

The Faithful Son, A Sermon for the Rest of Us
By Rev. Hugh Odhner

Lessons: Luke 15:1-10
Luke 15:11-32
Arcana Coelestia 5992

“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.'

But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.

And he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'”

(Luke 15: 25-30)

Most of us are familiar with the story of the prodigal son, the son who demanded his portion of the inheritance, left home and then wasted his inheritance on reckless and loose living, and who, after he had run out of money and food and needed to work for a living by feeding pigs, then came to his senses, decided to return home and ask his father's forgiveness; and how his father greeted him with great joy, throwing a feast in his honor and putting on him the best robe, a ring, and sandals.

This story is part of a trilogy of parables in Luke 15. The first parable is about a man who leaves his 99 sheep in the wilderness to go off and find his one lost sheep, and after finding it calls his friends and neighbors together to rejoice with him for finding the sheep that was lost. The second parable is about a woman who, having lost one of her 10 coins, sweeps her house and carefully searches for it until she finds the lost coin. She likewise calls together her friends and neighbors that they might rejoice with her for having found the coin that was lost. The third parable is that of the prodigal son.

It is easy to see that these three parables share a common theme: something was lost and when it was found there was rejoicing. What was lost, whether it was a sheep, a coin, or a son is compared to a sinner who repents, of which it is said, *"there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance."* And also, *"there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

The shepherd, the woman, and the father in the three parables represent the Lord. Their joy over recovering what was lost represents His joy over everyone's salvation. The joy of the Angels of heaven over a spiritually lost person who comes to his senses and repents comes from their sharing in the Lord's love for the salvation of all. And as we read from the Word, *"Scarcely anyone believes the Lord has that kind of concern for a person, a constant concern lasting from the very beginning of a person's existence to the final moment of his life, and for evermore after that."* (AC 5992)

But this sermon is not really about the prodigal son, or about the lost sheep or the lost coin. This sermon is about the son who stayed home, the 99 sheep who were not lost, and nine coins that the woman did not lose. It is, "A sermon on the faithful son, a sermon for the rest of us."

In Divine Providence 278 and in other places it is said that evils cannot be removed unless they appear. The prodigal son came to his senses because he suffered the results of his chosen way of life. They were right in his face as he was down and dirty feeding his boss's pigs. He knew that there was a better way of life than the one he was living. He knew that even his own father's servants ate better and lived better than the way he was now living. And knowing that, he made a decision: he returned to his father and admitted his sins, hoping that perhaps his father might allow him to live as one of his servants. When the results of prodigal, loose or wasteful living are so visibly evident to us (and also to others) a choice and a decision as to how we want to live may appear pretty clear -- as it was to the prodigal son.

But what about the unprodigal son, the one who stayed home and faithfully served his father? Likewise, there were 99 sheep that did not stray and were left by the shepherd in the wilderness while he went searching for the one that was lost. What about them? And what of the nine coins that were not lost? What about the rest of us who just go about doing our jobs quietly and faithfully, not acting out, and not being the center of attention?

Perhaps we can identify with the feelings of the older son. When his father was throwing a party for his prodigal brother, he was angry and would not go in. And when his father came out and pleaded with him, he answered and said to his father, *"Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him."* It is evident, the older brother was steamed. Perhaps many of us can understand his feelings and identify with him.

To the older brother, and to those of us who identify with him, the father said, *"Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours."*

But wait, that is not all that the parables are telling us. Let's go back to the very beginning, to the introduction to these three parables:

"Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." So He spoke this parable to them ..." (Luke 15:1-3)

The Lord was talking directly to the scribes and Pharisees. By means of parables he was trying to teach them something. In the three parables, the tax collectors and sinners were represented by the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal younger son. And the scribes and Pharisees may be represented by the 99 sheep who were left in the wilderness, the nine coins, and especially by the faithful older son.

The faithful older son and the scribes and Pharisees shared this in common -- they were disturbed and jealous that the Lord, or the father in the parable, should be receiving sinners or having anything to do with them. Yes, they were living faithfully. Yes, they were obeying the commandments. In the words of the older son, "*Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I have never transgressed your commandment at any time.*" Yet they lacked something very important. The fact that they were disturbed and angered by the Lord's receiving sinners shows that in their faithfulness, love and charity were lacking. They did not understand that the Lord has a love for everyone's salvation, and they did not have that love themselves. Perhaps also we have something of this -- perhaps we have found ourselves thinking way down deep (because we really don't want anybody to know that are thinking this) "I think that person is going to go to hell, and I kind of wish that they would -- and the sooner the better."

This thought and this feeling, represented by the older brother and by the scribes and Pharisees, may give us an indication of just how far we are from that angelic joy which takes delight in the salvation of everyone. For those of us who can identify easily with the thoughts, feelings and lifestyle of the older brother, and have trouble identifying with or sympathizing with our prodigal brothers or sisters, the rest of Divine Providence 278, which starts off by saying that evils cannot be removed unless they appear, has something for us.

Evils cannot be removed unless they appear This does not mean that a person is to do evils in order that they may appear, but that he is to examine himself, not only his actions, but also his thoughts, and what he would do if he were not afraid of the laws and disgrace; especially what evils he holds in his spirit to be allowable and does not regard as sins; for these he still commits. (Divine Providence 278)

The question then is, how ought a person to repent? The answer is, Actually; that is, by examining himself, recognizing and acknowledging his sins, praying to the Lord and beginning a new life. (True Christian Religion 530)

The Lord when he came into the world, preached repentance as can be seen from many passages in the Gospels. Even in the book of Revelation, the Lord called upon four of the seven churches to repent -- and these churches are said to represent the New Church such as it is with us! (By the way, the other three churches were urged to hold fast and be faithful to what they had received.)

The lesson then to the rest of us, to those of us who can identify ourselves with the older brother, is the need to practice self-examination and reflection, looking for those hidden evils which do not appear outwardly. We may recognize them from those very states of anger or jealousy that we may have toward those who it seems that the Lord has blessed in some way. When we observe and examine our thoughts and feelings in this way, we may ask ourselves, "Is this angelic thinking? Would the Lord be delighted that I am thinking in this way?" When we reflect upon our thinking in this way, we may come to realize that we are not so different from our prodigal brother or sister than we may have thought.

We are not so different from our prodigal brother or sister than we may have thought. In fact, both the prodigal son and the faithful son represent parts of our spiritual character and personality. We are both at the same time the one lost sheep and the 99 sheep that did not stray, the lost coin and the nine coins that were not lost, the prodigal son and the faithful son. To paraphrase a common saying, "we have met the prodigal son, and the faithful son, and he is us." Everything said in the three parables applies to each of us. Each side of us, the prodigal as well as the faithful, is in need of repentance. When the Lord came into the world he was preaching repentance to everyone, not just to the tax collectors and sinners, but to the scribes and Pharisees as well. For the Lord's love for the salvation of the whole human race is also a love for our whole spiritual personality, the faithful side as well as the prodigal side. As is said in Scripture, *"Scarcely anyone believes the Lord has that kind of concern for a person, a constant concern lasting from the very beginning of a person's existence to the final moment of his life, and for evermore after that."*

AMEN.

LESSONS

Lesson I

Luke 15:1-10

- ¹ Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.
- ² And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."
- ³ So He spoke this parable to them, saying:
- ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?
- ⁵ And when he has found *it*, he lays *it* on his shoulders, rejoicing.
- ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together *his* friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'
- ⁷ I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.
- ⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds *it*?
- ⁹ And when she has found *it*, she calls *her* friends and neighbors together, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I lost!'
- ¹⁰ Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Lesson II

Luke 15:11-32

- ¹¹ Then 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 falls *to me*.' So he divided to them *his* livelihood.
- ¹³ And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.
- ¹⁴ But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.
- ¹⁵ Then 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 gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything*.
- ¹⁷ But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!'

¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,

¹⁹ and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."

²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still 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 to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet.

²³ And bring the fatted calf here 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.

²⁵ Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.'

²⁸ But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.

²⁹ So he answered and said to *his* father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends.

³⁰ But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'

³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.

³² It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.' "

Lesson III

Arcana Coelestia 5992

AC 5992. The angels through whom the Lord leads and also protects a person are near his head. Their function is to impart charity and faith, to notice the direction in which the person's delights turn, and to modify and bend those delights towards what is good, so far as they can do so, without interfering with the person's freedom. The angels are forbidden

to act in any violent manner and thereby crush a person's desires and principles; they must act gently. Their function is also to control evil spirits who come from hell, which is done in countless ways, of which let only the following be mentioned here: When evil spirits infuse evils and falsities the angels instill truths and goods, which - even if they are not accepted - serve to temper what the former infuse. Spirits from hell are constantly on the attack, and angels provide protection; and this is a proper state of order.

[2] I the angels especially moderate affections, since they constitute a person's life and also his freedom. The angels also notice any influence on a person from hells which are now open but were not previously so, which happens when a person goes off into some new evil. To the extent that the person allows, the angels close those hells; they also remove any spirits who may be trying to come out from there. They also dispel any strange and new influences which can produce evil effects.

[3] In particular the angels call forth the forms of good and truth residing with a person and set them opposite the evils and falsities activated by the evil spirits. As a result the person is in the middle and is not conscious of the evil or of the good; and being in the middle he is in freedom to turn towards one or towards the other. Angels from the Lord employ means like these to lead and protect a person, doing so every instant and fraction of an instant. For if the angels were to let up merely for a single moment the person would be plunged into evil from which after that he cannot possibly be brought out. The angels are motivated to do all this by a love they receive from the Lord, for nothing gives them greater delight and happiness than to remove evils from a person and lead him to heaven. This is their joy; see Luke 15:7 (**where it says that "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance"**). Scarcely anyone believes the Lord has that kind of concern for a person, a constant concern lasting from the very beginning of a person's existence to the final moment of his life, and for evermore after that.

AMEN.