

Theophylact on The Prodigal Son

by Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria Luke 15:11-32



11-16. And He said, A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of the property that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there squandered his property with prodigal living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he longed to fill his belly with the pods that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

This parable is like those which precede it. For it also presents *a man*, Who is in fact God, the Lover of man. The two sons represent the two kinds of men, righteous and sinners. The younger son said, *Give me the portion of the property that falleth to me*. Of old, from the

beginning, righteousness belonged to human nature, which is why the older son (born at the beginning) does not become estranged from the father. But sin is an evil thing which was born later. This is why it is the younger son who alienates himself from the father, for the latter-born son grew up together with sin which had insinuated itself into man at a later time. The sinner is also called the younger son because the sinner is an innovator, a revolutionary, and a rebel, who defies his Father's will.

Father, give me the portion of the property (ousia) that falleth to me. The essential property of man is his rational mind, his *logos*, always accompanied by his free will (*autexousia*), for all that is rational is inherently self-governing. The Lord gives us *logos* for us to use, according to our free will, as our own essential property. He gives to all alike, so that all alike are rational, and all alike are self-governing.³ But some of us use this generous gift rationally, in accordance with *logos*, while others of us squander the divine gift. Moreover, everything which the Lord has given us might be called our *property*, that is, the sky, the earth, the whole creation, the law and the prophets. But the later sinful generation, the younger son, saw the sky and made it a god, and saw the earth and worshipped it, and did not want to walk in the way of God's law, and did evil

to the prophets. On the other hand, the elder son, the righteous, used all these things for the glory of God. Therefore, having given all an equal share of logos and self-determination, God permits us to make our way according to our own will and compels no one to serve Him who is unwilling. If He had wanted to compel us, He would not have created us with logos and a free will. But the younger son completely spent this inheritance. Why? Because he had gone into a *far country*. When a man rebels against God and places himself far away from the fear of God, then he squanders all the divine gifts. But when we are near to God, we do not do such deeds that merit our destruction. As it is written, *I beheld the Lord ever before me, for He is at my right hand, that I might not be shaken* (Ps. 15:8). But when we are far from God and become rebellious, we both do, and suffer, the worst things, as it is written, *Behold, they that remove themselves from Thee shall perish* (Ps. 72:25).

The younger son indeed *squandered* and scattered *his property*. For every virtue is a simple and single entity, while its opposing vice is a many-branched complexity, creating numerous deceptions and errors. For example, the definition of bravery is simple, that is, when, how, and against whom, one ought to make use of one's capacity to be stirred to action. But the vice of not being brave takes two forms, cowardice and recklessness. Do you see how logos can be scattered in every direction and the unity of virtue destroyed? When this essential property has been spent, and a man no longer walks in accordance with logos, by which I mean the natural law, nor proceeds according to the written law, nor listens to the prophets, then there arises a *mighty famine*—*not a famine of bread, but a famine of hearing the word (logos) of the Lord* (Amos 8:11). And he begins *to be in want*, because by not fearing the Lord he has departed far from Him. But *there is no want to them that fear the Lord* (Ps. 33:9). How is there no want to them that fear Him? Because *blessed is the man that feareth the Lord; in His commandments shall he greatly delight. Therefore glory and riches shall be in his house, and far from being himself in want, he hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor* (see Ps. 111). Therefore the man who makes a journey far from God, not keeping God's dread face ever before his eyes, indeed is in want, having no divine logos at work in him.

And he went, that is, he proceeded and advanced in wickedness, *and joined himself to a citizen of that country*. He who is joined to the Lord becomes one Spirit with Him. But he who is joined to a harlot, that is, to the nature of the demons, becomes one body with her (I Cor. 6:16) and he makes himself all flesh, having no room in himself for the Spirit, as it was for those men at the time of the flood (Gen. 6:4). The citizens of that country far from God are none other than the demons. The man who joins himself to these citizens, having advanced and become powerful in wickedness, *feeds the swine*, that is, he teaches others evil and filthy deeds. For all those who take pleasure in the muck of shameful deeds and carnal passions are like swine. Pigs are never able to look upward because of the peculiar shape of their eyes. This is why, when a farmer grabs hold of a pig, he is not able to make it stop squealing until he turns it upside down on its back. This quiets the pig, as if, by looking upward, the pig can see things it had never seen before, and it is startled into silence. Such are they whose eyes are ever turned to filthy things, who never look upward. Therefore, a man who exceeds many others in wickedness can be said to *feed swine*. Such are the keepers of brothels, the captains of brigands, and the chief among publicans. All these may be said to *feed swine*. This wretched man desires to satisfy his sin and no one can give him this satisfaction. For he who is habitual in sinful passions receives no satisfaction from them. The pleasure does not endure, but is there one moment and gone the next, and the

wretched man is again left empty. Sin is likened to the pods which the swine eat, because, like them, sin is sweet in taste yet rough and harsh in texture, giving momentary pleasure but causing ceaseless torments. Therefore, there is *no man* to provide satisfaction for him who takes pleasure in these wicked passions. Who can both satisfy him and quiet him? Cannot God? But God is not present, for the man who eats these things has traveled a far distance from God. Can the demons? They cannot, for they strive to accomplish just the opposite, namely, that wickedness never end or be satisfied.

17-21. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no longer worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no longer worthy to be called thy son.

The man who until now had been prodigal *came to himself*. This is because he was “outside himself” and had taken leave of his true self so long as he committed foul deeds. Rightly is it said that he wasted and spent his essential property. This is why he was outside himself. For he who is not governed by logos, but lives irrationally without logos, and teaches others to do the same, is outside of himself and has abandoned his reason, which is his very essence. But when a man regains his logos (*analogizetai*) so as to see who he is and into what a state of wretchedness he has fallen, then he becomes himself again, and using his reason, he comes to repent and returns from his wanderings outside reason. He says *hired servants*, signifying the catechumens, who have not yet become sons because they have not yet been illumined by Holy Baptism. Indeed the catechumens have an abundance of the rational bread, the sustenance of the Word (Logos), because they hear each day the readings of Scripture.

Listen, so that you may learn the difference between a hired servant and a son. There are three ranks of those who are being saved. The first kind are like slaves who do what is good because they fear the judgment. This is what David means when he says, *Nail down my flesh with the fear of Thee, for of Thy judgments am I afraid* (Ps. 118:120). The second kind, who are like hired servants, are those who are eager to serve God because of their desire for the reward of good things, as David again says, *I have inclined my heart to perform Thy statutes for ever for a recompense* (Ps. 118:112). But if they are of the third kind, that is, if they are sons, they keep His commandments out of love for God. This is what David means when he says, *O how I have loved Thy law, O Lord! The whole day long it is my meditation* (Ps. 118:97); and again, with no mention of fear, *I lifted up my hands to Thy commandments which I have loved* (Ps. 118:48), and again, *Wonderful are Thy testimonies, and because they are wonderful, therefore hath my soul searched them out* (Ps. 118:129). One must understand the *hired servants* to refer not only to the catechumens, but also to all those in the Church who obey God out of some lesser motive than love. Therefore when a man is among the ranks of those who are sons, and then is disowned because of his sin, and sees others enjoying the divine gifts, and communing of the Divine Mysteries and of the Divine Bread, such a man ought indeed to apply to himself these piteous words, *How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise, arise, that is, from my fall into sin, and go to my Father, and will say*

unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee. When I abandoned heavenly things, I sinned against heaven, preferring shameful pleasure to heavenly things, and choosing the land of hunger instead of my true fatherland, heaven. Just as we have a saying that the man who prefers lead to gold sins against the gold, so too the man who prefers earthly things to heaven, sins against heaven. Indeed he has gone astray from the road that leads to heaven. Understand that when he sinned, he behaved as if he were not acting in the sight of God, that is, in the presence of God; but once he confesses his sin, then he realizes that he has sinned *in the sight* of God.

And he arose, and came to his father, for we must not only desire the things that are dear to God but must get up and do them as well. You see the warm repentance—behold now the compassion of the father. He did not wait for his son to come to him, but he went and met him on the way and embraced him. God is called *Father* on account of His goodness and kindness, even though by nature He is God Who encompasses all things so that He could have restricted a man within His embrace, no matter which way the man might try to turn. As the prophet says, *The glory of God shall compass thee* (Is. 58:8). Before, when the son distanced himself, it was fitting that God, as Father, release him from His embrace. But when the son drew near through prayer and repentance, it was fitting that God again enclose him within His embrace. Therefore the Father *falls on the neck* of the one who before had rebelled and who now shows that he has become obedient. And the Father kisses him, as a sign of reconciliation, and by this kiss He first makes holy the defiled one's mouth, which is as it were the doorway to the whole man, and through this doorway He sends sanctification into the innermost being.

22-24. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the first robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the grain-fed bullock, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

The *servants* you may understand to mean the angels, the ministering spirits who are sent to serve those who are counted worthy of salvation. For the angels clothe the man who has turned from wickedness with *the first robe*, that is, with the original garment which we wore before we sinned, the garment of incorruption; or, it means that garment which is honored above all others, the robe of Baptism. For the baptismal robe is the first to be placed around me, and from it I receive a covering of my former shame and indecency. Therefore you may understand *the servants* to mean the angels who carry out all those things that are done on our behalf, and by means of which we are sanctified. You may also understand *the servants* to mean the priests. For they clothe the repentant sinner with Baptism and the word of teaching, placing around him *the first robe*, which is Christ Himself (*for all we that have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*, Gal. 3:18). And they put *a ring on his hand*, which ring is the seal of Christ given at Chrismation so that we might execute good deeds in His name. The *hand* is a symbol of action, and the *ring* is a symbol of a seal. Therefore he who has been baptized, and, in general, everyone who has turned from wickedness, ought to have on his hand, that is, on his entire faculty of action, the seal and the mark of Christ, which is placed on him to show that he has been made new in the image of his Creator. You may also understand the ring to signify *the earnest of the Spirit* (II Cor. 1:21-22). By that I mean that God will give us perfect and complete good things when it is time for them; but for now He gives us gifts as earnest, that is, as tokens of assurance

of those good things to come. For example, to some He gives the power to work miracles, to others the gift of teaching, and to others still other gifts; having received these gifts, we have more confident hope in the perfect and complete good things to come.

And *shoes* are put on his feet to protect him from scorpions, that is, from the seemingly small and hidden sins described by David (Ps. 18:12), which are in fact deadly. And these shoes also protect him from serpents, that is, from those sins which can be seen by all. And, in another sense, shoes are given to him who has been counted worthy of *the first robe*: God makes such a man ready to preach the Gospel and to bring benefit to others. This is Christianity—to benefit one's neighbor. We are not ignorant of what is meant by *the grain-fed bullock* (*ton moschon ton siteuton*) which is slain and eaten. It is none other than the very Son of God, Who as a Man took flesh which is irrational and animal by nature, although He filled it with His own glory. Thus Christ is symbolized by the bullock, the Youngling which has never been put under the yoke of the law of sin; and He is *grain-fed* in the sense that Christ was set apart and prepared for this mystery from before the foundation of the world. And though it may seem somewhat difficult to take in, nevertheless it shall be said: the Bread which we break in the Eucharist appears to our eyes to be made of wheat (*sitos*) and thus may be called *of wheat* (*siteutos*); but in reality it is Flesh, and thus may be called the *Bullock*. For Christ Himself is both Bullock and Wheat. Therefore every one who is baptized and becomes a son of God, or rather, is restored to the status of son, and in general, every one who is cleansed from sin, communes of this Bullock of Wheat. Then he becomes the cause of gladness to the Father, and also to His servants, namely, the angels and the priests, because he who was dead is alive again, and he who was lost is found. For whoever is dead from the abundance of his wickedness is without hope; but whoever is able, with his changeable human nature, to change from wickedness to virtue, is said to be merely *lost*. To be lost is less severe than to be dead.

25-32. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the grain-fed bullock, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, who hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the grain-fed bullock. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

Here is the celebrated question—how is it that the son who lived a God-pleasing life in all other respects, and who faithfully served his father, could display such envy? The question will be answered if one considers the reason why this parable was told. This parable and the ones preceding it were told because the Pharisees, who considered themselves pure and righteous, were grumbling at the Lord because He received harlots and publicans. The Pharisees murmured indignantly, believing themselves to be more righteous than the publicans, which is why the Lord presented this parable. Consider that the figure of the son who is seen to grumble is understood to refer to all those who are scandalized at the sudden good fortune and deliverance of sinners.

Such men grumble, not because of envy, but because neither they nor we can understand the outpouring of God's compassion for man. Does not David bring forward the figure of a man scandalized at *the peace of sinners* (Ps. 72:3)? And Jeremiah likewise, when he says, *Why is it that the way of ungodly men prosper? Thou hast planted them, and they have taken root* (Jer. 12:1-2). Such thoughts reflect man's weak and poor understanding, which easily ignites with annoyance and questions the good fortune of the wicked, which seems undeserved.

In this parable, therefore, the Lord is saying to the Pharisees words like these: "Let us suppose that you are as righteous as that elder son and well-pleasing to the Father; I entreat you who are righteous and pure not to grumble, as this elder son did, against the gladness which we are showing over the salvation of the sinner, who is also a son." Do you see that this parable is not about envy? Instead, by means of this parable, the Lord is instructing the minds of the Pharisees, so that they will not be vexed that the Lord receives sinners, even though they themselves are righteous and have fulfilled every commandment of God. It is no wonder that we too become vexed at those who appear undeserving. God's compassion is so great, and He gives to us so abundantly of His own good things, that we may even grumble at His generosity. That criticism follows generosity is a fact to which we refer in everyday speech. If we do good to someone who fails to thank us, we often say to him, "Everyone says I am a fool for having been so good to you." We use this expression, even if no one has actually criticized us, because extreme generosity is so often followed by criticism that to suggest the latter is to prove the former. But let us turn to the particulars of the parable, in brief.

The elder son was in the field, that is, in this world, working his own land, meaning his flesh, so that he might have his fill of bread, sowing with tears so that he might reap with rejoicing. When he learned what was being done, he did not want to enter into the common joy. But the compassionate father goes out and begs him to come in, and explains to him the reason for the joy, that a man who was dead has come back to life. Because as a man he did not understand, and because he was scandalized, the elder son accused the father of not giving him even a young goat, while for the prodigal son he slaughtered the fatted calf. What does the kid, the young goat, signify? You may learn here. Every young goat is considered to be of the portion of sinners who are placed on the left side. The righteous son is saying, then, "I have passed my life in toil and labor, I have been persecuted, suffered hardships, been oppressed by sinners, and on my behalf you have never slaughtered and killed a kid, that is, a sinner who afflicts me, so that I might have some small measure of rest." For example, King Ahab was just such a goat to the Prophet Elijah. Ahab persecuted Elijah, but the Lord did not quickly give this goat over to the slaughter so that Elijah could have some small rest, and take his ease with his friends, the prophets. Therefore Elijah complained to God, *Lord, they have digged down Thine altars, and have slain Thy prophets* (III Kings 19:10) And Saul was a goat to David, as were also all those who slandered David. But the Lord allowed them to tempt him, and did not slay them to give David some rest. Therefore David said, *How long shall sinners, O Lord, how long shall sinners boast* (Ps. 93:3)? The elder son in the parable is saying these things: "You did not count me worthy of any consolation in all my toils; you never handed over to me for slaughter any of these who were afflicting me. But now you save the prodigal son who never had to toil."

This is the entire purpose of the parable—to correct the Pharisees who were grumbling that He had accepted sinners. The parable also instructs us that no matter how righteous we may be, we

ought not to rebuff sinners, nor to grumble when God accepts them. The younger son, therefore, represents the harlots and the publicans; the elder son represents those Pharisees and scribes who consider themselves righteous. It is as if God were saying, "Let us suppose that you are indeed righteous and have not transgressed any commandments; if some others have turned away from wickedness, why do you not accept them as your brothers and fellow laborers?" I am not unaware that some have interpreted the elder son to signify the angels, and the younger son, the latter-born nature of men which rebelled against the commandment it was given and went astray. Still others have said that the two sons represent the Israelites and the Gentiles who later believed. But the simple truth is this: the person of the elder son signifies the righteous, and the person of the younger son signifies sinners who have repented and returned. The entirety of the parable is given for the sake of the Pharisees, to teach them not to be vexed that sinners are received, even if they themselves are righteous. Let no one be vexed at the judgments of God—let him be patient with those apparent sinners who prosper, and are saved. How do you know whether a man whom you think is a sinner has not repented, and on this account has been accepted? Or that he has secret virtues on account of which God looks favorably upon him?