



SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

March 3

THE GOSPEL READING

Luke 15:11-32

[The Prodigal Son]

The Lord said this parable: "There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his belly with the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father.

But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 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.' 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; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant.



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And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

THE SERMON

There is more joy in heaven over *one* sinner who repents than over *ninety-nine* just persons who need no repentance. God is our Father, and He desires us not to perish but to have eternal life. He gives His grace to us so we can turn to Him and become whole. The parable of the Prodigal Son describes God's love for us and how we are saved from sin and received back into His Kingdom by repentance. The father in the story symbolizes our heavenly Father, and the prodigal son represents each one of us.

While his father was still alive, the Lord tells us, the son asks for his inheritance. In a sense, this request made by the son reveals that he considered his father to be dead to him. In selfishness, the young son wanted to take his share of the household to depart and use his inheritance for immediate pleasure. His future inheritance would have been his father's kingdom, but he preferred the present pleasures of life instead. Like Adam, he leaves paradise when he turns from his father and goes his way, squandering his possessions on reckless living. He went from his father's estate to a "far country," which symbolizes the worldly life where people forget God.

When the prodigal son had spent everything, a famine spread throughout the land, so he took a job feeding pigs. This was a very lowly job for someone who once stood to inherit a kingdom! Unfortunately, by his choices, he had demeaned himself. He was now living in the filth of a pigpen, for he had nothing else left. His choices led him to degradation, poverty, loneliness, and despair.

However, the story comes to a turning point when the son realizes his lowly state. He "came to himself," the Lord tells us, and remembered that his father's servants had plenty of food while he was perishing with hunger among the pigs and the mud. The prodigal son, so to speak, hit "rock bottom" — and was thereby motivated to repentance (in Greek, *μετάνοια*), which means a turning around, a reorientation, and a new way of thinking.

Hitting rock bottom in our lives happens when we realize we cannot continue in the way we are living. An immediate change is necessary to begin our journey to recovery.

The prodigal son decided in his heart to go back to his father. His repentance begins with him rising from the mud and coming to his senses. He decides to leave the pigs, return to his father, and humble himself to ask for forgiveness. Then comes the necessary second step of repentance: the son does what he says. He gets up and starts the journey home.

While he was still at a distance, his father saw him, and at first sight of his son, he was moved with compassion (in Greek, *ἐσπλαγγνίσθη*). An earthly father would perhaps be conflicted to see the son who had betrayed and left him. However, because he represents our heavenly Father, Who is more merciful than any person, his immediate response is to be moved with compassion for his repentant son. The Lord is gracious and merciful, longsuffering, and abundant in mercy.

When the father saw his son, he ran to him. In that time and culture, it was usually considered undignified for an elder to run. Still, the father's love for his son is such that he does not even wait for him to approach him or apologize. He runs to his son, embraces him, and kisses him. The son's repentance is confirmed by his words, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight and am no longer worthy to be called your son." His *repentance* was conceived in his *heart* and born in his *actions*. This is nothing short of a spiritual resurrection from the dead.

The son had run back to the father's house, which symbolizes the Church. This reminds us that if we choose to stay out of the Church, we may have what looks like a full and happy life, but at some point, we come to realize that our spiritual gifts and riches have diminished. By distancing ourselves from the Church, we miss the most essential part of life: participation in God's love. We always have the choice to return to our Father's house — recognize our weakness, humble ourselves with repentance, and experience grace, joy, and love. The father receives the prodigal not as a servant but as his beloved son, showering gifts on him.

The elder son was out working in the field, and as he came home, he saw the feast that the father had given to his repentant son and became angry refusing to join. The elder son represents our hearts when we are more concerned about the sins of others than our own faults. During Great Lent, we have the prayer of Saint Ephraim the Syrian on our lips, and we ask, "Grant me to see my own sins and not to judge my brother."

The jealousy of the self-righteous older son is a warning to all of us. As we strive to serve God and His Church with all we have, we might be tempted to think that grace and salvation belong to us. We might think that we have earned it or are entitled to it. However, grace and salvation are given to us entirely by the love of our Lord. We do not earn anything from God. With open hands and hearts, we receive the gifts of God as His beloved children.

When a "sinner," a prodigal soul, finds their way back to the Church, we show genuine love, compassion, and joy for that person. We rejoice that they are again members of Christ's Body and have the same hope of salvation. Let us rejoice when our sisters and brothers reunite with our Father in heaven since we are all God's children. The father an-

swered, “Your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.”

The parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us that sin is a kind of internal exile, enslavement, and poverty. Repentance is the return from exile to our true home, so that we can receive our true inheritance and freedom as members of our Father’s household. To repent is not just to feel the weight of our sins. Rather, it is a conversion of our hearts, by which our actions change, reflecting our movement toward union with God. God will always welcome us as a Father Who forgives, embraces, and kisses us.

Saint Athanasios of Alexandria says, “His father neither takes him in like a hired servant nor treats him like a stranger. Oh no, he kisses him as a son. He accepts him as a dead man come back to life again. He counts him worthy of the divine feast and gives him the precious garment he once wore.”

In this parable, we learn three essential teachings of the Christian life: what it means to live in sin, what it means to repent, and the greatness of God’s love for us. We always remember that no matter how far we have strayed from God, the road back to Him is always open. We can always be encouraged that, no matter what sins we have committed, however serious they might be, God will forgive us if we repent. There is never a point of no return. Regardless of the condition we might be in when we remember who we truly are — God’s children — we can return to the Father’s house. When we do, He will run to us, forgive us, and embrace us in His never-ending love.