

The Forlorn Son seeks away from His Father.

“ And he said, A certain man had two sons : and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods 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 wasted his substance with riotous living.”—LUKE xv. 11–18.



T is a wonder, beloved in the Lord, to see a sinner tire of God and weary of His company. There is no ill in God nor anything that is worthy hatred. John says, “God is love;” and all things in God they are love also. Yet an ill eye sees colours wrong, and the sinner sees something in God which is not in Him. In Jer. ii. 5, the Lord there complains by His prophet : “What iniquity have your fathers found in Me, that they have gone far from Me ?” What sin or what ill can a sinner see in God ? And yet if they saw no ill in Him, impossible that they would leave Him, impossible it is that the reasonable appetite can flee from anything but that wherein it sees the notion of ill. But to see any ill in God, it is ill seen when all is done ; for He is the excellency of all the creatures. We have [need] therefore for us to pray to the Lord that our

judgment and our light may be rectified, that so we make not a prayer to God to be away from Him, as this young fool did. There is none that leaves God who sees things rightly. All that look so upon other things as to embrace them and leave God, they have a wrong and unsound judgment. Esau looked not well, and compared not between his birthright and the mess of pottage that he sold his birthright for. He looked not to the end of it. The drunkard, he looks not well upon his lawless lust and desire after drink, and the anger of God that is hot as fire; and the dishonourer of God's name compares not his present satisfaction and the roasting his tongue in hell for ever and ever. Sinners see something in sin that none can see but themselves. But it is but the first sight they get; in the second sight it is like Eve's sight, to see the Godhead growing upon a tree!—if she would eat, and sin against God, she should be like God in knowing good and ill. So do we fools. We think if we will commit such a sin we will be happy. But it is but a mistake. We are beguiled in the end, and this is the case of many who go away from God.

But learn to keep your judgment and understanding clear, learn to know God and to know the creature, to compare them rightly together; learn to know the vanity of sin and the excellence of God, and then ye cannot go wrong. The soul that sees Christ, and considers what is in Him, it must love Him. And there is none out of love with Christ but such as see Him not.

Ye heard the substance of the young man's prayer, "*Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth me.*"

Never a word that¹ "he seeks of his father that he would bless him, or that he seeks his father's favour and goodwill to the purpose that he is upon;" but "give him the portion of goods that falleth him." The meaning is, "Give me my own will to follow my own way with something of this life," and there is the sinner's heart-wish morning and evening. All that the sinner seeks here is something divided from God, that he may get some created perishing thing out of his Father's hand. That is all that a sinner can seek who is left and forsaken of God, either the world, or the glory thereof, or the pleasure, or ease, or gain thereof, or something to satisfy the lawless desire of his heart and lusts. That is all the divinity the natural man has.

In a word, it is only this life that the natural man seeks, even that which our Lord reproves, John vi. 26: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek Me not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves and were filled," and tells them what to seek, and what not to seek: "Labour not for that meat which perisheth, but for that which endureth to life everlasting which the Son of man shall give unto you." That is only reason from our misted² judgments that see not things rightly, and from this that the sinner would always be at something that he trows³ to be heaven and happiness, when indeed it is not so, for there is nothing in the creature can do so.

But is there nothing at all in the creature that is good or can make a man good and happy? Yes. All

¹ About his asking. ² Darkened. See "Rutherford's Letters" cxviii.

³ Believes.

the creatures of God in their own kind they are good. But when we make any of the creatures an idol, and make them a god, when we trust in the creature and place our heaven and happiness in them, then all the creatures are nothing else but vanity and vexation of spirit. When we do so then there is nothing good at all that is under the sun. When the creature is any ways divided from God, then it is not good. Whatever thou would rest upon without God or beside Him, that is ill. The creature as a creature is good; but the creature as an idol and a god is ill.

May we not, then, seek after the creature? Yes. But if thou seek it right it must be sought in God, the Creator. Seek ourselves in God, and we shall certainly find ourselves there. Seek yourselves, and seek the creature for God, and then ye shall find both God and the creature and yourselves. But if ye seek God out of God, and seek the creature out of God, then thou art seeking fire under you. And all natural men they are thus seeking fire under them. They seek their good things out of God, and so never get satisfaction to the soul. They seek a good thing that is like themselves. As it is in Psa. iv. 6: "Many say, Who will show us any good thing?" That is a well-fard¹ prayer to say, "Who will show us any good thing?" But the next verse tells us what the natural man's good things are, to have his corn, wine, and oil to abound. Their thought is how their house may be built up, and yet they may leave enough to their children behind them, as it is Psa. xlix. 11. And when they have gotten that

¹ Well dressed up.

their hearts are after, they are no¹ a whit the more happy, but rather further from happiness than before.

Again, third, How comes this that men desire to be away from God, and that they are set to seek something without God to place their happiness in, when they may be persuaded they will not get the thing that they would be at ?

The answer is, Ignorance can never make a right comparison of things whereof it is ignorant. He that never saw Spain cannot compare Spain and Scotland together. If one know not both the members of the comparison they cannot compare. The natural man he knows something of the creature, of lust, of gain, of reputation in the world, and court,² &c., but he knows nothing of God ; and therefore it is impossible that ever a natural man can make a right comparison between the Creator and the creature. And so the natural man is aye³ wrong in his comparing.

The natural man makes a comparison as bairns⁴ do sitting about their father's fireside, thinking there is not a fairer town in the world nor⁵ they are in ; for they never saw Rome. That is the best that ever they saw. They think there is no more pleasant garden or fields than where they live, because they never saw better, and so conclude there can be no better. All natural folks, they have bairns'⁶ wits in this point ; for they know something of this present world, but they know nothing of God, and therefore they make the comparison as they do. I grant, indeed, this world is a fair apple, and is

¹ Not. ² Influence. ³ Always. ⁴ Children. ⁵ Than.

⁶ No more intelligence than children.

good to have, it being rightly used ; but alas ! that we should be such fools as to prefer the world or anything in it to God ! Alas ! where is the wit of the Scribe and the scholar, when they go to seek their happiness in the creature, or anything beside God ! When we do so it is even as we would go to mend an egg-shell or a lame vessel.¹ For any to go build themselves up in a couch² of this world that time will take away, what folly is it ! That night that the Lord shall take thy soul from you, and that good thing that thou sought beside the Lord, it shall take its leave of you, and thou of it. Thou shalt be forced to say then, “ Oh, I made an ill comparison, for I looked not well upon things as they were, indeed, but with my blinded eyes.” They see the creature and the Creator rightly who see anything in the creature to be dry and lifeless without God himself be to be found there.

“ *And his father divided unto them his living.*” Why should his father [have] done this, given him such a suit.³

The *doctrine* it is this : They that love an ill end and have a wrong eye toward the creature that they must have, there is a Providence individually disposing that means shall be furnished to such for attaining their ill end, and for gaining their unlawful conquests.⁴ They that have an ill end before them and their intentions are poisoned in looking unto the last end beside God, the Lord in His providence disposes so that such shall

¹ An earthen vessel. See Rutherford's "Letters," clxxxiii.

² A compact portion of land as distinguished from that which is broken up into parts separated from each other.

³ Granted such a request.

⁴ Acquisition. See Rutherford's "Letters," ii.

be blinded, and means shall be furnished unto such to lead them on into the blind way they have set before them. There are some spoken of by the apostle (2 Thess. ii. 11) that are pleased in unrighteousness, because they received not the love of the truth, that they might walk therein, and therefore "God shall send them strong delusion that they should believe a lie, that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." God sends means unto such proportionable unto their wicked end, and that they may accomplish the same.

Eve she fell in love with those words, "Ye shall be as Gods knowing good and ill;" and because she fell in love with them, and had that wrong end before her, therefore the Lord left her, and then she gaed ¹ on in a course of defection as a boul² goes down a brae without stay, till she brought ruin upon herself, and all her posterity. Fra ³ Ahab was once set for Naboth's vineyard that he would die if he gat it not, the Lord finds out a way for that; and Jezebel, that wicked instrument, she is employed to hatch that plot, and promises to get him the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite. And the Lord disposes of matters so that he shall get it. Scribes and Pharisees they were thristy ⁴ for the blood of Christ, and the Lord's providence lets them see a way how they may be satisfied. A man comes to them and says: "What will ye give me and I will betray him unto you," and he and they make a market. They promise him threttie ⁵ pieces of silver to betray the Lord of

¹ Went.² Ball.³ From the time that.⁴ Thirsty.⁵ Thirty.

glory, and he receives them, and from that time he sought the opportunity to betray Him. The man that made profit and gain his end in following Christ, the Lord gives him an office like unto Himself. He is made Christ's purse master, and then at last he makes a market of Christ for his gain. It is said of some (Mic. ii. 2) they coveted a field, and the Lord answered them in means to fulfil their coveting desire. They "take it away by violence;" if they get their end they care not by what means they come to it, and the Lord answers them in means according to the end. Now, there are two reasons wherefore the Lord does this especially.

First: It is an ordinary gate¹ in God to punish sin by sin. If thou wilt be at a wrong end, then the Lord will let you go out of His hand, and thou shalt find wrong ways to follow that end. If thou would be at the world God says, "Take it to you, and thou shalt get means cast in thy way for acquiring the same;" to teach us to beware of unlawful desires to be away from God, and after any other thing, and to beware of our lawless and idolatrous desires.

A second reason for this: The making the creature your end is idolatry, and the highest degree of idolatry, because the Lord He is the first author of all things and of our happiness. And if anything be made the first author except God that is idolatry. And² ye make that to be your God, whether it be a king, or court, or pleasure, or profit, that is idolatry. And Romans i. 21 says that the Lord punishes that by other sinful sins: "Because when they knew God they glorified Him not as

¹ Way.

² And if.

God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness." And verse 28 says, "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, and to do those things which were not convenient." The Lord gave them over to that plague that they cannot repent, but follow after sin greedily. And therefore let us beware of such desires as we set upon the creature without warrant or beside the Lord, for ¹ fear the Lord say to you, "Thou shalt get it, and an ill end with it."

Now, secondly, *that his father gave unto him the portion of goods that fell to him.* Wherefore does God answer an ill desire to any? This is a question that flesh and blood are inclined to make. Wherefore should the Lord so easily [have] given this forlorn child his will, and not told him the ill of the course he was taking himself to; and that he was in a happy case presently ² if he would make good use of it? But his father gave him his portion, and he is content. He fell on his own weight, and that he may try whether it be better to be with him in his house or to feed upon the swine's husks of sin, and cannot find them, it may be, when he would have them.

The *doctrine* arising from this is, that it is not against the wisdom of God or the goodness of Christ to permit sinners to fall in [to] sin. It is not against the goodness of the Creator to permit Adam to fall, albeit at first he was made according to the image of God perfectly holy and happy. Natural wit and reason and the enemies of God's grace, they will not suffer any permis-

¹ Lest that.

² At that present time.

sion of sin to be in God because sin comes from our will, and make all the cause of sin to come only from our nature and will; and when we have willed such a thing, then the Lord joins His concurrence¹ to the committing thereof. This is indeed a devised justice in God, for this would prove the first sin to be before ever the first sin was committed. For why should the Lord [have] permitted Adam's will to look wrong, seeing He might [have] hindered the same? But we must go higher to see the cause why the Lord permits sin to be. He does it because it is the good pleasure of His will. It is the objection of that old heretic Marcion to say that the Lord envied man's estate and so permitted him to fall, or that He knew not of it, or that He was negligent and so permitted his fall.

Consider three things in God, and ye will then get the cause of this wherefore the Lord permits sin and permitted Adam to fall. The Lord has the nature of the creature to plead for him in this, a creature having free-will is unstable, and the Lord will make that to plead for him in this point. And they have well said who disputed this point, "Whether or not the creature could be created that it could not sin, that a creature shall be created unmovable and completely happy that way." That cannot be to create a creature after such a manner. Indeed, I grant the Lord may change the second act and so may hinder the creature to sin. But there is no reasonable creature but there is a power in it to fall, if God take away His hand from upholding him. Why, then, will some object, should the Lord make man

¹ Concurrence

such a creature to be under a possibility of sinning? That is even as to speir¹ wherefore did the potter make all the vessels of clay that they may be broken, and not that they cannot be broken?

The Lord at the beginning made man a creature, and a reasonable creature, and a reasonable creature endowed with free-will, and so had in him a possibility to stand or to fall, and it became the Lord very well to let him try his own strength, seeing He had given him free-will to stand or fall; and that is the second reason wherefore the Lord permitteth sin—even to let him know there is a great difference between his own will and the grace of the Mediator. And therefore it is that the Lord suffers men, and suffers His own children to fall in sin, that they may know that in themselves they are but frail creatures when God leaves them to themselves; that we may learn to put a difference between that which is ours concredited² to us of God, and that which is of free grace; that we may see when our will and the creature is left unto itself, that it is but a creature.

A third reason wherefore the Lord permits sin is because He made all things for Himself, and He has decreed that all He has made should be for two proposed ends to Himself—to wit, the glory of His justice, and the glory of His mercy. And fra³ the Lord has “made all things for Himself, even the wicked for the ill day” (Prov. xvi. 4), why but the Lord may make man with a possibility to sin, and to fall, even for that end that we may see what it is to be holden in God’s hand, and not to be left unto ourselves; that we may tremble and stand in awe

¹ Ask.² Entrusted.³ Since.

to sin against God, and provoke Him to forsake us ; that we may always put up the prayer unto the Lord, " Lord, lead us not into temptation ; " and that all may know if the Lord leave them there is no sin but they would be ready to fall in it if occasion offer, even the sin of Judas, to betray the Lord of glory. Being left and forsaken of the Lord, thou wilt be ready to fall in that unnatural sin of murdering thy own brother, as Cain did.

And therefore this serves to teach all of us this lesson, to count meikle¹ of grace, for God has our heaven and our hell in His hand this way as He is pleased to hold or to let go. Thou standest by grace, and therefore take heed and beware [not] to provoke the Lord by sinning against Him who may loose His fingers from upholding you, and He doing so thou wilt not miss to fall.

Now the text says : " *Not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey to a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.*"

The doctrine is clear, and it is this : As soon as God leaves us, then there is no longer standing for us ; as soon as [He] gives a sinner leave to sin, he must then sin necessarily. When his father had given him his portion, not many days after he took his journey to a far country, and spent all there with riotous living. When he is away he proved the man he was, for he was no more but a man, a perverse son, that could stand no longer fra² he was made his own tutor, and left his father's guiding. There is no longer standing fra² once God takes away His hand—especially, for a sinner.

¹ Much.

² From the time that.

There are three things that bring a necessity of a fall upon such—I mean upon such an one as stands with liberty having guiltiness with his liberty.

First: There is something in us that brings on a necessity of this falling. A misted¹ understanding, aye,² looking wrong. If there were no devil to tempt us to sin, there is in us a will going aye² downward to tempt us to wickedness. Christ tells us what it is that destroys a man, Matt. xv. 19: “Out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man.” The devil has little ado³ to make us fall in sin. He needs neither bring fire nor timber to kindle up that fire, for there is enough of that within us; and the devil’s tempting to sin is nothing else but to bring⁴ [the person and the sin] together, to present an object to the understanding, the will, and the affections. And if that once be, and the Lord go away and desert, then the sinner cannot stand, because his props whereby he stood are tane⁵ away; so the rotten house must down.

A second reason of this is: The thing that is most natural unto us now since the fall of Adam, is to sin. It is natural to us. And ye know there [is] no need to tempt the fire to burn timber. It is natural to it. And a stone being lift [ed] up, and loosed from any grip, there [is] no need to tempt it to go down; it must do it, because it is the nature thereof so to do. Our nature inclines to sin. The Word of God has said this of us, Eph. ii. 3. Our nature has an inclination toward sin

¹ Beclouded.

² Always.

³ Trouble.

⁴ There is a gap here in the MS.

⁵ Taken.

as a stone has to go downwards. There [is] a man inclined to wickedness and to sin, and therefore when the Lord lays the bridle on his neck, and upholds not nature by his strength, he must fall. And then—

Thirdly : What is it that holds all the sons of Adam in that estate they are in now? There is an upholding power in God, which, if he had, he could not fall. God made them according to His own image, for He had habitual grace that He might have stood in the state of innocency. But the Lord took his actual working from him, and therefore he behoved to fall. And since it was so with Adam in the state of innocence, far more must it be with us, if God take away His upholding power, and leave us to the guiding of our own will, down must we go. If He take away the working in us to will and to do of His good pleasure, we can do nothing but that which is ill. And the question is here between us and the enemies of the Lord's grace. Whether man's will or the grace of God be strongest; or, if the creature can stand when the Lord takes away His grace, or, if he must fall, He taking away His efficacious grace? This text says it must be so. And this also answers another false position of those who are enemies of the Lord's grace. They say when the Lord has permitted the creature to sin, it is in the power of the creature to sin or not, to sin as well as before the permission came. No. There is a place in Isa. lvii. 17, that says the contrary: "For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him. I hid me and was wroth, he went on frowardly in the way of his heart," and if that be a judicial hiding, all the world will not answer

it. In Psa. lxxxi. 12, it is said, "The Lord gave the people at that time to their lust," and what followed upon that? "They walked in the way of their own heart." If the Lord once loose His hand from Adam, then Adam must fall. If the Lord but permit Pharaoh to keep the people of Israel in bondage, leave it to his free will to let them go or not go, then Pharaoh's heart is hardened, and he will not let them go.

The *use* of this point is, first, to condemn those who say they can keep a moderation in sinning, who think they will only take this meikle ¹ of sin, and no more, even like the fool who says, "A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep," and he is aye ² the more ready for a new slumber. One will say I will do this little sin, but I will do no more; I will take this meikle ¹ ill conquersh,³ but no more. I will give it over when I have gotten that. I will only permit this looseness of my thoughts, but I will go no further on in sin. But remember that it is not in thy power to hold thy feet when the Lord looses His grip of you; and therefore hold fast thy grip of the Lord, and pray to Him to hold His grip fast of you, and that the Lord would not lead you into temptation. Thou knowest not when thy fire and the devil's timber are cast together, how soon they will make up a blaze; and therefore the hand of the Lord's grace is needful to be employed for upholding us; and, above all things, we would ⁴ employ the Mediator, Christ, and be thankful to Him, who has made the estate of His ransomed ones in Himself so sure and immovable.

Can we give thanks great enough to free grace, and to

¹ Much.

² Always.

³ Acquisition, possession.

⁴ Should.

the Mediator, Jesus, who keeps us that we fall not into the sin of Sodom, in Judas' sin, or Cain's sin? Make meikle¹ then of this grace of God, and employ it frequently. Well² is the heart that has gotten that grace to depend only upon the Lord, to father thy standing upon Christ only, and so to put thy trust in Him. This was Peter's fault that he lippeden³ not his standing only to Christ's strength, and it moved the Lord to let him know something of his own strength. For out of a conceit of himself he said, "Master, though all should forsake, yet will not I forsake Thee." But stay till death be presented before him, and he sees his Master bound and ill-used by men, and he be in fear of his life, and till his blood grow cold (for he spake that in hot blood). When it comes to that, he is made to see that man is nothing but man, and when God leaves him, he will prove but a brickle⁴ reed that will fall with the least opposition. Well⁵ to them who are upholden by the hand of the Lord, and are not lippingen⁶ to their own strength. Made meikle of Christ and of His free grace, and employ Him and His strength as ye would be kept safe to the second coming of our Lord. To this Lord, who is able to keep us and to present us blameless to His Father at His coming; to Christ Himself, to His Father and our Father, and the Spirit of grace, be all praise, and dominion, and glory for ever.—Amen.⁷

¹ Much.² Good is it for the.³ Trusted.⁴ Brittle.⁵ Good for.⁶ Trusting.⁷ The MS. has the following note at the close of the foregoing sermon—
"A sermon missed here through absence."