

so ; surely it is another, some sweet April day, to feel upon the brow a gust of vernal air, with its mystic fragrance, telling that spring is here.

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THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON.

THAT parable of our Lord which goes by the name of the Parable of the Prodigal Son begins with these words : " A certain man had two sons " (St. Luke xv. 11). It is true that the greater part of the parable is the story of the fortunes of the younger son, commonly called the prodigal, though he is not so described in the parable. But while this is so, we must not lose sight of the fact that a quite considerable part of the parable has to do with the other, the elder, son ; and indeed the point of the parable is in danger of being missed unless we bear this fact in mind. If thirteen verses are taken up with the wanderings and return to his father's home of the younger son, no fewer than eight deal with the elder brother, whose envy, provoked by the father's welcome of the long-lost son, has to be reprovèd and corrected. Indeed it is not too much to say that these last eight verses contain the real lesson of the parable. I am not suggesting that the story of the prodigal son is not an essential part of the parable. That would be absurd indeed. But I contend that the main point of the parable is to be found in the dialogue at the end of the parable between the father and the elder son.

The fifteenth chapter of St. Luke contains three parables—that of the lost sheep, that of the lost piece of silver, and the one under consideration. These parables our Lord spoke in reproof of the murmurings of the Pharisees and the scribes, who complained : " This man receiveth

sinner and eateth with them." All three parables aim at correcting the wrong temper of mind underlying this complaint. The spirit which those who thus murmured displayed was fundamentally wrong. If was of the earth, earthy. In heaven there is great joy over each repentant sinner, but the children of men, who know not the love of the great God and Father in heaven are filled with envy when favour is shown to the wicked man, who turns from his wickedness.

The publicans and sinners of course correspond with the younger son of our parable, the Pharisees and scribes with the elder son. The former had gone astray from God, but were now coming to themselves and returning to Him. The latter prided themselves on their nearness to God. They were like the elder brother of the parable who had stayed at home. But their murmurings, like those of their counterpart in the parable, showed how little they had imbibed the spirit of the home. If they were *in* it, they were not *of* it. Their minds were indeed carnal. This carnality had to be exposed and corrected. There was no room for it in the Kingdom of Heaven, the true temper of which is that of the Angels who rejoice with great joy over one sinner that repenteth. Man, carnal man, grudges to a repentant sinner the full and free forgiveness which the heavenly Father bestows upon him; not so the Angels in heaven, who reflect the Father's mind of love, and with Him joy, with true spiritual joy, that Love has triumphed. The temper of earth is thus contrasted with the temper of heaven. Man grudges to repentant sinners what the Angels of God delight to see him receive.

The parable divides itself naturally into two parts. The first has to do with the younger son, his attitude to his father and his father's attitude to him. The second concerns itself with the elder son and his attitude towards

his father and his younger brother, whose welcome home is unwelcome to him, even as Christ's reception of the publicans and sinners was unwelcome to the Pharisees and scribes.

The younger son had demanded independence of his father. Wishing to go his own way he had asked his father for that portion of the family substance which fell to him. The father then divided his living between the two sons. The elder brother remained at home, but the younger preferring independence, taking with him all that his father had given him, took his journey into a far country; and there he wasted his substance with riotous living. When he had nothing left, a mighty famine arose, and for the first time in his life he began to be in want. He was reduced to hiring himself out to feed swine, and so hungry was he that he could have eaten the food that the swine ate. Thus by his misery he is brought to himself, and he reflects on his folly in ever leaving his father's home where even the hired servants had bread enough and to spare. Better far to be at home as a servant than destitute in this far country. He determines to return home and confess his fault to his father and ask to be received back again, no longer as a son—that he feels he does not deserve—but as a servant. He returns. The father, who sees him while he is still far off, runs to meet him, and falling on his neck welcomes him home with a kiss. He makes his confession to his father; "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son." But it would seem that his lips failed him, and refused in the face of the father's love to make the suggestion that he should become as a hired servant. It is as a son, a son still beloved in spite of his waywardness, that the father receives him back, and so great is his joy at the return of his son that he gives orders to his servants to bring forth

the best robe and put it on him, and to put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and to bring the fatted calf and kill it that they may eat and make merry. For his son who had been as one dead is now alive. He had been lost but is now found.

The earthly father of the parable stands for the Father in heaven who rejoices over the return of His children to the bosom of His love. They had gone astray from Him, seeking their good apart from Him, away from the home. But they have, like the prodigal son, come to great misery and learnt the uselessness of their attempted independence. Not knowing the Father's love, they had sought their good away from Him, but now they have learnt their mistake. How can He do less than an earthly father would do? Through all his waywardness and self-will the child is still the object of the Father's love, which is only hindered in its operation until such time as the child comes to a proper mind. The love is always there, even when hindered.

And now the elder son comes upon the scene. Returning from the field he draws nigh to the house and hears the music and dancing. So he calls one of the servants and inquires the meaning of these things. On being told that his brother has come home and that his father, in joy at his return, has killed for him the fatted calf, he is angry and refuses to go in. His father then goes out to him and entreats him to come in and share in the rejoicing. But he would not. Why should there be joy over the return of a prodigal who had disgraced his family? He himself had not behaved in any such way. He had stayed at home and faithfully served his father, who had never even given him a kid, that he might make merry with his friends. "But when this thy son"—and there is a tone of contempt in the words as if he would say: This is no brother of mine though you call him so, you may call him your

son, if you will, though I am surprised that you should own him—"when this thy son came, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou killedst for him the fatted calf."

And then comes the father's answer: "Child (τέκνον), thou art ever with me and all that I have is thine."

There is a wealth of spiritual teaching in this reply. The favour shown to the returning prodigal in no way deprived the elder son of anything. He had all that he could possibly desire. He had but to ask and he would receive. But though he was in the home, he was not truly of it. He did not share the spirit of his father. If he has done his father's commandments he has not in so doing acted from love. If he loved his father he would have rejoiced with him. His aims are of the earth, earthy.

And here, as I said at the beginning of this paper, is the chief lesson of the parable. They who murmured at God's welcome of the sinner who returned to Him, knew not the mind and heart of the Heavenly Father. Their service was not of the right kind. It did not proceed from love. They had not learnt the first and great commandment to love God with all the heart and soul and mind. They thought of themselves as deserving of reward, instead of rejoicing to have been allowed to serve. Their service was of the wrong kind, and did not proceed from a right motive.

And what a depth of meaning there is in those words; "Child, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine!" This is just what our Heavenly Father says to us His children. But it is only as we accept the relationship implied in the word "Child" that we can lay hold of the privilege placed within our reach. God would have our love in response to His love to us. He does not want a perfunctory service. The mercenary spirit is wholly out of place in the Kingdom

of Heaven. If we but had the true spirit of sonship in our hearts what blessings might not be ours! But our surrender to the Divine Love is so imperfect that we are incapable of receiving the full blessing which it designs for us. Not until we have learnt to say to our Heavenly Father "All that I have is Thine" can we rightly receive the word which He speaks to us, "All that is Mine is thine."

All blessing in the Kingdom of Heaven is of grace, and any attempt to have an independent goodness of our own is foredoomed to failure. So great is the love of our Father in heaven for us that He would have us know it and recognise it, and receiving our every good consciously and thankfully from Him do all from the motive of love, which is the response to His love for us. Envy and jealousy are wholly and entirely out of place. If another is loved, this should be a cause of joy to us. The blessing which one receives deprives not another. To each and all who surrender to the Divine Love without reserve is the word spoken: "Child, thou art ever with Me, and all that is Mine is thine." It is impossible for us to accept this position of utter and entire dependence except as love, answering to love Divine, makes it easy for us.

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