

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE XV. 11–24.

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.

THE parable before us is commonly known as the parable of “the prodigal son.” It may be truly called a mighty spiritual picture. Unlike some of our Lord’s parables, it does not convey to us one great lesson only, but many. Every part of it is peculiarly rich in instruction.

We see, firstly, in this parable, man *following the natural bent of his own heart*. Our Lord shows us a “younger son” making haste to set up for himself, going far away from a kind father’s house, and “wasting his substance in riotous living.”

We have in these words a faithful portrait of the mind with which we are all born. This is our likeness. We are all naturally proud and self-willed. We have no pleasure in fellowship with God. We depart from Him, and go afar off. We spend our time, and strength, and faculties, and affections, on things that cannot profit. The covetous man does it in one fashion, the slave of lusts and passions in another, the lover of pleasure in another. In one point only all are agreed: like sheep, we all naturally “go astray, and turn everyone to his own way.” (Isai. liii. 6.) In the younger son’s first conduct we see the natural heart.

He that knows nothing of these things has yet much to learn. He is spiritually blind. The eyes of his understanding need to be opened. The worst ignorance in the world is not to know ourselves. Happy is he who has been delivered from the kingdom of darkness, and been made acquainted with himself! Of too many it may be said, “They know not, neither will they understand. They walk on in darkness.” (Psalm lxxxii. 5.)

We see, secondly, in this parable, man *finding out that the ways of sin are hard, by bitter experience*. Our Lord shows us the younger son spending all his property and reduced to want,—obliged to take service and “feed swine,”—so hungry that he is ready to eat swine’s food, and cared for by none.

These words describe a common case. Sin is a hard master, and the servants of sin always find it out, sooner or later, to their cost. Unconverted people are never really happy. Under a profession of high spirits and cheerfulness, they are often ill at ease within. Thousands of them are sick at heart, dissatisfied with themselves, weary of their own ways, and thoroughly uncomfortable. “There be many that say, Who will show us any good.” “There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.” (Psa. iv. 6; Isaiah lvii. 21.)

Let this truth sink down into our hearts. It is a truth, however loudly unconverted people may deny it. “The way of transgressors is hard.” (Prov. xiii. 15.) The secret wretchedness of natural men is exceedingly great. There is a famine within, however much they may try to conceal it. They are “in want.” He that “soweth to the flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption.” No wonder that St. Paul said, “What profit had ye in those things whereof ye are now ashamed.” (Gal. vi. 8; Rom. vi. 21.)

We see, thirdly, in this parable, *man awaking to a sense of his natural state, and resolving to repent*. Our Lord tells us that the younger son “came to himself and said, How many servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger? I will arise and go to my father, and say unto him, Father, I have sinned.”

The thoughts of thousands are vividly painted in these words. Thousands have reasoned in this way, and are saying such things to themselves every day. And we must be thankful when we see such thoughts arise. Thinking is not change of heart, but it may be the beginning of it. Conviction is not conversion, but it is one step, at any rate, in a right direction. The ruin of many people’s souls is simply this, that they never think at all.

One caution, however, must always be given: men must beware that they do not stop short in “thinking.” Good thoughts are all very well, but they are not saving Christianity. If the younger son had never got beyond thinking, he might have kept from home to the day of his death.

We see, fourthly, in this parable, *man turning to God with true repentance and faith*. Our Lord shows us the younger son quitting the far country where he was, and going back to his father’s house, carrying into practice the good intentions he had formed, and unreservedly confessing his sin. “He arose and went.”

These words are a life-like outline of true repentance and conversion. The man in whose heart a true work of the Holy Ghost has begun will never be content with thinking and resolving. He will break off from sin. He will

come out from its fellowship. He will cease to do evil. He will learn to do well. He will turn to God in humble prayer. He will confess his iniquities. He will not attempt to excuse his sins. He will say with David, "I acknowledge my transgression." He will say with the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner." (Psalm li. 3; Luke xviii. 13.)

Let us beware of any repentance, falsely so called, which is not of this character. Action is the very life of "repentance unto salvation." Feelings, and tears, and remorse, and wishes, and resolutions, are all useless, until they are accompanied by action and a change of life. In fact they are worse than useless. Insensibly they sear the conscience and harden the heart.

We see, fifthly, in this parable, *the penitent man received readily, pardoned freely, and completely accepted with God.* Our Lord shows us this, in this part of the younger son's history, in the most touching manner. We read that "When he was yet a long way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. 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. 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. And bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry."

More deeply affecting words than these, perhaps, were never written. To comment on them seems almost needless. It is like gilding refined gold, and painting the lily. They show us in great broad letters the infinite love of the Lord Jesus Christ towards sinners. They teach how infinitely willing He is to receive all who come to Him, and how complete, and full, and immediate is the pardon which He is ready to bestow. "By Him all that believe are justified from all things."—"He is plenteous in mercy." (Acts xiii. 39; Psalm lxxxvi. 5.)

Let this boundless mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ be graven deeply in our memories, and sink into our minds. Let us never forget that He is One "that receiveth sinners." With Him and his mercy sinners ought to begin, when they first begin to desire salvation. On Him and His mercy saints must live, when they have been taught to repent and believe. "The life which I live in the flesh," says St. Paul, "I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. ii. 20.)

NOTES. LUKE XV. 11-24.

- 11.—[A certain man had two sons.] Of all the parables in the New Testament this is perhaps the most full and instructive. Of the three in this chapter it is far the most striking. The first parable concerns one sheep out of a hundred. The second concerns one piece of money out

of ten. The one before us concerns one son out of two. We must not attach too much importance to these numbers. But it is interesting to observe them.

It is common to regard the “father” in this parable as the type of God the Father; and the sons, as types of Jews and Gentiles. I cannot assent to this view respecting the father. As to the sons, I only remark, that it was not the primary idea in our Lord’s mind.

I believe that the younger son was meant to be a type of all unconverted sinners, and that his return to his father’s house was an emblem of true repentance. I believe that the father’s kind reception of his son was meant to represent the Lord Jesus Christ’s kindness and love toward sinners who come to Him, and the free and full pardon which He bestows on them. I believe that the elder son was meant to be a type of all narrow-minded self-righteous people in every age of the Church, and specially of the Scribes and Pharisees, who “murmured” at our Lord for receiving sinners. These are what I believe to be the general lessons of the parable. So far I can go in interpreting it, but no further.

I may as well say here, once for all, that I am unable to see that the elder son represents the angels; or that the “citizen,” with whom the younger son took service, is the devil; or the best robe, Christ’s righteousness; or the ring, assurance of pardon; or the shoes, grace to walk with God; or the servants, Christ’s ministers; or the fatted calf, the Lord’s supper. All such interpretations are doubtless very ingenious, and are held by many. Maldonatus says wisely “they are uncertain.” I content myself with remarking that I do not believe they represent the mind of Christ. The parable contains a story which strikingly illustrates Christ’s love towards sinners. That story is told in the most striking manner, and is conveyed in imagery of the most graphic kind. But I am quite unable to see that every part of the imagery employed was intended by our Lord to bear a spiritual meaning.

12.—[*The younger of them said.*] Let it be noted that the “younger son” was the one who exhibited self-will, and love of independence. This makes his conduct more reprehensible.

[*That falleth to me.*] Parkhurst remarks, that “there is reference here to the laws both of Jews and Romans. In this they agreed that they did not allow the father of a family the voluntary distribution of his whole estate, but allotted a certain portion to the younger son. (Deut. xxi. 16.) The young man, therefore, only desired the immediate possession of that fortune which according to the common course of things must in a few years devolve to him.”

13.—[*With riotous living.*] The word would be more literally rendered, “living riotously.” The Greek word for “riotously,” is only used here. It means strictly “in such a way as to save nothing: wastefully.”

14.—[*A citizen of that country.*] Gill says that this means, “A Pharisaical legal preacher.” I cannot for a moment see this.

15.—[*To feed swine.*] Let it be remembered that our Lord was speaking to an audience of Jews. They regarded swine, by the law of Moses, as unclean animals. This circumstance of the story, therefore, would probably convey to Jewish minds a most vivid idea of the degraded condition to which the younger son was reduced.

16.—[*He would fain have filled.*] Major says that this expression does not mean that he desired and was unable to gratify his desire. It rather signifies “he was glad, he was only too happy.” See the same expression in Luke xvi. 21.

[*The husks.*] There seems little doubt that these husks mean the fruit of a tree called the carob tree, common in the Levant, and still used for feeding swine, but very unsuitable for the food of man. It probably answers to the beech mast, which swine eat, among ourselves.

[*No man gave unto him.*] This does not mean that “no man gave him husks,” as some have supposed. It only means, that “No man gave him anything at all: he was entirely neglected by everyone.”

- 17.—[*Came to himself.*] This expression has often called forth the remark that a man must come to himself before he comes to God.
- 18.—[*Against heaven and thee, &c.*] This is a confession of sin against God and man. It is one of the places in Scripture where “heaven,” the place where God dwells, is used for God Himself. See Daniel iv. 26; and Matt. xxi. 25.
- 20.—[*He arose and went.*] The remark is sometimes made that the prodigal son’s boldness in returning to his father’s house arose from the fact that, fallen as he was, he was yet “a son.” An argument has been extracted from this circumstance in defence of baptismal regeneration. Alford remarks, “he nowhere gives up his sonship,” and then gives the following quotation from Trench: “What is it that gives the sinner now a sure ground of confidence, that, returning to God, he shall not be repelled, nor cast out?—The adoption of sonship which he renewed in Christ Jesus at his baptism, and his faith that the gifts and calling of God are without recall.”

I believe the above argument to be erroneous. I cannot admit that the parable before us gives any aid to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. Parabolic expressions must never be strained into proof of doctrines. Those who see baptismal regeneration in the prodigal son’s expression, “Father, I have sinned,” and tell us to remark that, bad as he was, the young man did not forget his sonship, would do well to remember a twice-repeated expression in the parable. Twice over we are told that before the younger son came back he was “dead.” Now to be dead is to be without life, and to be without life is to need being “born again.” This is precisely what the younger son went through: he was dead, but he “lived again.” If those who hold baptismal regeneration will only concede that all unconverted sinners, whether baptized or unbaptized, are “dead,” we ask no more. But will they do this?

The plain truth is that parables are not those portions of Scripture to which we must turn for accurately-defined statements of doctrine. To find baptismal regeneration in this parable is to turn entirely away from our Lord’s intention in speaking it.

[*A great way off...ran...kissed.*] These three expressions are deeply touching. They bring out in strong relief the difficulty with which a sinner turns to Christ, and the readiness and willingness of Christ to receive him.

- 21.—[*To be called thy son.*] Let it be noted that the prodigal does not finish the sentence which he had intended to address to his father. The meaning of the omission probably is that our Lord desired to impress on us the father’s readiness to receive him. He did not allow him to finish his words, but interrupted him by expressions of kindness.
- 22.—[*The father said.*] Let it be noted that the father does not say a single word to his son about his profligacy and wickedness. There is neither rebuke nor reproof for the past, nor galling admonitions for the present, nor irritating advice for the future. The one idea that is represented as filling his mind, is joy that his son has come home. This is a striking fact.

[*The best robe.*] Some try to prove that this means that first old robe which the younger son used to wear, before he left his father’s house. This is the view of Theophylact and Calovius. The idea is untenable. Our translators have given the true sense.

[*A ring.*] This was a mark of honour, and confidence, and distinction. See Gen. xli. 42; Esther iii. 10; James ii. 2.

[*Shoes on his feet.*] This probably indicated that he was to be regarded not as a servant, as he had thought once he might be, but as a free man and a son. Prisoners and slaves were evidently barefooted. (Isa. xx. 4.)

23.—[*The fatted calf.*] This expression means literally, “the calf: that fatted one.” One kept for a special occasion,—a sacrifice or a feast.

Stella, the Spanish commentator, seems to have been much annoyed by allegorical commentators, in his day. He says, on this expression, with much quaint bluntness, “If you ask me what the fatted calf means, I reply that it means a calf, and nothing but a calf.”

24.—[*Was dead and is alive again.*] Let this expression be carefully noted. Though part of a parable, it is worthy of remark as our Lord’s language in describing the life of the prodigal son before his repentance, and the change when he repented. The one state was death. The other was life.

[*They began to be merry.*] The strong contrast between this expression and the one at the end of the 14th verse ought not to be overlooked. Unconverted, man begins to be “in want.” Converted, he begins to be “happy.”

In leaving this part of the parable, I feel it right to say that I fully admit that it may be taken in a national sense, and that in that sense it makes excellent divinity. The Gentile nations who departed from God after the flood, and reaped darkness, misery, and hard bondage under Satan, by their departure, may undoubtedly be typified by the younger son.

Their repentance and return to God, through the preaching of the Gospel after our Lord’s ascension, may be typified by the prodigal son’s return to his father’s house. The envy with which the believing Gentiles were regarded by the Jews may be typified by the conduct of the elder son. The parable would then, as is often the case, be a prophecy.

The words of our Lord are often so deep that they will admit of a double meaning. So it may be here. The parable may be interpreted both of nations and of individuals. All I maintain is, that the individual personal interpretation of it is decidedly the primary one which it ought to receive.