

Sunday of the Prodigal Son

“Hear, my son, your father’s instruction
and reject not your mother’s teaching;
A graceful diadem will they be for your head;
a pendant for your neck.” (Proverbs 1: 8-9)

Dear Brothers and Sisters, dear Children!

Although this Sunday is called the Sunday of the Prodigal Son, this parable includes other characters that help illustrate Christ’s teachings. One Sunday school teacher, for example, after reading the parable of the Prodigal Son to the children wanted to focus on the reaction of the hard-hearted elder brother. To check how well the children had understood the text, she asked, “Who was dissatisfied with the return of the Prodigal Son?” One of the children shouted from his seat: “The fattened calf!”

But today I am not going to focus on that poor fattened calf or the elder brother, or even the younger, spendthrift son. Instead, I am going to look at this parable from the viewpoint of the father, because this is really the Parable of the Merciful Father. Like the path trod by the Prodigal Son back to the threshold of his father, the humble path that leads to the threshold of our Heavenly Father is the most important and sweetest of our lives.

Our respect for our Heavenly Father, as well as our earthly parents is manifested in many ways: outward honor, love, and obedience. In the Old Testament, Sirach tells us that “those who honor their father atone for sins; they store up riches who respect their mother.” (Sir. 3: 3). Mark Twain grasped this truth when he recalled that “When I was 14, my father was so stupid that I could barely stand his presence. When I turned 21, I was amazed at how smart the old man had become over the last 7 years.”

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the father allows his son to go his own way. The spendthrift son got what he wanted, but lost everything he had. When a person rebels against God, our Heavenly Father answers “Okay. Let **your** will be done, but now let us see what it leads you to.” Truly, human choice and sinful desires become the very punishment that people voluntarily choose for themselves!

Some people think that they become free by fleeing from God and breaking God’s commandments, but in reality, they become slaves to sin. Raynaud III lived in the 14th century, a little-known duke in what is now Belgium. Raynaud loved to eat, or rather his love of food turned into a sinful passion causing considerable obesity. The duke’s peaceful life was interrupted by an uprising led by his younger brother. Raynaud the Fat, as he has become known to history, was taken prisoner and a prison cell was built around him. The cell windows had no bars, and the doors had no locks. The problem was that Raynaud was too fat to go through a normal-sized door, let alone a window. The younger brother promised to return the duke’s wealth and crown if he stopped eating and lost enough weight so that he could walk out of prison on his own.

The younger brother, however, also ordered the realm's best cooks to prepare the most delicious dishes and deliver them to Raynaud. Remaining a prisoner of his own insatiability, Raynaud continued to eat and eventually died as a slave to his own appetite. Having succumbed to sinful passion, Raynaud could not free himself from it. What had been pleasurable in the beginning became a prison and led to his inglorious death.

The Holy Fathers teach us that sinners, when attached to some object through which they satisfy their sinful passions, often bring themselves to the most humiliating state. When we begin to "feed the pigs," that is the human passions and lusts that are inspired by the spirits of evil and which captivate the soul, we become slaves to these evil desires.

It is no accident that Christ recounts that the Prodigal Son is eventually reduced to becoming a swineherd, perhaps the most humiliating occupation for a faithful Jew. Remember that the Law of Moses despised pigs as unclean animals. Our Savior thus shows the extremely difficult condition of this sinner, who even longed to eat the husks that he was feeding to the pigs.

Finally, the young man comes to his senses and recognizes his deplorable condition, waking up as if from a sinful sleep. He is like a seriously ill and unconscious hospital patient who is beginning to regain his senses and awareness of his surroundings. Having now awoken, the Prodigal Son sees and understands the gravity of his condition, and he begins to look for a way to get out of it. He reasons: "I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers'" (Luke 15: 18-19).

In these words, we see an expression of deep humility and a sense of one's own unworthiness. Such humility always accompanies sincere repentance, as does deep love for the Father's home and eagerness to be accepted into that home, even on the most difficult of terms. St. John Chrysostom says that: "God never rejects sincere repentance. Even if one reaches extreme depravity but then decides to return to the path of virtue, God accepts it and brings that person closer to Himself, and does everything to restore the person to his former, or even to a better, condition."

Dear Believers, before the Great Fast, the Holy Church calls us to repentance so that we do not fall into despair and doubt God's mercy. Saint John Chrysostom exhorts us: "Every day you sin, and every day you offer repentance." Remember that when repentance is combined with God's mercy, it has great power. The merciful Son of God, who came into the world to save sinners, proclaims mercy and forgiveness from the pages of the Holy Gospel: "Everything that the Father gives me will come to me, and I will not reject anyone who comes to me" (John 6:37). Thus, the Merciful Lord forgives the sins of sinners, for if sinners turn to God, all their sins will be forgiven. "I tell you ... there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need of repentance" (Luke 15: 7).