

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is probably one of the most familiar teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. It's a story that is timeless, easily seen to fit the context of the Church throughout the ages. It's a story that challenges us and confronts us with our sins, especially sins that can be quite tempting for Christians. And above all, this story offers great comfort as it shows us how God offers forgiveness and restores all who repent, no matter their sins against Him.

Jesus begins by speaking of a man who has two sons. Each of these sons sin against their father, and the father offers forgiveness to each one.

The younger son is probably the one we remember best, as his sin and its effects are the most dramatic. He tells his father, "Father, give me the share of the property that is coming to me." You get the sense of a spoiled brat, a kid who wants his stuff and wants it right now.

This impatience is certainly wrong, but this son's sin goes even deeper than that. He doesn't just want an advance on his pay or a loan until the harvest is gathered. He wants his share of the inheritance.

What's the big deal there? Well, when do you get an inheritance? When someone has died and leaves it to you. This son is effectively telling his father that he wishes he were dead. He wants his father's possessions – because remember, they are the father's until he dies – but he wants nothing to do with his father.

Right away we have a picture of our sinful human nature, applicable to people of any day and age, including us. Impatience is all throughout our culture. Why wait for tomorrow what you could get today?

Countless people are crushed under debt because we want it now, even if we can't pay for it now. Countless arguments and slanders come forth because we don't want to wait to hear all the sides, get all the information, and think about how people will be affected. Countless families are broken in divorce, and children especially devastated, because we don't want to wait for a Christian spouse and instead follow our sinful hearts and corrupt feelings rather than the truth of God's Word.

Refusing to wait for the Lord's timing always makes things worse.

And as with younger son, the impatience isn't the worst of it. Just like the son wants the father's stuff without the father's presence, humanity is constantly wanting to have authority over Creation without having anything to do with the Creator.

Rather than looking at the world as divinely created and ordered and then seeking our place in the order, our culture looks at world as a big sandbox or a blank canvas, something that we can shape and mold and use however we want. Everything from our natural resources to our place in society to our own bodies is seen as completely ours, free to do with as we please.

Yet when we try to order things contrary to God's design and order, we bring in trouble and pain.

In the parable, once the young man gets his inheritance – half his father’s estate – he heads off to a distant land. And what does he do with it all? “He squandered his property in reckless living.”

He didn’t buy fields to work like his father’s. He didn’t seek to help others who were in hardship. No, his focus was all on himself: his pleasure, his comfort, his happiness. This younger son enjoyed the things of right then and there, and didn’t at all consider the future, either the life to come or even the next day.

How do we use what God has graciously given to us? Or perhaps before that, how do we view what God has graciously given to us?

Are our possessions ours, things we’ve earned and bought and that we’re free to use however we want, or are they actually God’s possessions, and we’re just caretakers who are to use them to His glory?

Is our time ours, free to spend as we please, or is our every moment actually in the hand of God and which may come to an end whenever He knows is best?

Are our lives ours, are we truly independent, free to make of ourselves whatever we decide and declare, or is the very fact that we even exist at all a gift from God, connected to divinely-given purpose and meaning? As you answer those questions, then the other stuff like how you spend your money or what you do on Sunday mornings falls into place rather quickly.

If we seek the things of this life apart from the God who gives them, we will find out that, like the younger son, we are perishing. The irony of the son’s situation is that, he wants his father dead, but he ends up killing himself.

By grace, the son does not remain dead, however. He’s brought back to himself by suffering, of all things. Through the trials and hardship of a famine, he’s reminded of all the blessings of his father’s house. He’s longingly looking at the pigs’ food and recalls that even his father’s hired hands have more than enough bread.

As with the son, suffering is often sent to us to direct us away from the things of this world and remind us where true blessings are found. Times of sadness and pain are used by the Holy Spirit to bring to mind what God says to us in His word, those promises that we easily forget when things are good.

Having recalled all this, the son makes a plan. He decides that he’ll go to his father and confess his sin and his unworthiness to him, and then ask to be made a hired man, that he might earn his keep in the household. And so he heads back home.

Then comes the most wonderful part of this parable: “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” All this time, however long it had been, the father had been waiting, watching, looking for his son to come home. His patience is the perfect foil to his son’s impatience.

And when he sees his son, far off, what does he do? He doesn’t stand there and scowl as his son sheepishly trudges up the road, ready to give him a tongue lashing for all the pain and suffering he’s

caused. No, the father runs to his son and embraces him, hugging and kissing this son who is still covered in mud and pig filth.

As soon as he can pull away a little bit, the son starts to recite his speech. His father lets him confess his sins and acknowledge his unworthiness, but before he can say anything about earning his way, the father begins to speak.

He tells the servants to fetch a robe – the best robe – to cover the dirty rags that his son has been wearing. He tells them to bring a ring – a signet ring – to show that his son again possesses the authority of a son in the household. He tells them to bring shoes for his feet, that his steps might not be painful but made with confidence and purpose. And for this son who has been desiring to eat pig’s slop, the father has the fattened calf killed, that they all might feast and rejoice.

With all these gifts from the father, the son is fully restored as a son.

This is what happens whenever lost sinners return to God. Brought to repentance by the Holy Spirit and His working through the word, the lost are brought back to the household of God. There He hears our confession, that we have sinned against Him and are in no way worthy to be called His children.

But before we can even suggest earning our way back into His favor, doing enough good deeds or whatever, God speaks and restores us as His children. He clothes us again with that glorious robe of His righteousness, first given in our Baptisms and restored every time we are absolved. He grants us the full rights of sons in His kingdom, heirs to His eternal throne. He places shoes on our feet, granting us both peace and purpose as we walk through this life toward the life to come.

We who have starved our souls by seeking satisfaction in the empty, temporary things of this life are fed with the very banquet of heaven, the real body and blood of Christ Himself, who joins His very life to our lives in the eating and drinking.

For us, and for the younger son, this is a free gift. However, it cost the father dearly. The younger son’s sinful desires had consumed half of all the father had. Yet he still gives him the best robe and a ring and shoes, and throws a banquet upon his son’s return. The father doesn’t care about his stuff. The father cares about his sons!

Our forgiveness and salvation cost our Heavenly Father dearly – even the sacrifice of His only-begotten Son on the cross. Yet He loves us so much that He was willing to give His greatest treasure to win us back. And the Son likewise perfectly loves us and went willingly to Golgotha for every single man, woman, and child who has ever lived or will live.

Our Father desires all His people to be restored to Him as His sons and daughters.

This incredible act of love and forgiveness is beyond description to receive, and it is likewise wonderful for us as Christians to behold. Yet our sinful flesh at the same time recoils when it witnesses God’s love in action.

This is what is seen in the older son. He hears the great celebration going on, and finds out from a servant that his lost brother has returned. What’s his reaction? One that’s natural to each and

every one of us. “It’s not fair!” He’s so angry that he refuses to come into the house, refuses to join in the celebration.

When his father comes out to him, he says, “Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”

We might be tempted to think that this response is perfectly reasonable. But look closer. What’s the older son concerned about? The same thing as the younger one: stuff! “I’ve served perfectly (which is doubtful) and you’ve never given me stuff!” “Your other son did evil by wasting your stuff!”

There’s no mention of relationship to the father, or the emotional and spiritual suffering endured by the father. Only concern for stuff, whitewashed with a thin coat of legalism, and contained in a pile of arrogance.

This temptation to arrogance can be strong for Christians. We see others who have strayed from the faith and come back in repentance, and we think it’s not fair.

How can they be equal to us, who attend every Sunday, whose offerings keep the lights on, who bring all the food for the dinners? And how come God doesn’t seem to be blessing us like we think He should, rewarding us for our “perfect” keeping of His commandments? It’s not fair!

In frustration and arrogance we can be tempted to cut ourselves off from the body of Christ. If God won’t work out things the way we think they should be, well then, we’ll just leave. The thing is, though, if we do this, we’re ultimately hurting ourselves.

The elder son’s refusal cuts him off from the joy and celebration of the father’s feast. If we decide to shun the body of Christ, the Church, we cut ourselves off from the great gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, which He gives to us in His house.

But here again, the father comes out to his wayward son. A father shouldn’t have to come out and beg his son to come in, but that’s what this loving father does. He hears his son’s complaint and then replies, “Child, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

He points out that all that he has, he has shared with this son. Rather than be resentful, the son simply need ask, and then trust that his loving father will give to him out of love and wisdom. The father lovingly reminds his son that the life of the younger son – his brother – is more important than whatever material possessions the elder son might have in mind.

This return of the younger son was such a great thing that everything else paled in comparison, for one who was dead has come back to life.

This is how our Father lovingly addresses us as His children. Often our concerns aren’t really about “fairness” but about getting what we think we deserve. And our Father reminds us that, as His children, He is using all things – all – for our good.

Rather than be resentful, we simply need to bring our requests before Him, and then trust that He in perfect love and perfect wisdom will give us exactly what He knows is best. Whatever we are

given in our lives, be it plenty or little, peace or hardship, our Lord is using it according to His good and gracious will, using it to bring His children back to Him.

If we should suffer for a little while in this life so that others might join us forever in the life to come, isn't that worth it? The greatest gift we have is that we bear the title which the father calls his son: "Child." That is what truly matters.

The sons in this parable are concerned with the things of this world: possessions, pleasure, status, and so forth. But these all will pass away, and if we put our focus on them, we will pass away as well.

Yet like the father in the parable, our Father in heaven isn't desiring such empty things. Our Father doesn't want stuff; He wants sons and daughters who will join Him for eternity in the great feast of His Son Jesus Christ. Because of His grace and mercy, we who were dead are alive; we who were lost have been found.

In the name of Jesus, amen.