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Hieromonk Gregorios

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

A Commentary in the Light of the Fathers



CELL OF ST JOHN THE THEOLOGIAN
KOUTLOUMOUSIOU MONASTERY
MOUNT ATHOS

Hieromonk Gregorios
THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON:
Commentary in the Light of the Fathers

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	5
A. TEXT	10
B. Commentary in the Light of the Fathers	15
1. <i>God is Love</i>	15
2. <i>The Younger Son</i>	21
3. <i>Migration and Squandering of the Divine Gifts</i>	25
4. <i>Consequences of Sin</i>	29
5. <i>The Beginning of Repentance</i>	35
6. <i>Repentance is the Return to God</i>	39
7. <i>The Pathways to Repentance</i>	43
8. <i>The Loving Father</i>	47
9. <i>Confession of Sins</i>	53
10. <i>The Fruits of Repentance</i>	59
11. <i>The Elder Son</i>	71
EPILOGUE.....	81
A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER	85





Brethren, let us learn the power of the mystery. For when the Profligate Son ran back from sin to his Father's hearth, the all-good Father, coming out to meet him, kissed him and gave him back again the tokens of his own glory, and completed the mystical joy of those on high by sacrificing the fatted calf, so that we might live lives worthy of the loving Father, who offered the sacrifice, and of the glorious sacrificial victim, the Saviour of our souls.

-Vespers, Sunday of the Prodigal Son



PROLOGUE

In the pages of this small book a humble attempt has been made to approach the parable of *the compassionate Father of the prodigal son who was saved, and the elder brother*. We give this name to the parable because it reveals “the indescribable loving tenderness of the heavenly Father” and “the transformative power of repentance for sinners.”¹

The Lord taught this parable because “*Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them’.*” (Luke 15:1) Christ lovingly welcomed sinners and ate with them. The Scribes and the Pharisees were unable to comprehend this love and, because of this, grumbled against the benevolent Lord, accusing Him that he had in His company tax collectors and sinners. In order to help them, Jesus told this wonderful parable which incorporates great truths for all believers.

* * *

At Holy Baptism we were reborn in Christ, and with Holy Chrism we became, by Grace, sons of God. However, much like the prodigal son, we fetter away all the divine gifts given us as children of God – to a greater or lesser degree. Despite all of this, He never ceases giving us His fatherly love, and the opportunity to

¹ See Luke 15: 11–32 – Zigavinos, 1028A and 1021D.

return close to Him, and to become His children again. This return is accomplished by Holy Confession when the penitent confesses his sins to God and receives His pardon. He is once again accepted into his Father's House and invited to the Table of the holy Eucharist.

The Heavenly Father's love is also shown toward His elder son. While the younger son physically moved away from his father's house, the elder son, as demonstrated by his behavior, was essentially living apart from his father. He had in no way imitated His love. Thus, the loving Father also calls the elder son back when he responds to his brother's return with aversion and envy by coming out of His House, and inviting him to participate in their joy. That is, He calls him to repent and enjoy the supper of the heavenly Kingdom.

* * *

In order to enjoy the Lord's fatherly love, we must avail ourselves of the Sacrament of Divine Mercy (Confession) with the same repentance as the prodigal son. St Gregory Palamas urges us to experience this repentance in deed:

let us depart from the land of passions, from unbelief, greed, and wantonness, where the hunger for good things is horrible and where passions are worse than hunger itself... Let us run toward the perfect Father, the giver of life, walking on the path of life by the virtues. There we shall find Him and see that He has come out to meet us out of charity, and to grant us remission for our sins... and the betrothal of our future inheritance. For the prodigal son achieved nothing good, long sojourning as he was in the land of passions, until he left those works of sin and came running back to his Father. And after he achieved the impossible, he stayed near Him, humble and prudent, doing what is just and

maintaining unimpaired the Grace of God with which he had been renewed.²

* * *

It would be a blessing if even a few of the brethren reading this would make the decision to return to God our Father, whether it be like the younger or elder son (that is, according to his own spiritual needs) and confess: *Father I sinned in heaven and against you*. It is certain that they will hear the fatherly voice: *This son of mine was dead and is alive again*. And after their resurrection into God's embrace, they shall share anew in His philanthropic love.

Pascha 2009

Hieromonk Gregorios



² St. Gregory Palamas, 45CD



Repentance signifies the renewal of Holy Baptism. Repentance is a new agreement with the Lord for a new life...

Repentance is the daughter of hope and the renunciation of despair. It is reconciliation with God by deeds of virtue in opposition to our sins.

Repentance means a purification of our conscience.

(Ladder of Divine Ascent, Homily 5,2)

THE PARABLE

*Of the Compassionate Father,
the Prodigal Son who was Saved,
and the Elder Brother*

A. Text

(Luke 15: 11–32)

The Migration of the Prodigal Son to the Land of Sin.

Jesus said, "A certain man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that will come to me.' So the father divided his livelihood between them.

A few days later, the younger son gathered all that he had and traveled to a far country. There, he squandered his property, living immorally. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place in that country, and he began to be in need.

He went and hired himself to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. He wanted to feed himself with the husks that the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything.

Repentance and Return

But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough to spare, and I am dying with hunger! I will get up, go to my father, and tell him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son! Make me as one of your hired servants."'

So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still at a distance, his father saw him and was moved with compassion. He ran, and embraced his son, and kissed him. Then the son said, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you! I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The Reception of the Father

But the father said to his slaves, 'Bring out the first robe and put it on him! Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet! Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this, my son, was dead, and he is alive again! He was lost and [now he] is found!' And they began to celebrate.

The Elder Brother

Now his elder son was in the field. As he came near to the house, he heard music and dancing. Calling one of the servants, he asked what was going on. The servant replied, 'Your brother has returned! Your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and healthy.' However, the elder son became angry and he would not go in. Therefore, his father came out and begged him.

But he answered his father, 'Look, for so many years I have served you, and I have never disobeyed a commandment of yours. Yet, you never gave me a goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this, your son, arrived, he who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' The father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours! But it was fitting to celebrate and to rejoice, for this, your brother, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost and is found!'"





Christ our God, easily entreated, abundantly good and forbearing Word, to You the compassionate one, I humble myself and I warmly implore You, shouting in earnest prayer: I have sinned, save me, save me the profligate by Your compassion, as I joyfully shout: Lord, forgive me and I shall follow you on the path of uprightness.

(Sunday Vespers, Tone 2)

B. Commentary

in the Light of the Fathers



Our kind Father, do not close your benevolent arms to me, but having opened them accept me as the prodigal son and save me.

(Vespers, 2nd Sunday of Great Lent)



God is love

A certain man had two sons.

Jesus Christ, with His teachings and His Sacrifice on the cross, revealed to us the truth about God the Father. Because “God the Father is visible only to His Son by nature.”¹ We have been assured by John the Evangelist and Theologian: *No one has seen God at any time. The uniquely-begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has explained him.* (1 Jn 2: 10) Christ has taught us that God the Father is paternal Love, which is continuously offered to mankind. In order that this truth be understood, Christ used the parable of the prodigal son who was saved.²

* * *

A certain man. “In the parable, the Lord calls Himself man, and this is not strange, because He truly became man for our salvation. What does seem strange is His projecting Himself as a man for our benefit, He who is always the protector of our souls and

¹ St. Cyril of Alexandria, PG 73, 177C. – See John 6: 46 and John 1: 18

² Luke 15: 11–32. – See St. Gregory Palamas, 32C.

bodies as master and creator of both? He who presented deeds of extreme love and care for us even before we were created?”³

The whole creation is an overflowing of divine love. Thus, Gregory the Theologian says: It was not sufficient for the most merciful God “to be moved only in the contemplation of Himself, but the divine kindness had to overflow and expand, so that more and more could benefit from the God of mercy; such being proof of His infinite kindness.”⁴ This is why God initially creates the angelic Powers. Next “He creates a second visible material world,”⁵ which is the entire universe surrounding us.

Creation is a loving movement of God. St Maximos theologizes saying: God, “in the extreme magnitude of His kind love moves beyond Himself (goes forth from Himself), according to His providence, for all living beings, and in a certain way is attracted by kindness, affection and love, and from regions above everything and removed from all things, He descends into the region of all things with ecstatic hypersubstantial strength, without departing from Himself. That is why the most learned in divine things call Him a zealot, because He has a great kind love for living beings... They call God a projector and a progenitor of affection and love, because these qualities which resided within Himself (namely affection and love), He spread beyond Himself, throughout creation. This is why it has been said: God is love.”⁶

Even before God created man He demonstrated His love for him: “Before we were created, God created the Angels to be dispatched as deacons, as St. Paul says, to those who are going to inherit salvation, for our benefit. He also set in place the dome

³ St. Gregory Palamas, 33BC.

⁴ St. Gregory the Theologian, *Oration* 38, 9-10, PG 36, 320D-321B.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ St. Maximos the Confessor, *Chapters on Theology* 5, 86-7, PG 90, 1385AB. – See also Ex. 20:6 –1 John 4:16.

of heaven, built the foundation of the earth, and spread out the sea ... As for our moral betterment and our guidance towards virtue, there is nothing that our benevolent Master did not do [to assist us]. This material world was built by God as a mirror of the immaterial one, so that by spiritual contemplation of it, we will ascend towards it by means of a wondrous ladder, towards the numinous.”⁷

* * *

The purpose of creating the world and man, was to make him a communicant of divine love. Because “the light should not remain unseen, the divine glory undeclared, nor the divine kindness unenjoyed. Nor should the other divine goods remain unengaged, without someone to become their communicant.”⁸

Since the purpose of man’s creation was that he become a communicant of divine goodness, he “was adorned by God with life, logos, wisdom and all the divine goods, so that by means of any of them he would aspire to the corresponding divine good.” All such goods are collectively expressed by the phrase: *in the image of God*.⁹

Having created man, the Lord God took the man whom He had formed and placed him in the garden of delight, to cultivate and keep it. (See Gen. 2:15) In Paradise man experienced communion with God, “being God’s tenant in God’s residence, clothed in glory by the same God ... enjoying the uniquely sweet fruit, namely the contemplation of His face, like another angel.”¹⁰ The vision of God was the joy and food of Adam and Eve.

⁷ St. Gregory Palamas, 33C-36B. – See also Heb. 1:14

⁸ St. Gregory Nyssa, *Catechetical Oratio* 5, PG 45, 21B.

⁹ *Ibid.* PG 45, 21D. – See also Gen. 1:27

¹⁰ St. John of Damascus, *Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* 2: 25, PG 94, 916C.

The supreme good bestowed upon man by the Creator was “his sojourn near God and his union with Him by means of love.”¹¹ Man had to cultivate and to keep this divine gift in the Paradise of divine love. And this work that was to be done by man’s free will, would have been the transition from *according to the image* to *in the likeness*. (Gen. 2:15, Gen. 1:25)

The *according to the image* coexists in man from the beginning, but “to become *in likeness* to God can only be achieved through the effort of our own free will... The Lord by giving us the power to be like Him allowed us to work toward the likeness of God so that our reward in heaven would reflect our effort.”¹²

God is Love and the virtue that will perfect our likeness to God is the virtue of love: ‘Just as in an icon, when the most vivid of all colors is added it achieves its likeness to the prototype, so it happens to those whom Grace repaints in the divine likeness: when the lighting of love is added, it becomes apparent that the image is found in the effulgence of the likeness.’¹³ Man becomes like God through love: “In like manner, when the saints become perfect, they all attain to this perfection, and by the superabundant outpouring of their love and compassion upon all men they resemble God.”¹⁴

* * *

A certain man had two sons. The parable speaks about two sons, “because human nature was divided into two different paths, thus the division of good and evil separated the human world into two” classes. In the parable Christ “calls the benevolent Father and God *man*, and He calls all virtuous and sinful

¹¹ St. Basil the Great, *That God is not the Cause of Evil*, 6, PG 31, 344B.

¹² St. Gregory Nyssa, *On the Creation of Man According to the Image* 1, PG 44, 273AB.

¹³ St. Diadochos Photike, *Chapters on Knowledge* 89, SC 5β, 150.

¹⁴ St. Isaac the Syrian, Homily 71 (81), *The Ascetical Homilies* (Holy Transfiguration Monastery, Boston 1984), p. 346.

persons His *sons*. God is the father of both the virtuous and the sinful, because they have all been adopted by Holy Baptism and the parable refers to the faithful.”¹⁵

God is depicted as a man who has two sons. With the loving relationship between father and child, Christ reveals to us that God is love. (See 1 Jn. 4:8) He is *the source of love* from which man receives love. And because love is expressed most powerfully in the relationship of a father with his children, God calls Himself man and father of all of us. Because, “on the one hand He became man for our benefit, and on the other He had us reborn by holy Baptism.”¹⁶

From the first words of the parable, we can see that Christ told it in order to reveal to us the magnitude and the standard of God’s love.

* * *

God is love and man was created in the image of God, therefore man is an image of love. Man resided in Paradise in order to partake of God’s love. Because, “Paradise is the love of God”. Man, however, did not honor the divine gifts and chose death instead of life, and hate instead of love. Likewise, the prodigal son left the Paradise of Love towards a *far country*. He moved away from the Father who loved His children and from the blessed house of paternal love.



¹⁵ St. Gregory Palamas, 37A. Zigavinos, 1021D-1024A.

¹⁶ St. Gregory Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 5, PG 44, 137C. – St. Gregory Palamas, 36D.