

The Prodigal With the Father

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon emphasizes the importance of experiencing God's love and grace, and the need for honest confession and humility in order to return to God.

Scripture: Luke 15:11

Topics: "Grace", "Repentance"

Description

John Nelson Darby emphasizes the transformative journey of the prodigal son, illustrating how many sincere believers linger in a state of uncertainty and do not fully embrace the grace and love of the Father. He highlights that true peace comes from understanding the Father's heart and recognizing that our acceptance is based on what God is for us, not on our own righteousness. The sermon underscores the importance of confession and the realization that we are unworthy, yet God's grace is sufficient to welcome us back into His embrace. Darby contrasts the joy of the Father in receiving the repentant sinner with the self-righteousness of the elder brother, urging believers to fully experience the joy of divine love and grace. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper relationship with God, where believers find their identity and acceptance in Christ.

Transcript

THE PRODIGAL WITH THE FATHER

LUKE 15

I take this chapter because one finds that there are many sincere souls who are not in the second condition of this repentant prodigal—that is, when he had been kissed, and robed, and was in the house with the Father—they have not real peace with God. They are still lingering on the way ; and if they know salvation is a real thing thus given, they are not living in the enjoyment of it. As to their state of mind, they have not eaten of the fatted calf, nor have they got on the best robe ; they are not living with the Father on the ground of what the Father has shewn Himself to be.

It is striking the moment the Father comes, except the confession of the son, you hear nothing about him; all is about the Father. From the time of his confession the whole scene is the Father's mind, and the Father's ways—what His heart is, and what His house can afford; and that is the true Christian state, and what the heart has to be brought to enjoy. I take up that special point of view now. Many are sincere, yet are not on this ground, and the Lord shews us that this is so; we should ever cry, " Abba, Father," as

having this conscious place with Him.

There are two very distinct states in the prodigal ; only in the second do we really learn the father's thoughts and feelings, and not the prodigal's, but the effect upon him; and there he rests. We do not find judgment here, it is all grace. judgment is a real thing, and the Lord will lay hold of the conscience by it ; but it is not the subject here, salutary as it is. Neither is it the blood presented to God, as meeting that judgment, all true and important as it is ; but God in justifying grace, and then the way the soul enters into the enjoyment of that grace. We never should lose sight of the other ; but the side on which the gospel is presented here is not that judgment is outstanding, and that the blood is there to meet it, but the joy of divine love in blessing the wanderer brought back by grace.

And we must not confound this with the government of God. He may be angry even with His own child. It is different from the manifestation of His nature, so that there is no possibility of allowing sin in His presence. In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, and the wrath of God is revealed, and that from heaven; not merely judgments and punishment, not merely dealing with man, but the nature of God being perfectly revealed, so that He cannot have a single sin. " For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness, and unrighteousness of men." In the holiness of His nature He abhors and rejects the sin, and in the righteousness of His nature He judges it. Hence, when we speak of the Christian state, we walk in the light, as He is in the light. It is not now certain conduct that has to be measured and dealt with. God has no measure with sin (there are indeed 44 many stripes " and " few stripes "). He is a holy Being, and there is positive rejection of all sin in His nature. Even in paradise, it is not now merely innocence ; it came out previously ; but man left that state and then judgment comes on him, and he is to return to the dust from which he was taken-present judgment that marked God's displeasure. It is dreadful enough to see that God may chasten His own; but to find that people are shut out from the presence of the Lord for ever, from God's favour, that is what is so terrible. There is no veil over the glory of God. If you have to do with God at all, you must deal with Him, not as under the law, when there was a veil and God was hidden, but now He has come out, and wrath from heaven has been fully revealed. This is not the side we have here, but the grace which goes out to seek, and how the soul is brought back to enjoy this grace.

We have the whole Trinity in this chapter, but not as a doctrine ; the good Shepherd looks after the sheep ; the Spirit seeks for a soul, and Grace receives it when it comes back. We find the activity of God in grace, in Christ, and in the Holy Spirit ; and lastly, the way the soul is received by the Father. In the first two you have not the whole truth : you have in the last. The shepherd has lost his sheep ; he goes after it wandering farther and farther away, and brings it back, while the sheep never lays foot to the ground. The woman cares for the silver piece, seeks diligently until she finds it, when there could be nothing that passed in it-the simple power of grace bringing back what is lost. Then there is another-thank God, not a new principle, but a most blessed and lovely one, that runs through it all, that it is not our joy to be saved, but God's joy to save!

The Pharisees and publicans murmured. It is a righteous principle, and some may have it in their hearts still, that people must be righteous for God. The Pharisee thinks he has righteousness for God ; we have that described in the elder brother. You do not need to be a Jew to be a Pharisee what the Lord speaks of as a whited sepulchre, full of all uncleanness. The elder brother is the Pharisee in all ages ; it is the most hateful thing that exists. A Pharisee has no sense of sin, else he would know that he was a sinner ; no sense of holiness, or of love; there is nothing more foreign to the heart and mind of God than his state ; it is the most thorough selfishness, and not a thought of anything else - Thou never gavest me a kid, that I

might make merry with my friends." When he says, " Child, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine," he refers to the Jews ; the law, the prophets, Christ Himself as coming in the flesh, the worship of God, the word of God, all He had was theirs. The use they made of it was another thing ; they had got enough to be proud of it, but not to enter into the Father's heart; that was made known to the servants. " Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound." That ought to have touched his heart. He should have said, If my father is happy it must be right; but he objects to everything. The Father went out even to this Pharisee ; but nothing could win the self-righteous man ; his heart is unwinnable by God! He had no sense of righteousness or holiness, or he would know perfectly well, that if all that was in his heart was brought out, he would be ashamed of himself and go and hide. The Pharisee has no thought of that; he is hypocritical, only making the outside of the cup clean, as if God could not see its inside as well as its outside. But if man's righteousness was the way to God, why should He have given His Son ?

The Lord here takes up the way in which the soul returns to God, and He chooses the case of one who had gone to excess of riot as the prodigal eating husks with the swine. Many have not done that, but He takes this case to shew that grace reaches him there, and that is God's delight-the joy of God, to bring him back and receive him. Remark this-the moment the soul has got hold of what God is, the grace of God has found entrance into the heart. It is not feeding on husks which is the worst thing ; nor is there any real difference in people ; some are upright and honest, others are sunk in debauchery; but as regards the heart, when you come to the root of the matter, there is not one bit of difference. Suppose I was brought up among thieves and drunkards, I would be a thief and a drunkard. It is a great mercy to be separate ; that is connected with circumstances.

Here, in the first act of the young man, the whole mischief was done. To turn his back on his father was doing his own will. Scripture says, there is " no difference " before God ; there is in wickedness and vice, of course; but all have sought their own pleasure and their own way. When he crossed the threshold he was in will as much a sinner as when with the swine. There are differences among men; quite true. And man reaps what he sows. But as regards his state of soul, the young man was as much a sinner then as when eating the husks ; and what is more, he was nearer returning when there ; there was no pretence then that he was not perishing. It is the principle of all men, everywhere, to say, " Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." We like our own will; we like to be free from God to do our own will. It is perfectly immaterial what it is ; that is our history as men: " we have every one turned to his own way," and that brings these wretched fruits. That is what all are ; some have come back; but looked at as children of Adam, you have your back upon God, and your face on your own pleasures. There is no return till that is confessed.

The Lord takes the case of one who has gone to excess. The point was, leaving his father's house, and his getting back there. Suppose a son goes off in wild wickedness from his father's house, he may not have been a thief, or the like, but he is always doing wrong, till he comes back; and nothing will be right until he comes back. " If thou wilt return, saith the Lord, return unto me," Jer. 4 : 1.

Now, as to his return: " There arose a mighty famine in that land." Another thought as to the heart is, it never returns to God till there is a famine in the world. As long as people are in health, very rich and gay, they ruin themselves. When that is gone-when the natural pleasure gone, what then has the heart ? It has spent itself, and is going to die! " Thou fool! " that is all the Lord has to say to that! (Luke 12 : 20). He had got to Satan's world, and the heart finds nothing there to satisfy it. You see those that can spend their substance ; and there is a certain gaiety of nature which seems like happiness ; but leave such only for a day, and you will find how their heart has its canker at the core. There is in many a heart the sense that

there is a famine in the world. Why are there so many concerts and crystal palaces ? Because of the famine. They try to keep up their heart, to do without God; but it is all in vain; they cannot ! They would not have to take so much pains to make themselves happy, if they were so. They may get on merrily, but all these " artificers in brass and iron " are but efforts to make a city without God, and sufficiently pleasant to forget Him!

When the famine was there, he began to be in want. That never turns the heart to God: " And he joined himself to a citizen of that country ; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine." Drinking and pleasure and excitement did not satisfy; "and no man gave unto him." There is no giving there ; there is selling oneself. When the heart is away from God, this want never turns it to Him, but to what satisfies the flesh. " He would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat " ; a description of where he had got to, the sense of famine not bringing him to God at all.

" When he came to himself," there is a total change. He was like a mad man before; identified with the place where the famine was. The goodness of God comes into his heart, he says, " How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare ? " Not, I shall get it, or I would like to have it, or How should I be received ? But the sense of goodness is awakened in the soul, and this produces a want of another kind-a sense of the blessedness of God! When the Holy Ghost works in the soul, there is always a want. I want more holiness, more grace, I want God. He sees blessedness with God, and would give anything to be back with Him. The servants had bread enough and to spare ; there is goodness with God.

Wherever there is a revelation of self, and man is conscious of his real state, there is always a sense of the goodness of God. He is in the frame of mind you find at times in souls-Well, if I perish, I perish at the cross. It attracts him. Conscience is awakened ; but the heart is attracted, " I will arise and go to my father," that is everything. He had turned his back on his father, left God behind him ; now it is not that he has got to his father, but his face is turned towards him, and his heart too, and that is an immense thing! He has not peace yet; but it is an immense thing when God and the soul meet; when want of holiness and want of love is created, and there is a revelation that has attracted the soul to God. That which characterises him when he came to himself is, that he thinks there is goodness, and abundance, and plenty there. He did not know that he would be let in, but there was the goodness there to be let in to. " And I perish with hunger "-I have got away from God, and I am perishing as a man living without God-" I will arise and go to my father." The moment it is so, God and the soul have met. Orthodox as the Pharisees were, they had not God. Nicodemus says, You must be a teacher come from God ; but the Lord says, You have not the principle which connects you with God ; I cannot touch flesh; " ye must be born again." God and the soul have met, the quickening power of God gives consciousness that he is perishing, and there is a distinct result, " I will arise and go to my father," not I will get better, change my ways. He must change his ways ; but that is not what is in his heart. " I will arise and go to my father." It is want of God that characterises him. The sense of love that makes the heart want God, a totally different thing from the desire to mend myself-that is the work of the Spirit of God. The next thing is honest confession-" I have sinned against heaven and before thee." It is often a long while before we get up to this and say, I have no title ; and if so, how can I be there ?

That was what the Lord was doing with the Syrophenician. He said, " It is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it to dogs." " Truth, Lord (she replied), yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master's table." I have no title; I am just a wretched dog; but there is goodness enough in God for those who have no title.

It may be a long process before the soul comes to that point of full blessing. Without a holy nature we cannot enjoy Him ; but you cannot make righteousness or a ground of acceptance out of it. The prodigal has nothing to say to the blessing till everything is spent. The pride of the human heart finds it very difficult to get there. Some things are fit for God, it says. Are you fit for God ? I ask. It is not what is in God meets your case, but what is in you will, you hope, meet God's case. This is all wrong, totally wrong from beginning to end-" Without holiness no man shall see the Lord." You must come down; you have no title to anything whatever, and all depends on simple grace to those that are entitled to nothing but wrath.

Another thing, we have seen the young man's heart brought to turn to God. His eyes were opened, and God had met him; he had not yet met God. He acknowledged his sins ; all quite right ; the consequence is, he begins to reason how he will be with God when he meets Him. " Make me as one of thy hired servants." What does that prove ? That he had never met God at all. Lowliness, confession, is all right; but making terms shews he had not given up all hope in self, but thought he might have some small place, some little corner in heaven. God's presence is there, and can you pretend to be fit for His presence with all these rags ?-every proof of having been in the far country ? With his heart drawn to God, he confessed he was unworthy, yet still hoped. All proved he had not got to his father. The father had met him and touched his heart in grace, but he had not, in conscience, come to God at all! That is what I press.

There was a work of God in the man's soul, a sense of sin, of perishing, of bread in his father's house ; but this thought, because he had not met God, was all wrong; it was reasoning how it would turn out when he came. He had no terms to make with his father when he met him. You find numbers of sincere souls, who have seen the goodness of God and yet only hope in a general way; they have not met God to find out what God's thoughts are. They are reasoning from their condition, partly fearing, partly hoping for a poor servant's place. All proves they have not met God, though God has met them. He had met that young man. All perfectly true; but he was not judging from what God was, and had been; he had not given himself up as nothing but sin, so as to know what God was to those who have nothing but sin. " He arose and came to his father."

Now, in a certain sense, he disappears when the father comes in sight, and the whole blessing comes from, and is the result of, what the father is to this poor creature. All right his returning ; but what is the effect of it ? To bring him to his father with all the traces of the far country, in a condition totally unfit to go into the house. It would be a disgrace to have him in the house with those filthy rags-a perpetual dishonour. Then the elder brother might reproach and say, Look at this wretch ; is he fit to be in the house with you ? The effect of the experience of God's work in our hearts is to bring us to God in our sins. Did he not come in rags and nakedness the whole journey, just as he came out of the far country ? Until we submit to that, we never get peace. We are saying, Make me a hired servant. It is not self-righteousness, but reasoning from our thoughts and feelings as to what God will be. But that is giving God the character of judge; and if He is our Judge, it is everlasting destruction to us.

Are there not hearts who may read this, right in purpose, thinking of their state and condition, and how it will turn out when they meet God ? Why not confess you have not met Him yet ? (I do not say He has not met you.) You have never known Him. Why not put yourself just in the state the Lord is insisting on ? " When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him." Now he comes to be kissed in his rags. The father deals in absolute grace with him just as he was. The effect of this kind of experience is to bring me to Him in my rags, and to find Him loving me, such as I am, in a condition totally unfit to be in the house.

But he did not bring him in in his rags, but "fell on his neck and kissed him." The father acted from his thoughts and feelings and mind, and the only effect of the wretchedness of the son was to draw out the compassion of the father! That is what I learn in Christ. "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." The very essence of Christianity is that we have not to meet God as a Judge; and that because we could not He has come to meet us in grace. Sovereign grace has dealt with sinners, to shew that God in love is greater than their sins! The simple but blessed footing we are on with God, is not what we are for God (this has to do with government), but what God is for us. He "commendeth his love to us, in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." He does not look for righteousness, but He brings it; He will have the fruits of it afterwards; but the grace of God brings salvation. The very essence of Christianity (by which we too have to act in grace) is, not what God finds, but what He brings.

He is brought to confess what he is, but with the father on his neck; and he does not then say, "Make me as one of thy hired servants." Why? Because he had met his father, and he had acted as a father. He could not say, when he was kissing him, Make me a servant; it would be slighting grace! Ah! he had met his father, and knew his position. How? By being with him, and finding what his father was for him. The whole thing depended on what his father was for him.

Now, are you content, that your position and acceptance should depend on what God is for you, and not on what you are for God? Are you content to give up all title to His grace? If there is pride, and the old man still working, you will say, Must I not have this or that? Try your hand at it, and see what it will come to. The Lord wants you so to learn that you will never think of saying, Make me a servant. You will then have learned the Father's heart, and your relationship, a son's place, because you have found it in the Father's house. Thus, grace has gone out, and righteousness has gone in! "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him." That which the father has to put on him is out of his own treasure (the young man had got his share before, he had nothing of his own); it was that which was put on him when he came back, that when he went in he might be a witness to the whole house of his father's thought about him; that it was the father's joy to have him there in honour. We come in, not simply with our rags off, but with Christ on; we are "made the righteousness of God in him." He brings us to His own presence in the fulness of His own grace; and He puts the best robe on us, so that all may say, There is a son the father delights in. There is nothing now about the son feeding on the fatted calf, but the father and servants. No doubt he did so; but this is the way God receives a person; it is His own delight to have him, and the greatest delight of God is Christ; and He puts that upon him. We thus have righteousness, and glory too, in due time.

Thus there is a total difference between God meeting the soul, and the soul meeting God. All the reasoning you find, how it may turn out, and the like, characterises the state when God is meeting it in sinfulness. It is experience we get when the son was on his way to the father. I may get on slowly, or get on quickly, but that is experience, and experience is not righteousness. You never find in Scripture, Being justified by experience, we have peace with God; it is "by faith." Faith in what? In what has passed in my heart? Then I may doubt about my own heart, Surely it is not what I ought to be; all that does go on in the heart. But it is not the father's dealing with the son-not a bit. Experience was there, but experience led him in rags to the father's presence-the rest is all what the father is!

Are you content to be on that ground; a mere sinner, to be put by the Father's grace into the Father's house? It is Christ, of course, who is the best robe, as my righteousness. Then the soul sits down and enjoys all the Father has to give. Ali! you will find it hard, there is so much selfishness in the heart, to bow to dependence on what God is for you. Strange to say it, but you will. If you submit to God's righteousness you will then have true holiness, but never until you have the certainty of salvation. How can a child have

filial affections if he has not a father ? An orphan is capable of them. So, if I am born of God, I have a nature capable of enjoying Him. But if I have not the sense of relationship, I cannot have peace. We have the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. If we look up to God, is there the consciousness that you look to a Father ? Not a hope, but that your affections can go out on that footing, because you know Him as a Father ? You cannot have blessed, holy affections which delight in Him as a Father until consciously in the position which that relationship entails. I do not say that you are not on the road.

Do not be merely satisfied with being saved. When first I am saved, all my affections go out, and I say, What a mercy! But I am uneasy when I see a Christian resting too much upon what he was as a sinner ; that is not a healthy state. I believe we shall remember it in heaven. " The Lamb as slain " will be before us there, never to be forgotten. But if only there, and not occupied in thinking of what He is, I will not get on. A soul that is in the Father's house, is it not to grow up to know what the Father's heart is ? I was outside, and He took me in to learn it there.

I would now ask you, Are you in the best robe ? In Christ is your place. Is your heart there ? The conscience must be cleansed, of course ; but, is the place of your heart with the Father, living there in the affections which belong to that condition, or, are you uncertain ? That is not a Christian state, though you may be on the way to it. Are you content to take your whole condition and blessing from what the Father is to you ?

The Lord give you to see what you are, so that you may find you have a new place in Christ, and nothing to do with the old thing. The Father brings the son to His own heart and His own house.

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