

THE FATHER OF MERCIES

– LUKE 15:11-32. – *AUGUST 12.* –

THE PARABLE of the prodigal son is one of three teaching the same general lesson: God's love and sympathy toward the poor and fallen and degraded and lost. These three parables were spoken to the Pharisees and Doctors of the Law, who, while admiring the Lord Jesus, were indignant with him because he did not, like themselves, spurn the lower classes, the publicans and sinners.

In one of the associated parables the word-picture is that of a shepherd with an hundred sheep, one of which goes astray: the shepherd leaves the ninety and nine to follow the straying sheep, and, recovering it, rejoices greatly, more than over the ninety and nine which went not astray. The picture here seems to represent God's entire creation as his flock, the one sheep which went astray seeming to portray Adam and his race lost in sin. The pursuing of the lost sheep was the heavenly Father sending his Son to redeem Adam and his race, to bring back all or so many as are willing to come back to the fold – to fellowship with God and the enjoyment of his favor, everlasting life. This picture was one which would appeal to the people of that country, many of whom were shepherds or acquainted with the customs of shepherds. It presented the heavenly Father in a new light, as interested in the straying ones with a love that is in no sense selfish, but sacrificing.

The other associated parable was that of the lost piece of silver. The women of those times usually wore a bracelet on which was fastened ten coins. Such a bracelet was generally the gift of the bridegroom at the time of marriage, and the bracelet and each piece associated with it was highly esteemed by its

wearer. The parable pictures the loss of one of these pieces, and shows the diligence with which a woman would search and sweep to find it because it was valuable in her eyes, and how she would rejoice at the finding. Our Lord's comment on this is that much more would the heavenly Father have an interest in humanity in its lost condition, and search for and rejoice in finding the lost. Both of these parables bore specifically upon the attitude of the Pharisees toward the masses of the people – the common people, including the publicans and sinners. These parables showed that their attitude was not the proper one.

PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Then follows the parable of today's lesson. A father has two sons. It was the custom of that time and country that the elder son should inherit the principal part of the estate if he chose to remain at home with his father. The younger sons were usually given some portion, and allowed to embark if they would in some other business or profession. The parable opens with the proposition of the younger son that he would leave home, taking with him whatever the father was willing to give him. His request was granted; the father gave a portion of his means to each of the sons. We do not understand the parable to teach that the father unwisely retained nothing to himself, but contrarywise – that he merely gave a reasonable individual portion to each son, retaining the remainder, which, however, was intended for the elder son, if faithful, at the father's death. Incidentally we remark that experience shows that would be unwise for a father to take any other course than the one here suggested. A man's estate is his stewardship from the Lord, and while children may be properly recognized in this stewardship, the responsibility of a Christian man's consecration should extend beyond his own immediate offspring while including them.

Rehearsing the story briefly; the younger son used his father's gifts riotously, wastefully, and soon came to want in a foreign land. In his degradation he became a swineherd, an especially demeaning occupation amongst the Jews at that time. He got down to the level of the swine in many respects, and yet he felt a longing for better things that he had known before. He was not satisfied, and determined to return to his father and to seek to be a servant in the household, claiming nothing further as a son, realizing that he had dishonored the relationship. The loving father is pictured as seeing the prodigal a long way off and hastening to him, embracing him and kissing him repeatedly. The prodigal attempts to make his statement of contrition, but is interrupted by the father's expressions of love and directions for the best robe, the ring, the feast on fatted calf, and general rejoicing that the dead had come to life, the lost had been found, the wayward had returned.

The parable shows the elder son offended, refusing to enter into the joys of the occasion, and complaining that his loyalty to his father had less demonstration than was given to the return of the prodigal. The father urges the elder son to come and rejoice also, to enter into his spirit in the matter, assuring him that this meant no less love for himself, and points to the fact that as the loyal son he may still be the heir of all his possessions, "All that I have is thine" – is for thee.

THE PROPER INTERPRETATION

No interpretation of the parable is given, but it might be explained in harmony with itself and in harmony with other Scriptures in two ways:

(1) We might interpret it as we have done the parable of the hundred sheep, that the elder brother represented those who had always been in harmony with God, the holy angels; that the younger brother was mankind, etc.

(2) Another interpretation seems much more appropriate and fitting. The elder brother well represents the Pharisees and Doctors of the Law, who outwardly and theoretically were in harmony with God. Paul, who had been one of this class, declares that with all good conscience he had served the God of his fathers as a Pharisee. Doubtless there were others of the class whose intentions and desires were to remain loyal and obedient to the Heavenly Father – who sought daily by obedience to the Law to remain at home with God, and who did remain at home up to the time that our Lord addressed them this parable. They had their good portion in this present life, as well as the promise of the great Oath-Bound Covenant in the future.

The younger son would represent that portion of the nation of Israel which, while aware of the Oath-Bound Covenant and of the blessings and privileges of relationship with God, had nevertheless wandered off into the ways of sin as publicans and sinners and careless ones. These realized in large measure their own unworthiness, and sometimes smote upon their breasts saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner." These were all repudiated by the Pharisees and Doctors of the Law, who declared them to be in no sense of the word participants in the promises, regarded them as prodigals, sinners and would not eat with them nor salute them nor have any dealings with them. Our Lord, on the contrary, representing the Father, was willing to speak to these, willing to receive them, told them of the Father's love of his provision to give them the robe of Christ's righteousness, justification; of his willingness to make them participants in the great feast of fat things, the Kingdom blessings; of his willingness to give them the ring as a signet of his everlasting mercy, forgiveness and love, the Pentecostal blessing.

The Pharisees, etc., as the elder son, noting this divine favor to the poor common people, the publicans and sinners,

were angry. They rejected the message of the Father through the Son, they would not go to the same feast. They thus showed that they lacked a very important quality of heart – they lacked the spirit of lovingkindness, and hence were not at all prepared for the feast. They left the Father's house, left their share in the Oath-Bound Covenant and **[R3835 : page 254]** the wonderful favors connected therewith, because they had not the Father's spirit, because they lacked the spirit of brotherly kindness, love. The Lord as a result cast them off as a nation, and they lost the privilege of the chief blessing and were blinded.

Although the heavenly Father has temporarily discarded the nation represented by this elder brother, nevertheless amongst those with whom he is now dealing (spiritual Israel) there are similar classes – some who are self-righteous and self-confident, moral and religious, but who, like the Pharisees, have not a sufficiency of the spirit of love to appreciate the Father's conduct and to abide in his love. On the other hand there is still the Lazarus class, still the returned prodigal class, to which the Father is pleased to grant riches of grace and mercy and truth, the robe of righteousness, the feast of fat things and the ring, symbolizing his eternal love and mercy.

The lesson for us all is that even after we have been favored of the heavenly Father, been accepted as his children, there are two ways of departing from him. One way is that of open sin and wantonness, the other a failure to attain to the divine likeness in our hearts. The parable seems to imply that there is more hope of those who have gone into sin and degradation returning to God, being accepted of him and received into his blessings and becoming inheritors of his future favors, than there is of some who, while outwardly moral and religious, fail to acquire the Lord's spirit of love and mercy. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of his"; and being none of his he will surely not be permitted to share in the fruits and graces

of the spirit of the present time, love, joy, peace, etc., nor in the exceeding great and precious things of the divine provision which are yet future – glory, honor and immortality.

OUR GOLDEN TEXT

The thought everywhere held out in the Scriptures is that God's mercy endures forever – that is, "olan," or to a completion. A small portion of the world of mankind at the present time has received God's favor to the extent of being justified and made participators in the divine favors and mercies of this present time. As in his dealings with these the Lord is very gracious, so is he to those who return from the ways of sin, and he is even patient with those who lack the spirit of love and forgiveness, and comes to them entreating them to join in his gracious plans and arrangements. This lovingkindness bestowed upon the believers of the present time illustrates the Spirit of the Lord. It becomes an assurance to us of the fulfilment of his promise that in due time all the families of the earth shall be brought to a knowledge of his goodness, to an opportunity for knowing him whom to rightly know and appreciate will mean to them everlasting life.

It is not in violation of the Lord's declaration of mercy that we find the Scriptures clearly teaching that when mercy shall have fully accomplished its work, when it shall have accomplished all it can accomplish in the interest of the fallen and the sinful, its work will be at an end, and all those not favored will then be those who, despite their knowledge of the divine character and the divine will, and despite their opportunities for coming into harmony with the same, will have refused to enter into the Father's gracious arrangements and plans. For such willful sinners to be eventually destroyed will evidently be not only for their best interests but for the interests also of all those who are in accord with the Lord. Thus the Lord

will eventually bring to pass the promise that every creature in heaven and in earth and under the earth shall be heard acknowledging and praising the God of our salvation, for he is worthy. (Rev. 5:13) No discordant note shall be heard throughout the universe of God. Every member of Adam's race shall through Christ be granted a full opportunity for return to the relationship of the sons of God, and all the willing and obedient will receive the great blessing. Indeed also it will be a blessing to the unwilling and disobedient that they should be cut off in the Second Death, rather than that they should continue perverse and unhappy and injurious to others as well as to themselves.
