

## *The Forlorn Son—the Father's Expressed Welcome.*

*“But the father said to his servants, 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.”—LUKE XV. 22-23.*



WHO has such opportunity, beloved in our Lord, of our Lord's kindness to a soul running to a free Saviour as those who have once been rebels and are come home again to their Lord and Father. None can sing mercies' song so well as they who can do it out of sense and experience. None can do this so well as one who can say, "Once I was blind, but now I see. I was dead once, but now I live. Once I was a child of Satan and an heir of hell, but now I am made an adopted son of God, and an heir of heaven." Who can speak more to our Lord's commendation out of experience, nor ' a home-coming sinner thus made welcome to his Lord and Father again? You heard in the first part of this parable how our Lord was pleased with this forlorn, and what welcome the father gave him, or ever he spake one word of apology for himself, or ever he made any

1 Than.

prayer at all, his father fell upon his neck and kissed him, for he waited not upon our God to move Him to be merciful unto us. He will not wait till He gets a hire for His mercy. He waits not till we make some way on our part for any good He is to do to us. He may not look for anything from us that will down-weigh the weights of His free love. O! so weighty as that is there is meikle <sup>1</sup> telling there. Nothing in us to prevene <sup>2</sup> the same. But or ever this poor forlorn son speak a word he falls upon his neck and kisses him. And then when he makes his prayer to his Lord, leaving the half of that he resolved to say unspoken, God welcomes it. The Son of God, the same Lord who is here called Father, He passed by all the slips of his prayer, and commands that he be received by the servants of the house as a son and not as a servant. And truly they will be very feckless <sup>3</sup> and confused prayers that come from any spunk of faith that our Lord will not accept and make welcome. Yea, in Hosea xiv. 2, he learns <sup>4</sup> His Kirk what to say to Him when they come: "Take with you words, turn to the Lord and say to Him, Take away all iniquity, and save us graciously. So will we render the calves of our lips," &c. He will take half-prayers, or He want all, even prayers where words are missed, and the meaning they intended to be at. Ay, He will take sighing and sobbing for prayer, the lifting up of the hands, or of the eyes, &c., so content is He with what His Spirit says, however it be said, as it is Rom. viii. 26, He knows the meaning of the Spirit. He seeks no more for a prayer at some times but a believing sigh that is a work of His Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> Much.<sup>2</sup> Prevent.<sup>3</sup> Worthless.<sup>4</sup> Teaches.

And when we know not what we are doing, He knows well enough the meaning of His own Spirit, and can put a perfect commentary upon that, albeit we know not what it will do, that no man should think the Lord will not hear their prayers, because they have not good oratory to speak to the Lord in prayer, because they cannot speak as a print book, and set all the words in order, and so leave off to pray to the Lord. No, the Lord He hears the very breathing of His Kirk, Lam. iii. 56. Ay, when His children cannot speak, and they have no words to say to Him for what they would be at, they may be confident to be heard, for many a dumb beggar has gotten almost at His door. They who cannot set their words in good method and order in prayer, if their heart look honestly toward the Lord, then He accepts of the sighs and good meaning of such, and takes that for prayer, and will answer it. So that all who come to Christ as they are bidden, and come in truth and sincerity, may be comforted in this, that their prayers shall not be cast away of Him.

Now, we have the expressed welcome of the Lord towards his forlorn son, and the direction and charge he gives unto his servants for getting ornaments for his body, and entertainment for cheering himself and all the house. For the ornaments that he gives direction to get, it stands in three particulars: First: That they get the best robe and put upon the home-coming sinner. Like enough he was ragged, or he came home, as all are ill clad when they come first to Christ. Second: He commands them to get a ring upon his finger, that is an ornament of honour; and then, Third: To put shoes

upon his feet. And then for expression of the joy of the Lord's mind, and the joy of the whole soul, and that all that hear what the Lord has done may be allured thereby, the fat calf is slain that all may rejoice at the home-coming of a lost sinner.

O! the rejoicing that our Lord and all the angels make for the home-coming of a lost sinner. There is more joy in heaven for the recovery of one lost sinner than there is for ninety and nine righteous persons. The Lord He knows not how to express His joyfulness and His kindness to a sinner who acknowledges what he has been doing, and repents of his misdeeds! O! repentance, it is an unknown work. Repentance is not known to be so acceptable a sacrifice to the Lord, as indeed it is. A home-coming soul that can get a bleeding heart for sin, that can thrust out an honest tear before the Lord for sin committed against Him, it knows not that God has a bottle to keep<sup>1</sup> that in. They know not that God writes down all their sighs and their sobs, their tears and their sad looks. And because this is not known by the most part, therefore repentance is a slighted and neglected work. The world loves nothing worse than sorrow for sin. They think it a sad and melancholious thing; but there is no joy hereaway<sup>2</sup> comparable to that joy which proceeds from an honest tear shed for sin, and for offending such a majesty as we have to do with.

Now, the first ornament that our Lord commands to be put upon this prodigal is "*The best robe.*" He commands to put a robe upon him, and the best of the robes.

<sup>1</sup> Catch.

<sup>2</sup> In this world.

There is no necessity that we should strike largely upon every particular in a parable, if the main scope of the parable be looked unto. And yet there is little in this parable that looks not clearly to point out the state of a sinner in the state of sin, and to show the Lord's welcoming when they return to Him, and to let us see what ornaments He puts upon them when they come to Him.

First: Ye see he is to be clothed with a "*robe*," and with "*the best robe*." While a sinner is in the state of sin he is a ragged creature, and so has need of a robe, if ye will consider him two ways. If ye will consider him as he is, a man in nature, or if ye will consider him as he is, a civil<sup>1</sup> righteous man; for man of himself as he is a natural man has no righteousness at all, or if he have any righteousness if he will say, it is as the phrase is, "A clout with many a hole in it," like that garment spoken of Job viii. 14; it is like the spider's web, that garment of man's righteousness—it holds no wind away. All our righteousness is like a menstruous clout (Isa. lxiv. 6). And you will find that all the garments that the natural man, while he is in the state of nature, they are so indeed. For while he has them he is not honest; nor marriage like to be married upon such a bridegroom as Christ. So long as we have no other garment but only our own natural righteousness, it is nothing else but sin, defiled further with sin. Isa. lix. 6: "Their webs shall not become garments, neither shall they cover themselves with their works; their works are works of iniquity, and the act of violence is in their

<sup>1</sup> Respectable character.

hands." The works of the natural man are compared there to webs, but their webs will not cover them, for the best things they do there are violence in them and unrighteousness. All those who would be married upon Christ, and would be handseled<sup>1</sup> new with Him for evermore, they must have another covering upon them than their own works, or their civil righteousness. There are two things in all natural garments that make them faulty.

First: That no natural garment we can have is able to hold away the cold from us. All those who stand to be Pharisees in the act of justification by the works of the law, or by their own righteousness, they shall be forced at last to say that it will not be able to hold out the rain of the Lord's indignation. And therefore David says, "Lord, enter not into judgment with Thy servant, for in Thy sight no flesh living shall be justified" (Psa. cxliii. 2). "If Thou, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand." All thir<sup>2</sup> and many moe<sup>3</sup> places. They are shamed both with the lining and the outer half of their garments, which are only covered with nature and civil honesty, and with a seeming righteousness that the natural man counts so meikle<sup>4</sup> of.

Another fault in a natural garment is that it is not honest before the Lord. It will be long or<sup>5</sup> God give that commendation to a natural and civil<sup>6</sup> righteous man, that He gives to His spouse in the Song of Solomon: "Thou art all fair, my beloved, thou art all fair: there is no spot in thee." Long or thou smell in his nosethirls<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Gifted.<sup>2</sup> These.<sup>3</sup> More.<sup>4</sup> Much.<sup>5</sup> Ere ever.<sup>6</sup> Outward.<sup>7</sup> Nostrils.

of myrrh, aloes, cassia, and cinnamon. The natural and civil righteous man has no smell of heaven, or of glory. But Isa. lxiv. 6, says, "They smell like a menstruous woman." All their "righteousnesses"—in the plural number—are like filthy rags that will never make a creature beautiful in the sight of God, and therefore there must be such a niffer <sup>1</sup> as that which is spoken of 2 Cor. v. 21: "He must be made sin for us who knew no sin; that we may be made the righteousness of God in Him." These two must be done or <sup>2</sup> we can be clean in the sight of God. Christ must be clothed with our sins, and we, again, must be clothed with His righteousness, and that is the fairest and the closest garment that any can be.

Now this garment is called "the best garment;" and it is the king's best garment, for it is the righteousness of our Lord. There may be good garments and better garments, but this is the best of all garments. Ay, this garment of Christ's righteousness is better in respect of the event, and for us, than if Adam had stood in the state he was in, and so we to have been clothed with Adam's righteousness. This is the best robe of all—the righteousness of God made ours, Phil. iii. 9; the apostle says, "He counted all things but dung that he might win Christ; and be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith," clothed with that righteousness, that is, the righteousness of Him who is both God and man. And look what wisdom of God is to be found here! and what goodness and loving-kindness! and

<sup>1</sup> Exchange.

<sup>2</sup> Ere ever.

such a supernatural providence that whereas the devil, that old serpent, had a mind by Adam's fall to bring Adam and all his posterity in the compass of eternal damnation; yet the Lord has turned about the wheel, so that so many as belong to Him in His election shall get better nor<sup>1</sup> they lost in Adam, a more sure and permanent and glorious estate.

This reproves those who would have the death of our Lord Jesus for sinners to come by hazard; who say that the Lord at first intended not the incarnation of Christ and His death and sufferings of itself, but at the first He principally intended Adam's obedience, creating him in the state of innocence; and that he was able to stand, but that Adam fell, and then there was a necessity of a Saviour; that He intended no[t] principally, but it came upon our Lord by hazard. This is a wrong unto our Lord, who, from the beginning, intended the glory of His mercy and free grace, and also the glory of His justice. No; the Lord was not deprived of His first intention, as they say, and so behoved to take Him to a second thought. No; for from the beginning the Lord He intended the glory of His mercy to be manifested towards some, and to manifest the glory of His justice upon others, to the glory of His name. And we owe Him hearty thanks for this, that we should be made welcome to get the borrowed righteousness of Jesus; and if we get that, we shall be marriage-like, and our Lord will marry us. Alas! what will the civil<sup>2</sup> living of many do to them without this? No; such are in the way to be lost for ever, and to be naked, so that the

<sup>1</sup> Than.

<sup>2</sup> Outward.



cold shall seize upon them, and Christ will not marry them to Him because they live and die and never see themselves to be sinners, and so cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Our Saviour says, "Unless a man be born again he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven." The civil natural man he knows not what that is to be born again, and so lives and dies without seeing himself to stand in need of Christ. He contents himself with the outward calsay<sup>1</sup> godliness, and thinks that enough to take him to heaven. But certainly if thy natural pride be not subdued, and thy worldly-mindedness, thou cannot come there. If thou only seek to be approven in the eyes of the present world, that will fail you, for it is not the best robe; it is not the main thing the Lord gives His elect ones to live a civil<sup>2</sup> life. But those who are clothed with the robe of Christ's righteousness it shall not fail them, but cover them from the cold.

The second ornament his father appoints for him it is a "*ring upon his finger.*" This is a simple ornament.

We may learn from this that the laigher<sup>3</sup> a sinner set himself, the Lord will set him up higher. Albeit he set himself very low, the Lord will not do so also. The forlorn son would not believe when he sought a rowme<sup>4</sup> among the servants that his father would [have] advanced him to be a son; he thought it much if he gat that. But now his father makes him a son, and will have him no lower, and he is adorned with the best robe, and gets a ring put upon his finger. Thus we may see, let a humbled sinner set himself very low, God will not do so

<sup>1</sup> Causeway, street.  
civil state.

<sup>2</sup> *I.e.*, a commonplace life as a member of the  
<sup>3</sup> Lower.

<sup>4</sup> Place.

to him. Also Eph. iii. 8: "To me who am less than the least of all saints is this grace given to be a preacher of the gospel." Paul there is little in his own conceit, but God counts not so of him also. And when Ananias makes a question, Acts ix. 13, if he shall go to Paul shortly after his conversion the Lord says, "Go" to him, "for he is a chosen vessel to carry My name through the world." The Lord gives unto the humbled sinner a high rowme<sup>1</sup> and seat in heaven. The believer is never a whit the worse esteemed in God's books that he counts little of himself. That thou count'st thyself very base and low, shall not blot thy name out of the Lamb's book of life. High shalt thou be in the Lord's books if thou humble thyself very low. Better that the Lord lout,<sup>2</sup> and take thee out of the dust than that thou shalt build thy nest among the stars with Edom, and the Lord to pull you down out of thy nest.

This speaks against many of the dear children of God that put themselves far beneath themselves, and will not let it light<sup>3</sup> that God has thoughts of peace towards them while indeed He has great and large thoughts towards them for their good. But if believers knew what thoughts God has of them, and what a royal and stately throne He has prepared for them, they would then be over<sup>4</sup> fain, and would set their sails over high, and would not not be so much tane<sup>5</sup> up with the sense of the Lord's loving-kindness. But He will let His children mourn and walk humbly under the sense of their own unworthiness, that they may be the better fitted to make a high preaching of the Lord's goodness and

<sup>1</sup> Place.   <sup>2</sup> Stcop down.   <sup>3</sup> Let it appear.   <sup>4</sup> Too glad.   <sup>5</sup> Taken up.

free mercy, who louts<sup>1</sup> Himself to take up those who are so low, and respects them who are little in their own eyes and the eyes of the world about them.

The third ornament is "*shoes upon his feet.*" Albeit, it is true, we need not, neither will we, stand upon every particular, yet there is good ground for this in Scripture, that a home-coming sinner he is ordained for a journey after he is come home. In Cant vii. 1, shoes are spoken of: "How beautiful are thy feet with shoes, O prince's daughter." And Eph. vi. 15, among the rest of the pieces of the spiritual [armour], we are commanded to have our "feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace." Why would the Lord speak this to His Kirk and children, but to let sinners know when they are come to Him, they may not be barefooted. For there are thorns and sharp rocks in the way to heaven, and therefore we have now to take heed to that exhortation set down Heb. xii. 13: "Make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way." What a sweet word is that which we have in Psa. cxix. 104: "I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I may keep Thy word." The righteous sinner must take heed where he sets his feet, and not set down his feet in every place, nor be barefooted, for there are moe<sup>2</sup> snares and rough passages in the way to heaven nor<sup>3</sup> ye trow<sup>4</sup> there be. How many are there who go to heaven and sink not in some myres<sup>5</sup> by the way? We have heard of none of these. It is well said that the way to heaven is like a mossy way, some wet their feet as they go through it, and yet win<sup>6</sup> through at last.

<sup>1</sup> Bends down. <sup>2</sup> More. <sup>3</sup> Than. <sup>4</sup> Believe. <sup>5</sup> Moss or bog. <sup>6</sup> Get.

But some going on unawares they drown in a myre <sup>1</sup> by the way, and never win <sup>2</sup> through. The Lord's children in the way towards heaven must not be barefooted, but have shoes upon their feet, for there are many thorns in the way, as the examples of the servants of God that have gone before us declare. David's adultery and murder was a thorn strake up in his foot, and made him to halt all his days. Noah's drunkenness, and the Lord's chief disciple Peter, [who] in denying his Lord and Master, gets a thorn in his foot, tell us that we had great need to take heed to our feet, and to walk in Christ's way that He has gone before us, to have our feet shod against those rough ways. And how many are there in the world who live and die in adultery and harlotry, living a profane and godless life, not making conscience of swearing, drinking, breaking the Lord's day, and so tyne <sup>3</sup> the right gate <sup>4</sup> to heaven, only because they are not shod with the shoes of the gospel of peace, and see not the right way where they should walk?

There is yet a particular to be marked which is very worthy our observation, and it is also a part of the scope and drift of the parable, and it is this: That our Lord He makes more of the forlorn son coming home again to Him nor <sup>5</sup> he does of the other son who had stayed at home, not departing from the house. For ye see there are no ornaments put upon the eldest son, nor any melody for his biding in the house. Where we may learn this, that repentance and rising by the grace of God out of the state of sin, is better nor <sup>5</sup> all the civility <sup>6</sup> and Pharisaical righteousness in the world.

<sup>1</sup> Moss or bog. <sup>2</sup> Get. <sup>3</sup> Lose. <sup>4</sup> Way. <sup>5</sup> Than. <sup>6</sup> Outwardly moral life.

And in some respects this repentance and rising by grace out of the state of sin having fallen, is better nor<sup>1</sup> no sinning at all.

There are great questions about this, Whether it had been better for man not to sin, or to sin and get mercy for sin. It is true, I grant, there is danger in the one which is not in the other, and in reference and respect towards us, it were better not to sin than to sin. It were better not to be sick, and so not to need the physician, than to be sick and need his cures. But if we will look unto Christ's feasts and offers that He makes unto us, having sinned, and to the Lord's comforts and refreshments He has prepared for His own, we may say that it is best. And in respect of the Lord and what He gave for repentance; He gave a dear price for repentance, a greater price than was given for Adam's not sinning; for if [he] had continued there needed no repentance, and it was free; but the other cost a very dear price (Acts v. 31). Christ coft<sup>2</sup> repentance. He died and rose again to purchase repentance; and therefore it must be of more worth than Adam's not sinning, seeing it cost our Lord such a price. Ye will grant that a jewel that has cost ten hundred thousand thousand pounds must be better nor<sup>1</sup> that which cost but twenty pounds if he have any skill that coft<sup>2</sup> it. Repentance cost very dear. Ay, it is dearer nor<sup>1</sup> if Adam had stood in the state of innocence to this day, and all His seed with him. It cost no less price than the blessed blood of the Son of God. The Lord in His blessed wisdom foresaw this, for it is not without His providence that our Lord

<sup>1</sup> Than.

<sup>2</sup> Purchased.

He would suffer man to drown himself in the debt of sin, that he might get a royal and kingly cautioner to relieve him of his debt. He would suffer him to be under the hazard of hell that he might get a lovely Redeemer. He would suffer him to be sin-sick for that end, that he might get a drink of the blood of the Son of God. He would suffer him to do that which procured him to be shot<sup>1</sup> out of Paradise, and from the trees of the garden, that he might have right to the Tree of Life that grows in the midst of the Paradise of God, that bears twelve manner of fruits every month, and to the River of the water of life. And that certainly is better than his first estate was.

The Fathers said to this purpose, that the fall of Adam it was *felix culpa*,<sup>2</sup> not that it was happy in itself, but happy in regard to the consequents of it; to have such a disease as will have the Lord of life Himself to come from heaven for the curing thereof, and take our sickness and infirmities upon Him in our nature, and make us partakers of His Divine nature, and clothe us with the robe of His righteousness!

And if ye will look unto us also, this is better to sin and repent of sin, than to live in a Pharisaical righteousness, or<sup>3</sup> we had stood in our first estate; for there is no man who has such experimental knowledge of the goodness of God as that man has who has been over head and ears in sin. And our Lord gives not a fairer commendation to any as<sup>3</sup> that woman, who wash Christ's feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Christ says she loved much because much

<sup>1</sup> Thrust.<sup>2</sup> A happy sin.<sup>3</sup> Than.

was forgiven her, for He had cast seven devils out of her.<sup>1</sup> And Paul was a blasphemer, a persecutor of the Church, thirsting for the blood of the saints, an injurious person, &c., yet being forgiven, and the Lord taking him into His service, he does more glorious works than all the rest of the apostles did. Now this teaches us two things shortly.

First: That we beware of turning the grace of God into wantonness. For whatever I have said of the excellence of repentance, and rising from the state of sin beyond standing in the first estate of Adam, and not sinning, comes all by accident of the grace of God, and no thanks to the sinner for it. And therefore let no man say because Jesus Christ is come into the world to die for sinners, and to purchase repentance and remission of sins, therefore we will live as we please, and go on in a course of sinning, for that is to tramp the blood of the covenant under foot. He who does so, whatever he be, he knows not the worth of the blood of the Son of God, and the excellence of Jesus our Lord. The dear blood of God that was shed for sin, it should teach us to beware of sin, that seeing our sins put Him to such pain, shame, to so many sore scourges and wounds, and many sad hearts, put Him to those words, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto the death;" "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me," should not this make us to beware to commit sin?

And another thing this teaches us, is to let us see what our Lord will do unto them who come home to

<sup>1</sup> Rutherford evidently held the opinion, now generally rejected, that the woman who was a sinner and Mary Magdalene were the same person.

Him, that He will receive them graciously and pardon them, that no man may despair, and think their sin to be such that mercy and forgiveness and a welcome are above anything they can look for at the Lord's hand. If thou wilt come home to God and Christ, repenting for thy sins, and seek to be into the kingdom He has purchased, there is more remedy for thy disease than can be spoken of, there is more sweetness in our Lord nor <sup>1</sup> the sinner believes to be in Him. The coming to the kingdom, let be to the kingdom of glory, is like the Queen of Sheba's coming to see the glory and order of Solomon's court, she confessed she saw much more than was reported to her. If the natural man know Christ's welcome He gives to a home-coming sinner, how He adorns, puts the robe of His righteousness on them to cover their nakedness, puts a ring on their finger to adorn them, and shoes upon their feet that they may walk the better in His ways, He gives them the joy of the Holy Ghost, and inward peace of conscience, gives them a feast of fat things, gives them to drink of the wines refined upon the lees; think you that they would love sin and the way thereof, as they do? Would they count so meikle of roses and lilies and windle-straes <sup>2</sup> that will presently fade, and there is no more of them. No, certainly. It is because the world knows not what it is to meet with Christ, whose breath is heaven itself, whose comforts transcend far the motions of all natural understanding, that they count so little of Him, and follow after other vanities. O, but there is meikle sweetness in meeting with Christ. Men know not what

<sup>1</sup> Than.

<sup>2</sup> Stalks of grass.



tranquillity and security under a pacified conscience are. O! but that is solid rejoicing under the hope of glory. Now for this hope's sake, and the hope of redemption laid up for the children of God, we render, to the Father of our Lord Jesus, and our Father, and to Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, all praise and glory for ever and ever.—Amen.