

God is Merciful

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Mother of God Prayer Meeting
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Exegesis of Luke 15:11-32 The Generous Father

Over the next few months at the prayer meeting we will be focusing on God's attributes. Each week we will Then Jesus said, 'There was once a man who had two sons and the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me that portion of the property that is coming to me." So he divided his estate between them. ¹

Once again, we have a parable about two sons (Mt 21:28-32). The younger, that is the one who would receive quite a bit less of the property, says that he wants what is "coming to him," and when there are two sons that would mean about a third of the property. Most of it was either in some form of money or convertible into money.

Not long afterward the younger son gathered together all he had and left home for a distant land where he squandered his property living a dissolute life.

What was given by the father in total freedom to the son in is completely squandered and lost through a life which is "dissolute," that is, disintegrating because of the deceptiveness of desire.

When he had spent everything a severe famine came upon that land and he began to be in want. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that land who sent him off to his farm to feed the pigs. He longed to have his fill even of the carob pods on which the pigs used to feed but nobody would give him anything.

The situation described here is one of the utmost degradation. He has lost everything, including all of his "friends." He has gone to work for someone, undoubtedly a Gentile because he keeps pigs. He, as a Jew, is tending pigs and further yet, in the degradation is so hungry he wants to eat what they are eating. He is experiencing the reality of his dissolute living.

Finally, he came to himself and said, "How many hired hands working for my father have more than enough to eat and here am I dying of hunger? I shall get up then and go to my father and say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands." So he got up and went back to his father.

This describes conversion in the most elementary terms. The boy reflects on the day laborers back on his father's farm who at the end of a day are paid a decent wage and go their way to provide for themselves and their families. At least he thinks to himself, "If I go home, my father, being who he is, will not reject me. He has given me the inheritance which I have turned into cash and squandered, but he will allow me to work as one of his hired hands." He even prepares a speech: "I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands." But he does acknowledge his sin. There is here a genuine acknowledgement that he has abused the freedom that his father gave him.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and had pity on him. He ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. (Hesed: he looks to the

relationship)

We are not told how far away he was, though it is a long way, or how his father saw him, but we are given, now, a description of the love the father had. The father saw him, had pity on him, ran to meet him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. We must remember that this is our Lord Jesus Christ telling us this story. It is not a metaphor; it is an analogy. He is trying to mediate to us some sense of the Father's love for us and so he describes in detail the depth of love and affection with which the father welcomes back his son.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I no longer deserve to be called your son." But his father said to the servants, "Quick, bring the best robe and put it on him. Give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. Bring out the fatted calf and slaughter it. Let us feast and be merry because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found." And they began to make merry.

(Mercy, not pity: he looks to the person)

The son begins his speech but never finishes it. The father interrupts him. He does acknowledge that he has sinned and that he no longer deserves to be called the son of his father. He doesn't ask to be made one of the hired servants, and the father's reaction is one of total restitution of the son to the family.

First, the father gives instructions, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him." By thus clothing him, the father reinstates him totally as his son. He then says, "Give him a ring for his finger." Here, again, this is not simply an ornament but a symbol of authority, particularly of royal authority (1 Macc 6:15, Esther 3:10; 8:8). Third, shoes were a sign that a person was a free man, not a slave; at the same time, they were worn in the house by the master and not by the guests who took them off on arrival. Hence, they indicated authority and possession as well as freedom. The son, therefore, is totally reinstated as son by a father who has hugged him and kissed him and welcomed him back.

Now the next set of instructions leads to the celebration of the son's return. There is the slaughtering of the animal which has been specially fed and kept for a special occasion. He speaks now of feasting and making merry and he gives this reason: "Because this son of mine was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and he was found." There may be implied here the fact that somehow the son was legally considered disinherited because he now took all of his inheritance, had no more coming to him and left. To reinstate someone, therefore, is literally to revive him from the dead and so that may be implied, but certainly what is implied is that this boy was outside the life of the family. Once again, we have use of the notion of "lost" (see Luke 15:4, 8).

Now the eldest son was in the field as he was coming in and entered the house and heard music and dancing. He called one of the servant boys and asked what it was all about. He told him, "Your brother has come and your father has slaughtered the fatted calf because he got him back safe and sound." Then the older brother became angry and refused to go in. This is an integral part of the parable. The reason why it is really not the parable of the prodigal son but of the deprived father. We are not told exactly why the son was so angry. That will come up in a few more lines. What we do see is how different the reaction of the father is to his returning son and that of the brother to his returning brother. This, too, is an essay in freedom as we shall see.

So his father went out and pleaded with him but he replied to his father, "Look, I have been serving you so many years and I have never disregarded a single command of yours; yet you never gave me even a goat that I might make merry with my friends. Now this son of yours has come back who has devoured your estate with prostitutes and you have slaughtered for him the fatted calf."

We now see the source of the son's anger. Here again there is a very subtle illusion on the part of the Lord to those who rely on their own legal observance rather than on the love of the Father. "I have never disobeyed a command, and yet you have not treated me as well as you treat this one" whose dissolute living is described very graphically. The son was there but he was not a free man. Now, his lack of freedom and lack of real love for the father is remarkably contrasted with the younger boy who comes home feeling free enough to come back to his father's house because he knows his father and, despite everything he has done, can trust his love.

The father said to him, "Son, you are always with me. All that I have is yours. But we had to make merry and celebrate for that brother of yours was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and has been found."

The father makes two remarks: one to the son and one about the younger brother. First, he says to the son, "You are always with me." Besides the privilege of being with the father, there is implied: "Being always with me it is surprising you learned so little about me." Then there is the promise that the inheritance is still his. The father is not unjust. Then, finally, the last part. The boy whom the older brother has continued to call "that son of yours" is now called by the father, "that brother of yours." Once again, he is described as having been dead and now alive; lost and having been found. Notice how the elder son omits any respectful address to his father, very different from the way the younger son addressed him. He cast dispersions on his brother and criticized his father. He reflects the outlook of the Pharisees (Luke 18:9ff; 18:21; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). The picture here agrees with what Jesus said elsewhere about the Pharisees and it should be regarded as a "persuasive definition" rather than as a statement with which they could at once identify themselves. Note how also the son speaks contemptuously, "this son of yours."

Discussion Questions

1. What is an attribute?
2. Does mercy make me free? How? Find two or three scriptures that show how someone is made free through mercy.
3. When I go to the Father, do I expect to be received as the younger son was? Can I give an example of a time when I went to the Father not expecting it, and a time when I did expect it?
4. Read and meditate on Ps 145:8-9; Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4-7; and 1 Jn 4:9-10 (also, if time permits, Hos 1-2). Do I understand that, in this life, the face of love is mercy? What does that mean?
5. Jesus told this story (Lk 15:11-32) from his own experience of the Father. Explain.