

"His Father Ran and Kissed Him"

"Then drew nigh unto him (Jesus) all the publicans and sinners for to hear him"—Luke 15:1.

WHAT ATTRACTS these outcasts, whom the Pharisees openly despised? It was not because he hid his light or condoned their sins. None was more outspoken or uncompromising in his denunciation of sinfulness. But he showed sympathy for them. He wanted to help them. He won their confidence and attention by his genuine and unmistakable concern for them. He *worried* about them, if we may use that term. It *grieved* him that they should be astray—that they should grope in darkness—that they should be in ignorance of the pleasures and glories of God's love, the incomparable joy of a pure heart at peace with itself and God—that they should be as sheep without a shepherd, ignored and despised by those whose duty it was to teach them.

It was his main concern. It was not a hobby or a pastime with him. It was his *life*—his meat and drink. He had come, he said (Matt. 18:11), "to save that which was lost."

For the self-righteous and hypocritical Pharisees he had little patience. Having the keys of knowledge, they neither entered in themselves, nor permitted others to enter (Luke 11:52). But to these unfortunates, who, in the absence of guidance or instruction, were making shipwreck of their lives, Jesus came with understanding and compassion.

After reading so often of the sublime and awful *holiness* of God, it is very pleasant to read here of His *long-suffering mercy and compassion*. He is represented to us as not only joyfully receiving the repentant sinner, but as actually going after that which was lost until He find it, and carrying it back upon His shoulders rejoicing. To the sanctimonious, letter-of-the-law Pharisees, this must have seemed blasphemous heresy. But to those whose minds are receptive it furnishes a powerful motive toward righteousness. "*Grieve not the holy Spirit of God*," says Paul (Eph 4:30). It is a solemn thought that God has given us the power to grieve Him, and also to give Him joy. How careful we should be!

This conception of God as grieved at waywardness and joyous over repentance reveals to us a loving Father with deep concern for His children—His own offspring, created in His image and after His likeness. The mystery of parental love is a wonderful thing. In humans it is often misguided, perhaps, but still it is a strange and beautiful thing to contemplate. Ever ready to forgive. Ever ready to forget the unhappy past. Believing all things . . . hoping all things . . . enduring all things.

"Come now, and let us reason together, said the Lord" to Israel (Isa. 1:18), "though your sins be as scarlet they shall be white as snow, though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

But we must not distort the picture by sentimentally ignoring its other aspects. God's mercy is great and His love is long-suffering, but judgment finally descended upon Israel. Isaiah continues in the next verse (v. 20)—

"But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."

"*Behold therefore the goodness and severity of God*," says Paul (Rom. 11:22), "*on them which fell, severity: toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off*."

A proper balance will give us a correct and inspiring view of God as the loving Father Who will withhold nothing from His obedient children, and Who is eager and joyful to receive them back upon repentance, but Whose authority and holiness must be respected, and Whose righteous anger is a consuming fire.

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THE PARABLE of the prodigal son is written for the instruction of that class represented by the elder brother. The younger son wasted all his substance in wicked living. He forsook his father for the world's pleasures. *He only returned when all was gone and he had nowhere else to go.*

The elder son surely had grounds to feel justified in his suspicions, and to feel that his father was being taken advantage of. But the prodigal was sincere. He was truly humble and penitent. He realized his foolishness, though to the elder brother, who gave his suspicions the benefit of the doubt, the evidence was not convincing because he preferred to think the other way. "*With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.*"

The father, on the other hand, gave the benefit of the doubt to mercy and love and hope. There was no bitterness or reservations in his forgiveness. While he was yet a great way off he *ran* to meet him. He did not stand upon his dignity, or remain coldly aloof demanding proof. He did not force an apology. He loved him and he wanted him back and he was willing to forget the past and hope for the future. He showered every display of affection and attention upon him, in his intense joy at reconciliation.

The elder son did not share all this exuberant enthusiasm for the returned sinner. He had his doubts. He was angry and resentful. He doubtless felt the prodigal should be made to suffer a little and be humbled instead of being royally feasted.

Most of all he lacked the balancing and softening influence of brotherly love. If, instead of thinking of only himself, he had loved his brother as he should, he too would have been truly glad to see him return, *he would have been only too eager to hope for the best and believe the best.* He would have been overjoyed to know that his brother had been reclaimed in time from his folly. Far better to be found wrong on the side of kindness and gentleness and faith in others, than to be found wrong on the side of judgment and suspicion. "*With what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.*"

True, indeed, justice demanded that the younger son be punished, but should his own brother urge the claims of justice when the father extended mercy? Let us remember that the father here represents God. His reaction is the proper one. He went out to meet the returning sinner. All his actions were dictated by love and fatherly affection. The father was not necessarily sure the younger son would justify his love, but still he gave it without stint, knowing that *it would be the strongest incentive possible to keep his son in the proper path*, if anything could. Many times God forgave and accepted Israel back to His favor, knowing that they would lapse into sin again.

How ungracious the older brother seems in contrast with his father's love! But it did not seem so to him. He felt quite justified in his self-righteous indignation. He had no qualms at distressing his father, or marring the joy of reconciliation. He could only see one point of view and that was that he had worked hard and faithfully and here was this returned wastrel being shown favours that he had never received.

He had no doubts about the justice of his position. He KNEW he was right. All the cold, hard facts were on his side. The younger son should have been humiliated and made an example. He should have been made to pay for his sins, right to the uttermost farthing. According to the letter of the law, he was right, dead right, and he knew it. But he could not see, in his vindictive eagerness, that he was killing the spirit. It was his father who had been wronged, and the father had chosen to forgive. Love is wise enough not to go too far—"*There is a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up.*"

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THE FATHER'S approach to the elder brother was just as tender as to the other. Gently he reminds him of the true state of affairs—of the need for love, and for joy, rather than prolonging the bitterness of selfish jealousy.

The older brother's task was hard. The prodigal's share of the inheritance had been wickedly squandered with no thought for either his father or the brother that remained. Now the latter was called upon to share with the returned renegade what was rightfully his own. Only one thing could enable him to fight down the well-justified but destructive reactions of the flesh, and that was a strong and deep love for his father and his brother—a *love that was big enough and wise enough to take into account his brother's weaknesses and failures and still be able to love him and make sacrifices for him and unselfishly seek his welfare*. It is the unlovable, the weak, the stragglers, the lost sheep that need love and sympathy and help most—

"They that be whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick" (Matt. 9:12).

Jesus does not tell us what the older brother replied. The parable closes with the father's gentle entreaties. Each of us must supply the older brother's answer within ourselves, remembering that "*He shall have judgment without mercy, that hath showed no mercy*" (James 2:13), and "*Love will cover the multitude of sins*" (1 Peter 4: 8). —G.V.G.
