

## THE PRODIGAL SON.

Luke 15:11-32.

John Bunyan says the Bible is a mirror, a looking-glass of strange and wonderful powers. If you turn this glass one way it will show you your own likeness. Not as you thought you were. Not as your friends have appraised you. But just as you are, stripped of all your pain and powder and your superfluous adornments. Generally such a view of ourselves is a great shock. The likeness is so different from what we thought we were like that often we do not recognize it. We may be like the little boy, who, on first seeing a photograph of himself, cried, in astonishment, "Ma, is that me?" But if we are honest we will acknowledge the likeness. And there is hardly any experience that is worth more to a man than to see himself as he is. Robert Burns cried, "O, that some power might the gift to give us, To see ourselves as others see us." The Bible does this as no other book ever given to men. No man has ever begun a real improvement of himself till he had a real view of himself as he is.

But this is only one of the wonders of this great mirror. You turn it the other way and it shows you the likeness of God. Not as you thought He was, not as your friends and neighbors thought He was, but just as He is. It shows you God in all His perfection and matchless wonder. It shows you the beauty of God in the face of Jesus Christ. It shows us God in His compassion and mercy. It shows us God in His righteousness, holiness, and justice. It shows

us the forgiving Father. It is a vision that dazzles the eyes of every man who has seen it. But after we have seen ourselves as we are it is wonderful to see God as He is. It begets in us a longing to be like Him. No other book ever given to men has given us such a wonderful likeness of God as the Bible.

How truly does the story of the Prodigal Son fit this description of the wonderful mirror. Who is the Father? Who is this old gray-haired man who gives so patiently priceless treasure for his son to squander in a strange land? Who is it that watches through all the years with his head bowed in grief? Who is it that runs to meet the returning sinner at the first sight of him coming over the hill? It is no one but a loving forgiving God. It is God in the face of Jesus Christ that we behold. The new robe, the ring, the fatted calf are gifts that only His riches and majesty could bestow.

But who is the Prodigal Son? It is none other than our own selves. Some say the story has the wrong name. They think the name ought to have been the Forgiving Father instead of the Prodigal Son. There is no doubt the Father does transcend every other character in the story. But the wayward son is the character that holds our attention. To men he will always be the chief actor in this great drama of life. Why? Because he is one of us. The Prodigal Son of the story is our own likeness. The Forgiving Father is what we would like to be. But the Prodigal Son is what we are.

"Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." Was this request wrong? Sam Jones says the request was both reasonable and innocent. But Mr. Wesley does not think so. "See the root of all sin," says that great man, "a desire of disposing of ourselves, and independency on God." In the light of events that followed we must agree with Mr. Wesley. Even in our day the family estate is not usually divided till after the father's death. In asking for his portion ahead of time the young man shows that he distrusted his Father's wisdom or that he chafed at his authority. A will meekly submissive to God is the very foundation of a holy religion. Most sin, if not all of it, has its root in our own stubborn self-will. "Until we can say with Christ, "Not my will, but thine be done," we are not baptized with His baptism. Self-will is one of the surest indications of base ingratitude. "How sharper than a serpent's tooth is a thankless child," says the Bard of Avon.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country." He had first grown tired of the restraints of a Father's love. Now, that he had wounded the kindest heart that he had ever known it is natural that he should want to go away. Unless we are penitent we do not like to see again those whom we have wronged. When the wounds we have given are deep and cruel every sight of the grief-stricken face is like a thunder-clap to our conscience. After this a "far country" is the only refuge of an impenitent heart.

"And there wasted his substance in riotous living." John

Bunyan says the Lord has given every pilgrim two purses. One purse contains spending money. If we spend this wisely and for the right kind of merchandise it is lawful. This part of our estate was given us for trade and barter. It is our passage money through this life. But the other purse contains precious jewels. We must never part with these. No matter how great the necessity we must never part with this treasure, it is sacred. These jewels must be turned in untarnished at the end of our journey. If we keep these jewels as they should be kept they grow in value each day. Rightly used these jewels will one day buy the whole world. But the moment they are thrown on the counter for barter they lose much of their value.

No doubt the young man at first used only his spending money. Even the most reckless spirit quails at the thought of parting with the precious treasures of life. But at the rate he was going his spending money soon gave out. There was nothing to do then but to open up his inner purse and begin spending his sacred treasure. So generous has the Lord been with this endowment that it seems limitless at first. When we start spending this treasure it seems that we have enough to buy all the kingdoms of the world. But once these jewels are thrown on the world's market we are astonished at the value. The poor boy was bewildered to find how little ropes of pearls and chains of gold would bring when thrown on the devil's counter. Another stunning surprise was the staggering cost of the gewgaws of sin. No man could ever believe the follies of sin cost so much till he has bought

some.

"And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want." There were many other inhabitants in this land, and they had all been doing the same thing. Now the money was spent, and there was a mighty famine. There had never been any good in this land except what had been brought from another country. It was a barren, seedless, desert land, and, of itself, could produce nothing on which life could exist. Now, that all the money was spent, hunger and want in all its gaunt hideousness walked the broad highways and haunted men in their bed-chambers.

"And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country." This was the very worst thing he could have done. This citizen was his greatest enemy, but the poor man did not know it. He is a friendly citizen as long as your money lasts. As long as you have ropes of pearls and chains of gold to throw across his counter he is as genteel and oily as a dancing master and accomodating as a politician. But when your money gives out he is a different person. Then he pulls off the mask and shows his hoofs and his horns. Talk about a hard master, he is Shylock and Simon Legree in one. And his heart is as hard as a nether millstone.

"And he sent him into his fields to feed swine." Could there be any greater degradation for the son of a Jewish father? But it was a job, and jobs were as scarce in that land of famine as diadems werè in the land of his father. Filthy as it was, there were others who didn't even have that.

Perhaps the poor fellow thought at the time he was pretty well off. To make the job more attractive the citizen no doubt put a paper cap on his head with tinkling bells around the border, penned a pewter badge on his ragged coat, and called the job, "Lord High Keeper of the Pig Sty." He is a past master at such arts. He has lots of men feeding his hogs who think they are doing something important.

But suppose some citizen of his Father's country had passed through the land? Wouldn't it make their hearts bleed to see him so poor? "Do you see that boy?" says one who knows him better than the rest. "His Father is a king! He had a high place for that boy at his court. Wouldn't it break his heart to see him where he is now? You cannot know unless you knew how much his Father loved what great things he had planned for that boy."

"And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him." They had nothing to give. Wretches of a common lot, they could share nothing with him but his hunger and rags. But wouldn't it make angels weep to see him trying to satisfy his hunger with those coarse hard pods? Sad plight for a spirit made for God!

"Did Christ o'er sinners weep, And shall our cheeks be dry?"

Let floods of penitential grief Burst forth from every eye.

The Son of God in tears, The wondering angels see!  
Be thou astonished, O my soul! He shed those tears for thee."

Friends, God made you for nobler work than feeding swine. He fashioned you for diviner raiment than the rags of the swine-herd. He tuned your ears for nobler sounds than the squeeling of pigs and the grunting of sows. Don't blame Him if these things fail to satisfy you. He made you for greater things.

"And when he came to himself,----" Can it be possible that he had endured all this degradation and want, and didn't know it? Yes, I think he had. He had been ragged a long time. But what of that? Rags were as common in that land as the leaves on the trees. He had been hungry for many a day, but in that famine stricken land hunger was the common lot of all. One of the prophets, writing of this man, says he was full of sores from the sole of his feet to the crown of his head. But in that sickly land sores were as common as the pebbles on the beach. He was sick and ready to die, but sickness was so common in that land he had not noticed it. In that land of death a rosy cheek was as rare as a carnation in a desert. When misery and want are the common lot of all it takes but little to make a man think he is rich.

But one day he compared his lot with that of the servants in his Father's house. "How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" he cries, as the awful truth of his poverty dawns on his darkened soul. "I have fallen to low ever to be restored as a son, but surely he would not refuse his son a piece of bread when he is starving. 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 more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of they hired servants."

"Show pity, Lord; O Lord, forgive; Let a repenting rebel live."

And now the friendly citizen steps up. "Look at your shoes, boy," he cries, in scorn and derision, "and your coat is in rags. Do you think your princely father will own you in this garb? Hadn't you better stay till you get a new coat and a new pair of shoes? "What, wait for a new coat and new shoes in a land where the richest citizen could afford nothing but rags! He had waited to long already.

"And he arose and came to his father." Many a good resolution comes to naught because we wait awhile before we put it into execution. This man did not wait, he went at once.

"But when he was a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him." How many times do you suppose the Father had looked down that long empty road since the boy went away? If he was not watching for his return why did he see him when he was a great way off? And the poor man thought he would have to knock at the back door and ask for a job. What a reception for a boy who had brought his fathers head toshame!

"Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son," He



He was going to propose that the father give him a job as a servant, but he never did get to it. The feverish haste with which the Father received him as a son drowned the words on his lips.

"Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; And bring hither the fatted calf, 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." "This my son!" Could grace go further than that? to own him in his rags! The citizen in the far country told him he wouldn't do it. But he did.

"And they began to be merry." And every song rang with the news that his son had returned. His son! wasn't that a welcome home? How sweet the strains of the harp and the notes of the organ to a man whose ears had heard nothing for months and months but the squeeling of pigs and the grunting of hogs! And now the Father could look at the son with nothing but joy and the son could return the Father's smile without shame, for by this time he put on the fine robe and washed his wounds in healing waters. In all the drama of human life it is hard to find a joy greater than the joy of a wrong forgiven.

Do you think the Father ought to have been harder on this boy? Do you think he was too ready to forgive such a wrong? Do you think he ought to have used the rod of correction before he restored him to high favor? It wasn't necessary. His back was already in whales where the cit-

Hear him, "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." By his own speech he is condemned. Could it be possible that he had served the father all these years and had never done anything to cause a feast of joy. What a cold heartless service that was! Surely a father who would order a great feast for the return of a faithful child would give one for the victories of a faithful son. If He would set all the choirs of heaven to singing over the return of a prodigal surely he would ring the bells at every triumph of a faithful one. Friends, did the bells of heaven ring a great many years ago at your conversion? and have they never rung since? Are all the victories you ever won over the world, the flesh, and the devil so small that they have caused no musick in the heavenly choir? If so, you may be as great a stranger there as this man was.

"But as soon as this thy son is come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf." "Thy son!" Could any dagger be made sharper for wounding the father's heart than these words? A son, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, had been restored to his bosom after he was given up for dead; but this unnatural son refuses to own him as a brother/ He would not go in, though the father went out and entreated him. O jealousy, groundless spiteful jealousy, what bitter sorrow, what unprovoked sorrow you have brought into this world!

izen of the "far country" had beaten him. The Father's gentle hand had already found those wounds. It was his boy!

Do you think the father ought to have taken him in first as a hired servant, and let him learn what it is to trample on a father's love before he restored him again to such high favor? He wasn't able to do the work of a servant, he was sick and ready to die. The father saw his faltering step as he reached the brow of the last hill. He felt the stagger in his step as he fell into his arms. Don't be angry with the Father because He is so tender with these sick and wounded ones. He could not be otherwise when they are coming home. Don't be like the elder brother, afraid that He will love these so much there will be none left for you. He has enough to spare for the returning prodigal.

There is something about this fellow that makes us think his own coat was pretty ragged. Maybe he had been going off now and then on a little lark of his own. If he had Jesus has thrown the mantle of charity over it and left untold what he had done. But we know he had not spent much time with the Father. If he had he would have known him better.

"And he was angry and would not go in." He calls himself a son, and the Son of God did not dispute the relationship. But his manners are so different from the rest of the inhabitants of that happy land it is hard to believe the relationship was genuine. Surely this churlish grumbler had not spent much time in the courts of Shadal the Great King. His speech, his manner, his uncharitable treatment of a sick brother do not sound like that of a son.