 221-233).

Almost always, then, there is a pathway back through repentance. And in the case of the prodigal son, there is a further lesson in the reception he meets. For the father does not condemn him. Rather he welcomes him with compassion and celebration. "Bring out the best robe and put it on him," he said, "and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it," he said, "and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The extent of the celebration may be measured by the killing of the fatted calf. For people in ancient times did not eat as much meat as we do today. They had no refrigeration, and meat not eaten in a few days would become rotten and unfit for food. People living near seas and lakes did eat fish, because fish could be wholly consumed in a brief time. But not beef, unless many mouths were present to finish the whole of it, as in the case of a celebration. We may imagine, therefore, a celebration of the prodigal son's return to include a number of people—all the father's servants, perhaps, and some of his friends and neighbors.

Thus the father forgave his son, and the lesson for us is to be ready to forgive the penitent. Readiness to forgive is, indeed, a Christian virtue.

"Blessed are the merciful," the Lord said, "for they will obtain mercy." (Matt. 5:7)

To the woman taken in adultery, He said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:11)

When Peter asked Him how often he should forgive—whether up to seven times," the Lord replied, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matt. 18:21,22)

And in one of His last appearances to His disciples, He told them that the purpose of His crucifixion was that "repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations." (Luke 24:46,47)

In short, to be a Christian is to be ready to forgive—to forgive even sinners who repent and return to a life in conformity with the precepts of religion; who perhaps, having left the church, and having lived contrary to its teachings, now repent and seek to return; who in heart are moved similarly to the prodigal son to believe in effect, "I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

There is always the natural temptation to think, "You have made your bed. Now lie in it." To think the penitent unworthy of forgiveness. After all, did he or she not willingly choose to stray from the narrow path?

But to be a true Christian is to dismiss that thought, to discipline oneself if necessary to welcome the penitent, as though welcoming a wayward and repentant child back home. That is the message and the lesson of the parable of the prodigal son.

There is, however, still more to the parable. It has also something to say about envy and jealousy. For when the elder son learns of his brother's return and their father's celebration of it, he was angry and would not participate. "Lo, these many years I have been serving you," he said to his father, "I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends."

The elder brother was jealous of the younger brother, and he envied his father's show of love

for his younger brother by his father's welcome of him.

Was the elder brother's anger justified? Certainly it could be viewed as a natural reaction. But consider the father's response: "Son, you are always with me," he said, "and all that I have is yours."

The land, all his father's property, was now his. His father's servants were now his servants. If his brother was to be like one of the servants, as he had implored his father, he would now be working for the elder brother. So what was the state and condition of his brother that the elder brother should be envious and jealous of him?

This points up the negative effect of envy and jealousy; for it turns the attention away from the blessings one already has. Which of the two sons in the end was better off? Surely it was the elder son, whose envy and jealousy blinded him to the fact that everything belonging to his father was now his.

There are several cases of envy and jealousy found in the Old Testament: Cain's jealousy of his brother Abel. Sarah's jealousy of Hagar. Joseph's brothers' jealousy of him as his father's favorite. And of course Saul's jealousy of David, which led him to fear David's usurpation of the throne.

"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." So sang the chorus of women who came out of the city to welcome back Israel's victorious army. And owing to his envy and jealousy Saul tried several times to kill David or to get him killed. Did Saul have anything to fear? Here he was, king of Israel, with all the trappings of the throne: servants, wealth, power, and in fact, honor. The women did sing that Saul had slain his thousands. As for David, twice he had an opportunity to kill Saul, and twice he deliberately refused to harm the Lord's anointed.

No. Saul had nothing to fear. And yet his envy and jealousy in the end drove him mentally unbalanced, to have an evil spirit that troubled him.

The trouble with envy and jealousy is that they create discontent. In several places the Heavenly Doctrines observe that someone who trusts in God and His providence is content with his lot (AC 8478:2, DP 250:2, Charity 168). Envy and jealousy destroy that contentment. They blind the mind to blessings already possessed. Cain was jealous of his brother Abel, even though he was living in a paradise. Sarai was jealous of Hagar, even though she was Abraham's wife and Hagar was only a slave woman, whose child would be accounted Sarai's child. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him, even though they continued to participate in the family's wealth in livestock. And Saul was jealous of David, even though he was king of Israel, and David only one of his captains.

Envy, too, may well lead to coveting, which is Divinely forbidden.

So, now, in considering the parable of the prodigal son, it may be supposed that the younger son is more to be respected than the elder son. For as we noted at the outset of this sermon, the previous two parables in this chapter in Luke end with the statements, first, that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance;" and second, that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

But that the case is not so is made clear in this third parable, the parable of the prodigal son. For though it teaches the ever-present opportunity for repentance and forgiveness, it is the elder son who in the end inherits the father's land. That is because every experience that affects us remains, consciously or unconsciously. Youth is in this way the parent of the adult. We are the

product of our past. Every prior state is gathered up into the present one; and though prior states may be displaced by subsequent events, and unfortunate ones put away through repentance, still they remain.

Nevertheless, because it is possible to repent of past thoughts and actions, so that they are made dormant and inactive, therefore the father of the prodigal son said to his elder son, "It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

Still, because it is better not to have strayed, not to have wasted what one has been given, therefore he first reassured his elder son, saying,, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours."