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## THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

### [LUKE 15:11-32. – EXAMINED BY REQUEST.]

Many have applied this parable to Jews and Gentiles, assuming that the Gentiles are illustrated in the prodigal son. To us, this interpretation is not consistent with facts and Scripture; for up to the time of the giving of the parable, and for years afterward (three years and a half after Pentecost), the Gentiles were not recognized as sons of God, but as "strangers," "aliens," "foreigners," "having no hope, and without God in the world." (Eph. 2:11,12.) From the time of the fall none but the one line of Adam's children had divine favor – the line of which Noah and Abraham and Israel and Christ came – the line of Seth. (Amos 3:2.) All of this line, as the record shows, were accepted through the mediation of *typical* sacrifices of atonement for their sins – except Christ, whose life was from another father than Adam, and who himself became the true antitypical sacrifice of atonement for Adam and all who lost life in him.

Gentiles, consequently, cannot have been meant or illustrated by the prodigal son of the parable, for they had never been sons, and could not have left the father's house when they never were in it. We must look elsewhere for the class represented.

Others have suggested that the two sons represent, the elder the "overcomers" and the younger the "great company" of the Gospel Church: that those who fail to live up to their covenant are represented in the prodigal and may be said to be wasting their spiritual privileges, with figurative publicans and harlots, in the enjoyments of worldly favor, and in immunity from the reproaches which fall upon the faithful covenant-keepers who are "dying daily" in the service of the Master according to their

covenant. But it should be noticed that this exposition reverses the order of the parable, makes of the prodigal the one free from the reproaches and opposition of the world, and represents those who *suffer* with Christ for righteousness' sake as the elder son who suffered nothing. In the parable it was the elder son that had the good things, the plenty of food and clothing and every comfort; and it was the prodigal son who was ragged and hungry and barefoot and suffering and outcast with the swine.

The application of the parable most reasonable and most fitting, all phases of the parable and the facts considered, is as follows:

In the parable the elder brother represented the Pharisees, and the younger brother the publicans and sinners. The context shows that our Lord's willingness to receive the "lower classes" of the Jews, those who were living sinful lives regardless of God's laws and of their covenant, had excited the anger of the Pharisees. The latter were strict observers of God's Law, and in this respect commendable; but they were blameworthy in that they were *proud* of their religion, and boasted of their goodness; and because they despised and spurned and would not recognize, nor speak to, nor eat with, the irreligious class; and the more so because in their pride they failed to acknowledge the fact that, when doing their best to fulfil God's law, they came far short of perfect obedience.

Our Lord's strict observance of the Law [for, being born a Jew, born under the Law, he was bound to and did respect every legal requirement up to the day of his death – which ended that Law covenant] no doubt made him at first a favorite with the Pharisees: accordingly we find him occasionally the guest of some of them. **[R1460 : page 313]** (Luke 7:36; 5:17; John 3:1,2.) But when they found that he received sinners and ate with them, they began to realize that his righteousness was of a different sort

from theirs, and, as darkness is opposed to light, they hated him. Moreover, soon they began to see that his teachings reflected against them, severely reproofing their claimed and yet very imperfect sanctity. So it was in this parable and the others of the same discourse: they were spoken to the Pharisees as a reproof, *because* they had murmured at him for teaching or having anything to do with the disreputable *backsliders*. – See Luke 15:1-3. [R1460 : page 314]

Originally all the Jews entered into covenant relationship with God, and thus became, typically, his *sons*. Although they were a "house" of servants as contrasted with the Christian Church, called the "house" of sons, yet we must remember that they *typified* the house of spiritual sons, and that as Adam was a *human* son of God before he sinned, so all who obtain forgiveness and return to harmony with God are again *sons*, either of the earthly or the spiritual family. So, then, as in this parable, all Israelites under the Jewish covenant were treated as (human) sons of God. The beginning of this relationship dated from the Covenant at Sinai.

ndered off into the ways of sin and forgetfulness of God, and his love and care, and into dissipation – the younger son of the parable, represented in our Lord's day by the publicans and sinners.

Sin always brings misery in some form, and often in many forms: and one can fancy that the publicans and sinners, as they heard the story of the young prodigal beginning to feel his lack, would realize their own miserable condition therein pictured. Before the Master had finished telling how the prodigal "came to himself," and how the father "saw him a long way off" and ran to meet and greet him, no doubt many of the hearers' eyes were wet with tears, and many of their hearts swelling with emotion and

sympathy and the desire similarly to get back from the service of the devil to God's favor and love.

And how true to facts was the picture of the Pharisees standing around and objecting to his telling those poor prodigals anything about the love of God and his willingness to forgive them, and to welcome them back home again. The elder son of the parable was "angry, and would not go in:" the self-righteous Pharisees were angry, too, and refused to enter the Kingdom, then nigh at hand, and first offered to their nation according to divine promise. Our Lord said to them upon another occasion, "Woe, unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13); and again he said, "Verily, I say unto you that publicans and sinners shall go into the kingdom before you." (Matt. 21:31.) Poor, self-righteous Pharisees! To this day they are jealous and will "not go in." As a class they refused the Kingdom on the conditions offered, until the offer and opportunity were taken from them entirely (Matt. 21:43), and given to a class whom they esteemed still less than the publicans and sinners – even to the Gentiles whom they esteemed as "dogs," from among whom, strangers and aliens and not then sons, members for the Bride and Kingdom of Christ are being selected.

We who have been accepted by God from among the Gentiles to be his sons – joint-heirs with Christ – can perhaps enter as fully into the spirit of this parable as did the publicans and sinners who heard the gracious words from the Redeemer's lips. We, who were strangers and aliens, learned that the Father prepared a great sacrifice for the sins of all condemned in Adam. We have heard and tasted of his loving welcome into his family – we who were dead in trespasses and sins, but who are now alive toward God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. We received the "*best robe*," the robe of Christ's righteousness, replacing the

filthy rags of our unrighteousness; we received the ring, representing the witness of the spirit that we are sons and heirs; we received the sandals, preparing us for the sharp contact often to be experienced from the beggarly elements of the present evil world; and above all we received the kiss, the seal of our reconciliation, the mark of our adoption into the divine family. Nothing in this parable shows the necessity for the *ransom* as other Scriptures show it. This, however, is not out of harmony but consistent with our interpretation of the parable; for Israel as a whole had been typically atoned for in the typical sacrifices by which their covenant was introduced and renewed [R1460 : page 315] yearly. It is therefore evidently a picture of the return of a backslidden *son*, and not that of the redemption of a condemned stranger and alien.

The lesson of this parable to the Pharisees is one widely applicable in its principles – viz.: that all who are in harmony with God should, nay, all who have the spirit of holiness will, rejoice to see sinners returning to divine favor. Any other spirit will surely work injury, as it did to the Pharisees, who, as a class, were *unfit* in their selfishness to share the blessings God had or ever will have to offer. Thank God, the time for removing blindness will soon be here. (Isa. 35:5.) Let us trust that under the new conditions many more will learn and practice the spirit of love, who now are ruled by selfishness. How hardly shall a selfish man enter the Kingdom! Let us beware of selfishness, and embroider our wedding-robe with flowers of humility and love.

### **PRODIGAL RETURN!**

"Return, return!" thy Father's voice is pleading,  
    "Tho' far astray, I bid thee turn again!  
Thy robe is rent, thy tender feet are bleeding,  
    Thy heart is faint and sick with famine pain:

Return, my child: a welcome here awaits thee;  
No longer in the distant country rove;  
Resist the cruel tempter that belates thee,  
And keeps thee from my dwelling and my love."

Return, return! Thy Father's loving-kindness  
Thou long hast scorned, and done his grace despite;  
Yet in his touch is healing for thy blindness,  
And he can turn thy darkness into light.  
Return in all thy rags of sin's defilement;  
Return with all thy want and sore distress;  
Thy Father's voice bespeaks his reconciliation:  
Flee to his breast, and there thy guilt confess.

Return, return! Thy substance hath been wasted –  
Thou hast not aught to bring but thy poor heart;  
Yet art thou longing for the bread once tasted,  
And for his paths of peace, and faith's good part?  
Return, for why shouldst thou delay the pardon  
Thy Father's great compassion waits to grant!  
Arise and go, before thy doubts shall harden  
The homesick yearnings of the penitent.

Return, return! Leave thou the swine and famine  
And seek again the plenty of thy home!  
Why dost thou toil among the husks of mammon,  
When to his rest the Father bids thee come?  
Return thou to his arms, his kiss, his blessing;  
Accept the robe, the sandals, and the ring;  
And there, thy sinfulness and guilt confessing,

*Thou shalt be found*, lost treasure of the King!

Return, return! The angel-hosts bend o'er thee –  
They wait to bear the tidings' joyful sound.  
They have beheld the Savior dying for thee,  
And will rejoice to sing, *The lost is found!*  
Return, for he will heal all thy backsliding –  
Will love thee freely, and will thus forgive;  
Come, weary soul, rest in his love abiding.  
Thou hast been dead – arise to-day and live!

F. G. BURROUGHS.

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