**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LUKE-058**. **THE PRODIGAL AND HIS FATHER by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"11. And He said, A certain man had two sons: 12. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. 13. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. 14. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. 17. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough, and to spare, and I perish with hunger! 18. I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, 19. And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. 20. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. 21. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. 22. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: 23. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: 24. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry."*

*Luke 15:11-24*

The purpose of the three parables in this chapter has to be kept in mind. Christ is vindicating His action in receiving sinners, which had evoked the murmurings of the Pharisees. The first two parables, those of the lost sheep and the lost drachma, appeal to the common feeling which attaches more importance to lost property just because it is lost than to that which is possessed safely. This parable rises to a higher level. It appeals to the universal emotion of fatherhood, which yearns over a wandering child just because he has wandered.

We note a further advance, in the proportion of one stray sheep to the ninety-nine, and of one lost coin to the nine, contrasted with the sad equality of obedience and disobedience in the two sons. One per cent., ten per cent., are bearable losses, but fifty per cent. is tragic.

**I. The first part (vs. 11-16) tells of the son's wish to be his own master, and what came of it.**

The desire to be independent is good, but when it can only be attained by being dependent on him whose authority is irksome, it takes another colour. This foolish boy wished to be able to use his father's property as his own, but he had to get the father's consent first. It is a poor beginning of independence when it has to be set up in business by a gift.

That is the essential absurdity in our attempts to do without God and to shake off His control. We can only get power to seem to do it by misusing His gifts. When we say, Who is Lord over us?the tongues which say it were given us by Him. The next step soon followed. Not many days after, of course, for the sense of ownership could not be kept up while near the father. A man who wishes to enjoy worldly good without reference to God is obliged, in self-defence, to hustle God out of his thoughts as soon and as completely as possible.

The far countryis easily reached; and it is far, though a step can land us in it. A narrow bay may compel a long journey round its head before those on its opposite shores can meet. Sin takes us far away from God, and the root of all sin is that desire of living to one's self which began the prodigal's evil course.

The third step in his downward career, wasting his substance in riotous living, comes naturally after the two others; for all self-centred life is in deepest truth waste, and the special forms of gross dissipation to which youth is tempted are only too apt to follow the first sense of being their own masters, and removed from the safeguards of their earthly father's home. Many a lad in our great cities goes through the very stages of the parable, and, when a mother's eye is no longer on him, plunges into filthy debauchery. But living which does not outrage the proprieties may be riotous all the same; for all conduct which ignores God and asserts self as supreme is flagrantly against the very nature of man, and is reckless waste.

Such a merrylife is sure to be short. There is always famine in the land of forgetfulness of God, and when the first gloss is off its enjoyments, and one's substance is spent, its pinch is felt. The unsatisfied hunger of heart, which dogs godless living, too often leads but to deeper degradation and closer entanglement with low satisfactions. Men madly plunge deeper into the mud in hope of finding the pearl which has thus far eluded their search.

A miserable thing this young fool had made of his venture, having spent his capital, and now being forced to become a slave, and being set to nothing better than to feed swine. The godless world is a hard master, and has very odious tasks for its bondsmen. The unclean animals are fit companions for one who made himself lower than they, since filth is natural to them and shameful for him. They are better off than he is, for husks do nourish them, and they get their fill, but he who has sunk to longing for swine's food cannot get even that. The dark picture is only too often verified in the experience of godless men.

**II. The wastrel's returning sanity is described in verses 17-20a.**

He came to himself. Then he had been beside himself before. It is insanity to try to shake off God, to aim at independence, to wander from Him, to fling away our substance, that is, our true selves, and to starve among the swine-troughs. He remembers the bountiful housekeeping at home, as starving men dream of feasts, and he thinks of himself with a kind of pity and amazement.

There is no sign that his conscience smote him, or that his heart woke in love to his father. His stomach, and it only, urged him to go home. He did, indeed, feel that he had been wrong, and had forfeited the right to be called a son, but he did not care much for losing that name, or even for losing the love to which it had the right, if only he could get as much to eat as one of the hired servants, whose relation to the master was less close, and, in patriarchal times, less happy, than that of slaves born in the house.

One good thing about the lad was that he did not let the grass grow under his feet, but, as soon as he had made the resolution, began to carry it into effect. The bane of many a resolve to go back to God is that it is sicklied o'erby procrastination. The ragged prodigal has not much to leave which need hold him, but many such a one says, I will arise and go to my father to-morrow, and lets all the to-morrows become yesterdays, and is sitting among the swine still.

Low as the prodigal's motive for return was, the fact of his return was enough. So is it in regard to our attitude to the gospel. Men may be drawn to give heed to its invitations from the instinct of self-preservation, or from their sense of hungry need, and the belief that in it they will find the food they crave for, while there may be little consciousness of longing for more from the Father than the satisfaction of felt wants. The longing for a place in the Father's heart will spring up later, but the beginning of most men's taking refuge in God as revealed in Christ is the gnawing of a hungry heart. The call to all is, Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat.

**III. The climax of the parable, for which all the rest is but as scaffolding, is the father's welcome (vs. 20b-24).**

Filial love may die in the son's heart, but paternal yearning lives in the father's. The wanderer's heart would be likely to sink as he came nearer the father's tent. It had seemed easy to go back when he acted the scene in imagination, but every step homewards made the reality more difficult.

No doubt he hesitated when the old home came in sight, and perhaps his resolution would have oozed out at his finger ends if he had had to march up alone in his rags, and run the gauntlet of servants before he came to speech with his father. So his father's seeing him far off and running to meet him is exquisitely in keeping, as well as movingly setting forth how God's love goes out to meet His returning prodigals. That divine insight which discerns the first motions towards return, that divine pity which we dare venture to associate with His infinite love, that eager meeting the shamefaced and slow-stepping boy half-way, and that kiss of welcome before one word of penitence or request had been spoken, are all revelations of the heart of God, and its outgoings to every wanderer who sets his face to return.

Beautifully does the father's welcome make the son's completion of his rehearsed speech impossible. It does not prevent his expression of penitence, for the more God's love is poured over us, the more we feel our sin. But he had already been treated as a son, and could not ask to be taken as a servant. Beautifully, too, the father gives no verbal answer to the lad's confession, for his kiss had answered it already; but he issues instructions to the servants which show that the pair have now reached the home and entered it together.

The gifts to the prodigal are probably significant. They not only express in general the cordiality of the welcome, but seem to be capable of specific interpretations, as representing various aspects of the blessed results of return to God. The robe is the familiar emblem of character. The prodigal son is treated like the high-priest in Zechariah's vision; his rags are stripped off, and he is clothed anew in a dress of honour. Them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also sanctified. The ring is a token of wealth, position, and honour. It is also a sign of delegated authority, and is an ornament to the hand. So God gives His prodigals, when they come back, an elevation which unforgiven beings do not reach, and sets them to represent Him, and arrays them in strange beauty. No doubt the lad had come back footsore and bleeding, and the shoes may simply serve to keep up the naturalness of the story. But probably they suggest equipment for the journey of life. That is one of the gifts that accompany forgiveness. Our feet are shod with the preparedness of the gospel of peace.

Last of all comes the feast. Heaven keeps holiday when some poor waif comes shrinking back to the Father. The prodigal had been content to sink his sonship for the sake of a loaf, but he could not get bread on such terms. He had to be forgiven and bathed in the outflow of his father's love before he could be fed; and, being thus received, he could not but be fed. The feast is for those who come back penitently, and are received forgivingly, and endowed richly by the Father in heaven.