

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON.

A STUDY OF LUKE XV. 11-32.

EXEGESIS is not much in request here. There is perhaps no page in the Bible which comes home so perfectly to the understanding of every human being. Tell the story to a group of the most savage of our sunken classes, without a word of explanation, it will draw tears from eyes unused to weeping and find its way to hearts long seared to human sympathy. They will urge its repetition. And when the visit is renewed, "untired they will ask it again." It is so human. There is so much in it that touches the very nerve of man's misery. No need to explain Eastern or ancient manners here. The story never grows old, alas! nor unintelligible. The sad fact in human households on which it is based is only too familiar. Have we not all seen such a youth set out from home in the full tide of health and happiness, hastening to the great city or the foreign shore? Then, from time to time, rumours would find their way to his native place that all was not right, that his habits were being rapidly corrupted;—until at length there has come the sudden report of a miserable end, or the pallid and shattered invalid,—a moral wreck,—has returned to bring down the parents' grey hairs with quicker sorrow to the grave.

But human as the story is, the parable is truly Divine. A shepherd will go after his lost sheep, though it be but one in a hundred. A woman will make diligent search for her one lost piece of silver out of ten. But their feelings are as nothing to those of the fond father who yearns for his erring son. Let us view the love of God through the glass of human affection at its brightest and best. Never is man so likely to forgive, as when the wandered

child comes home. Take man—a father—in the hour when his heart is readiest to melt and to pardon—at that ecstatic moment when the long-lost one, weary and wretched, falls upon his bosom repenting. Believe that there you have a likeness of our Father in heaven, rich in mercy, ready to forgive; only that His boundless patience and His fathomless love for us sinners are as far above even this likeness as the heavens are above the earth. So we get at the meaning of this Crown and Pearl of our Lord's parables—this Gospel within the Gospel—an unfailing text from which to declare mercy for the chief of sinners, a door of hope and a place for repentance to the uttermost and to the last.

There are three distinct pictures, or compartments rather, in the one composition: the Prodigal's Progress; the Penitent's Return, and the Elder Brother; in which last the Master's design is fully revealed.

I.

THE PRODIGAL'S PROGRESS.

"A certain man had two sons." It is of the younger, who is usually called "the prodigal"—"the sinner," that we are now to speak. That there is much of sinful human nature to be found in the portraiture of the elder brother we shall see. For though we take the prodigal as the portrait of every sinner in his departure from God, no doubt it is the "publican" type of sinner—the man whose "sins are open beforehand, going before to judgment," that is immediately in view. We are all familiar with the two classes of men depicted in these two brothers. The elder brother is "an austere man." He passes for a character irreproachable in the common acceptance. The people who see most of him like him least. He has a proud and sullen temper and a firm grasp of the world. But no one

can lay much to his charge. He keeps his character for piety. He stands high in the estimation of the religious public. But we pass him by at present. His sins are of another order; "they follow after." The younger brother is a universal favourite. He is so gay, so frank, so merry. He has a fine, generous temper; a bold, free carriage; an openness of hand and heart that win him ready favour and applause. "To be sure," they say, "he is a free liver as well, and far from prudent, yet he has a kind heart." Would they but look a little deeper, they would find a character not so noble, nor generous. Instead of finding in this reckless youth one who was "nobody's enemy but his own," we find one who weakly and meanly sacrifices every interest to the selfish gratification of his own appetites and passions, and returns ill for good to those who have heaped treasures of affection on his ungrateful head.

Ver. 12. "*And the younger of them said, . . . And he divided unto them his living.*"¹ "Give me the portion of goods!" Is that a noble and generous temper? Mark the petulant demand, the cold-blooded legal technicality, as if it were a matter of right, the grasping selfishness, the want of natural affection that he could insult such a father to his face with an open expression of his desire to be rid of him. A *post-obit* will not serve this youth. He must carry off his father's possessions in his lifetime. He has such a dislike of the restraints of his father's presence and care, that nothing will satisfy him but to be loosened at once and remove where he may indulge himself without a check and see his father no more. "Shame upon him," we say,

¹ Δός μοι τὸ ἐπιβάλλον. Notice the Hebrew law of patrimony (Deut. xxi. 17). The elder son gets a double share, the younger a single. How this bears upon the elder we shall see. Meanwhile, the younger asks the father to hand over at once to his free disposal what would fall to him in due time by the law of inheritance. The father fully complies with the request, for he divides to both sons (τὸν βίον) his substance, paying over to the younger his share, while appointing the bulk of his property to the elder, who abides with him in the house, as chief heir. See Goebel.

“for an unnatural and selfish creature, not worthy to be called a child!” But does not conscience say to each of us “Thou art the man”? This is our own portrait, drawn by the hand of God’s one, true, eternal Son. So He tells how we have cast off our sonship and denied the Fatherhood of God. This is sin’s beginning and bitter root—REBELLION. It is the false self-sufficiency of man. The insane desire to set up for life and happiness apart from God, upon “the portion of goods that falleth to him” from God; a folly bound up in the sinful heart of every child of Adam. The primeval lie on which all sin-palaces of the soul are built is, that my chief end is the doing of my own will and the gratification of my own nature. When once I have believed that lie, and am given over to that delusion, comes the death of all filial love to God—the insatiable thirst for pleasure that will be gratified even over the barriers of law, human and Divine. Thus begins the prodigal’s course with the words, “Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.” “Give us this day our daily bread” is another language altogether. It is the children’s prayer. It is the voice of those who are returned unto their Father, who, even in this life, are by faith at home with Him, feed daily at His table, and in the grace of faith ask no more than daily bread. The sinful heart wants to be self-sufficient, to have its dowry at its own disposal—its fortune and happiness in its own hands. It will have all now, and nothing in reversion. And as that father in the story, so the Supreme Father seems at times to act. God gives such a man over to his folly. The Divine Spirit ceases to strive against the waywardness of the spoiled heart, hands him over to another of His ministers, His providential justice; yet leaves Himself a door by which to revisit the soul when its sin shall have found it out.

Ver. 13. “*And not many days after . . . a far*

country." This is the second step of the prodigal's career. That first movement of inward rebellion against dependence and restraint is soon followed by open departure from the father's house. The one soon follows on the other. The aversion of the heart precedes, but not long, the apostasy of the life. "He gathered all together," turned everything into money, that he might carry it off and have it in hand, "and took his journey," proving that license and unworthy liberty was his aim. The estrangement of heart from his father showed itself by putting speedily as great a distance as possible between himself and his father's house.

Here again we have the likeness of our sin, its APOSTASY or departure from God, as before we had of its revolt against God. Man collects all his energies and powers, to carry them far off from God and spend them on himself. He takes his journey into a world of his own, walking where God is not,—“not in all his thoughts.” For his “far country” is his forgetting of God, not God's absence from him (Aug.). It is man that is by sin “without God in the world,” though “He is not far from every one of us.” Men “worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator,” who all the while has “left not Himself without witness.”

“*And there wasted his substance with riotous living.*”¹ The young man is now fairly his own master, he has got his patrimony into his own hand, he has got rid of the restraints of his father's house and presence, has arrived at his self-chosen land of promise, and now that he is “lord of himself” will find it soon enough to be—

“ . . . that heritage of woe,
That fearful empire which the human breast
But holds to rob the heart within of rest.”

¹ ζῶν ἀσώτως, “with prodigal living” has been suggested; for this phrase has given title to the parable. Ὁ υἱὸς ἀσώτος is *Filius perditus* or *prodigus*—the Prodigal Son.

At first, indeed, it promises well. There is nothing now to restrain, no father's eye to check him, no pure and gentle mother to save him. He has burst all bonds. And, in his own sense, it is well with him. It is the height and summit of his joy. It is the sparkling wine-cup of his mirth, that tickles the palate and maddens the brain and leads him to quaff another and another draught. Yet, already it begins to bite, almost before it has begun to please, for he soon discovers that his happiness is transitory—the means of it is melting away. He there “scattered” (διασκορπίσεν) “his substance.” The word is used in a sharp, ironical contrast to his former “gathering” (συναγαγὼν) “all together.” This selfish, grasping youth turns out a spendthrift. He has lighted the candle at both ends, and already darkness and dismay are approaching with rapid strides.

Thus our Lord paints the climax of sin—its PROFLIGACY. The sinner may flatter himself, for a time, that he is doing well at a distance from God, that he is sufficient unto himself; yet all the while, by indulging, he is exhausting himself and hastening with rapid strides from the height of his folly to the depth of his misery. “Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine, and when men have well drunk then that which is worse.” Most true of the cup which Satan puts into the sinner's hand. It has a sparkle on the surface, a paltry flicker of joy at the beginning, but afterwards comes “that which is worse.” So it was with the prodigal. First it looked like good wine, —freedom, plenty, liberal spending, brave enjoying,—the after-cup is of a very different flavour. For now we come to his *misery*.

Ver. 14. “*And when he had spent all . . . he began to be in want.*” The first step of the penalty which sin pays is put very significantly in the case of this youth. There is in it that “irony of providence” which startles us

so often in the experience of real life. Would it not have been enough to say that he soon spent his all and was allowed to find the bottom of his purse and of his appetite? The land and people around him might still have had plenty, and perhaps have helped him. But, no! just at that juncture "there arose a mighty famine in that land." It is always so. The famine comes upon the sinner's chosen country, just when he wants it to be a land of plenty. In other words, his extremity is the world's opportunity to desert him. "Thy calf, O Samaria, hath cast thee off." "It shall be broken in pieces." A golden calf the worshipper made it. Much he has spent on it and offered to it. But in the day of his calamity he finds it a dumb and mocking idol, or, in just retribution, pounded into bitter dust which mingles with the draught of his misery. The thing on which he spent himself and in which he trusted turns round upon him and becomes his punishment.

Ver. 15. "*And he went and joined himself . . . to feed swine.*" The second step in sin's punishment is, when it brings forth more sin. Wrong-doing has brought suffering in the first instance; and now suffering, instead of leading at once to repentance, often plunges the man deeper into his folly. The youth is down, but his heart is unbroken, his pride unhumbled. Beggared though he be, he will not yet brook to go back a suppliant to his father's door. He has chosen for himself. He will stick to his choice. He tries hard to make the "far country"—famine-stricken though he now finds it—"his home." He went and "*pinned himself to a citizen of that country.*" "The word (*ἐκολλήθη*) intimates that the citizen would fain have repelled him, and was induced to take him into his service only by urgent entreaty" (Goebel). He has been vile, he will yet be more vile. But he can hardly have been prepared for the utter degradation which his self-chosen master

imposed upon him—degradation, to the Jewish mind, the most extreme which could be conceived, that he, the son of a Hebrew family, should be a swine-herd.

Our Lord has here depicted the mystery of sin and its servitude in these successive steps :—the reluctance to confess our wrong and to return, even when punishment has begun ; the proud refusal of the heart to go back to the offended Father ; the mad resolve to go on sinning, to wring the wine of pleasure out of the bitter dregs of iniquity ; the recourse to the world itself to drown the misery and feed the famishing soul ! What sad and humbling truth too there is here, as to the altered relation of the sinner to his sin ! He came into that land a lord, and used its joys to minister to his pleasure. He remains in it a slave and the drudge of his own evil. He began a rioter at the devil's table. He ends a thrall in the devil's service. How unsuspectingly he is ensnared ! How unconsciously has he slid from depth to deeper depth, to a fall within a fall, till at last he reaches the lowest to which sin and misery combined can bring him in this world !

Ver. 16. "*And he would fain, . . . and no man gave unto him.*"—No picture of destitution could be more complete. The son of a Jew and a man of position reduced to the rank of a feeder of swine, is almost as far as language could go ; when, with inimitable art, is added this particular. So abject was the poverty of this poor wretch at last, that he was fain to stave off absolute starvation by partly feeding with his charge. No man cared for him so as to give him aught better. To such a pass has our fair youth come, who set out, a short while since, so bravely from his father's house : first, to want begun, then to slavery and degradation ; last of all, to utter destitution and hunger unsated, for the food of beasts could not appease the man's craving.

Translated into the moral region, the description is supremely graphic, as to sin bringing its own punishment.

Do we need to be reminded that it is literally applicable to some kinds of sin? In the nervous language of Coleridge, the downward course of the victim of appetite "has not even the gleam of an expected pleasure before to tempt it forward, but only the spur of an inexorable craving from behind, that urges it as with the goad of destiny." But take the picture in its whole breadth. The degradation of this gentleman's son is a description of the misery of man's fallen nature—a fall so deep because of the greatness of the original and because of the height for which it was first fitted. According to this parable, our state of Sin is Rebellion against God's fatherhood, Removal from our Father's house, and Wasting of our Father's goods. Our consequent Misery is Poverty, Slavery, and Starvation. We are spiritually lost, dead, and beside ourselves. Is the picture overdrawn? Surely He who drew it knew what was in man at his best and at his worst; knew also what is in God. Therefore He spared no darkest line, that this might be a parable for all sorts of sinners; to show that no departure from God makes return impossible, to witness that "He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God through Him."

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