

The Forlorn Son—the Father's Welcome.

“ 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 more worthy to be called thy son.”—LUKE xv. 20-21.



WE have heard, beloved in our Lord, of the conclusion and logic of the first part of this parable, and of the behaviour of the forlorn son, when he came first home to his father. Now follows the second part thereof, which is the Lord's acceptance of His forlorn son, His welcoming him home again, and this is expressed in three particulars in the text. (1) The Lord's own behaviour towards: *“ When he saw him afar off, he had compassion upon him, and ran, and fell upon his neck, and kissed him.* (2) We have set down the preparation the father makes for him, and the direction that he gives unto his servants for welcoming him home again. He gives direction to make him a new man, and to adorn him with other ornaments than these he had in the days of his vanity. There is a change upon him, for he gets the best robe put upon him, a ring put upon his hand, and shoes upon his feet, and to kill the fat calf. And then (3) there is

the welcoming of both the father and all the house towards this prodigal son. There is a feast made, and the fat calf is killed, and great mirth and joy among all as it sets¹ our Lord well, and all the angels and glorified in heaven well to rejoice at the home-coming of a runaway sinner.

There is none who comes to our Lord in spirit, truth, and sincerity, who shall get a worse welcome than this, or shall be put away, because they have been running away from Him, John vi. 37: "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no ways cast out." No, in no sort He will send such away again. No, there is here not so meikle² as a sign of the Lord's anger for his former misspending of time and means and all; but a loving intimation of his Father's love towards him, and such sweet expressions as you will find in no other father welcoming home such a child. There is no quarrelling³ of bygones now, but all these are laid aside. There is not a word of finding fault, that before he tired of his father's company; no rebuking him for his looseness, nor misspending that which he got. Fra⁴ this forlorn son breaks his own heart, the Lord will not break it. When he is sad and mourning for his provocations, the Lord has nothing to say to him; but He will give him the garments of joy and gladness for the spirit of sorrow and sadness.

If we humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, the Lord will lift us up. If we judge ourselves we shall not be judged of Him. If we had a casten down heart for sin, then should we get from our Lord the garment of righteousness and rejoicing. It were good

¹ Becomes.² Much.³ No finding fault for.⁴ Since.

for us to come with such preparation as this to God and Christ, with a heart humbled and cast down for sin. But this is not a thing that we have of our own. This is not a flower that grows in our garden. All dispositions and preparations to make a soul meet for Christ, the King Himself sends before He come to lodge in that inns : "Every good gift and every perfect donation come down from Him who is the Father of lights." There is no man who can come out to meet Christ till first He come to him. No man can love Christ till He love him first, because our love of Christ is nothing else but an effect of this love to us. There would be no light in the earth, nor any glancing[†] in a transparent if there were not light without. We would not have light here, if the sun were not in the firmament. Even so if any let out a love look towards Christ, it is because He has loved us first. So we may learn for ever to sing a song of free grace shown in our conversion, that we may know on whom we should father it, that we make it not a bastard, that our home-coming to our Lord may only be put upon Him who is spoken, James i. 18 : "Of His own will He begat us with the word of truth, that He should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures ;" and 2 Tim. i. 9 : "Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His grace and His own purpose, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began ;" Tit. iii. 4 : "But after that the kindness and love of God toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us."

[†] Shining through.

What is the ground of our salvation? The love that God carried toward man applied unto us. His free love is allenarly¹ the cause that moves Him to make a market to buy us; John iii. 16: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." It were good for us to seek all that we stand in need of for our salvation in Him; and happy they who get grace to know to whom they owe thanks for the work of their conversion, and know to whom their eyes should be lifted for the same, even to Him who has that draught in His hand (John vi. 44) to draw all men unto Him.

A word, now, of the Lord's behaviour towards His forlorn son. His kissing him and falling upon his neck tell us this far: when a sinner comes to the Lord truly humbled for sin, there is nothing then but free love and kindness and expressions of love upon the Lord's part: Rev. iii. 20: To him who knocks, the Lord says that He will open to him, and will come in, and they shall sup together. At the Lord's first meeting with a sinner, the Lord opens his heart by grace to let Him in, and there they sup together. There is a feast of love between them. And it sets² our Lord well to do so at the first conversion of a sinner. I mean not that the sinner has no sorrow before Christ and he meet. Ay! he has meikle³ grief and sadness. But at the first meeting, I say, it sets² our Lord to give the humbled sinner joy and consolation, and a feast of His presence. And there are three good reasons for this. The

¹ Solely.² Becomes.³ Much.

First is taken from the disposition that the poor soul has been under before, for our Lord has promised that such shall be comforted, and the reason is clear thus: there are none who are converted but those who are once¹ humbled, for our Lord has good news unto none but them that mourn; Isa. lxi. 1: He is sent to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; and to them who are not humbled and mourn not, He has a day of vengeance to preach unto them. So those who are humbled and mourn, and meet with the Lord, must be comforted.

Second: It is also agreeable to the Lord's love that humbled sinners, at their first meeting with Christ, should get such arles² as they may never forget again all their days. Now I mean not by this that all the children of God can tell the very first mathematical point of the time of their conversion, for there be some with whom the Lord has dealt from their youth, and, with some, the Lord deals more smoothly in their conversion than He does with others. But for the most part I say this is His dealing, that when sinners have been going on into a course of rebellion, running away from Him, after their humiliation ordinarily He fills them with a feast of the sense of His love, that all their days they cannot forget it. And this answers a point that troubles very many of the children of God, "That they had once a hearty desire after the Lord and a rejoicing in His presence, they were earnest in seeking Him long syne,³ and found Him

¹ One time or another. ² An earnest or a pledge. ³ Long ago.

very kind to them, but now they find it not so with them." This answers the doubt. This is Christ's manner of dealing with His own, that at the first starting to the race He will give them a sight of the gold¹ and garland, but afterwards He will only give them blinks of it now and then. At the first He will give them such a sight and sense of His kindness as that they may mark the very day and hour of their meeting and His, and that we may cry forth to His praise, O the excellence of that day wherein the Lord began first to shine in upon a poor soul by the blinks of His loving-kindness, who had no mind of Him to make them seek after more of it. A

Third reason of this is taken from the case of weak beginners. For to scare weak beginners at the first with glowing,² they would then be discouraged. The first day that bairns go to the school it is no wisdom to strike or to boast³ them, but to make of them rather. When the Lord gets a new scholar to His school, the first seat He sets them in He puts them into His bosom, that so they may be forced to say, He is a Lord worthy to be served, and that they may be made to condemn themselves for biding so long away from such a Lord, who is love and kindness itself.

The *use* we are to make of this is: O, if we could get natural people persuaded but to take a trial of Christ's love! if we could make them but to kepp⁴ one of Christ's kisses! But O! it be a hard matter to persuade nature what grace is. Ay, it is the hardest task in the world to gar⁵ natural men believe themselves to be in such a

¹ Prize. ² Frowning. ³ Threaten. ⁴ Catch, or intercept. ⁵ Cause.

case as indeed they are in. If we could but come to this, to make the world believe the ill of drinking, swearing, whoring, covetousness, &c.; and, upon the other hand, to believe the superexcellency of Christ's love, then the field were won. But it is a hard matter to persuade two sorts of people of this, that there are thousands who believe they are in Christ who, notwithstanding, are deceived, and are not in Him.

The *first* [sort are] secure sinners, who know not what God is, or what heaven and hell are, and are going on in sin and will not be convinced thereof, nor rise out of the state they are in. No; were Christ in the flesh preaching to them they would not rise out of their secure estate.

A *second* sort of people hard to believe this are natural¹ civilians, who go under the name of honest men in the world. They are not adulterers, thieves, ordinary drunkards, or blasphemers, &c., they have a civil white life in their own eyes and the eyes of the world. O! but it be a great matter to persuade such to fail in love with Christ, because they think they have already as meikle² as to take them to heaven; and it is but a mistake when all is done. It is only nature that they take for true grace. And there are thousands in the world who are beguiled with this. I wish that ye would labour to know indeed what it is to have a conscience purified from dead works; to have many waking nights for sin; that ye were put to this, "Lord, if I had Christ I should quit all the world for Him, for He is more worth than it all." O! to be acquainted with the Son of God and His excellency. If men had such thoughts as these, and

¹ In the state of nature.

² Much.

knew what need they stand in of Christ, O! what a high price would they put on such an excellent Saviour as Christ is!

Now there is cast in here a word, by the way, of the prayer of the forlorn son and of his father's welcome to him. If ye will compare his prayer with the prayer he resolved upon while he was in a strange country, there is something left out of his last prayer, and he gets not all said that he would say. Ay, he gets it but half said. There can be no other reason for it but this. The forlorn son was struck with confusion and sorrow and grief for offending his father, and with astonishment and wondering that his Lord and Father met him, and that at their meeting there is nothing but words of love, whereas he deserved no such thing.

And there is none but when they come to seek God, at their first meeting with Him they shall find confusion and shall have broken prayers to God, like that we read in the Psalm vi. 3: "O Lord, how long! Return, O Lord, deliver my soul! O save me!" Sorrow and desire fighting together—and so the poor soul is overwhelmed. So was it with the forlorn son at this time: his heart was so tane¹ up with the consideration of his father's love, and with the sense of his own unworthiness, that it is no wonder that he forgot the half of his prayer.

We may learn here, that the prayers of the children of God when they come to pray to Him are not aye² so logical and so methodic, that there is nothing left out of them, that they should say that all their prayers are set down in rhetorical and logical terms; neither are we to think

¹ Taken.

² Always.

that God answers no other prayers but those that are formed that way. No; you will oftentimes find the prayers of the children of God to be imperfect this way; and yet the Lord for all that makes them and their prayers welcome to Him. For in prayer He looks not so meikle¹ to words as He does to the meaning of his own spirit. Ye will find in the Word of God there are seven sorts of expressions that are called prayer; and yet in our form of speaking we only call that prayer when a sinner pours out his heart to the Lord, and vocally utters his mind to Him.

First: The Lord He acknowledges crying to be prayer, even crying where there is no distinct voice, as in Psa. xxii. 1; and in Psa. lxi: "Why art Thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring, O my God. I cry in the day-time, and Thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent." And David is brought, in Psalm lxi., crying until his throat be dry, and till he be weary, and, indeed, crying to the Lord's majesty, albeit it be not joined with words. When the heart is going with the cry, it is prayer. When David makes a noise that way the Lord acknowledges that for prayer, and esteems it to be no less than prayer. Again—

Second: The Lord counts the very breathing, and that is less, to be prayer. The afflicted Kirk says (Lam. iii. 56): "Thou hast heard my voice, hide not Thine ear at my breathing, at my cry." When the Kirk of God is under distress they are but sending up their very breathing to the Lord, and beseech Him to accept of it.

¹ Much.

And David panting to the Lord, it is accepted. The speech is borrowed from them who cannot speak being out of breath, and so they pant. "I have panted for Thee all the day long," and the Lord welcomes that as praying.

Third : The lifting up of the eyes is expounded as prayer, and therefore in Psalm lxix. that is a part of David's complaint that his eyes failed with looking up, and he gat no answer of the Lord ; Psa. v. 3 : "O Lord, in the morning will I direct my prayer unto Thee and look up," says David. Looking up, with the eyes towards the Lord, is one of these gestures that He esteems. All these are sacrifices of the heart which the Lord makes welcome, albeit words be not joined with them.

Fourth : Making moans in prayer the Lord accounts it as prayer. Jer. xxxi. 18 : "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself." The like is spoken of King Hezekiah (Isa. xxxviii. 14), that he chattered like a crane, or a swallow, and mourned as a dove ; and Ezek. vii. 16 : "They that escape of them shall escape, and shall be on the mountains as doves of the valleys, all of them mourning, every one for his iniquity." The Spirit of God is speaking there of a repenting people that they shall mourn for their iniquities as doves of the valleys.

Fifth : Prayer is expressed by sighing and sobbing. The Lord is said (Psa. cii. 20) to look down from heaven, to hear the groaning of the prisoner ; and Rom. viii. 26 it is said, we ourselves know not what to pray, but the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings that cannot be expressed. Even dumb sighs that want

auricular words and verbal expressions the Lord accepts them as prayer.

Sixth: Stretching out the hands is put for prayer; also as in Psa. lxxxviii. 9: "Lord, I have stretched out my hands unto Thee;" and in Psa. cxliii. 6, David says, "I stretch forth my hands unto Thee." The Lord accounts that to be prayer in His estimation.

Seventh: Even tears, where the children of God do not pray, they have a voice unto the Lord, as we may see Psa. vi. 8: "Depart from me all ye workers of iniquity, for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping."

Any of these expressions in prayer, whether it be crying, breathing, or panting, lifting up the eyes, making a moan, stretching out the hands, sighing and sobbing, or if it be but a tear, or some few tears where words are not, but the mind is confused with sorrow and grief, the Lord makes all these or any of them welcome, and counts them prayer. This answers many doubts that trouble the children of God.

Some will say, "Alas! I cannot get words in prayer, and so can look for nothing at the Lord's hand."

Answer: God is that² kind, that dumb beggars get alms from Him as well as speaking beggars. Alas! if we would learn to tell God in the morning in our family, what ails us or them. And ye need not a book to do this to signify to Him what ails you, for the Lord will accept of a sigh, if thou cannot get a look to Him nor speak to Him. Make both a sign to the Lord, and lift up your eyes and your heart to Him, and acknowledge to Him

¹ Can.

² So.

what ye are. Speak to the Lord as ye can, and I will assure you He will not find fault with your prayers for want of order and method, and because ye want logic in them; for it is the heart the Lord looks to. It is the sighing of his spirit that he specially beholds.

There be some who complain they could never get a prayer put up to God all their life's time that they could count [to be] prayer. There may be reasons for this, I grant, for there be some who will pray earnestly to the Lord, who will not get fine terms in prayer, and this is no want in prayer when all is done. For sometimes the constitution of the natural parts will do this, as want of that measure of natural abilities that others have, and sometimes the grief of the mind will be greater than that the tongue can express the same; but the Lord esteems more of the sighings of the spirit nor of all the finest terms that can be uttered. [By] the poets it is said that some, being about great matters, they have been so much tane^t up therewith that they could not speak, and so have gone away stricken in dumbness, and that has been accounted sufficient to represent the weightiness of the matter; and therefore the children of God should not be cast down for any of those things.

But what cares He for the bowing of the head, or spreading out the hand, or lifting of the eyes, or breathing, or crying? No; He cares for no sort of expression that can be used where the spirit is not humbled in His sight. But where the spirit is humbled before Him, O! but the least expression that such can make is very welcome to Him, if it were but a sigh, or a sob, or a lifted-

^t Taken.

up head, or hand, or eye ; till more come, He will accept of that, and will not let it go without an answer. If ye would set up a kirk to God, every one that has a family, in your families, and learn to speak to Him there, it would be a welcome and acceptable sacrifice to Him. It is a sore matter that so many should say they cannot speak to God in their families. If any of you have a suit to present to any magistrate, ye will seek him out and present your suit to him yourselves. Ay, ye will take upon you to speak to a king if it be a matter that concerns life and death. Nature teaches you to do that. But it must be the spirit of adoption that maun¹ teach you to pray to God ; and I assure you all the book prayers in the world will not teach you this lesson to pray to God. The Lord gives the spirit of prayer unto His children in a special manner, and therefore this should be sought of Him. And this proves you to be the sons of God, indeed, when ye can thus speak to Him in prayer. What says the first word of the Lord's prayer ? Says it not, "Our Father which art in heaven," teaching us this far that none can pray right to God but those who can in faith say "Our Father," and apply Him to be their Father. Those who can only call the Lord their Creator, the Lord who provides for them, who keeps them in being, they cannot pray right to the Lord, but only those who can call Him "Our Father."

Another thing here in this confession, he says : "*I have sinned against heaven and against thee.*" He was far from God while he was riotously wasting all that his

¹ Must.

father gave him. To say, "I have sinned against heaven and against thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son," comes from another heart than he had before. And to say this as this forlorn son said it, none can do it but one who is a new and converted man. We read that David said this when Nathan came to him and accused him of his sin. He says: "Against Thee, against Thee only have I sinned" (Psa. li. 9). It is a great matter to say this right—not to say the syllables thereof distinctly; that is easily done; but to say this from the heart, this is a work of the Lord's Spirit, and only the converted child of God can say it after this manner. Where was this prayer when he prayed to his father: "Father, give me the portion of goods of that which falleth unto me; I am tired of your company, and therefore give me what you will give me, and let me go my ways and be my own tutor"?

But we may learn here: There is no man, so long as he is in the estate of sin, that is sensible it is so. But fra¹ once we are converted and turn unto the Lord, then we feel our sores, and see that we have been sinning against the Lord. Now there are three reasons wherefore it is so.

First: You know people use to say, "A green wound is half whole." All have reason to say they have sinned against the Lord. But sin is not sensible of itself. Grace, indeed, knows grace to be grace; but sin knows not sin to be sin. Death knows not that death is death, but life knows life to be life. A man that is beastly drunk knows not that he is so, but when he is fresh and

¹ From the time when.

free of drink, he will know himself to be so ; for drink, where it is, puts the senses out of the right place, and so they cannot discern. Now, while a man is in the state of sin, he is even like a man dead drunk. Therefore it is said, "They are drunk, but not with wine ; they stagger, but not with strong drink" (Isa. xxix. 9). To persuade the natural man that drinking is a sin, and such a great sin as indeed it is, that we cannot get done. Can we make the blasphemer of the Lord's name believe that for that sin, if he repent not, his tongue shall be tormented in hell's fire for ever and ever ? A man that is in the estate of nature he knows not what the ill of those sins is. But when some sense of the life of God is begun in the soul, when grace begins to grow, and the Lord begins to show His loving-kindness in some measure, then they begin to see their wanderings. And when that is so, Ephraim begins to say (Jer. xxxi. 18) : "I am as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke ;" but not till then. And there are two reasons for this—

First: Because it is an infused light from heaven that lets man see sin and the breach of the law. A natural conscience, I grant, will say something to this, but it lets not the sinner see sin every way as it is, for it lets him not see the main object against whom sin is committed—lets us not see that glorious Majesty whom we provoke by our sins, before whom the glorious angels cover their face when they behold Him, and the heavens are not clean in His sight. There are two things to be seen in Christ if we look right unto Him. There is light and divinity ; or rather there is in Him light and Divine light. There is a Divine power that comes from God

to convince a sinner of the estate that he is in. The natural conscience will see and discern those sins to be sins that pagans, wild Americans, Turks, may also see, as killing of father or mother, adultery, oppression, &c. But to see spiritual sins to be sins, as to see and discern the pride of their nature to be a sin—that they cannot. Unbelief in the Son of God, no[t] making conscience to sanctify the Lord's day, to set up His worship in families, to keep correspondence with Him in heart, &c.—a natural conscience cannot see such to be sins; for as the natural conscience cannot believe in the Son of God, it being a supernatural work, so the natural conscience cannot see unbelief in the Son of God to be a sin, for it sees no form² or privation therein. Thus it is supernatural light that maun² let us see such sins as these to be sins. That which is called divinity in the conscience, if it be right and sound divinity, it is a plant which the Lord Himself plants there.

I observe this now for this cause, because I persuade myself of this, that the main cause wherefore multitudes in the world run on headlong into many ill courses without any awe or fear of the Lord's majesty and of His judgments, it is because they have no supernatural light in their conscience, for where this supernatural light is, it prevails against all temptations that can be cast into our way to draw to sin. But where all the light that one has is natural light that is soon overcome. There is no man that will abstain from sin as sin, but the man who has more than the light of nature. The main reason wherefore the world goes on in sin, and

¹ A scholastic term.

² Must.

there are so many gods set up therein to be worshipped, and wherefore men live in drunkenness and in the breach of the Lord's day, wherefore they fear not an oath, as Solomon says; the reason wherefore men care not to live contentedly in the ignorance of God, it is because they want this supernatural light to awaken them. Never man shall go right to heaven who is pleased with the way he is in, as natural men are pleased with their way. This form of service to God contents them, and they will never speer¹ whether that form be right or not. They never question but they are on the way to heaven, and that they have the marks of the children of God.

This says that many believe themselves to be right when they are wrong, and in the end shall be deceived; or² then they would be after³ speering what shall become of them in that day, when they shall appear before the Lord in judgment. "Lord! if we could but once persuade you of this, that we could bring men to acknowledge they are in a state of sin, to be convinced that they are undone if they find not salvation in Christ, and win not to heaven another way than by anything I can do myself." And while the world is thus blinded as the most part, what marvel that they say they have faith in Christ, that they believe as well as any, while in the meantime there is no such matter!

For Christ's sake be not beguiled, and deceive not yourselves as the most part do. There are hundreds of you who hear me that trow⁴ you are going to heaven and will not be put off it. But it is so. But when it

¹ Ask. ² If they did: ³ Engaged in asking. ⁴ Believe.

comes to that part of it, "Give account of your stewardship," and the poor soul maun¹ be judged according to the works done in the flesh, whether they be good or bad, O! there will be wakening then, and ye will see that ye have been far wrong! But alas! it is out of time when a sinner is once wrong, and doubts not that it is so. He goes on, and so still goes further wrong, even like a traveller going in an unknown way. He goes wrong, and ay the further he goes that way he is the worse and the further from his lodging; and when night comes he is disappointed of lodging, and lies in the fields, because he never doubted that he was in a wrong way, and so speered² not for the right way.

It were good for us to speer and try in time, if we be in the way to heaven or not, and to be earnest to know what shall become of you when ye shall be called to give an account of your behaviour, what it has been, how ye have spent your life, and what you have profited by the hearing of the gospel. What wilt thou answer to God, who hast had twenty years' occasion of hearing the Word, receiving the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, and had many occasions of that kind, and yet are not the better of these, not a whit wiser to salvation than at the first? But alas! I see I was beguiled. I thought I had been right enough, and yet thou shalt see then thou wast close wrong. Such are those who shall come at the last day and say to Christ, "We have preached, wrought miracles in Thy name; we have eaten and drunken at Thy table, &c., and so thought all was well enough." But Christ tells them they were mistane,³

¹ Must.² Asked.³ Mistaken.

and He shall say to them, "Depart from Me, ye workers of iniquity." This will be a cold meeting with the Son of God, and yet thousands shall be met therewith who will not believe it now, and will not examine their case to see if they be right or not. Lord, make us wise to see and try our case in time, that so we be not deceived with many others, and to this Lord, to His Father and our Father, and the Spirit of grace, be all praise and dominion and glory for ever.—Amen.