

PARABLE XXIV.

THE PRODIGAL SON.

LUKE XV. 11-32.

WE proceed to consider a parable which, if it be permitted to compare things divine with each other, may be fitly called the pearl and crown of all the parables ;¹ as further, it is the most *elaborate*, if we may use a word having a certain unfitness when applied to the spontaneous and the free, but which yet the fulness of all the minor details suggests ;—a parable too, containing within itself such a circle of blessed truths as abundantly to justify the title, *Evangelium in Evangelio*, which it has sometimes borne. Of its relation to the two other in the same chapter there has been occasion to speak already. To the parable itself, therefore, we may address ourselves without further preface.

'*And he said,*'—these words mark a new departure—'*A certain man had two sons.*' Interpreters separate off into two groups at the very outset of their interpretation. There are who see in these two sons the Jew and the Gentile ; and therefore in the younger son's departure from his father's house, the history of the great apostasy of the Gentile world ; in his return the reception of the same into the privileges of the New Covenant ;—as in the elder son a figure of the narrow-hearted self-extolling Jews, repining that 'sinners of the Gentiles' should be admitted to the same privileges with themselves. and sullenly refusing blessings which they must

¹ Grotius : 'Amid all the parables of Christ this one surely is remarkable, as full of feeling, and painted with the fairest colours.'

possess in common with these. Others, on the contrary, recognize in the two sons not Gentile and Jew, at least not primarily these, but penitent sinners and proud sinners, wheresoever such may be met; and have naturally found the first example of the one in the publicans, of the other in the Pharisees, seeing that the Lord spake the parable to justify to these his gracious reception of those.

These latter interpreters with good right object to the other interpretation, that it is alien to the scope of the parable; which, so explained, fails to meet the necessity which called it out, or to teach, except by remote inference, the truth which Christ plainly intended to teach by it. He would fain put the Pharisees to a wholesome shame, offended as with Him they were for consorting so freely and so graciously with fallen members of the Jewish Church. If indeed '*the publicans and sinners*' whom He so freely admitted to hear Him had been Gentiles and not Jews, the other interpretation might have some claim to stand. A setting forth of the gracious reception by his heavenly Father of the whole Gentile world when it turned to Him, would in that case have been a proper justification of his own receiving of those who might be properly regarded as the first-fruits of the heathen. Some have very eagerly asserted that the '*publicans and sinners*' were heathen; Tertullian, for example, who is in great dread lest, if they be acknowledged as members, though fallen ones, of the Jewish Church, an argument should be drawn from this for receiving back into communion those who, within the Church, and after their baptism, have greatly sinned. He does not scruple to assert that the publicans were always heathen; and this in the face of our Lord's declaration that Zacchæus, a chief publican, was 'a son of Abraham'¹ (Luke xix. 9), of the fact that Matthew the Apostle had sat as a publican at the receipt of custom (Luke v. 27), that publicans came to the

¹ This is not decisive with him; for of him he says (*Adv. Marc. iv. 37*): Zaccheus, 'although perhaps an alien, was yet possessed of some knowledge of the scriptures from his dealings with the Jews.'

baptism of John (Luke vii. 29).¹ Set by their fellow-countrymen on a level with the heathen, counted traitors by them to the dearest interests of the nation, and till the words of Christ awoke them to a nobler life, many of them, perhaps, deserving all, or nearly all, the scorn which they found, the publicans were yet beyond all question Jews;² which being so, we confidently conclude that we have not here the mystery of the calling of the Gentiles into the covenant; whereof during his earthly life the Lord gave only slightest hints; but a truth as precious, namely, that, *within the covenant*, He was come to call and to receive sinners to repentance. For all this the interpretation, which must thus be disallowed as the primary, need not be excluded altogether. Wherever there are penitent sinners and proud sinners, there the parable is finding its fulfilment; and thus in a very real sense the Gentile world *was* the prodigal younger son, and the Jewish synagogue the self-righteous elder. Nor have they by

¹ See also Lightfoot, *Hor. Heb.* on Matt. v. 46.

² Many proofs of this are urged by Jerome (*Ep.* 21, *ad Damasum*), who marvels at the audacity of Tertullian's denial. The great aim of the latter in his treatise *De Pudicitia*, 7-9 (written after he had forsaken the Catholic Church), is to prove that nothing in this parable applies to those who, after baptism, have grievously sinned; and in his passionate eagerness to prove this, he does not hesitate to affirm its occasion to have been, 'because the Pharisees were murmuring at the Lord for receiving publicans and sinners of *the Gentiles*.' His fear is lest sinners should be overbold in their sin, having hope, like the prodigal, to find grace, whenever they will seek it; and he asks, 'Who will fear to squander what he can afterwards recover? Who will care always to keep what he is not in danger of always losing?' But how little was he really promoting holiness in this his false zeal for it. Tell men after they have sinned grievously, that there is for them no hope of pardon, or, which amounts to nearly the same thing, give them only a dim uncertain distant hope of it, and for one whom you may thus hinder from squandering his goodly heritage, you will hinder ten thousand, who have discovered the wretchedness of a life apart from God, from casting themselves on the riches of his mercy, and henceforth living, not to the lusts of men, but to his will. Not thus Chrysostom, *Ad Theod. Laps.* i. 7; *De Pœnit. Hom.* i. 4, where among other things he says: 'This son, therefore, is the type of those who fall after baptism,' which he proceeds to prove. Compare Ambrose (*De Pœnit.* ii. 3), as against the Novatianists.

any means exhausted the parable. It stands good also for us. In the Christian Church too prodigals and elder brothers still exist; and as thousands and ten thousands of those have from it taken heart to return to a heavenly Father's house, so will thousands more to the end of time; whom no perverse, narrow-hearted, 'elder-brotherly' interpretation will succeed in robbing of the strong consolation which it affords.

'And the younger of them said to his father, *Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me;*' he asks for his 'bairndole,' as they call it in Yorkshire. It is not without a meaning that of the two sons it is the younger who thus enacts the part of the prodigal; 'childhood and youth are vanity;' cf. Prov. vii. 7. This claiming of his share in a technical, almost legal, form,¹ as a right and not as a favour, is a delicate touch, characteristic of the entire estrangement from all home-affections which has already found place in his heart. Such a legal right the Lord *may* intend to intimate that he had; and, no doubt, a custom of the kind existed among some nations of the East, for example, among the Hindoos; but no satisfactory proof has been adduced that it ever prevailed among the Jews.² But we *need not* conceive of him as asking his portion otherwise than as a favour: 'That portion which will hereafter fall to me, which thou designest for me at last, I would fain receive it now.' A younger brother's portion, according to the Jewish laws of inheritance, would be the half of that which the elder brother should receive (Deut. xxi. 17; 2 Kin. ii. 9). Contemplated spiritually this request is the expression of man's desire to be independent of God, to become a god to himself (Gen. iii. 5), and to lay out his life at his own will and for his own pleasure.

¹ Τὸ ἐπιβάλλον μέρος τῆς οὐσίας = rata hereditatis pars; the phrase, like so many in St. Luke, is classical and happily selected (see Wetstein, in loc.).

² Rosenmüller, *Alte und Neue Morgenl.* vol. v. p. 115. Abraham indeed in his lifetime bestowed the bulk of his possessions on Isaac, at the same time giving gifts to the sons of his concubines, evidently their portions; for with these he sent them away (Gen. xxv. 5, 6). It may have been on his part a wise precaution to avoid disputes after his death.

Growing weary of living upon God's fulness, he desires to be, and believes that he can be, a fountain of blessedness to himself; that, laying out his life for himself, he can make a better investment of it than God would have made for him.¹ This sin of pride is the sin of sins; in which all subsequent sins are included; they are all but the unfolding of this one. Over against the prodigal's demand, '*Give me my portion of goods,*' is the children's cry, '*Give us day by day our daily bread;*' they therein declaring that they wait upon God, and would fain be nourished from day to day by his hand.

'*And he divided unto them his living.*' The father does not refuse his request. It would have profited nothing to retain *him* at home against his will, who was already in heart estranged from that home: better that he should discover by bitter experience the folly of his request. Such, too, is the dealing of God; He has constituted man a spiritual being, a being with a will; and when *his* service no longer appears a perfect freedom, and man promises himself something better elsewhere, he is allowed to make the trial (Rom. i. 24, 26, 28).² He shall discover, and, if need be, by most painful proof, that the only true freedom is the freedom in God (John viii. 32-34); that to depart from Him is not to throw off the yoke, but to exchange a light yoke for a heavy one, and one gracious master for a thousand tyrannous lords.³

'*And not many days after the younger son gathered all together.*' Having obtained his portion, a certain interval of time elapses before he actually forsakes his father's house. It is a fine and delicate touch, the apostasy of the heart, as

¹ St. Bernard observes, that it is a sign of evil augury, when this son 'begins to desire the division of the property which is more sweetly held in common, and to have to himself that which is not decreased by participation, but is lost by division.'

² See Chrysostom, *De Pœnit. Hom. i. 4.*

³ Augustine: 'If thou wilt cleave to the higher, thou shalt tread lower things under foot; but if thou depart from the higher, the lower shall be turned to thy punishment.' Compare the Italian proverb: *Chi non vuol servir ad un sol Signor, a molti ha da servir*, 'He who will not serve one Lord has to serve many.'

St. Bernard here well observes, often running before the apostasy of the life.¹ The sinner is indeed pleasing himself; but the divergence of his will and God's does not *immediately* appear. This, however, cannot be for long. As the young man in the parable, after a shorter or longer pause, '*gathered all together,*' turned what had fallen to his share into ready money or jewels or other valuables, and then '*took his journey into a far country,*' so '*after not many days*' he too will *openly* depart from God, who in will and affections has departed from Him already. Gathering all together, collecting all his energies and powers, with the deliberate resolve of obtaining, through their help, all the gratification he can out of the world,² and now manifestly preferring the creature to the Creator, he will take '*his journey into a far country,*'³ even into that land where God is not.

And now it must be well with him at last; he has gotten what he desired; no other is lord over him. Henceforth he is his own master;—but only to find the truth of that line which the poet wrote, and to which so many, he himself included, have set their seal:

'Lord of himself; that heritage of woe!'

Nor shall he wait long before he makes proof of this. For in that far land the Prodigal,—fitly so called by the Church,⁴

¹ *De Divers. Serm.* 8: 'A man is still under his own control, whilst fulfilling his own pleasure, but not yet possessed by vices and sins. But now he sets forth for a far country, and is no longer merely separated from his father, but at a distance from him.'

² Cajetan: 'The gathering together of his goods is man's confidence in all his gifts of nature and grace, of soul and body.'

³ Augustine: 'The far country is forgetfulness of God.' Bede: 'A man is removed afar from God, not by regions but by his feelings.'

⁴ 'Ο υἱὸς ἄσωτος. The title, however, lies wrapped up in the ζῶν ἄσωτος of ver. 13; and has its fitness, ἄσωτος being in the best Greek the constant epithet given to a son who squanders his patrimony (see Wetstein, in loc.). It nowhere occurs in the New Testament, in the Septuagint only at Prov. vii. 11; but ἀσωτία three times (Ephes. v. 18; Tit. i. 6; 1 Pet. iv. 4). The ἄσωτος is the *prodigus* or the *perditus* according as we give the word an active or a passive force. Most give it the active, deriving from ἀ and σώζειν, he who does not spare, the

though he nowhere bears this name in the sacred narrative,— ‘wasted his substance with riotous living’ (compare Prov. xxix. 8); so quickly has his *gathering* issued in a *scattering*, so little was it a *gathering* that deserved the name. For a while the supplies he brought with him may have lasted; and so long he may have congratulated himself, and counted that he had done wisely and well in asserting his own liberty. But anon, ‘when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want,’¹ the famine reached

scatterling, who counts that he may squander for ever without having squandered all. So Aristotle, the word forming part of his ethical terminology, the *ἄσωτος*, spendthrift or dingthrift, being set over against the *ἀνελεύθερος*, or niggard; these two occupying the two extremes, remote alike from a true liberality (*Eth. Nicom.* iv. 1, *passim*). So too Chrysostom: *ἄσωτος, οὐ γὰρ σώζει, ἀλλ’ ἀπόλλυσιν*, and Theophylact, who makes *ἄσωτία* = *ἔμετρος χρῆσις* (Suicer s. v.). But for others *ἄσωτος* is passive, and = *ἄσωστος*, i. e. *σώζεσθαι μὴ δυνάμενος*, a word prophetic of his doom who bears it; he is one of the ‘hopelosts,’ a word which might very well be recovered. So Clement of Alexandria (*Pæd.* ii. 1) and Plutarch (*Alcib.* 3); so too Grotius: ‘The class of men who are so sunk in vice that their salvation is despaired of;’ here too, as so often, the heathen ethical terminology saying more than it meant or knew. We must not restrain *ἄσωτία* on the one side to intemperance and excess at the table, as Grotius too much has done; in this sense Cicero (*De Fin.* ii. 8) has latinized *asotus*; nor yet on the other to fleshly lusts and impurities. It signifies reckless profligate living in its widest extent. In the *Tabula* of Cebes, c. 11, ‘*ἄσωρία*, as one of the tempting courtezans, keeps company with ‘*Ἀκρασία*, ‘*Ἀπληστία*, and ‘*Κολακεία*. C. Deyling, *Obs.* Sac. vol. iii. p. 435, and my *Synonyms of the New Testament*, § 16.

¹ The Vulgate has not missed the force of the *αὐτός*: *Et ipse cœpit egere* (see Winer, *Gramm.* § xxii. 4). Godet here says excellently well: ‘Freedom of enjoyment is not unlimited, as the sinner delights to imagine: it has two sorts of limits, the one touching the individual himself, such as the disgust, the remorse, the feeling of destitution and abjectness which results from vice (the ‘when he had spent all’); the others, such as proceed from the unfavourableness of certain external circumstances, represented here by the famine which comes at this crisis: such are the domestic or public calamities which finally break the already burdened heart; lastly, the deprivation of all divine consolation. Only let these two causes of misfortune happen to come together, and misery is at its height. Then ensues what Jesus calls *ὑστερεῖσθαι*, *the being in want*, the absolute void of a heart which has sacrificed everything to pleasure, and to which nothing remains but suffering.’

even to him (Prov. vi. 26). What a picture of the downward progress of a soul that has estranged itself from the one source of happiness and joy. It is not at the first moment that the wretchedness of this is discovered. The world has its attractions, and the flesh its pleasures; the affections are not all at once laid waste, nor the springs of natural delight drawn dry in an instant. But to this spiritual bankruptcy the sinner is more or less rapidly hastening; and the time inevitably arrives when he comes to an end of all the satisfaction which the creature can give him; and he too finds out that there is 'a mighty famine'¹ in the land where he has chosen to dwell,²—a famine of truth and love, and of all whereby the spirit of man indeed lives; that it is an evil thing and bitter to have forsaken the fountain of living waters, and hewn out for himself broken cisterns which hold no water (Jer. ii. 13; xvii. 5, 6, 13). There need no outward distresses, though often these will not be wanting, to bring on a sense of this famine. A man's worldly possessions may stand in their fulness, may go on abounding more and more; all his external helps to felicity may remain in their strength; while yet in the true riches he may have run through all, and may be beginning 'to be in want.'³ The famine of which Christ

¹ Λιμὸς ἰσχυρὰ = λιμὸς σκληρὰ (Isai. viii. 21); λιμὸς κραταῖός (1 Kin. xviii. 2); λιμὸς μέγας (2 Kin. vi. 25; Luke iv. 25); λιμὸς στενός (Job xviii. 12).

² Ambrose (*Exp. in Luc.* vii. 215): 'For he who departs from the word of God hungers, because man does not live by bread alone, but by every word of God: he who departs from the fountain, thirsts; he who departs from the treasure-house is in need; he who departs from wisdom, becomes dull; he who departs from virtue, is ruined.'

³ Thus, when a great English poet, with everything that fortune and rank and genius could give him, — and who had laid out his whole life for pleasure, and not for duty, — yet having hardly reached half the allotted period of man, already exclaimed,

' My days are in the yellow leaf ;
The flowers, the fruits of love are gone ;
The worm, the canker, and the grief,
Are mine alone ——'

what are these deeply affecting words, but the confession of one who,

here speaks presides often at the sumptuous tables of rich men ; it finds its way into the palaces of kings. In these palaces, at those tables, the immortal soul may be famishing, yea, ready to '*perish with hunger*;' yea and often has so done.

It was observed just now that we had a right to trace, as a secondary meaning in this parable, the history of the apostasy of the Gentile world from the knowledge and service of the true God. Regard it in that sense, and then this wasting of goods will be exactly described at Rom. i. 19-23 ; what remains in that chapter corresponding to the prodigal's joining of himself to a citizen of the far country, and seeking to fill his belly with the husks of the swine. The great famine of the heathen world was at its height when the Son of God came in the flesh : therein consisted in part 'the fulness of time,' the fitness of that time, above all other, for his appearing. The glory of that old world was fast fading and perishing. All child-like faith in the old religions had departed ; 'creeds outworn,' they could no longer nourish, ever so little, the spirit of man. The Greek philosophy had completed its possible circle, but it had found no sufficient answer to the doubts and questionings which tormented humanity. 'What is truth?' this was the question which all asked ; some in mockery, some in despair ; some without the desire, and all without the expectation, of obtaining an answer.

When the prodigal '*began to be in want*,' there was here a summons to return to the home which he had forsaken. But his proud heart is not yet subdued, his confidence in his own resources, however shaken, not altogether overthrown. God's first judgments do not always tame ; but, like Ephraim,

having spent all, had found himself in want ? The prodigal's misery, his sense of the barrenness of sin, finds presently a yet deeper voice :

'The fire that on my bosom preys
Is lone as some volcanic isle ;
No torch is kindled at its blaze,
A funeral pile !'

the stricken sinner exclaims, 'The bricks are fallen down, but we will build with hewn stone; the sycamores are cut down, but we will change them into cedars' (Isai. ix. 10; lvii. 10; cf. Jer. v. 3; Amos iv. 6-10; Rev. xvi. 10, 11). In such a spirit as this '*he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country,*'—'fastened' or 'pinned himself upon' him, as Hammond expresses it, hoping to repair his broken fortunes by his help¹ (Jer. ii. 36; Hos. v. 13; 1 Sam. ii. 5). 'That citizen,' says St. Bernard, 'I cannot understand as other than one of the malignant spirits, who, sinning with an irremediable obstinacy, and having passed into a permanent disposition of malice and wickedness, are no longer guests and strangers, but citizens and abiders in the land of sin.' But may not this term bring out the deep distinction between the prodigal and the lord to whom he addicted himself for a while? With all his guilt, *he* was not '*a citizen,*' but a stranger, in that '*far land.*' He did not feel himself at home, nor naturalize himself there. The other was well to do; the famine had not touched him; herein how far more miserable, though he knew it not, than he who '*began to be in want.*' There is hope for him who feels himself a miserable alien in the land of sin: but what hope for one who has made himself '*a citizen*' there, who is troubled with no heavenly homesickness, no divine hypochondria, no remembrances of a Father's house which he has forsaken? For the present indeed there is set forth to us here a deeper depth in the sinner's downward course, a fall within a fall,—a more entire and self-conscious yielding of himself in heart and will to the service of evil. He sells himself to the world; the poor deceitful show of being its master has disappeared; he is evidently its slave. A hint is here of that awful mystery in the downward

¹ So Unger: '*Ἐκολλήθη* contemptuously, he thrust himself upon;' see Suicer, *Thes.* s. v. *κολλάομαι*. Keil puts a little more into the word than to me it seems to contain, when he explains: '*Ἐκολλήθη* points to the fact that the citizen of that country did not wish to receive him into his service, but that he had first to abandon himself to pressing entreaty.' But the same use of *hærerere*, *adhærerere*, without any such emphasis, is common in Latin.

progress of souls, by which he who begins with using the world as a servant to minister to his pleasures, must submit in the end to a reversing of the relations between them, so that the world uses him as its drudge, and sin as its slave. He becomes cheap in the esteem of that very world, in whose service he has forfeited all. Its good wine, which it offered him at the first, it offers him no longer, but, now that he has well drunk, that which is worse¹ (John ii. 10). It rejects him, as the sea after a while rejects the carcasses which itself has swallowed up. There is a hint of something like this, Ezek. xxiii. 22.

Bankrupt now in all, it is little pity which he finds from the new master on whom he has thrust himself; and who, if he must needs engage one who so crouches to him for a morsel of bread, will yet put him far off and dismiss out of sight. '*He sent him into his fields to feed swine,*' put him to an employment than which in the eyes of a Jew, there could be none viler nor more degrading.² And now '*he would fain have filled his belly with the husks*³ that the

¹ *De Divers. Serm.* 8. Theophylact: 'When he had advanced in wickedness.' Cajetan: 'He submitted himself wholly to the devil, who truly is a citizen of the country of sin.'

² Lightfoot, *Hor. Heb.* on Matt. viii. 30; Gfrörer, *Urchristenthum*, vol. i. p. 115. Herodotus (ii. 47) describes the swineherds as the only persons excluded from the temples in Egypt.

³ These *κεράτια* are not so much the husks of some other fruit, as themselves the fruit of the carob tree (*κερατωνία*), called 'St. John's bread-tree,' from the tradition that the Baptist fed on its fruit in the wilderness. They are common in South Italy, in Spain, on the northern coasts of Africa, and in the Levant; being sometimes eaten by the very poor, but oftener used for the foddering of cattle. In shape they resemble a bean-pod, though larger, and curved more into the form of a sickle: thence called *κεράτιον*, or little horn, and the tree sometimes in German, Bockshornbaum. They have a dark hard outside, and a dull sweet taste, hardly justifying Pliny's *prædulces* siliquæ. (See Rosenmüller, *Altes und Neues Morgenland*, vol. v. p. 198; Winer, *Realwört.* s. v. *Johannis Brodtbaum*; Duschak, *Botanik des Talmud*, 1871, p. 91.) The beans were used for weights, and thus it has fallen out that *κεράτιον*, after long travels in the East, has come back to us through the Arabic in the form of 'carat.'

swine did eat ; and no man gave unto him.' Was it that he looked with a longing eye upon these swine's husks, and that even these were denied him ? So commonly ; ¹ for myself I should rather understand that in his unscrupulous hunger he was glad to 'fill his belly' with these husks, and did so.²—no man giving him any nobler sustenance (Prov. xiii. 25). A homely phrase has here been chosen of design ; ³ all that these could do for him was just this, to 'fill his belly,' not to satisfy his hunger ; ⁴ a profound moral truth lying in the words, even this, that God and He only can satisfy the longings of an immortal soul ; that none other can fill the heart which was made for Him.⁵

¹ Thus Luther : Und niemand gab sie ihm. Bernard (*De Convers.* 8) : 'Deservedly did he hunger for husks, and not receive them, who preferred to feed swine rather than to eat his fill at his father's table.'

² Calvin : 'The meaning is that so great was his hunger that he thought no more of his former delicacies, but greedily devoured the husks ; for when he was feeding the swine with this kind of food it was impossible for him to lack it. . . . The reason is added, because *no man gave unto him*, for, in my judgment, the copula should be taken as causal.'

³ So homely that more than one manuscript, the great Alexandrian for instance, has substituted a more refined—*χορτασθῆναι*—in its place.

⁴ Ambrose (*Exp. in Luc.* vii. 217) : 'A food with which the body is not refreshed but filled.' Augustine : 'He fed on husks and was not satisfied.' Stella : 'They do not satisfy man, but only load his belly.' Compare Lucretius : *Atque explere bonis rebus satiareque nunquam* ('Filled with good things and never satisfied').

⁵ I append some beautiful lines from a poem of Henry Vaughan's, which has not yet found its way into our collections of religious verse, but deserves it well :

'When first my youthful sinful age
Grew master of my ways,
Appointing error for my page,
And darkness for my days ;
I flung away, and with full cry
Of wild affections, rid
In post for pleasures, bent to try
All gamesters that would bid.
I played with fire, did counsel spurn,
Made life my common stake :
But never thought that fire could burn,
Or that a soul could ache.'

The whole description is wonderful, and in nothing more than in the intimate connexion wherein his punishment stands to his sin. 'He who would not, as a son, be treated liberally by his father, is compelled to be the servant and bondslave of a foreign master; he who would not be ruled by God, is compelled to serve the devil; he who would not abide in his father's royal palace, is sent to the field among hinds; he who would not dwell among brethren and princes, is obliged to be the servant and companion of brutes; he who would not feed on the bread of angels, petitions in his hunger for the husks of the swine.'¹ In his feeding of swine, what a picture have we of man, 'serving divers lusts and pleasures,' in whom the divine is for the time totally obscured, and the bestial merely predominant: and in his fruitless attempt to fill himself with the husks, of the sinner seeking through the unlimited gratification of his appetites to appease the fierce hunger of his soul. But in vain, for still 'he enlarges his desire as hell, and is as death, and cannot be satisfied.' One might as well hope to quench a fire by adding fuel to it, as to slake desire by gratifying it² (Ezek. xvi. 28, 29). And the crowning misery is, that the power of sinful gratifications to stay that hunger even for the moment is ever diminishing,—the pleasure which is even hoped for from them still growing fainter, and yet the goad behind urging to seek that pleasure, still becoming fiercer;—the sense of the horrible nature of the bondage ever increasing, with the power of throwing off that bondage ever growing less.³ All the monstrous luxuries and

¹ Corn. a Lapide.

² Jerome (*Ad Dam. Ep.* xxi. 13): 'He could not satisfy himself, because pleasure ever hungers after itself, and when it is past leaves no sense of fulness;' and Bernard (*De Convers.* 14): 'For it is not abundance but contempt that produces this satiety. So, therefore, ye foolish sons of Adam, in devouring the husks that are the swine's, ye feed not your hungry souls but rather your souls' hunger. By such provender as this only your starvation is nourished, only hunger is fed by unnatural food.'

³ Cajetan: 'The devils who now possess the man in undisturbed dominion grudge him the satisfaction of his appetite, which yet they used to procure for him until he was fully subjected to themselves.'

frantic wickednesses of imperial Rome show like the last despairing effort of man to appease his hunger with the husks.¹ In this light we may regard the incredibly sumptuous feasts, the golden palaces, the enormous shows and spectacles, and all the pomp and pride of life pushed to the uttermost,² the sins of nature, and the sins below nature; while yet from amidst all these the voice of man's misery only made itself the more distinctly heard. The experiment carried out on this largest scale only made the failure more signal, only made more conspicuous proof that from the food of beasts there could not be drawn the nourishment of men.

It might here be urged, that the picture traced in the parable is an exaggeration alike of the wickedness and of the woe even of those who have forsaken God; that, in the corruptest times not all, and in more moral epochs only a few, even of these fall so low in misery and guilt; that their fall in a thousand ways is mercifully broken. This is quite true; yet all might thus fall; by the first departure from God, all this guilt and all this misery are rendered possible; they are legitimate results; which only do not always follow, because God, in his infinite mercy, does not always suffer sin to put forth *all* the bitter fruits which in it as in a bitter root are contained. In the present case, it is allowed to put forth its bitterest and its worst; we have one who has debased himself even unto hell; and the parable would have been faulty but for this; it would not have been a parable for *all* sinners; it would have failed to show that there is no extent of departure from God which precludes a return.

Hitherto we have followed the wanderer step by step in a course which is carrying him ever farther and farther from his God. But now the crisis has arrived, the *περιπέτεια*

¹ Augustine's explanation is not virtually different; the '*husks*' are for him, 'barren doctrines of the world resounding with vanity;' such as had been to himself once his own Manichæan figments. Cf. Jerome (*Ad Dam. Ep.* xxi. 13); and H. de Sto. Victore: 'The mean fictions of poets, and philosophic doctrines stained with various errors.'

² See, for instance, Suetonius, *Caligula*, xix. 37.

of this 'Soul's Tragedy;' and a more grateful task remains—to trace the steps of his return, from the first beginnings of repentance to a full re-investiture in all the rights and privileges of a son. For though he has forsaken his God, he has not been forsaken by Him—not in that far land, nor even among the swine's husks; all the misery which has fallen on him being indeed an expression of God's anger against the sin, but at the same time of his love to the sinner. God hedges up his way with thorns, that he may not find his paths (Hos. ii. 6); makes his sin bitter to him, that he may abhor it; pursuing his fugitives, and summoning them back to Himself in that only language which now they will understand.¹ He allows the world to make its bondage hard to them, that they may know the difference between his service and 'the service of the kingdoms of the countries;' and cry to Him, by reason of the bitter bondage (2 Chron. xii. 8; xxxiii. 11-13).² On how many, alas! this severe but loving discipline is wasted. They, perhaps, change their yoke, but they do not break it. They betake them to some other citizen of that far country, who promises them a little better fare, or treatment a little less contemptuous. Or, it may be, they learn to dress their husks, that these shall look like human food, and then deny that they are the fodder of swine. Or, glorying in their shame, and wallowing in the same sty with the beasts they feed, they proclaim that there was never meant to be any difference between men and beasts, that the food of one is the food also of the other: 'Gryll will be Gryll, and keeps his hoggish mind.' But this is not so with all. It was not so with him whose story we are following here. Under that discipline of love '*he came to himself*'³—words of deepest significance, saying as they do that to come to one's self, and to come to God, are one and the same thing; that when we truly find

¹ Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. cxxxviii.* 3, 4.

² Augustine: 'The stern discipline of the divine compassion.'

³ Compare Seneca (*Ep.* 53): 'Why does no one confess his sins? Because even now he is beset with them. To recount a dream is the act of one who is awake, and to confess one's sins is a sign of health.' Cf. Lucretius, iv. 994.

ourselves we find Him ; or rather having found Him, find also ourselves ;¹ for it is not man in union with God, who is raised above the true condition of humanity ; but man separated from God, who has fallen out of, and below that condition.

He remembers now his father's house, and all the abundance there : '*How many hired servants² of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I [here] perish with hunger !*'³ There is a touch of truest nature here ; for the sinner never so feels the discord which he has introduced into his innermost being, as when he compares himself with the creation, animate and inanimate, around him and beneath him. He sees the happy animals, undisturbed with his longings, unable to stain themselves with his sin ; he beholds suns and stars travelling in their appointed paths, and all nature fulfilling the purposes for which it was ordained ; everywhere else peace and harmony ; he only

' a jarring and a dissonant thing
Amid this general dance and minstrelsy.'

Many too of his fellow-men he sees, who, with no very lofty views about living to the glory of God, with no very lively affections towards Him, do yet find their satisfaction in the discharge of their daily duties ; who, though they do his work more in the spirit of servants than of sons, rather looking to their hire than out of the free impulses of love, are not without their reward. It is true, they may fall very short of the highest joy which some of his children know ; yet, on the other hand, they are far from the misery and destitution into

¹ Luther: Da schlug er in sich. Augustine, *Serm.* xcvi. 2: 'That he came again to himself, shows that he had gone out of himself.' Repentance is *resipiscentia*.

² The *μισθοιοι* may be regarded as occupying a lower social position even than the *δουλοι*. The *δουλος* had a certain place in his master's household, and indeed, under the humane conditions of household slavery in the East, an assured and recognized position there ; not so the *μισθοιος*, hired from day to day (Matt. xx. 1), and dismissible at pleasure ; while yet the Prodigal is reduced so low that even these, the lowest, are objects now of his envy.

³ 'To die by the shameful death of famine,' Thucydides, iii. 59.

which he has sunk. 'Hired servants' of his Father, they yet 'have bread enough and to spare,' while he, a son, and having once had a son's portion and place, must 'perish with hunger.'¹

We may picture the forlorn prodigal to ourselves as having sat long upon the ground, for the earth is the natural throne of the utterly desolate² (Job ii. 8, 13; Isai. iii. 26; xlvii. 1; Lam. ii. 10; Ezek. xxvi. 16), and revolving there into what a depth of wretchedness he has fallen. But now he gathers up anew his prostrate energies, as a better hope awakens in his bosom. Why should he tarry longer among the swine? 'I will arise³ and go to my father.' The words were urged by the Pelagians of old in proof that man could turn to God in his own strength,⁴ and needed no drawing from above, no grace at once preventing and following; just as the (self-styled) Unitarians of modern times have found in the circumstances of the prodigal's return an argument that man's repentance is of itself sufficient to reconcile him with God, and this

¹ Thus Jerome (*Ad Dam. Ep.* xxi. 14); Ambrose (*Exp. in Luc.* vii. 220); and Bernard (*De Divers. Serm.* 8): 'For who that is bound with the habit of sin would not think himself happy were it given him to be as one of those whom he sees living lukewarmly in the world, without crime, yet very little concerned as to things above, but rather as to such as are upon the earth.' Cf. Schoettgen, *Hor. Heb.* vol. i. pp. 260, 532. Goebel in the *Theol. Stud. u. Krit.* 1874, p. 525, suggests that it is not exactly this tacit comparison and contrast between himself the son, and those other the hired servants, in his father's house, which he draws; but rather between himself the hired servant of an alien lord, and those other the hired servants in his father's house. Here the hired servant is perishing with hunger, there they have abundance of bread. The suggestion is an ingenious one, but I must be content to leave it as such.

² Thus Constance in *King John*, Act iii. Sc. 1:

' My grief's so great
That no supporter but the huge firm earth
Can hold it up: here I and sorrows sit;
Here is my throne, bid kings come bow to it.'

³ Augustine: 'He said "I will arise," for he had been seated.'

⁴ But Augustine (*Ep.* 186): 'When would he have had this good thought had not the most compassionate Father secretly inspired him with it?' Cf. *Enarr. in Ps.* lxxvii. 39; and the quotation, p. 360.

without a Mediator or a sacrifice. Following in the same line a German Rationalist at the beginning of this century exclaimed : ' All the dogmatic dreams of the upholders of an atonement by blood vanish, like oppressive nightmares, before this single parable.' The assertions are utterly without warrant, such conclusions being sufficiently guarded against by innumerable clearest declarations ; as by John vi. 44 ; Heb. x. 19-22, neither have we any ground for expecting that every passage in Scripture, least of all that parables, which exist under necessary limitations in their power of setting forth the truth,¹ shall contain the whole circle of Christian doctrine. He who will know the truth of God, must consider not what one Scripture says, but what all ; and the silence of one passage must not be pleaded against the plain statements of innumerable other.²

' *And will say unto him, Father.*' That relation his obedience has not constituted, and so his disobedience could not disannul. This was the ground of his confidence, even that a son once is a son ever. The adoption of sonship in baptism, and the gifts and calling of God, are on his part without repentance or recall. They may and will perish, who choose to remain in guilty ignorance to the last that these things have been freely given them of God ; but having been once given, they may claim and challenge them for their own whensoever they will ; nothing which has passed can have extinguished their right to do this. '*I have sinned against heaven, and before thee ;*' compare for this double confession Exod. x. 16—when we give these words their higher application, the two acknowledgments run into one, '*I have sinned against Thee, my Father in heaven :*'—'*and,*' as he goes on to say, '*am no more worthy to be called thy son.*' He shows

¹ Godet has brought this out well : ' The absence of any feature appropriate to represent the sacrifice of Christ is easily explained when we remember that we have here a parable, and that the atonement has no place in the relations of man with man.'

² ' The parable cannot contain the whole truth ; but in the parable of the Prodigal Son we may say that the Saviour and Mediator is concealed in the kiss which the father gives the son ' (Riggenbach).

his repentance to have been divinely wrought, a work of the Holy Spirit, in that he acknowledges his sin in its root, as a transgression of the divine law, as wrought against God. Thus did David: 'Against thee, thee only, have I sinned' (Ps. li. 4); while yet his offences had been against the second table. For we may *injure* ourselves by our evil, we may *wrong* our neighbour; but, strictly speaking, we can *sin* only against God; and the recognition of our evil at first and chiefly an offence against Him, is of the essence of all true repentance, and distinguishes it broadly from remorse and all other kinds of sorrow which may follow on evil deeds. This willingness to confess is ever noted in Scripture as the sign of a true repentance begun; even as the sinner's refusal to humble himself in confession before God is the sure note of a continued obduracy (2 Sam. xii. 13; Ezra ix. 6; Job ix. 20; xxxi. 33; xxxiii. 27; Ps. xxxii. 5; xxxviii. 18; Prov. xxviii. 13; Jer. ii. 35; iii. 13; xvi. 10; Hos. xiv. 2; 1 John i. 9, 10). In Augustine's words, 'He shows himself worthy, in that he confesses himself unworthy;'¹ while a scholar of St. Bernard's here exclaims: 'Keep, O happy sinner, keep watchfully and carefully this thy most just feeling of humility and devotion; by which thou mayest ever esteem the same of thyself in humility, of thy Lord in goodness. Than it there is nothing greater in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, nothing more precious in the treasures of God, nothing more holy among all graces, nothing more wholesome among all sacraments. Keep, I say, if thou wilt thyself be kept, the humility of that speech and feeling, with which thou confessest to thy Father, and sayest,

¹ And again: 'Be thy own accuser, and He will be thy indulger;' cf. *Enarr. in Ps. xxxi. 5*. Tertullian (*De Pœnit.* 9, 10) has much in connexion with this parable, on the benefit of unreserved confession: 'Confession of sins is as great a relief as dissimulation is an increase of their burden. For confession is the counsel of reparation, dissimulation of obstinacy. In proportion as thou sparest not thyself, so, believe me, does God spare thee.' The treatise breathes a far different spirit from that in which the other, *De Pudicitia*, is written; but does not the less show how serious a thing repentance was accounted in the early Church; how closely linked with outward self-denials and humiliations.

"*Father, I am no more worthy to be called thy son.*" For humility is of all graces the chiefest, even while it does not know itself to be a grace at all. From it they begin, by it they advance, in it they are consummated, through it they are preserved.¹ Thus far all has been well; but the words that follow, '*Make me as one of thy hired servants,*'²—are these, it may be asked, the voice of returning spiritual health, so that we should desire to meet the temper which they imply in every *normal* repentance, or not? For the present we would only call attention to the fact that at a later period he lets them fall (ver. 21), and shall then have something more to say on this question.

There is no tarrying now; he makes haste and prolongs not the time; what he has determined to do, at once he does. '*He arose, and came to his father.*' He had believed in his father's love; he shall find that love far larger and freer than all which he had ventured to believe. '*But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.*' It was not by an accident that his father was the first to see him. He doubtless for many a day, hoping all things, had watched and waited for his return; and now with the quick glance of love detected in the far distance him whom he had thus watched and waited for so long. '*And had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck* (Gen. xxxiii. 4; xlv. 14, 15; xlv. 29; Acts xx. 37), *and kissed him.*'³ The evidences of the father's love are described with a touching minuteness; he does not wait till the poor returning wanderer has come all the way, but himself hastens to meet him; neither does he wear at first an

¹ Guerrius (*Bernardi Opp.* vol. ii. p. 986): 'Since humility is the greatest of all virtues, but only so long as it is ignorant that it is a virtue: from this they begin, by this they advance, in this they are consummated, by this they are preserved.'

² Cajetan: 'I will not dare to seek restoration to the condition of a son, to the great gifts I once enjoyed: but I will seek the gifts of those who make their beginning, who are serving God in their desire for an eternal reward.'

³ Κατεφίλησεν, kissed him, that is, not once only, but much and many times.

aspect of severity, only after a season to be relaxed or laid aside, but at once welcomes him with the kiss, which is more than a token of affection, being the significant, and in the East well understood, pledge of reconciliation and peace (Gen. xxxiii. 4; 2 Sam. xiv. 33; Ps. ii. 12); even as the *osculum pacis* of the Middle Ages. It is thus the Lord draws nigh unto them that draw nigh unto Him¹ (Jam. iv. 8); He listens to the first faint sighings of their hearts after Him, for it was He who awoke those sighings there (Ps. x. 17). And though they may be ‘*yet a great way off,*’ with far too slight an insight into the evil of their sin, or into the holiness of God, He meets them, notwithstanding, with the evidences of his favour towards them. Neither does He compel them first to go through a dreary apprenticeship of servile fear at a distance from Him; but at once embraces them in the arms of his love, giving them at this first moment strong consolations—perhaps stronger and more abounding than afterwards, when more settled in their Christian course, they will always receive. And this, because they need such now, to assure them that they are accepted, despite of all the loathsomeness of their sin; to convince them of that which it is often so hard for penitents to believe, which tasks all their faith, that God has indeed put away their transgressions, and is pacified toward them.

But the prodigal, though thus graciously received, with his sin not once mentioned against him, does not the less make the confession which he had meditated when the purpose of returning was first conceived in his heart: ‘*Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.*’ And this is well; for, though God may forgive, man is not therefore to forget. Let

¹ Thus there is an Eastern proverb, ‘If man draws near to God an inch, God will draw near to him an ell;’ or as Von Hammer (*Fundg. d. Orients*, vol. iv. p. 91) gives it:

Wer sich mir eine Spanne weit naht, dem eile ich eine Elle lang entgegen:

Und wer mir gehend entgegen kömmt, dem eile ich in Sprüngen zu.

us note too that it is *after*, and not *before*, the kiss of reconciliation, that this confession is made; for the more the sinner knows and tastes of the love of God, the more he grieves to have outraged that love. It is under the genial rays of this kindly love that the heart, before bound up as by a deadly frost, thaws and melts and loosens, and the waters of repentance flow freely forth. The knowledge of God's love in Christ is the cruse of salt, which alone can turn the bitter and barren-making streams of remorse into the healing waters of repentance (2 Kin. ii. 19-22). And thus the truest and best repentance follows, and does not precede, the sense of forgiveness; and thus too repentance will be a lifelong thing, for every new insight into that forgiving love will be as a new reason why the sinner should mourn to have sinned against it. It is a mistake to affirm that men, those, I mean, in whom a real spiritual work is going forward, will lay aside their repentance, so soon as they are convinced of the forgiveness of their sins; and that therefore,—since repentance, earnest, long-continued, self-mortifying repentance, is a good thing,—the longer men can be kept in suspense about their forgiveness the better, as thus a deeper foundation of repentance will be laid. This is a preposterous view of the relation in which repentance and forgiveness stand to each other; their true relation being opened to us in such passages as Ezek. xxxvi. 31, where the Lord says, '*Then*' (and for what that '*then*' means, see ver. 24-30; *after* I have cleansed you, given you a new heart, heaped my richest blessings upon you, *then*, under the sense of these) 'shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations.' See Ezek. xvi. 60-63, where the Lord avouches that He has established his covenant with Judah for this very end—'that thou mayest remember, and be confounded, and never open thy mouth any more because of thy shame, *when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done.*' The younger son, albeit with the clearest evidence that his father is pacified toward him, does

not the less confess his shame.¹ He does not indeed utter all that he had once intended; he does not say, '*Make me as one of thy hired servants:*' though some authorities have brought these words from ver. 19, where they have right, to this verse, where they have none; for this purpose of shrinking back from his father's love, and from the free grace which would restore to him all, was the one troubled element of his repentance; and in his dropping of these words, in his willingness to be blessed by his father to the uttermost, there is evidence that the grace already received has not been received in vain. Bengel thinks it possible that his father cut him short, left him no opportunity to say what he intended, but suggests also the truer explanation.² This being so, that scholar of St. Bernard's, whose excellent words on the precious grace of humility I quoted just now, is at fault here, exhorting as he does the returning penitent still to persist in taking the place of a servant, even after his father has bidden him to resume the position of a son. This is that false humility, of which we meet so much, and which often is so mightily extolled, in monkery, but of which we meet nothing in Scripture. It is the truest humility, when bidden to go up higher, to go. It was true humility in Peter to suffer the Lord to wash his feet; as it would have been false humility, as well as disobedience, to have resisted longer than he did (John xiii. 6-10). It is true humility in the prodigal, at his father's bidding, to accept at once the position of a son.

'*But the father said to his servants, Bring forth*'—or more correctly, '*Bring forth quickly*³—*the best robe, and put*

¹ Cajetan: 'Receiving such favour he does not put aside but carries out his holy purpose.'

² 'Either because his father's graciousness in coming to meet him kindled his filial confidence and absorbed all his feeling as a servant, or because the father's graciousness cut short the speech of his son.' So Augustine (*Quæst. Evang.* ii. qu. 33): 'For while he lacked bread he desired to be even a hired servant, but for this after his father's kiss he has now a noble scorn.'

³ Ταχὺ has a right to the place in the text, to which it is now admitted in the best critical editions.

it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet.' He will restore to him a place and a name in his house, as in these words he plainly declares, all these being ornaments, not of the slave, but of the free;¹ all, therefore, speaking of restoration to his former dignity and honour. Or, if we cannot suppose the Roman customs which accompanied the lifting up of a slave to a freeman's rank, to have been familiarly known in Palestine, or alluded to here, yet since the giving of the robe and ring was ever accounted in the East among the highest tokens of favour and honour (Gen. xli. 42; 1 Macc. xi. 15; Esth. vi. 7-11), these commands would testify to the same.

Few even of those interpreters usually most averse to the tracing of a spiritual meaning in the minuter details of a parable, have been able to resist the temptation here. It has been debated whether '*the best robe*,' as in our Translation, or '*the former² robe*,' that which he wore of old when he walked a son in his father's house, the robe kept for him long, and now restored, will best express the intention of the original. The difference is not important (though our Translation is clearly right)—nor yet whether we say that by the giving of this robe is signified the imputation of the righteousness of Christ,³ or the restoration of sanctity to the soul. If

¹ Thus Tertullian (*De Resur. Carn.* 57), of the manumitted slave: 'He is honoured with the splendour of a white robe, with the honour of a gold ring, with the name and tribe of his patron, and with a feast.' Grotius: 'The ring among the Romans is the mark of freedom, among Eastern peoples of exalted rank, as also of wealth' (Jam. ii. 2; Gen. xli. 42). Cf. Elsner, *Biblioth. Brem.* vol. iii. p. 906; and the *Dict. of Gr. and Roman Ant.* s. v. Rings, p. 824.

² *Stolam primam* (Vulg.); 'his original or former robe' (Tertullian); 'his ancient robe' (Theophylact); but rather, 'that most splendid robe' 'most precious' (Euthymius): cf. Gen. xxvii. 15: 'goodly raiment.' *Πρώτος* is often used in this sense of chiefest, best (Ezek. xxvii. 22; Passow, s. v.: *der vornehmste, angesehenste*). The *στολή* is the *vestis talaris*, the stately garment reaching to the feet (Mark xii. 38): see my *Synonyms of the N. T.* § 50.

³ 'The garment of the Holy Spirit' (Tertullian); 'The robe which in another parable is called the wedding garment' (Jerome); 'The first robe

we see in it his rehabilitation in his baptismal privileges, then both will be included. They who shall '*bring forth the best robe*' have been generally interpreted as the ministers of reconciliation; and if we may imagine them as first removing from him the tattered garments, the poor swineherd's rags, which were hanging about him, then Zechariah iii. 4 will supply an interesting parallel. Those who stand before the Lord there, will correspond to the servants here; and what they do for the High Priest there, removing his filthy garments from him, and clothing him with a change of raiment, and setting a fair mitre on his head, the same will the servants do here for the son; with the difference only that instead of the mitre, the appropriate adornment there of the High Priest, the ring and the shoes are here mentioned; and the symbolic act has in each case the same signification; which there is plainly declared, '*Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee.*' That passage brought to bear on this leaves it most probable that, by this clothing him with the best robe, is especially signified that act of God which, considered on its negative side, is a release from condemnation, a causing of the sinner's iniquity to pass from him,—on its positive side, is an imputation to him of the merits and righteousness of Christ (Isai. lxi. 10).

This explanation for other reasons is preferable, since we have the gift of restoration of the Spirit indicated in the ring with which the returning wanderer is also adorned.¹ In the East, as with us, the ring was often a seal (Esth. iii. 10, 12; Jer. xxii. 24). Here is a point of connexion between the

is the dignity lost by Adam' (Augustine); and elsewhere: '*The hope of immortality in baptism; the garment of incorruptibility*' (Theophylact); '*The sanctification of the Spirit by which the baptized is clothed, and the penitent reclad*' (Guerricus).

¹ Clement of Alexandria (Potter's ed. p. 1017): '*The royal seal and divine signet,*' and presently after, '*The seal of glory.*' The fragment whence these words are taken is interesting in many respects;—and among others in this, that the author, whether Clement or another, affirms of the Prodigal that he had not merely wasted the natural gifts of God, but especially abused '*the honoured blessings of baptism.*'

giving of the ring and such Scriptures as Ephes. i. 13, 14; 2 Cor. i. 22, in which a *sealing* by God's Spirit is spoken of, whereby the faithful are assured, as by an earnest, of a larger inheritance reserved in heaven for them (Gal. iv. 6; Rom. viii. 23; 2 Cor. v. 5). Neither shall we plant ourselves altogether in another circle of images if we further regard the ring as the pledge of betrothal: ¹ 'And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness; and thou shalt know the Lord' (Hos. ii. 19, 20).² Shoes are also put on his feet, to which corresponds the promise, 'I will strengthen them in the Lord; and they shall walk up and down in his name' (Zech. x. 12). The penitent shall be equipped for holy obedience,³ having his 'feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace' (Ephes. vi. 15). No needful strength shall be wanting to him (Deut. xxxiii. 25). — 'And bring hither the fatted calf' (a choice delicacy, Gen. xviii. 7; 1 Sam. xxviii. 24; Amos vi. 4; Mal. iv. 2);⁴ 'and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry.' It creates a confusion of images to go back ⁵ here to the sacrifice of Christ, which

¹ Ambrose (*De Pœnit.* ii. 3): 'Let him place on his hand a ring, which is the sign of faith and the seal of the Holy Spirit.'

² The whole chapter affords deeply interesting parallels: ver. 5 (the latter part) answering to ver. 11, 12 here; ver. 6-13 there to 13-19 here; and ver. 14-23 to 20-24.

³ Guerricus: 'The shoes with which he is protected to enable him to tread under foot the poisons of serpents, or with which he is prepared for the work of the Gospel.' Grotius: 'To penitents received into grace God grants even this, that they are fitted for the teaching of others, if not by words certainly by example;' and he quotes well Ps. li. 13. Clement of Alexandria (Potter's ed. p. 1018) has much that is beautiful, and something fanciful, on these *ὑποδήματα*. They are sandals rather than shoes, which are of rare use in the East; the word is used interchangeably with *σανδάλια* by the LXX, though there is a distinction (see Tittmann, *Synonyms*, and the *Dict. of Gr. and Rom. Antt.* s. v. *Sandalium*, p. 839).

⁴ *Σπειρώς* here and Judg. vi. 25 = *σπιστός*, Matt. xxii. 4.

⁵ As Origen (*Hom. 1 in Lev.*) does.

was implicitly contained in the giving of the robe. That sacrifice, moreover, is not a *consequence* of the sinner's return, as the killing of the fatted calf is the consequence of the prodigal's, but the *ground* which renders such a return possible.¹ Nor should we, I am persuaded, see here any special allusion² to the Holy Eucharist, but more generally to the festal joy and rejoicing which is in the heavenly places at the sinner's repentance.³

As the shepherd summoned his friends (ver. 6), and the woman her neighbours (ver. 9), so here the householder his servants, to be sharers in his joy. For the very nature of true joy is, that it *runs over*, longs to impart itself: and if this be true of the joy on earth, how much more of the purer and unselfish joy in heaven.⁴ And summoning his servants to rejoice, the father announces to them the grounds of the joy in which they are invited to share. Some might naturally be presumed to make part of the household now, who had not belonged to it at the time of the young man's departure. To them, therefore, it is needful to announce that this wanderer, whom they beheld just now in the swineherd's rags, is no other than a son of the house, and as such to be honoured. That there may be no doubt upon this matter, the father solemnly reinstates him in the rights and privileges of a son. '*This my son*'—so he names him in the presence of all—'*was dead*;'—for the state of sin is a state of death (1 John iii. 14; Matt. viii. 22; 1 Tim. v. 6; Ephes. ii. 1; Col. ii. 13), '*and is alive again*;' for the life in God is life indeed, is the only true life (John x. 28)—'*he was lost, and is found*' (1 Pet. ii. 25); and since thus the lost was found,

¹ Augustine endeavours to evade this difficulty: 'For unto each man Christ is then killed, when the man believes that He was so killed.'

² So Tertullian (*De Pudic.* 9) and Clement of Alexandria.

³ Arndt (*De Verbo Christ.* ii. 8): 'This feast betokens the joy of the angels, or that life-giving, joy-giving and crowning compassion which is depicted in Ps. lxxiii. 5; Jes. lxvi. 13.'

⁴ Origen (*Hom.* 23 *in Lev.*) on the words, '*My feasts*,' which there occur, asks: 'Has God then his feast days? He has. For the salvation of men is to him a great festival.'

and the dead was alive again, '*they began to be merry*' (Zeph. iii. 17; Cant. ii. 4).

At this point the parable, like the two preceding, might have ended. But the mention of '*two sons*' at ver. 11 has already indicated that this has a wider intention; and, complete as is this earlier part within itself, it shall also form part of another and more complex whole, and derive new beauty from the contrast now to be drawn between the large heart of God and the narrow grudging heart of man. For the bringing out of this contrast the elder son, who hitherto has been named and no more, now appears upon the scene. '*Now his elder son was in the field.*'¹ While the younger had been wasting his whole portion in excess abroad, he had been engaged at home, on his father's ground; and now, at the close of one among many toilsome days, is returning home, ignorant of all that had befallen; and only receiving the first hint, when, '*as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.*' It would be alien to the manners and feelings of the East, to suppose the guests themselves engaged in these diversions: they would be but listeners and spectators, the singers and dancers being hired for the occasion. Surprised at these unwonted sounds, '*he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.*' With what a fine touch the ungenial character of the man has been indicated already. He does not at once go in; he does not take for granted that when his father makes a feast, there is matter worthy of making merry about. But, as one already resolved to dislike what is proceeding, he prefers to remain without, and to learn from a servant the occasion of the joy; or, as he himself significantly puts it, '*what these things meant,*' demanding an explanation, as if they required it. '*And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed*

¹ Godet: 'While the house is rejoicing, the elder son is at work. We have here a type of the Pharisee busied with the observance of his rites, while the repentant sinners are rejoicing in the serene illumination of grace.'

the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.' How delicate again is here the observance of the smaller proprieties of the narrative. The father, in the midst of all his natural joy, is yet full of the moral significance of his son's return—that he has come back another person from what he was when he departed, or while he tarried in that far land. He sees into the deep of his joy, that he is receiving him now, a son indeed; once dead, but now alive; once lost to him and to God, now found alike by both. But the servant deals only with the external features of the case, with the fact that, after all he has gone through of excess and hardship, his father has received him '*safe and sound.*'¹ Even if he could enter more deeply into the matter, he confines himself with a suitable discretion to that which falls plainly under his own and every one's eye.²

The explanation is not satisfactory to the questioner. The contemplation of his father's joy, of his brother's safety, so far from stirring up any gladness in his heart, moves him rather to displeasure; instead of rushing into his brother's arms, '*he was angry, and would not go in.*' Nor even when his father '*came out and entreated him,*' would he lay aside his displeasure at the course which things were taking; but loudly complained of the unequal measure dealt out to him and to his brother, of the bounty bestowed upon his brother's misconduct: '*Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me*'—or, *to me thou never gavest*³—'*a kid* (Gen. xxvii. 9; xxxviii. 17; Judg. xv. 1), *that I might make merry*

¹ ἴγυιαλοντα = 'safe and sound,' salvom et servatum, Plautus, *Aulul.* iv. 6. 11; salvom et sospitem, *Capt.* iv. 2. 93.

² Hofman takes a less favourable view of this servant's answer to the elder brother's question: 'With heartless scorn for the father whom the return of such a son can make so happy, he speaks in such a tone as will best please the evident ill-will of the brother, whom he thus incites on his own side.' But there is nothing to warrant this interpretation.

³ Ἐμοῖ will so have the force which its position demands, but which now it has not.

with my friends.'¹ The word 'father,' it will be observed, does not escape his lips. And then he invidiously compares this treatment of him with the treatment of his brother; '*But as soon as this thy son,*' he says not '*my brother*'—'*was come,*' he says not '*was returned,*'² as of one who had come back to his own,—'*which hath devoured thy living,*' again invidiously, for in a sense it was his own—'*with harlots,*' most probably, but only a presumption on his part,³ though he may have claimed to read backward the words of Solomon, '*he that keepeth company with harlots spendeth his substance*' (Prov. xxix. 3)—'*thou hast killed for him*' not a kid merely, but '*the fatted calf,*' the choicest calf in the stall. What would he have said, had he known all? could he have seen his brother arrayed in the best robe, and with all his other adornments, when this which alone he mentions, as it is all which he has learned from his informant, so fills him with indignation?

It is too joyful an occasion for the father to take that just exception which he might at the tone and temper of this remonstrance. There shall not, if he can help it, be a cloud upon any brow; and instead of answering with severity, he expostulates with the malcontent; shows him the unreasonableness of his complaint; warns him that he is now, in fact, falling into the very sin which his brother committed when he said, '*Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me.*' He too is feeling that he does not truly possess what he possesses *with* his father, but that he must separate something off from the common stock, before he can count it properly his own. The same mischief lies at the root of his speech, as spoke out more plainly in his brother's; and this the father

¹ Jerome (*Ad Dam. Ep.* 21) on these words, '*with my friends,*' asks him: '*Canst thou have any mirth without thy father to keep the feast with thee?*' Cf. Bernard, *In Cant. Serm.* xiv. 4.

² Bengel: '*As if speaking of a stranger, he uses the words "is come," not "is returned."*'

³ Massillon indeed is here upon his side, and takes this for granted too. He has a very impressive Lent Sermon on this sin of impurity, which he treats as the master sin of the Prodigal.

will make him see : ' Son,' or with a still greater tenderness, ' Child, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine ; ' and proceeds to show him the unloving spirit, out of which his discontent had grown, and the fitness of the present joy ; ' It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad ; for this thy brother ' (not merely ' my son,' as he ungraciously had put it, but ' thy brother,' kinned to him, and to whom therefore his kindness is due)—' was dead, and is alive again,¹ was lost, and is found.'

With this the parable concludes ; nor are we told whether the discontent of the elder brother gave way before these expostulations or not. This for us will be mainly determined by the interpretation of the parable with which we have started. It must be freely owned that those who see in the younger brother the Gentile, and therefore in the elder the Jew,² find it encumbered here with fewer difficulties than such as deny that in its *primary* purpose it sets forth the relations of these to God and to one another. These last must look elsewhere for a solution of difficulties, which resemble closely those we have already met in the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. They indeed resolve themselves into this single one,—Is *their* righteousness, whom the elder brother represents, true or false ? An answer either way has its own perplexity. If true, how reconcile this with his contumacy towards his father, and his unloving spirit towards his brother ?³ What true believer charges God with injustice and partiality ? grudges, and does not rather rejoice, when one who may have wandered more widely than himself, is brought home to the true fold ? How, too, reconcile this assumption with the scope of this part of the parable, aimed as it is against the Pharisees, whose righteousness in the

¹ Schoettgen, *Hor. Heb.* vol. i. p. 877.

² As Augustine, *Quæst. Evang.* ii. qu. 33.

³ Jerome's reply to Damasus (*Ep.* 21), more than once referred to already, shows these difficulties to have been felt quite as strongly in his time as now. It was just this question which Damasus had asked : ' Can such frightful jealousy be reconciled with his character as just ? ' ' A much discussed question ' Theophylact calls it.

main was *not* real, but feigned and hypocritical? But if, on the other hand, pressed by these embarrassments, we refuse to see in him any true righteousness at all, in what sense shall we understand his having remained ever with his father, or how does an estimate of his character so entirely unfavourable fall in with his uncontradicted assertion of his own continued obedience, or with the need of approbation and assurances of favour, which he receives from his father's lips?

Either determination of the question has embarrassments of its own; theirs certainly has great, though perhaps not the greatest, who in the elder brother see the Pharisees,¹ with a righteousness altogether feigned and hypocritical. His assertions concerning his own continued obedience are suffered, they say, to pass unchallenged, because, even granting them true, the case would not be altered, the father arguing with him *e concessio*:² 'Be it so, that is not the question now in hand; allowing your obedience to have been unbroken, your works always well-pleasing in my sight, yet ought you in love to rejoice that your brother has returned, and to take your share in this festal gladness with which he is welcomed home.' But is it not possible, by a middle course, to escape the embarrassments which attend this no less than the opposite scheme of interpretation; namely, that we see in this elder brother a low, but not altogether false, form of legal righteousness? He is one whom the law has kept from gross offences; he has been occupied, though in a servile spirit, in the works of that law. So, no doubt, had it been with not a few of the Pharisees. Some were hypocrites; but some sincerely, though in much blindness of heart, followers after righteousness (Rom. x. 1, 2). The righteousness indeed was of a low sort,³ in the strivings after which, being mostly external,

¹ Jerome, for instance, who says that Christ portrays the Pharisees, 'not as they were, but as they ought to have been.' Theophylact calls them 'hypothetically righteous.'

² Jerome: 'He did not allow the truth of what his son had said, but soothed his anger by another argument.'

³ Salmeron: 'We must understand this as of persons of real but not conspicuous righteousness.'

they attained to no such acquaintance with the plague of their own hearts, as should render them mild and merciful to others, no such insight into the breadth of that law which they professed to keep, as should thoroughly abase them before God. Such may have been the murmurers here; not therefore utterly to be rejected, nor the good in them wholly denied; but needing to be shown what was deficient, narrow, and loveless in their service;—to be invited to renounce their servile for a filial spirit, and to enter into the nobler liberties of that Church and kingdom which Christ was establishing upon earth. Hitherto the elder son had been labouring ‘*in the field,*’¹ but now he is bidden to a festival. They whose work for God had hitherto been servile, the hard taskwork of the law, are invited now to ‘*come in,*’ to enter into the joy of the Lord, the freedom of the Spirit.² This part of the parable will then be as much a preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom to the legalist, as its earlier part had been to the gross sinner;—as love to the one spoke there, so love to the other here.

But the elder son’s reply (ver. 29, 30) to the father’s first invitation shows only too plainly that he whom that son represents is ignorant of the nature of that kingdom to which he is invited. He is looking for certain definite rewards of his obedience, to the getting of something *from* God, in preference to possessing all *in* God.³ Instead of regarding as his true reward, that he had been ever with his heavenly Father, he rather pleads this as establishing his claim to some further reward.⁴ In the father’s rejoinder (ver. 31),

¹ Ambrose: ‘Busied with earthly toils and ignoring the things of the Spirit of God.’ But Augustine (*Enarr. in Ps. cxxxviii.*) rather more favourably: ‘This signifies those who were holy under the law, performing its works and precepts.’

² Augustine: ‘He invites to the enjoyment of a more potent and more delightful exultation.’

³ Augustine: ‘The father saith not, Thou possessest all, but, All that I have is thine.’

⁴ He should have felt, in Bernard’s words: ‘He is our recompenser, He is our recompense, nor do we now look for aught from him save himself.’

we must be careful to place the emphasis on the right word, for without this the meaning will entirely escape us. It is not, 'Son, *thou* art ever with me,' drawing thus a contrast between him and his brother, who for so long a time had *not* been with his father; but 'Son, thou art ever *with me*,' the emphasis resting on the concluding words. 'What need to talk of other friends? thou art ever with a better than them all, with myself. Why shouldst thou feel hurt that a kid was never given thee, when *all that I have is thine*?' To make the first clause of this rejoinder an honourable recognition of his past obedience, the second a promise that the whole inheritance will devolve on him, is a missing and marring of the whole. Rather in the first lies at once the keenest, and the most loving, rebuke: 'Am not I more to thee than all besides?' in the second the most earnest warning: 'What is mine is thine, if only thou wilt so regard it; what can I do for thee, if fellowship in my things fails to make thee rich?' How wonderfully does that '*All that I have is thine*,' when thus understood, declares to us the true nature of the rewards of the kingdom. In the elder son's esteem, whatever was bestowed on his brother was withdrawn from himself; but in the free kingdom of love one has not less, because another has more; all is possessed by each. The fountain of God's grace is no scanty desert spring, round which thirsty pilgrims need strive and struggle, muddying the waters with their feet, pushing one another away, lest those waters be drunk up by others before their turn shall arrive; but an inexhaustible river, on whose banks all may stand, and where none need grudge lest, if others drink freely, there will not enough remain for themselves. Not to one, but to each of his true servants and children the Lord can say, '*All that I have is thine.*'¹ If any then is straitened, and counts that he has not enough, he

¹ Augustine, on these words, says: 'For by the sons who are perfected, purified and already immortal all things are so held, that each thing belongs to all, and all things belong to each; for as cupidity possesses nothing without straitening, so charity possesses nothing which involves straitening.'

is straitened, as the elder son here, not in God, but in himself, and in his own narrow and grudging heart.

It is easy to perceive why nothing is told us concerning the success or failure of the father's attempt to remove the sullen dissatisfaction of his son ; why, as we read the parable, there seems a certain abruptness in its close. This was inevitable, for it was still uncertain whether the Scribes and Pharisees might not be won to repentance ; which repentance, though of another kind and for other sins, they needed quite as much as the publicans and harlots. The Lord, not distinctly declaring that the elder son obstinately refused *to the last* to enter in, or that he was finally excluded for his contumacy, intimated to these, that the kingdom of God was not yet closed against them ; that they too, as well as the publicans and sinners, were invited and summoned to leave their low, poor, and formal service, 'the elements of the world' (Gal. iv. 3), and to enter into the glorious liberties of the kingdom of grace ; they too guests, if they would esteem themselves such, at that marriage festival where He should manifest his glory, changing the weak and watery elements of the old dispensation into the generous and gladdening wine of the new (John ii. 1-11).¹

For all this, none can read the parable without an ominous presentiment that the elder brother *does* refuse to the end to go in. And such refusal there was, and on the largest scale, when the Jews in the apostolic age would take no part in the great festival of reconciliation which celebrated the reception of the Gentile world into the Church of the redeemed ; nay rather, with all their malice and their might set themselves against that reception (1 Thess. ii. 14). What a mournful

¹ Anselm's instructive *Dialogus Christiani et Judæi* concludes with these words from the former : 'Come now, as I bade thee, stay not outside, neither envy the robe, the shoes and the ring, the seal of faith, all which the Father has given to me, his penitent son ; but come thou within, and share in the joy, and be a partaker of the feast. But if thou dost not so, then will I wait and endure thy indignation until the Father himself come forth and entreat thee ; and meanwhile I will say unto the glory of the same Father, My ring is mine, My ring is mine.'

commentary is the whole book of Acts on these words, '*he would not go in*;' '*would not*,' because his brother was received so freely and with such tokens of joy (xiii. 45; xiv. 19; xvii. 5, 13; xviii. 12; xxii. 21-23). If that younger brother had been submitted first to a painful apprenticeship of the law, if he too had been sent to work '*in the field*,' it might have been another thing (Acts xv. 1); but that he should be thus made free of the kingdom, and brought into the festival at once,—this was more than the elder could endure. Numbers stayed openly and sullenly without. Others, as the Ebionites, only pretended to go in, or went in under a mistaken assumption that it should be as they in their narrow hearts desired (Gal. ii. 12-14), and discovering their mistake, presently withdrew themselves again.¹ Yet while all this was then the fact, it behoves us of the Gentile Church never to forget that all the conditions of the parable will be reversed at the end of the present dispensation, and the parts so shifted, that it is *we* who shall then be in danger of playing the elder brother's part, and of falling into his sin. And this we shall do, if we repine at the largeness of the grace bestowed upon the Jew, once the son ever with his Father, but now the Prodigal feeding upon husks, far away from his heavenly Father's house² (Hos. iii. 4, 5; Rom. xi.), to which however he shall one day return.

¹ Augustine: 'The elder brother is angered . . . Even so the Jews were incensed that the Gentiles by so short a method, without the imposition of any of the burdens of the law, and without the pain of the circumcision of the flesh, should receive in their sin the health-giving baptism.'

² Cajetan's view of the displeasure of the elder brother is interesting, and in its main features original. He speaks first of the sweetness which the penitent often finds at his first return unto God, '*the music and dancing*;'—for him all the glories of the Gospel have the freshness of novelty, an overpowering gladness, which they cannot possess for one to whom they have been familiar from the beginning. The joy of the latter has indeed been infinitely greater than this one burst of gladness, but spread over larger spaces of time:—so that, seeing the exultation of the newly converted, he may be tempted to ask, with a transient feeling of discontent, why to him also is not given this burst of exulting joy? why for him '*the fatted calf*' has been never slain?—The answer is, because he has been ever with his father, because his father's possessions are, and

have been always, his. His joy, therefore, is soberer and more solid,—not the suddenly swelling mountain torrent, but the deep, though smooth and silent, river: and what is given to the other, is given to him just because he is a beginner. Cajetan concludes thus: ‘Here, careful reader, I would have you mark, that God sometimes sends to the newly-penitent great consolation of inward joy, until they be confirmed in the way of God; . . . but these are not the fruits of greater perfection, but are as it were the charms and caresses of the heavenly Father, which are denied to many who are more perfect.’ In this spirit the Mystics observed how in the festivals, the first and eighth days, that is, their beginnings and their glorious consummations, were commonly the days of chiefest gladness; and they compare these joys to sugared dainties, with which those who are children in spiritual things are first allured into Christ’s school. Volmar (*De Spirit. Perfect.*): ‘This grace, therefore, of devotion is wont to be given to infants, that by it they may be incited to good works, just as at first whelps are allowed to taste the blood of the captured prey, that they may press more bravely upon the chase.’—In Kleine’s *Gesch. des Dramas*, vol. ix. p. 178 sqq., there is an analysis of an early Spanish play, *Comedia Prodigia*, by Luis de Miranda, in seven acts, being the dramatized story of the Prodigal Son. This analysis is all that I know about it; but it is evidently not without considerable merits.