

“The Parable of the Lost Son” – 4-5

Luke 15:11-32

CXX.-CXXI. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke

Sept. 7 & 21, 2014

What kind of reception does the lost soul seeking reconciliation with God receive? We’ve watched the prodigal renounce his family and his faith, travel to the “far country,” live recklessly, consuming his inheritance and ending up feeding pigs, even longing to eat their food. We’ve seen him come to his senses, purpose to return to his father, confess his sin, and plead for mercy. What response should he expect from his father, and should we from our Father in heaven? This is an important question not the least because of three common misconceptions that must be refuted if the Pharisees, who object to Jesus fraternizing with sinners, are to be corrected.

First, are some so far gone that they are beyond restoration? This outlook is more common than one might have thought. The child molester, the mass murderer, the evil dictators who caused millions to suffer horrible loss and death, the terrorist butchers and barbarians are all beyond forgiveness, many would think. They should go straight to hell. They don’t *deserve* reconciliation with God. They should never be pardoned. Or at least, the bar for forgiveness should be set so high that people like them, like the tax-collectors and sinners, will rarely be able to achieve it.

Second, are certain religious works necessary before restoration? Must one keep the ceremonial laws, the cleansing ordinances, the kosher dietary laws; must one tithe, honor the Sabbath and observe the calendar of holy days, and then and only then, is the forgiveness of sin possible? Must sinners first clean up their acts before they can be restored to God?

Third, on the other hand, is God's nature to forgive such that one might infer from the parable that lost souls need not repent of their sins in order to be reconciled to God? Indeed, given the absence of any reference to a redeemer, cross, atonement, or the Holy Spirit, need anything at all be done? Must the lost soul even return to the Father? Some liberals of the old school argued for universalism on the basis of this and other texts.

The answer to these questions can be seen in the response of the father to the returning prodigal. What does he require?

The eager Father

What does the prodigal encounter upon return? An angry father? A father disgusted by his son's disrespectful behavior? Is his reception cool, the father cautious or apprehensive? Is the father even tentative, taking a "wait and see" approach? We see none of that. Jesus says,

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

(Lk 15:20)

Before we proceed, there are two unwarranted conclusions of which to be aware as we apply the parable to ourselves. Both are related to the father, who in the terms of the parable represents God. Some have concluded that the immediate forgiveness of the father means 1) that parents should immediately without any questions, without any probation, without any testing, accept the word of a wayward child's profession of repentance and restore him; 2) that the church should likewise immediately accept the repentance of a wayward member without any church discipline; if they express repentance, the thinking goes, they should be fully restored without admonition or suspension from the sacrament. The problem with both of these conclusions is that whereas God knows all things and in particular knows people's hearts, we don't. He can safely and joyfully extend immediate forgiveness. He knows if a prodigal is sincere or not. He knows if his repentance is genuine or not. We as parents and church leaders don't. For us to take the word of a long-term prodigal at face value, one who has manipulated and lied for years, is naïve. It is to risk becoming enablers. It is to become complicit in their "crimes." This is especially the case when there has been repeated deception. We parents and church leaders can't know if our prodigals are sincere or merely wearing another mask behind which to hide further rebellion and self-indulgence. We have to proceed carefully and wisely, whereas the father-figure in Jesus' parable does know. He represents God. God is able to do what we cannot do. Consequently, He cannot serve as a model for parents without some qualifications.

How then does God respond to a returning rebel?

Compassion

The first thing that Jesus tells us is that the father “felt compassion.” Why compassion? Why not just joy? Because though he sees his son “a long way off,” yet he is able to see his rags and filth. He is able to “connect the dots,” as we would say, and realize the extent to which his son has fallen. He discerns the suffering brought on by the ravages of sin, the degradation and shame. His response? Sympathy. David Murray, a professor at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, in a modern retelling of the parable, imagines the prodigal son saying to himself,

“Okay, I’m done. I can’t take any more of this. I’ve got to risk it and go home to Dad. The thought of seeing my brother smirking is agony, but I’ve got a chance with my father, especially if I ask his forgiveness and beg for mercy. Even if he takes me on as a servant, that would be more than I could hope for. Maybe he can even help me spiritually, because I’ve sinned against God as well. In fact, I’ve sinned against Him above all. I have no idea what lies ahead, but I’m finished with this so-called ‘life.’ Whatever the future holds back home, it’s got to be better than this, even if I could be a servant. Perhaps Dad will give me a place with the hired help.”¹

¹ David Murray, “The Prodigal Son,” in *Tabletalk*, Vol 36, No 12, Dec. 2012, 14.

However, in the next moment he's asking,

“Who's that on the hill? Looks like Dad. Must have lost a sheep. Oh, now he's running in this direction. I wonder if he saw me? Wait, I think I hear him yelling 'My son, my son, my son. Welcome home, my son, my son.' Can it be? 'Dad, please. Please, Dad! Dad, can you hold off on the kisses?'"²

The father “felt compassion for him” before he ever had a word of remorse from the Prodigal. His outlook is one of sympathy for a son whose foolishness has brought suffering upon himself. This should surprise us to some extent. Again, we could easily imagine the father looking away or turning his back. We can easily imagine the father erupting with fury once his son arrives. We can imagine him slapping him across the face while shouting, “Do you realize what heartache you have caused us? Your mother has been worried sick. You have disgraced the family. Where is your inheritance? Do you mean that you have consumed it all?” And so on. No, compassion greets him, and it greets the lost but repentant sinner. God is angry with sin “every day,” say the Psalms (Ps 7:11). Yet his primary outlook on sinners is not anger but compassion. He is “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin” (Ex 34:6,7a NASB). Where our sin abounds, grace abounds all the more (Rom 5:20). We have a “merciful God and faithful high priest” (Heb 2:17). “We do not have a high priest who is unable to

² Ibid. Because it was “while he was still a long way off” that the father saw him, many have speculated that the father must have been looking for his son, trusting, eager, hopeful that one day he might return. “The father has long been watching for this,” says Plummer (376). This may or may not be implied.

sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” How ought we to respond to a sympathizing savior? “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:15, 16). God is patient with us. As the Apostle Peter says,

The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)

Morris comments,

“The Father’s feeling precedes any confession of repentance by the son and corresponds to the seeking and searching in the two preceding parables.”³

Compassion greets the lost son when he returns. Sympathy meets the rebel when he goes home to the Father.

Forgiveness

The father is so eager for his son’s return that he can’t stand still. The father runs to him, an unusual, even unprecedented and undignified move for an older middle-eastern father. I have wondered what to label the outlook of the father. He could accurately be called “the gracious father,” or “the forgiving father,” or “the merciful father.” However, each of these

³ Morris, 610.

characterizations misses the eager, expectant, hopeful outlook of the father in the parable. He doesn't wait for his son to arrive. The father overlooks the ragged clothes, the filth that covered hands and feet, and the stench that clung to his body. There is no anger. He responds with pity. He can see the poverty, his hunger, his degradation, his pain. He sees the penitent intentions. His son is coming home. He has left the "far country" behind. The father sees in the return of his son the desire for restoration. Consequently, acceptance is immediate, despite the filth and stench of sin. He is received with affection. He is greeted, as God greets all repentant sinners, with warmth and joy. The father "embraced" and "kissed him." "What does this much kissing mean?" Spurgeon asks. "It signifies that when sinners come to God, He gives them a loving reception, and a hearty welcome."⁴ The kissing of the son also may be an additional sign of forgiveness (as in 2 Sam 14:33).

God is not merely *willing* to forgive us. He certainly is not *reluctant* to forgive us, or *begrudging*. God is *eager* to forgive. This is the outlook that we sinners face, and face no matter how low we have fallen. Remember, the point of placing the Jewish prodigal in the pigsty was to describe in a Jewish context that which was the lowest of the low. True, God requires repentance. We must leave the world's pigsties. We must leave the far country. We must confess and forsake our sin. Yet He looks upon us with compassion, eager for our repentance, anxious to forgive and restore, even when our hardships are self-inflicted.

⁴ C. H. Spurgeon, "Prodigal Love for the Prodigal Son," in *The Treasury of the New Testament*, Volume II, (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, n.d.), 27.

And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' (Lk 15:21)

Murray imagines the prodigal continuing,

“Dad, Dad, please don’t call me your son. I don’t deserve that. I am so, so sorry. I’ve sinned against God and I’ve sinned against you. Listen, I know I don’t deserve even this, but if I could even be one of your servants, that would be huge.” “Servant? Never, never, never. You’re my son. Always and ever my son.”⁵

Notice what follows. Before the son is able to complete his pre-planned repentance (vv 18, 19), his father interrupts him. He is not given the opportunity to say, “Make me as one of your hired hands” (v 19). This underscores how eager the father is to forgive. Forgiveness and acceptance is immediate. There is no delay. There is no wait and see. There is no ceremonial law to fulfill. No works to perform. Nothing to prove. No lengthy probation. Not with God. Not with the Father. If we would but repent, He will immediately forgive and accept us.

Restoration

As for the son receiving a reduced status as a slave, the father will hear none of it. The thought never so much as enters into his mind.

⁵ Murray, “The Prodigal Son,” 14.

But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. (Lk 15:22)

The father calls his “slaves” (*doulos*), here referring to household servants. He orders that the son is to be dressed in the best robe, sandals, and be given a ring. These are items “appropriate to a son,” says Marshall.⁶ The “robe” is an indication of status (as in Gen 41:42). The “ring” is “a symbol of authority,” Marshall says.⁷ The “shoes” or “sandals” (NASB) are “a sign that a person was a freeman, not a slave.” In addition, “they were worn in the house by the master, and not by guests” who would have removed their shoes upon entering the house, and so indicate “authority and possession as well as freedom,” says Marshall.⁸ All taken together, “He is doing him honour,” summarizes Plummer.⁹ The father’s actions, says Green, “are all emblematic of the son’s honorable restoration to the family he had snubbed and abandoned.”¹⁰

And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. (Lk 15:23)

This language has entered into the common English usage. The “fattened calf” was one fed and fattened for a special occasion. The commentators estimate that the slaughtered calf would have produced enough meat for 35-75 people, a large party by any measure. This is an elaborate

⁶ Marshall, 610.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, 611.

⁹ Plummer, 376.

¹⁰ Green, 583.

celebration. The father is sparing no expense. The return of the son was an occasion to feast and rejoice.

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate. (Lk 15:24)

The father uses extreme language to typify his outlook on his prodigal son. He was “dead” and now has “come to life.” Like the sheep and the coin, he was “lost” and now is “found.” We are right to think that the Prodigal had announced his intention never to return to home and had implied as much by demanding his inheritance and leaving. Even the father had come to regard him as dead. Yet he had returned, as from the dead, as one long lost and at last found. Put in those terms, what else was there to do but celebrate? This is what the objecting Pharisee and scribes should ponder. What else is there to do but rejoice? This is the attitude of heaven when one lost sinner repents (vv 7, 10). This is why the lost are to be pursued aggressively. This is why they are to be befriended and won.

Am I one who has been in a “far country?” Have I been in rebellion against God, and have I sunk into moral degradation? Have I had enough? Do I want to come home, but I’m wondering if I can? Returning to our opening questions: none have fallen so far that they can’t be restored to the Father. He is compassionate, ready, and eager to forgive and restore us to His family. We will encounter not anger, not contempt, not even cool aloofness, but *celebration*. “Come home!” he says. Leave it all behind. Repudiate the past there. Leave the far country. Rise up from the

immoral filth. Come home. The Father will receive us warmly, compassionately and generously. He will forgive and restore. He will overlook our past. He will never again accuse us. He will never treat us as though we were still unworthy and untrustworthy. He will clothe us in the robes of Christ's righteous. He will shod our feet with the gospel of peace. He will feed us the fattened calf of forgiveness, reconciliation and adoption. He will grant us all the privileges of the children of God.

The resentful Son

We come now to the older brother, who, according to Wright, "provides the real punch-line of the parable."¹¹

Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. (Lk 15:25)

The scene shifts in verse 25 to the dutiful elder brother. There is nothing wrong with being a dutiful elder brother. Indeed, being a dutiful elder brother is a good thing. I like the elder brother. He's been out in the field working away faithfully, while the irresponsible brother has been living it up with his buddies. He hears the "music and dancing." One scholar (Jeremias) suggests that singing and clapping and dancing by the men of the farm is indicated. Morris says it "would have been performed by entertainers, not the banqueters."¹² Either way, it's clear that a party's being

¹¹ Wright, 190.

¹² Morris, 243.

thrown and he's not yet been informed of it. He's been overlooked. He is still laboring and everyone else is celebrating. No doubt he's miffed.

And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' (Lk 15:26, 27)

What's going on? he asks. A party? Even more galling, a party for my brother? The celebration to which I have not yet been invited is for my no-good profligate brother? The older brother angrily objects to the feast and refuses to participate.

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,
(Lk 15:28)

The elder sons' refusal to enter the father's home is "a symbolic act of gargantuan proportions in a culture where kinship boundaries are secured through the sharing of food," Green maintains.¹³ He would have had a role to play in this banquet as a semi-host along with his father. He refuses this role, the role of son and heir. We can understand why he feels this way. His brother has been living scandalously. His return, as he sees it, is an occasion not for celebration but shame. Where the prodigal has been and what he's been doing will become the talk of the town once more.

"We've been trying to move on," he might be thinking. "For months all people could talk about

¹³ Green, 585.

was his departure and journey to the ‘far country.’ Just when everything had finally quieted down he returns to stir it all up again, bringing further disgrace to the family,” he thinks. Pack up the band. Dismiss the partiers. Pull down the shades. Hide the bum in a closet.

The father “came out” to the elder brother. Here is the seeking love of the previous two parables. “The father does not wait for the elder brother to come into the house to him; he goes out to him,” Warfield observes.¹⁴ The father “entreated” the older boy (*parekalei*) rendered by Morris as “he spoke kindly to him.”¹⁵ He speaks “soothing words,” says Warfield.¹⁶ Yet the older brother obstinately refuses to go in. His father’s pleas make no impact upon him. He chooses to remain outside.

but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.’ (Lk 15:29)

The father, the prodigal son, and the household celebrate, and the elder brother remains outside, self-righteous, superior, and resentful. He continues,

¹⁴ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 21.

¹⁵ Morris, 244.

¹⁶ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 21.

'But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' (Lk 15:30)

We only begin to understand the nature of the older brother's outlook when we look carefully at what drives his resentment. What does he resent? Having to serve his father? His brother's sin? Missing out on the opportunity his brother had to indulge the flesh? The graciousness of his father?

Warfield explains as he applies the parable to the outlook of the Pharisees and scribes:

Their moving principle was not, as they fancied, a zeal for righteousness which would not have sin condoned, but just a mean-spirited jealousy which was incapable of the natural response of the human spirit in the presence of a great blessing. They are like some crusty elder brother, says our Lord, who, when the long-lost wanderer comes contritely home, is filled with bitter jealousy of the joyful reception he receives rather than with the generous delight that moves all human hearts at the recovery of the lost.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid, 20.

N. T. Wright makes a similar observation. “Here were all these people being changed, being healed, having their lives transformed physically, emotionally, morally, and spiritually, and the grumblers could only see litter, the human garbage that they normally despised and avoided.”¹⁸

We are being led to see the elder brother not as righteous but as a *different kind of sinner*.

Warfield continues:

The effect (of the Parable), you see, is to place the Pharisaic objectors themselves in the category of sinners, side by side with the outcasts they had despised; to probe their hard hearts until they recognized their lost estate also; and so to bring them as themselves prodigals back in repentance to the Father’s house.¹⁹

The elder brother represents not the vile, degraded sinner, but the civilized, cultured, religious sinner. His sins are not the gross public kind, like his brother’s, but the hidden, internal heart kind. He too, without repentance, remains outside the father’s house. He is an outcast. He is a prodigal, religious, moral, observant, but a prodigal. He represents, according to Ryle, “a type of all narrow-minded self-righteous people in every age of the church.”²⁰ Jesus’ point, Warfield summarizes, is that,

¹⁸ Wright, 190.

¹⁹ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 21.

²⁰ Ryle, II:185.

the Father in heaven has no righteous children on earth; that His grace is needed for all, and most of all for those who dream they have no need of it . . . our Lord breaks down the artificial distinction by which they had separated themselves from their sinful brethren, and in doing so breaks down also the barriers which held their sympathies back and opens the way to full appreciation by them of the joy He would have them feel in the recovery of the lost.²¹

Let us now look in detail at the sins of the elder brother.

First, he demands reward for his life of service. “Look!” he says. “These many years I have served you . . .” What is he saying? Sounds like a mixture of pride and complaint. I’ve served faithfully. He’s played shamefully. Truth is, as Wright points out, father and son had been working as partners since, “the father had already divided his assets between them (v 12).”²² The older brother has been working for himself as much as working for his father. When the father dies, all that he owns will go to the older brother. Probably this is a part of the older brother’s gripe. Anything spent on the younger brother would be coming out of the older brother’s future inheritance. Yet, Morris points out that “his use of the verb *douleuō* ‘to serve as a slave’ (cf. NEB, ‘I have slaved for you all these years’) gives him away. He did not really understand what being a son means.”²³ The NIV renders it, “I’ve been slaving for you.” What else? “Yet you

²¹ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 22.

²² Wright, 190.

²³ Morris, 244.

never gave me...” (v 30). I deserve what for my brother was a gift he does not deserve. I’ve earned it. I’ve merited it.

This is the outlook of religious sinners. On the one hand, they view the service of God as sacrifice, as a burden, as self-deprivation, as drudgery. On the other hand, they expect reward. If they are going to give up so much, they want pay-back. They deserve it.

Service, rightly understood, is a privilege. When we properly serve God we do so out of gratitude, not for reward. Our service is not meritorious. Our best works are deeply flawed. Rewards there are in this life, and rewards there shall be in eternity, yet they don’t provide the motive. Grace does. Love does. Gratitude does. We place no confidence in our service. It should have been enough for the elder brother to have lived in his father’s presence and to have enjoyed his provisions of food, clothing, shelter, and love. It should be enough for us that God is our Father, that our sins are forgiven, that we have been promised eternity in heaven with God, and that He loves us and provides for us in this life.

Over the years I’ve noticed that among those who are truly godly, among ministers, missionaries, Sunday School teachers, elders, deacons, and church members, there is an admirable tendency to completely depreciate any mention of sacrifice or cost in the service of God. Ask them what they have given up, they’ll say “nothing.” They simply

want to contribute. They just want to serve. They are ready to give and work and go and do in any way that they can, and count it their highest privilege.

The problem with the elder brother is that he views service as a *quid pro quo*. I've been slaving, he says, "yet you have never given me a kid" (NASB). He has worked so as to be paid. He sees work not as grateful service for his father but as contract labor. This means he sees it as a possibility *to earn his inheritance through hard labor*. He does not see his reward as a gift. The elder brother is "lost" after the fashion of religious sinners. Religious sinners are *legalists*. That term gets tossed around far too indiscriminately today. What we mean is that they, the legalists, think they can earn salvation. They imagine that they can earn eternal life. They fail to understand that we could never do enough to earn a place in heaven with God. We cannot earn our inheritance. We cannot earn a place in the Father's household. We could never be good enough, or work hard enough. The elder brother, and the Pharisees and scribes with him, betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the ways of God with men.

Second, he demands reward for his life of obedience. The elder brother continues in verse 29, "and I have never disobeyed a command of yours." Yes, and the point would be what? He's building his case for the father's injustice. I've not been rewarded. There's been no "kid" for me. There has been no "pay off." My obedience has gone unrecognized. I have earned reward and never received it. The inequity is appalling to him.

“I have *never* disobeyed?” Here the older brother betrays his attitude. Never? Really? He has an inflated view of his virtue. He thinks his perfect obedience merits the gifts that his brother didn’t deserve. Yet, “you killed the fattened calf for him” and not for me (v 30)!

Note what his outlook is not. He isn’t saying, as I think he should, that obedience is its own reward. He is not grateful, as we should be, for the “good” and “righteous” and “holy” and “spiritual” law of God (Rom 7:14ff). The Psalmist delights in the law of God and meditates on it day and night (Ps 1:2). He finds it more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (Ps 19:10). He says,

Oh how I love your law!

It is my meditation all the day. (Ps 119:97)

“His commandments are not burdensome,” says the Apostle John (1 Jn 5:3). Christ’s yoke is easy, His burden is light (Mt 11:30).

This is not the outlook of the older brother. He may be thinking, “If I knew I could get the fattened calf without serving and obeying I wouldn’t have bothered. I only obeyed so as to earn my inheritance. I want what I have coming and I bitterly resent that *he* got what he didn’t deserve.” Our older brother is both self-righteous and a legalist. He is superior to others, thinking he deserves what they don’t, thinking he is sufficiently righteous to

earn the Father's rewards. This is the classic mistake of the religionist and the moralist. He cannot see his own sin. He fails to see his own unworthiness. He is convinced of his own virtue. He is certain he is righteous. He is self-satisfied and self-congratulatory.

Third, he resents his father's grace.

'But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' (Lk 15:30)

He goes on to complain that he has been under-rewarded for his service. "You have never given me a young goat," he complains. Not even a "kid" (NASV), that is, "a much cheaper meal than a fattened calf," as Marshall points out.²⁴ He is underscoring the disparity. "I've stayed and obeyed and I don't get so much as a little goat and he gets a fattened calf!"

Notice he refers to his brother as "this son of yours." "He cannot bring himself to speak of him as his brother. He is seething with resentment. He complains that his brother has consumed the family wealth, devouring the portion of the estate that had been given to him. The prodigal had no doubt made a devastating impact on the family's financial position. Moreover he had done so not because of bad investments, which would be one thing, but for morally degrading reasons. He has "devoured *your* property with prostitutes." Consequently the father was wrong to celebrate the prodigal's return, he says. "He regards his father as utterly weak in his treatment of

²⁴ Marshall, 612.

the prodigal,” says Plummer.²⁵ The elder brother puts his opinion above that of his father, presuming to know better, to know more, to be wiser, fairer and more just than he.

At this point the older brother knows nothing about the attitude of his prodigal brother. Is his brother repentant? Is he a changed man? Is he returning as a servant, not a son? None of this seems to matter. We can assume that the father’s entreaties would have included a description of the changed heart of the prodigal. However, for the elder brother, there is little room for grace, mercy, or forgiveness. As far as he is concerned, his younger brother is guilty, he committed terrible sins, and he is forever disqualified from restoration. He certainly should not be given a celebration upon his return. There can be no mercy for him.

The Psalmist asks,

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

O Lord, who could stand? (Ps 130:3)

The answer is, none could stand. We only stand by God’s mercy:

But with you there is forgiveness,

that you may be feared. (Ps 130:4)

²⁵ Plummer, 378.

Only the self-deceived, the hypocritical, the deluded could say what the older brother says. Those who truly know God understand that we all have our own sins. We need mercy so we extend mercy. This doesn't mean that we accept each other's *sins*, but it does mean that we accept each other's *repentance*. Remember, Jesus is describing sinners who repent (15:7, 10, 18). This distinction between sin *condoned* and sin *renounced* is crucial. We don't say, "Oh well, we all have our hang-ups," and then affirm each other in our gossip, pride, hypocrisy, promiscuity, or drunkenness. No, what we accept from each other is each other's repentance. I, too, am a sinner, I say, though my sin may be of a different stripe from yours. Warfield says, "When all are in equal need of salvation, where is there room for censorious complaint of the goodness of God?"²⁶

The elder brother seems to know nothing of this. His inability to celebrate betrays an inability to forgive. An inability to show mercy probably reveals a heart that has not received mercy.

He is harsh, and even censorious of his father's kindness. "This story reveals, above all," says Wright, "the sheer self-centeredness of the grumbler."²⁷ He is so consumed with himself that he not only fails to see the good, but he disrespects his father, lecturing him in front of his guests and refusing to obey him. Behind the contempt of the scribes and Pharisees (v 2) for tax-collectors and sinners, and the contempt of the older brother for the younger, is a self-righteousness and pride that separates one from the common herd and suffocates mercy.

²⁶ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 23.

²⁷ Wright, 191.

The entreating Father

How does the father respond to his insufferably self-righteous elder son? Does he smack him, denouncing his poisonous envy and resentment? Truth be told, we'd like him to. Our bias today is so against the pious proud, the judgmental, the unforgiving, the hypocrite, the merciless, that we'd like the father to blast him. Instead, the father is tender even with the elder brother:

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.' (Lk 15:31)

“The father responds with mild entreaties, addressing him tenderly as ‘child,’ proffering unbroken intercourse with him, endowing him with all his possessions—in a word, pleading with him as only a loving father can,” says Warfield.²⁸

“My child,” he says, using the diminutive as a term of affection. “You are always with me,” and I recognize that and am grateful for it. I long for your presence with me to continue. “All that is mine is yours,” he assures him. This saying “must be interpreted to mean that legally the son will inherit the farm, since it has already been promised to him,” says Marshall.²⁹ It’s yours and it has been and is at your disposal. You need only to ask for it. Nevertheless, the father continues, this was an occasion to rejoice and “we had to rejoice.”

²⁸ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 21.

²⁹ Marshall, 613.

It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’’ (Lk 15:32)

Why was it “fitting” or “necessary” to be glad and celebrate?³⁰ Because a fellow lost sinner has been reclaimed. Heaven celebrates this and as fellow sinners so must we. Jesus is explaining why He socializes with sinners, why he seeks their conversion, and why we ought to rejoice when they do convert. Celebration is a natural and necessary response to the recovery of the lost.

The parable ends with the elder brother still outside, excluded by his own self-righteousness and pride. The parable leaves an unresolved question: Will the elder brother go in to the celebration? Will he continue to think in terms of what is legally his and what he has earned and remain outside, or will he embrace the grace of God in Christ? “In leaving these points unresolved He throws out a challenge to all His hearers, be they like the elder or like the younger,” says Morris.³¹ “We are supposed... to ask ourselves,” says Wright, “where we fit within the story, and to learn more about ourselves and our churches as a result.”³² The same grace that saves the morally polluted but repentant prodigal also saves the proud, self-righteous and legalistic Pharisee. To reject the grace of God for the prodigal, as the elder son has, is also to reject the

³⁰ *dei* indicates divine necessity (Green, 278)

³¹ Morris, 245.

³² Wright, 192.

grace of God for himself. Only if he overcomes his self-righteousness and pride can he join in the celebration.

He must come to understand, as must we all, that we, like the prodigal, are sinners, and that we, like the prodigal, need God's grace. Jesus came and died on the cross for sinners, for us all, for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," for "all we like sheep have gone astray" (Rom 3:23; Isa 53:6). Only when we grasp this, do the doors of heaven open up for us.