

CHAPTER 15

Evil manners, we say, beget good laws; so, in this chapter, the murmuring of the scribes and Pharisees at the grace of Christ, and the favour he showed to publicans and sinners, gave occasion for a more full discovery of that grace than perhaps otherwise we should have had in these three parables which we have in this chapter, the scope of all of which is the same, to show, not only what God had said and sworn in the Old Testament, that he had no pleasure in the death and ruin of sinners, but that he had great pleasure in their return and repentance, and rejoices in the gracious entertainment he gives them thereupon. Here is,

I. The offence which the Pharisees took at Christ for conversing with heathen men and publicans, and preaching his gospel to them (v. 1, 2).

II. His justifying himself in it, by the design and proper tendency of it, which with many had been the effect of it, and that was, the bringing of them to repent and reform their lives, than which there could not be a more pleasing and acceptable service done to God, which he shows in the parables,

1. Of the lost sheep that was brought home with joy (v. 4-7).
2. Of the lost silver that was found with joy (v. 8-10).
3. Of the lost son that had been a prodigal, but returned to his father's house, and was received with great joy, though his elder brother, like these scribes and Pharisees, was offended at it (v. 11-32).

LUKE 15:1-10

THE LOST SHEEP

Here is,

I. The diligent attendance of the publicans and sinners upon Christ's ministry. *Great multitudes of Jews went with him* (^{<24>}Luke 14:25), with such an assurance of admission into the kingdom of God that he found it

requisite to say that to them which would shake their vain hopes. Here multitudes of *publicans* and *sinner*s drew near to him, with a humble modest fear of being *rejected* by him, and to them he found it requisite to give encouragement, especially because there were some haughty supercilious people that frowned upon them. The *publicans*, who collected the tribute paid to the *Romans*, were perhaps some of them *bad men*, but they were all industriously put into an *ill name*, because of the prejudices of the Jewish nation against their office. They are sometimes ranked with *harlots* (⁴⁰³Matthew 21:32); here and elsewhere with *sinner*s, such as were openly vicious, that traded with *harlots*, known rakes. Some think that the *sinner*s here meant were *heathen*, and that Christ was now on the other side Jordan, or in *Galilee of the Gentiles*. These *drew near*, when perhaps the multitude of the Jews that had followed him had (upon his discourse in the close of the foregoing chapter) *dropped off*; thus afterwards the Gentiles took their turn in hearing the apostles, when the Jews had rejected them. *They drew near to him*, being afraid of drawing nearer than just to come within *hearing*. They drew near to him, not, as some did, to solicit for cures, but to hear his excellent doctrine. Note, in all our approaches to Christ we must have this in our eye, to *hear him*; to hear the instructions he gives us, and his answers to our prayers.

II. The offence which the *scribes* and *Pharisees* took at this. They *murmured*, and turned it to the reproach of our Lord Jesus: *This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them*, v. 2.

1. They were angry that *publicans* and *heathens* had the means of grace allowed them, were called to repent, and encouraged to hope for pardon upon repentance; for they looked upon their case as *desperate*, and thought that none but Jews had the privilege of repenting and being pardoned, though the prophets preached repentance to the nations, and Daniel particularly to Nebuchadnezzar.

2. They thought it a disparagement to Christ, and inconsistent with the dignity of his character, to make himself familiar with such sort of people, to *admit* them into his company and to *eat with them*. They could not, for shame, condemn him for *preaching to them*, though that was the thing they were most enraged at; and therefore they reproached him for *eating with them*, which was more expressly contrary to the tradition of the elders. Censure will fall, not only upon the most innocent and the most

excellent *persons*, but upon the most innocent and most excellent *actions*, and we must not think it strange.

III. Christ's justifying himself in it, by showing that the worse these people were, to whom he preached, the more glory would redound to God, and the more joy there would be in heaven, if by his preaching they were brought to repentance. It would be a more pleasing sight in heaven to see Gentiles brought to the worship of the true God than to see Jews go on in it, and to see publicans and sinners live an orderly sort of life than to see *scribes* and *Pharisees* go on in living such a life. This he here illustrates by two parables, the explication of both of which is the same.

1. The parable of the *lost sheep*. Something like it we had in ⁴⁸²Matthew 18:12. There it was designed to show the care God takes for the preservation of saints, as a reason why we should not offend them; here it is designed to show the pleasure God takes in the conversion of sinners, as a reason why we should rejoice in it. We have here,

(1.) The case of a sinner that goes on in sinful ways. He is like a *lost sheep*, a sheep *gone astray*; he is *lost* to God, who has not the honour and service he should have from him; *lost* to the flock, which has not communion with him; *lost* to himself: he knows not where he is, wanders endlessly, is continually exposed to the beasts of prey, subject to frights and terrors, from under the shepherd's care, and wanting the green pastures; and he cannot of himself find the way back to the fold.

(2.) The care the God of heaven takes of poor wandering sinners. He *continues* his care of the sheep that did not go astray; they are *safe in the wilderness*. But there is a particular care to be taken of this lost sheep; and though he has a hundred sheep, a considerable flock, yet he will not *lose* that *one*, but he goes after it, and shows abundance of care,

[1.] In *finding it out*. He follows it, enquiring after it, and looking about for it, until he *finds* it. God follows backsliding sinners with the calls of his word and the strivings of his Spirit, until at length they are wrought upon to think of returning.

[2.] In *bringing it home*. Though he finds it *weary*, and perhaps *worried* and worn away with its wanderings, and not able to bear being driven home, yet he does not leave it to perish, and say, It is not worth carrying home; but *lays it on his shoulders*, and, with a great deal of tenderness and

labour, brings it to the fold. This is very applicable to the great work of our redemption. Mankind were gone astray, ²⁵¹⁶Isaiah 53:6. The value of the whole race to God was not so much as that of one sheep to him that had a hundred; what loss would it have been to God if they had all been left to perish? There is a world of holy angels that are as the ninety-nine sheep, a noble flock; yet God sends his Son to *seek and save that which was lost*, ²⁵¹⁰Luke 19:10. Christ is said to *gather the lambs in his arms*, and carry *them in his bosom*, denoting his pity and tenderness towards poor sinners; here he is said to bear them *upon his shoulders*, denoting the power wherewith he supports and bears them up; those can never perish whom he carries upon his shoulders.

(3.) The pleasure that God takes in repenting returning sinners. He *lays it on his shoulders rejoicing* that he has not lost his labour in seeking; and the joy is the greater because he began to be out of hope of finding it; and he *calls his friends and neighbours*, the shepherds that keep their flocks about him, *saying, Rejoice with me*. Perhaps among the pastoral songs which the shepherds used to sing there was one for such an occasion as this, of which these words might be the burden, *Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost*; whereas they never sung, *Rejoice with me, for I have lost none*. Observe, he calls it *his sheep*, though a *stray*, a wandering sheep. He has a right to it (*all souls are mine*), and he will claim his own, and recover his right; therefore he looks after it himself: *I have found it*; he did not send a servant, but his own Son, the great and good Shepherd, who will find what he seeks, and will be found of those that seek him not.

2. The parable of the *lost piece of silver*.

(1.) The *loser* is here supposed to be *a woman*, who will more passionately grieve for her loss, and rejoice in finding what she had lost, than perhaps a man would do, and therefore it the better serves the purpose of the parable. She has *ten pieces of silver*, and out of them loses only one. Let this keep up in us high thoughts of the divine goodness, notwithstanding the sinfulness and misery of the world of mankind, that there are nine to one, nay, in the foregoing parable there are ninety-nine to one, of God's creation, that retain their integrity, in whom God *is* praised, and never *was* dishonoured. O the numberless beings, for aught we know numberless worlds of beings, that never were lost, nor stepped aside from the laws and ends of their creation!

(2.) That which is lost is a piece of silver, *drachmen* — the fourth part of a *shekel*. The soul is *silver*, of intrinsic worth and value; not base metal, as iron or lead, but *silver*, the mines of which are *royal mines*. The Hebrew word for *silver* is taken from the *desirableness* of it. It is *silver coin*, for so the *drachma* was; it is stamped with God's *image and superscription*, and therefore must be *rendered to him*. Yet it is comparatively but of small value; it was but seven pence half-penny; intimating that if sinful men be left to perish God would be no loser. This silver was lost *in the dirt*; a soul plunged in the world, and overwhelmed with the love of it and care about it, is like a piece of money in the dirt; any one would say, It is a thousand pities that it should *lie there*.

(3.) Here is a great deal of care and pains taken in quest of it. The woman *lights a candle*, to look behind the door, under the table, and in every corner of the house, *sweeps the house*, and *seeks diligently till she finds it*. This represents the various means and methods God makes use of to bring lost souls home to himself: he has *lighted the candle* of the gospel, not to show himself the way to us, but to show us the way to him, to discover us to ourselves; he has *swept the house* by the convictions of the word; he *seeks diligently*, his heart is upon it, to bring lost souls to himself.

(4.) Here is a great deal of joy for the finding of it: *Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost*, v. 9. Those that rejoice desire that others should rejoice with them; those that are merry would have others merry with them. She was glad that she had found the piece of money, though she should spend it in entertaining those whom she called to *make merry with her*. The pleasing surprise of finding it put her, for the present, into a kind of transport, *heureka, heureka* — *I have found, I have found*, is the language of joy.

3. The explication of these two parables is to the same purport (v. 7, 10): *There is joy in heaven, joy in the presence of the angels of God, over one sinner that repenteth*, as those publicans and sinners did, some of them at least (and, if but *one of them* did repent, Christ would reckon it worth his while), more than *over a great number of just persons, who need no repentance*. Observe,

(1.) The *repentance* and *conversion of sinners* on earth are *matter of joy* and rejoicing *in heaven*. It is possible that the greatest sinners may be brought to repentance. While there is life there is hope, and the worst are

not to be despaired of; and the worst of sinners, if they repent and turn, shall find mercy. Yet this is not all,

[1.] God will *delight* to show them mercy, will reckon their conversion a return for all the expense he has been at upon them. There is always *joy in heaven*. God *rejoiceth in all his works*, but particularly in the works of his grace. He rejoiceth to do good to penitent sinners, with his *whole heart* and his *whole soul*. He rejoiceth not only in the conversion of churches and nations, but even over *one sinner that repenteth*, though but *one*.

[2.] The good angels will be glad that mercy is shown them, so far are they from repining at it, though those of their nature that sinned be left to perish, and no mercy shown to them; though those sinners that repent, that are so mean, and have been so vile, are, upon their repentance, to be taken into communion with them, and shortly to be made like them, and equal to them. The conversion of sinners is the joy of angels, and they gladly become ministering spirits to them for their good, upon their conversion. The redemption of mankind was matter of joy in the presence of the angels; for they sung, *Glory to God in the highest*, ~~414~~ Luke 2:14.

(2.) There is more joy over *one sinner that repenteth*, and turneth to be religious from a course of life that had been notoriously vile and vicious, than there is *over ninety-nine just persons, who need no repentance*.

[1.] More joy for the redemption and salvation of fallen man than for the preservation and confirmation of the angels that stand, and did indeed need no repentance.

[2.] More joy for the conversion of the sinners of the Gentiles, and of those publicans that now heard Christ preach, than for all the praises and devotions, and all the *God I thank thee*, of the Pharisees, and the other self-justifying Jews, who though that they *needed no repentance*, and that therefore God should abundantly rejoice in them, and *make his boast* of them, as those that were most *his honour*; but Christ tells them that it was quite otherwise, that God was more praised *in*, and pleased *with*, the penitent broken heart of one of those despised, envied sinners, than all the long prayers which the scribes and Pharisees made, who could not see any thing amiss in themselves. Nay,

[3.] More joy for the conversion of one such great sinner, such a Pharisee as Paul had been in his time, than for the regular conversion of one that

had always conducted himself decently and well, and comparatively *needs no repentance*, needs not such a universal change of the life as those great sinners need. Not but that it is best not to go astray; but the grace of God, both in the power and the pity of that grace, is more manifested in the *reducing* of great sinners than in the *conducting* of those that never went astray. And many times those that have been great sinners before their conversion prove more eminently and zealously good after, of which Paul is an instance, and therefore in him God was greatly *glorified*, ^{<R12>}Galatians 1:24. They to whom much is forgiven will love much. It is spoken after the manner of men. We are moved with a more sensible joy for the recovery of what we had lost than for the continuance of what we had always enjoyed, for health *out of* sickness than for health *without* sickness. It is as *life from the dead*. A constant course of religion may in itself be more valuable, and yet a sudden return from an evil course and way of sin may yield a more surprising pleasure. Now if there is such *joy in heaven*, for the conversion of sinners, then the Pharisees were very much strangers to a heavenly spirit, who did all they could to hinder it and were grieved at it, and who were exasperated at Christ when he was doing a piece of work that was of all others most grateful to Heaven.

<251> LUKE 15:11-32

THE PRODIGAL SON

We have here the parable of the prodigal son, the scope of which is the same with those before, to show how pleasing to God the conversion of sinners is, of great sinners, and how ready he is to receive and entertain such, upon their repentance; but the circumstances of the parable do much more largely and fully set forth the riches of gospel grace than those did, and it has been, and will be while the world stands, of unspeakable use to poor sinners, both to direct and to encourage them in repenting and returning to God. Now,

I. The parable represents God as a *common Father* to all mankind, to the whole family of Adam. We are all his *offspring*, have all *one Father*, and *one God created us*, ^{<301>}Malachi 2:10. *From him we had our being, in him we still have it, and from him we receive our maintenance.* He is *our Father*, for he has the *educating* and *portioning* of us, and will *put us in*

his testament, or *leave us out*, according as we are, or are not, dutiful children to him. Our Saviour hereby intimates to those proud Pharisees that these publicans and sinners, whom they thus despised, were their brethren, partakers of the same nature, and therefore they ought to be glad of any kindness shown them. God is the God, *not of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles*, (Romans 3:29): *the same Lord over all, that is rich in mercy to all that call upon him.*

II. It represents the children of men as of *different* characters, though all related to God as their common Father. He had *two sons*, one of them a solid grave youth, *reserved* and *austere*, sober himself, but not at all *good-humoured* to those about him; such a one would adhere to his education, and not be easily drawn from it; but the other *volatile* and *mercurial*, and impatient of restraint, roving, and willing to try his fortune, and, if he fall into ill hands, likely to be a rake, notwithstanding his virtuous education. Now this latter represents the publicans and sinners, whom Christ is endeavouring to bring to repentance, and the Gentiles, to whom the apostles were to be sent forth to *preach repentance*. The former represents the Jews in general, and particularly the Pharisees, whom he was endeavouring to reconcile to that grace of God which was offered to, and bestowed upon, sinners.

The *younger son* is the prodigal, whose character and case are here designed to represent that of a sinner, that of every one of us in our natural state, but especially of some. Now we are to observe concerning him,

1. His *riot* and *ramble* when he was a prodigal, and the extravagances and miseries he fell into. We are told,

(1.) What his request to his father was (v. 12): *He said to his father*, proudly and pertly enough, “*Father, give me*” — he might have put a little more in his mouth, and have said, *Pray give me*, or, *Sir, if you please, give me*, but he makes an imperious demand — “*give me the portion of goods that falleth to me; not so much as you think fit to allot to me, but that which falls to me as my due.*” Note, It is bad, and the beginning of worse, when men look upon God's gifts as debts. “*Give me the portion, all my child's part, that falls to me;*” not, “*Try me with a little, and see how I can manage that, and accordingly trust me with more;*” but, “*Give it me all at present in possession, and I will never expect any thing in reversion, any thing hereafter.*” Note, The great folly of sinners, and that which ruins

them, is being content to have *their portion in hand*, now in this lifetime to *receive their good things*. They look only at the things that are seen, that are temporal, and covet only a present gratification, but have no care for a future felicity, when that is spent and gone. And why did he desire to have his portion in his own hands? Was it that he might apply himself to business, and trade with it, and so make it more? No, he had no thought of that. But,

[1.] He was *weary* of his *father's government*, of the good order and discipline of his father's family, and was fond of liberty falsely so called, but indeed the greatest slavery, for such a *liberty to sin* is. See the folly of many young men, who are religiously educated, but are impatient of the confinement of their education, and never think themselves their own masters, their own men, till they have broken all God's bands in sunder, and cast away his cords from them, and, instead of them, bound themselves with the cords of their own lust. Here is the original of the apostasy of sinners from God; they will not be tied up to the rules of *God's government*; they will themselves *be as gods*, knowing no other *good and evil* than what themselves please.

[2.] He was willing to get *from under his father's eye*, for that was always a check upon him, and often gave a check to him. A shyness of God, and a willingness to disbelieve his omniscience, are at the bottom of the wickedness of the wicked.

[3.] He was distrustful of his *father's management*. He would have his *portion of goods* himself, for he thought that his father would be laying up for hereafter for him, and, in order to that, would limit him in his present expenses, and that he did not like.

[4.] He was *proud of himself*, and had a *great conceit of his own sufficiency*. He thought that if he had but his portion in his own hands he could manage it better than his father did, and make a better figure with it. There are more young people ruined by *pride* than by any one lust whatsoever. Our first parents ruined themselves and all theirs by a foolish ambition to be *independent*, and not to be beholden even to God himself; and this is at the bottom of sinners' persisting in their sin — they will be *for themselves*.

(2.) How kind his father was to him: *He divided unto them his living*. He computed what he had to dispose of between his sons, and gave the

younger son *his share*, and offered the elder his, which ought to be a *double portion*; but, it should seem, he desired his father to keep it in his own hands still, and we may see what he got by it (v. 31): *All that I have is thine*. He got all by staying for something in reserve. He gave the younger son what he asked, and the son had no reason to complain that he did him any wrong in the dividend; he had as much as he expected, and perhaps more.

[1.] Thus he might *now see his father's kindness*, how willing he was to please him and make him easy, and that he was not such an unkind father as he was willing to represent him when he wanted an excuse to be gone.

[2.] Thus he would in a little time be made to see *his own folly*, and that he was not such a wise manager for himself as he would be thought to be. Note, God is a kind Father to all his children, and gives to them all *life, and breath, and all things*, even to the evil and unthankful, *dieilen autois ton bion* — *He divided to them life*. God's giving us life is putting us in a capacity to serve and glorify him.

(3.) How he managed himself when he had got his portion in his own hands. He set himself to spend it as fast as he could, and, as prodigals generally do, in a little time he made himself a beggar: *not many days after*, v. 13. Note, if God leave us ever so little to ourselves, it will not be long ere we depart from him. When the bridle of restraining grace is taken off we are soon gone. That which the younger son determined was to *be gone* presently, and, in order to that, he *gathered all together*. Sinners, that go astray from God, *venture their all*.

Now the condition of the prodigal in this ramble of his represents to us a *sinful state*, that *miserable state* into which man is *fallen*.

[1.] A sinful state is a state of *departure* and *distance* from God. *First*, It is the *sinfulness* of sin that it is an apostasy from God. He *took his journey* from his father's house. Sinners are fled from God; they *go a whoring from him*; they revolt from their allegiance to him, as a servant that runs from his service, or a wife that treacherously departs from her husband, and they say unto God, *Depart*. They get as far off him as they can. The world is the *far country* in which they take up their residence, and are as at home; and in the service and enjoyment of it they spend their all. *Secondly*. It is the misery of sinners that they are afar off from God, from him who is the

Fountain of all good, and are going further and further from him. What is hell itself, but being *afar off* from God?

[2.] A sinful state is a *spending* state: There he *wasted his substance with riotous living* (v. 13), devoured it *with harlots* (v. 30), and in a little time *he had spent all*, v. 14. He bought fine clothes, spent a great deal in meat and drink, treated high, associated with those that helped him to make an end of what he had in a little time. As to this world, they that *live riotously waste* what they have, and will have a great deal to answer for, that they spend that upon their lusts which should be for the necessary substance of themselves and their families. But this is to be applied spiritually. Wilful sinners *waste* their patrimony; for they misemploy their thoughts and all the powers of their souls, misspend their time and all their opportunities, do not only bury, but embezzle, the talents they are entrusted to trade with for their Master's honour; and the gifts of Providence, which were intended to enable them to serve God and to do good with, are made the food and fuel of their lusts. The soul that is made a drudge, either to the world or to the flesh, *wastes its substance*, and *lives riotously*. *One sinner destroys much good*, ²⁰⁹⁸Ecclesiastes 9:18. The good he destroys is valuable, and it is none of his own; they are his *Lord's goods* that he *wastes*, which must be accounted for.

[3.] A sinful state is a *wanting* state: *When he had spent all* upon his harlots, they left him, to seek such another prey; and *there arose a mighty famine in that land*, every thing was scarce and dear, and he *began to be in want*, v. 14. Note, Wilful waste brings woeful want. Riotous living in time, perhaps in a little time, brings men to a *morsel of bread*, especially when *bad times* hasten on the consequences of *bad husbandry*, which good husbandry would have *provided for*. This represents the misery of *sinners*, who have thrown away *their own mercies*, the favour of God, their interest in Christ, the strivings of the Spirit, and admonitions of conscience; these they *gave away* for the pleasure of sense, and the wealth of the world, and then are ready to perish for want of them. Sinners want necessaries for their souls; they have neither food nor raiment for them, nor any provision for hereafter. A sinful state is like a land where *famine reigns*, a *mighty famine*; for the *heaven is as brass* (the dews of God's favour and blessing are withheld, and we must needs want good things if God deny them to us), and the *earth is as iron* (the sinner's heart, that should bring forth good things, is dry and barren, and has no good in it). Sinners are *wretchedly* and *miserably poor*, and, what aggravates it, they

brought themselves into that condition, and keep themselves in it by refusing the supplies offered.

[4.] A sinful state is *a vile servile state*. When this young man's riot had brought him to want his want brought him to servitude. *He went, and joined himself to a citizen of that country*, v. 15. The same wicked life that before was represented by *riotous living* is here represented by *servile living*; for sinners are perfect slaves. The devil is the *citizen of that country*; for he is both in city and country. Sinners *join themselves* to him, hire themselves into his service, to do *his work*, to be at *his beck*, and to depend upon him for maintenance and a portion. They that commit sin are the *servants of sin*, ^{483A}John 8:34. How did this young gentleman debase and disparage himself, when he hired himself into such a service and under such a master as this! He *sent him into the fields*, not to feed sheep (there had been some credit in that employment; Jacob, and Moses, and David, kept sheep), but to *feed swine*. The business of the devil's servants is to *make provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof*, and that is no better than feeding greedy, dirty, noisy swine; and how can rational immortal souls more disgrace themselves?

[5.] A sinful state is a state of *perpetual dissatisfaction*. When the prodigal began to be in want, he thought to help himself by *going to service*; and he must be content with the provision which not the house, but the field, afforded; but it is poor provision: *He would fain have filled his belly*, satisfied his hunger, and nourished his body, *with the husks which the swine did eat*, v. 16. A fine pass my young master had brought himself to, to be fellow-commoner with the swine! Note, That which sinners, when they *depart from God*, promise themselves *satisfaction in*, will certainly disappoint them; they are *labouring for that which satisfieth not*, ^{281D}Isaiah 55:2. That which is the *stumbling-block of their iniquity* will never *satisfy their souls, nor fill their bowels*, ^{307B}Ezekiel 7:19. Husks are food for swine, but not for men. The wealth of the world and the entertainments of sense will serve for bodies; but what are these to *precious souls*? They neither suit their nature, nor satisfy their desires, nor supply their needs. He that takes up with them *feeds on wind* (³⁰¹Hosea 12:1), *feeds on ashes*, ^{234D}Isaiah 44:20.

[6.] A sinful state is a state which *cannot expect relief from any creature*. This prodigal, when he could not earn his bread by *working*, took to *begging*; but *no man gave unto him*, because they knew he had brought all

this misery upon himself, and because he was rakish, and provoking to every body; such poor are *least pitied*. This, in the application of the parable, intimates that those who depart from God cannot be helped by any creature. In vain do we cry to the world and the flesh (those gods which we have served); they have that which will *poison* a soul, but have nothing to give it which will *feed* and *nourish* it. If thou refuse God's help, whence shall any creature help thee?

[7.] A sinful state is a *state of death*: *This my son was dead*, v. 24, 32. A sinner is not only dead in law, as he is under a sentence of death, but dead in state too, dead in trespasses and sins, destitute of spiritual life; no union with Christ, no spiritual senses exercised, no living to God, and therefore *dead*. The prodigal in the *far country* was *dead* to his father and his family, cut off from them, as a member from the body or a branch from the tree, and therefore *dead*, and it is his own doing.

[8.] A sinful state is a *lost state*: *This my son was lost* — lost to every thing that was good — lost to all virtue and honour — lost to his father's house; they had no joy of him. Souls that are separated from God are *lost* souls; lost as a *traveller* that is out of his way, and, if infinite mercy prevent not, will soon be lost as a ship that is sunk at sea, lost irrecoverably.

[9.] A sinful state is a state of *madness* and *frenzy*. This is intimated in that expression (v. 17), *when he came to himself*, which intimates that he had been *beside himself*. Surely he was so when he left his father's house, and much more so when he joined himself to the citizen of that country. *Madness* is said to be *in the heart* of sinners, ²⁹⁹⁸Ecclesiastes 9:3. Satan has got possession of the soul; and how raging mad was he that was possessed by Legion! Sinners, like those that are *mad*, destroy themselves with *foolish lusts*, and yet at the same time deceive themselves with *foolish hopes*; and they are, of all diseased persons, most enemies to their own cure.

2. We have here his *return* from this *ramble*, his penitent *return* to his father again. When he was brought to the last extremity, then he bethought himself how much it was his interest to go home. Note, We must not despair of the worst; for while there is life there is hope. The grace of God can soften the hardest heart, and give a happy turn to the strongest stream of corruption. Now observe here,

(1.) What was the *occasion* of his return and repentance. It was his *affliction*; when he was in *want*, then he *came to himself*. Note, Afflictions, when they are sanctified by divine grace, prove happy means of turning sinners from the error of their ways. By them the ear is opened to discipline and the heart disposed to receive instructions; and they are sensible proofs both of the vanity of the world and of the mischievousness of sin. Apply it spiritually. When we find the insufficiency of creatures to make us happy, and have tried all other ways of relief for our poor souls in vain, then it is time to think of returning to God. When we see what miserable comforters, what physicians of no value, all but Christ are, for a soul that groans under the guilt and power of sin, and no *man gives unto us* what we need, then surely we shall apply ourselves to Jesus Christ.

(2.) What was the *preparative* for it; it was *consideration*. He said within himself, he reasoned with himself, when he recovered his right mind, *How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough!* Note, Consideration is the first step towards conversion, ~~283~~ Ezekiel 18:28. *He considers, and turns*. To consider is to retire into ourselves, to reflect upon ourselves, to compare one thing with another, and determine accordingly. Now observe what it was that he considered.

[1.] He considered how bad his condition was: *I perish with hunger*. Not only, "I am *hungry*," but, "*I perish with hunger*, for I see not what way to expect relief." Note, Sinners will not come to the service of Christ till they are brought to see themselves just ready to perish in the service of sin; and the consideration of that should drive us to Christ. *Master, save us, we perish*. And though we be thus driven to Christ he will not therefore reject us, nor think himself dishonoured by our being forced to him, but rather honoured by his being applied to in a desperate case.

[2.] He considered how much better it might be made if he would but return: *How many hired servants of my father's*, the meanest in his family, the very day-labourers, *have bread enough, and to spare*, such a good house does he keep! Note, *First*, In our *Father's house* there is bread for all his family. This was taught by the twelve loaves of *showbread*, that were constantly upon the holy table in the sanctuary, a loaf for every tribe. *Secondly*, There is *enough and to spare*, enough for all, enough for each, enough to spare for such as will join themselves to his domestics, enough and *to spare* for *charity*. *Yet there is room*; there are *crumbs* that fall from his table, which many would be glad of, and thankful for. *Thirdly*, Even

the *hired servants* in God's family are well provided for; the meanest that will but hire themselves into his family, to *do* his work, and *depend* upon his rewards, shall be well provided for. *Fourthly*, The consideration of this should encourage sinners, that have gone astray from God, to think of returning to him. Thus the adulteress reasons with herself, when she is disappointed in her new lovers: *I will go and return to my first husband, for then was it better with me than now,* ~~XXX~~ Hosea 2:7.

(3.) What was the *purpose* of it. Since it is so, that his condition is so bad, and may be bettered by returning to his father, his consideration issues, at length, in this conclusion: *I will arise, and go to my father.* Note, Good purposes are good things, but still good performances are all in all.

[1.] He determined what to do: *I will arise and go to my father.* He will not take any longer time to consider of it, but will *forthwith* arise and go. Though he be in a *far country*, a great way off from his father's house, yet, far as it is, he will return; every step of backsliding from God must be a step back again in return to him. Though he be *joined to a citizen of this country*, he makes no difficulty of breaking his bargain with him. *We are not debtors to the flesh;* we are under no obligation at all to our Egyptian task-masters to give them warning, but are at liberty to quit the service when we will. Observe with what resolution he speaks: "*I will arise, and go to my father:* I am resolved I will, whatever the issue be, rather than *stay* here and *starve.*"

[2.] He determined what to say. True repentance is a *rising*, and *coming* to God: *Behold, we come unto thee.* But what words shall we take with us? He here considers what to say. Note, In all our addresses to God, it is good to deliberate with ourselves beforehand what we shall say, that we may *order our cause before him*, and *fill our mouth with arguments.* We have *liberty of speech*, and we ought to consider seriously with ourselves, how we may use that liberty to the utmost, and yet not abuse it. Let us observe what he purposed to say.

First, He would confess his fault and folly: *I have sinned.* Note, Forasmuch as we have all sinned, it behoves us, and well becomes us, to own that we have sinned. The confession of sin is required and insisted upon, as a necessary condition of peace and pardon. If we plead *not guilty*, we put ourselves upon a trial by the covenant of innocency, which will certainly condemn us. If *guilty*, with a contrite, penitent, and obedient

heart, we refer ourselves to the covenant of grace, which offers forgiveness to those that *confess their sins*.

Secondly, He would aggravate it, and would be so far from extenuating the matter that he would *lay a load* upon himself for it: I have sinned *against Heaven*, and *before thee*. Let those that are *undutiful* to their *earthly parents* think of this; they sin *against heaven, and before God*. Offences against them are offences against God. Let us all think of this, as that which renders our *sin exceedingly sinful*, and should render us exceedingly sorrowful for it.

1. Sin is committed in contempt of God's authority over us: *We have sinned against Heaven*. God is here called *Heaven*, to signify how highly he is exalted above us, and the dominion he has over us, for the *Heavens do rule*. The malignity of sin aims high; it is *against Heaven*. The daring sinner is said to have *set his mouth against the heavens*, ^{<B319>}Psalm 63:9. Yet it is *impotent* malice, for we cannot hurt the heavens. Nay, it is foolish malice; what is shot *against the heavens* will return upon the head of him that shoots it, ^{<B376>}Psalm 7:16. Sin is an affront to the *God of heaven*, it is a forfeiture of the glories and joys of heaven, and a contradiction to the designs of the kingdom of heaven.

2. It is committed in contempt of God's eye upon us: "I have sinned *against Heaven* and yet *before thee*, and under thine eye," than which there could not be a greater affront put upon him.

Thirdly, He would judge and condemn himself for it, and acknowledge himself to have forfeited all the privileges of the family: *I am no more worthy to be called thy son*, v. 19. He does not deny the relation (for that was all he had to trust to), but he owns that his father might justly deny the relation, and shut his doors against him. He had, at his own demand, the portion of goods that belonged to him, and had reason to expect no more. Note, It becomes sinners to acknowledge themselves unworthy to receive any favour from God, and to humble and abase themselves before him.

Fourthly, He would nevertheless sue for admission into the family, though it were into the meanest post there: "*Make me as one of thy hired servants*: that is good enough, and too good for me." Note, True penitents have a high value for God's house, and the privileges of it, and will be glad of any place, so they may but be in it, though it be but as *door-keepers*, ^{<B380>}Psalm 84:10. If it be imposed on him as a mortification to sit with the

servants, he will not only submit to it, but count it a preferment, in comparison with his present state. Those that return to God, from whom they have revolted, cannot but be desirous some way or other to be employed for him, and put into a capacity of serving and honouring him: “*Make me as a hired servant, that I may show I love my father's house as much as ever I slighted it.*”

Fifthly, In all this he would have an eye to his father as a father: “*I will arise, and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father.*” Note, Eyeing God as a Father, and our Father, will be of great use in our repentance and return to him. It will make our sorrow for sin genuine, our resolutions against it strong, and encourage us to hope for pardon. God delights to be called *Father* both by penitents and petitioners. *Is not Ephraim a dear son?*

(4.) What was the performance of this purpose: *He arose, and came to his father.* His good resolve he put in execution without delay; he struck while the iron was hot, and did not adjourn the thought to some more convenient season. Note, It is our interest speedily to close with our convictions. Have we said that we will arise and go? Let us immediately arise and come. He did not come halfway, and then pretend that he was tired and could get no further, but, weak and weary as he was, he made a thorough business of it. *If thou wilt return, O Israel, return unto me, and do thy first works.*

3. We have here his reception and entertainment with his father: *He came to his father;* but was he welcome? Yes, heartily welcome. And, by the way, it is an example to parents whose children have been foolish and disobedient, if they repent, and submit themselves, not to be harsh and severe with them, but to be governed in such a case by the wisdom that is from above, which is *gentle and easy to be entreated;* herein let them be followers of God, and merciful, as he is. But it is chiefly designed to set forth the grace and mercy of God to poor sinners that repent and return to him, and his readiness to forgive them. Now here observe,

(1.) The great love and affection wherewith the father received the son: *When he was yet a great way off his father saw him,* v. 20. He expressed his kindness before the son expressed his repentance; for God prevents us with the blessings of his goodness. Even *before we call he answers;* for he knows what is in our hearts. *I said, I will confess, and thou forgavest.* How lively are the images presented here!

[1.] Here were *eyes of mercy*, and those eyes quick-sighted: *When he was yet a great way off his father saw him*, before any other of the family were aware of him, as if from the top of some high tower he had been looking that way which his son was gone, with such a thought as this, “O that I could see yonder wretched son of mine coming home!” This intimates God’s desire of the conversion of sinners, and his readiness to meet them that are coming towards him. *He looketh on men*, when they are gone astray from him, to see whether they will return to him, and he is aware of the first inclination towards him.

[2.] Here were *bowels of mercy*, and those bowels turning within him, and yearning at the sight of his son: *He had compassion*. Misery is the object of pity, even the misery of a sinner; though he has brought it upon himself, yet God compassionates. *His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel*, ^{<318>}Hosea 11:8; ^{<0716>}Judges 10:16.

[3.] Here were *feet of mercy*, and those feet quick-paced: *He ran*. This denotes how swift God is to show mercy. The prodigal son came slowly, under a burden of shame and fear; but the tender father ran to meet him with his encouragements.

[4.] Here were *arms of mercy*, and those arms stretched out to embrace him: *He fell on his neck*. Though guilty and deserving to be beaten, though dirty and newly come from feeding swine, so that any one who had not the strongest and tenderest compassions of a father would have loathed to touch him, yet he thus takes him in his arms, and lays him in his bosom. Thus dear are true penitents to God, thus welcome to the Lord Jesus.

[5.] Here were *lips of mercy*, and those lips dropping as a honey-comb: *He kissed him*. This kiss not only *assured* him of his *welcome*, but *sealed his pardon*; his former follies shall be all forgiven, and not mentioned against him, nor is one word said by way of upbraiding. This was like David’s kissing Absalom, ^{<143>}2 Samuel 14:33. And this intimates how ready, and free, and forward the Lord Jesus is to receive and entertain poor returning repenting sinners, according to his Father’s will.

(2.) The penitent submission which the poor prodigal made to his father (v. 21): *He said unto him, Father, I have sinned*. As it commends the good father’s kindness that he showed it before the prodigal expressed his repentance, so it commends the prodigal’s repentance that he expressed it after his father had shown him so much kindness. When he had received

the kiss which sealed his pardon, yet he said, *Father, I have sinned*. Note, Even those that have received the pardon of their sins, and the comfortable sense of their pardon, must have in their hearts a sincere contrition for it, and with their mouths must make a penitent confession of it, even of those sins which they have reason to hope are pardoned. David penned the fifty-first psalm after Nathan had said, *The Lord has taken away thy sin, thou shall not die*. Nay, the comfortable sense of the pardon of sin should increase our sorrow for it; and that is ingenuous evangelical sorrow which is increased by such a consideration. See ^{2316B}Ezekiel 16:63, *Thou shalt be ashamed and confounded, when I am pacified towards thee*. The more we see of God's readiness to *forgive us*, the more difficult it should be to us to *forgive ourselves*.

(3.) The splendid provision which this kind father made for the returning prodigal. He was going on in his submission, but one word we find in his purpose to say (v. 19) which we do not find that he did say (v. 21), and that was, *Make me as one of thy hired servants*. We cannot think that he forgot it, much less that he changed his mind, and was now either less desirous to be in the family or less willing to be a hired servant there than when he made that purpose; but his father interrupted him, prevented his saying it: "Hold, son, talk no more of thy unworthiness, thou art heartily welcome, and, though not *worthy to be called a son*, shalt be treated as a *dear son*, as a *pleasant child*." He who is thus entertained at first needs not ask to be made *as a hired servant*. Thus when *Ephraim bemoaned himself* God comforted him, ^{2418B}Jeremiah 31:18-20. It is strange that here is not one word of rebuke: "Why did you not stay with your harlots and your swine? You could never find the way home till beaten hither with your own rod." No, here is nothing like this; which intimates that, when God forgives the sins of true penitents, he forgets them, he remembers them no more, they *shall not be mentioned against them*, ^{2302B}Ezekiel 18:22. But this is not all; here is rich and royal provision made for him, according to his birth and quality, far beyond what he did or could expect. He would have thought it sufficient, and been very thankful, if his father had but taken notice of him, and bid him go to the kitchen, and get his dinner with his servants; but God does for those who return to their duty, and cast themselves upon his mercy, abundantly above what they are able to ask or think. The prodigal came home between hope and fear, fear of being rejected and hope of being received; but his father was not only better to

him than his fears, but better to him than his hopes — not only *received* him, but received him with respect.

[1.] He came home *in rags*, and his father not only *clothed* him, but *adorned* him. He *said to the servants*, who all attended their master, upon notice that his son was come, *Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him*. The worst old clothes in the house might have served, and these had been good enough for him; but the father calls not for a *coat*, but for a *robe*, the garment of princes and great men, the *best robe* — *ten stolen ten proten*. There is a double emphasis: “*that robe, that principal robe*, you know which I mean;” the *first robe* (so it may be read); the robe he wore before he ran his ramble. When backsliders repent and do their *first works*, they shall be received and dressed in their *first robes*. “Bring hither that robe, and put it on him; he will be ashamed to wear it, and think that it ill becomes him who comes home in such a dirty pickle, but *put it on him*, and do not merely offer it to him: and *put a ring on his hand*, a signet-ring, with the arms of the family, in token of his being owned as a branch of the family.” Rich people wore rings, and his father hereby signified that though he had spent one portion, yet, upon his repentance, he intended him another. He came home barefoot, his feet perhaps sore with travel, and therefore, “Put *shoes on his feet*, to make him easy.” Thus does the grace of God provide for true penitents. *First*, The *righteousness of Christ* is the robe, that *principal robe*, with which they are clothed; they *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*, are clothed with that *Sun*. The *robe of righteousness* is the *garment of salvation*, ²⁸¹⁰Isaiah 61:10. A *new nature* is this *best robe*; true penitents are clothed with this, being sanctified throughout. *Secondly*, The *earnest of the Spirit*, by whom we are sealed to the day of redemption, is the *ring on the hand*. After you believed you were sealed. They that are sanctified are adorned and dignified, are put in power, as Joseph was by Pharaoh's giving him a ring: “Put a ring on his hand, to be before him a constant memorial of his father's kindness, that he may never forget it.” *Thirdly*, The *preparation of the gospel of peace* is as *shoes for our feet* (⁴⁹⁸⁵Ephesians 6:15), so that, compared with this here, signifies (saith Grotius) that God, when he receives true penitents into his favour, makes use of them for the convincing and converting of others by their instructions, at least by their examples. David, when pardoned, will teach transgressors God's ways, and Peter, when converted, will strengthen his brethren. Or it intimates that they shall go on cheerfully, and with

resolution, in the way of religion, as a man does when he has shoes on his feet, above what he does when he is barefoot.

[2.] He came home *hungry*, and his father not only *fed him*, but *feasted him* (v. 23): “*Bring hither the fatted calf*, that has been stall-fed, and long reserved for some special occasion, and *kill it*, that my son may be satisfied with the best we have.” Cold meat might have served, or the leavings of the last meal; but he shall have fresh meat and hot meat, and the fatted calf can never be better bestowed. Note, There is excellent food provided by our heavenly Father for all those that *arise* and *come to him*. Christ himself is the Bread of Life; his flesh is meat indeed, and his blood drink indeed; in him there is a feast for souls, a feast for fat things. It was a great change with the prodigal, who just before *would fain have filled his belly with husks*. How sweet will the supplies of the new covenant be, and the relishes of its comforts, to those who have been *labouring in vain* for satisfaction in the creature! Now he found his own words made good, *In my father's house there is bread enough and to spare*.

(4.) The great joy and rejoicing occasioned by his return. The bringing of the fatted calf was designed to be not only a *feast* for him, but a *festival* for the family: “*Let us all eat, and be merry*, for it is a good day; for *this my son was dead*, when he was in his ramble, but his return is as *life from the dead*, he is *alive again*; we thought that he was dead, having heard nothing from him of a long time, but behold *he lives*; he *was lost*, we gave him up for lost, we despaired of hearing of him, but he is *found*.” Note,

[1.] The conversion of a soul from sin to God is the raising of that soul from death to life, and the finding of that which seemed to be lost: it is a great, and wonderful, and happy change. What was in itself *dead* is made *alive*, what was *lost* to God and his church is *found*, and what was *unprofitable* becomes *profitable*, ^{<5011>}Philemon 1:11. It is such a change as that upon the face of the earth when the spring returns.

[2.] The conversion of sinners is greatly pleasing to the God of heaven, and all that belong to his family ought to rejoice in it; those in heaven *do*, and those on earth *should*. Observe, It was *the father* that began the joy, and set all the rest on rejoicing. *Therefore* we should be glad of the repentance of sinners, because it accomplishes God's design; it is the bringing of those to Christ whom the Father had given him, and in whom he will be for ever glorified. *We joy for your sakes before our God*, with an eye to him (^{<5019>}1 Thessalonians 3:9), and *ye are our rejoicing in the*

presence of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Master of the family, ~~179~~1
Thessalonians 2:19. The family complied with the master: *They began to be merry*. Note, God's children and servants ought to be affected with things as he is.

4. We have here the *repining and envying of the elder brother*, which is described by way of reproof to the scribes and Pharisees, to show them the folly and wickedness of their discontent at the repentance and conversion of the publicans and sinners, and the favour Christ showed them; and he represents it so as not to aggravate the matter, but as allowing them still the privileges of elder brethren: the Jews had those privileges (though the Gentiles were favoured), for the preaching of the gospel must begin at Jerusalem. Christ, when he reproved them for their faults, yet accosted them mildly, to smooth them into a good temper towards the poor publicans. But by the *elder brother* here we may understand those who are really good, and have been so from their youth up, and never went astray into any vicious course of living, who *comparatively* need no repentance; and to such these words in the close, *Son, thou art ever with me*, are applicable without any difficulty, but not to the scribes and Pharisees. Now concerning the elder brother, observe,

(1.) How *foolish and fretful* he was upon occasion of his brother's reception, and how he was disgusted at it. It seems he was abroad *in the field*, in the country, when his brother came, and by the time he had returned home the *mirth was begun*; *When he drew nigh to the house he heard music and dancing*, either while the dinner was getting ready, or rather after they had eaten and were full, v. 25. He enquired *what these things meant* (v. 26), and was informed that his brother was come, and his father had made him a feast for his *welcome home*, and great joy there was because he had received him *safe and sound*, v. 27. It is but one word in the original, he had *received* him *hygiainonta* — *in health*, well both in body and mind. He received him not only well in body, but a penitent, returned to his *right mind*, and well reconciled to his father's house, cured of his vices and his rakish disposition, else he had not been received *safe and sound*. Now this offended him to the highest degree: *He was angry, and would not go in* (v. 28), not only because he was resolved he would not himself join in the mirth, but because he would show his displeasure at it, and would intimate to his father that he should have kept out his younger brother. This shows what is a common fault,

[1.] In men's families. Those who have always been a comfort to their parents think they should have the monopoly of their parents' favours, and are apt to be *too sharp* upon those who have transgressed, and to grudge their parents' kindness to them.

[2.] In God's family. Those who are comparatively *innocents* seldom know how to be compassionate towards those who are manifestly *penitents*. The language of such we have here, in what the *elder brother* said (v. 29, 30), and it is written for warning to those who by the grace of God are kept from scandalous sin, and kept in the way of virtue and sobriety, that they sin not after the similitude of this transgression. Let us observe the particulars of it. *First*, He *boasted of himself and his own virtue and obedience*. He had not only not run from his father's house, as his brother did, but had made himself as a *servant* in it, and had long done so: *Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment*. Note, It is too common for those that are better than their neighbours to boast of it, yea, and to make their boast of it before God himself, as if he were indebted to them for it. I am apt to think that this elder brother said more than was true, when he gloried that he had never *transgressed his father's commands*, for them I believe he would not have been so obstinate as now he was to *his father's entreaties*. However, we will admit it comparatively; he had not been so disobedient as his brother had been. O what need have good men to take heed of pride, a corruption that arises out of the ashes of other corruptions! Those that have long served God, and been kept from gross sins, have a great deal to be humbly thankful for, but nothing proudly to boast of. *Secondly*, He *complained of his father*, as if he had not been so kind as he ought to have been to him, who had been so dutiful: *Thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends*. He was out of humour now, else he would not have made this complaint; for, no questions, if he had asked such a thing at any time, he might have had it at the first word; and we have reason to think that he did not desire it, but the *killing of the fatted calf* put him upon making this peevish reflection. When men are *in a passion* they are apt to reflect in a way they would not if they were in their right mind. He had been fed at his father's table, and had many a time been merry with him and the family; but his father had never given him so much as a kid, which was but a small token of love compared with the *fatted calf*. Note, Those that think *highly* of themselves and their services are apt to think *hardly* of their master and meanly of his favours. We ought to own ourselves utterly

unworthy of those mercies which God has thought fit to give us, much more of those that he has not thought fit to give us, and therefore we must not *complain*. He would have had a kid, to *make merry with his friends* abroad, whereas the *fatted calf* he grudged so much was given to his brother, not to *make merry with his friends* abroad, but *with the family* at home: the mirth of God's children should be with their father and his family, in communion with God and his saints, and not with any *other friends*. *Thirdly*, He was very *ill-humoured* towards his younger brother, and harsh in what he thought and said concerning him. Some good people are apt to be overtaken in this fault, nay, and to indulge themselves too much in it, to look with disdain upon those who have not preserved their reputation so clean as they have done, and to be sour and morose towards them, yea, though they have given very good evidence of their repentance and reformation. This is not the Spirit of Christ, but of the Pharisees. Let us observe the instances of it.

1. He *would not go in*, except his brother were *turned out*; one house shall not hold him and his own brother, no, not his *father's house*. The language of this was that of the Pharisee (²³⁸⁵ Isaiah 65:5): *Stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou*; and (ch. 18:11) *I am not as other men are, nor even as this publican*. Note, Though we are to shun the society of those sinners by whom we are in danger of being infected, yet we must not be shy of the company of penitent sinners, by whom we may get good. He saw that his father had *taken him in*, and yet he would not *go in* to him. Note, We think too well of ourselves, if we cannot find in our hearts to *receive* those whom God *hath received*, and to admit those into favour, and friendship, and fellowship with us, whom we have reason to think God has a favour for, and who are taken into friendship and fellowship with him.

2. He would not call him *brother*; but *this thy son*, which sounds arrogantly, and not without reflection upon his father, as if his indulgence had made him a prodigal: “He is *thy son*, thy darling.” Note, Forgetting the relation we stand in to our brethren, as brethren, and disowning that, are at the bottom of all our neglects of our duty to them and our contradictions to that duty. Let us give our relations, both in the flesh and in the Lord, the titles that belong to them. Let the rich call the poor *brethren*, and let the innocents call the penitents so.

3. He *aggravated his brother's faults*, and made the worst of them, endeavouring to incense his father against him: He *is thy son, who hath devoured thy living with harlots*. It is true, he had spent his own portion foolishly enough (whether *upon harlots* or no we are not told before, perhaps that was only the language of the elder brother's jealousy and ill will), but that he had devoured *all his father's living* was false; the father had still a good estate. Now this shows how apt we are, in censuring our brethren, to *make the worst* of every thing, and to set it out in the blackest colours, which is not doing as we would be done by, nor as our heavenly Father does by us, who is not extreme to mark iniquities.

4. He *grudged him the kindness* that his father *showed him: Thou hast killed for him the fatted calf*, as if he were such a son as he should be. Note, It is a wrong thing to *envy* penitents the grace of God, and to have our eye evil because he is good. As we must not envy those that *are* the worst of sinners the gifts of common providence (*Let not thine heart envy sinners*), so we must not envy those that *have been* the worst of sinners the gifts of covenant love upon their repentance; we must not envy them their pardon, and peace, and comfort, no, nor any extraordinary gift which God bestows upon them, which makes them eminently acceptable or useful. Paul, before his conversion, had been a prodigal, had *devoured* his heavenly Father's *living* by the *havoc* he made of the *church*; yet when after his conversion he had greater measures of grace given him, and more honour put upon him, than the other apostles, they who were the elder brethren, who had been *serving Christ* when he was persecuting him, and had not transgressed at any time his commandment, did not envy him his visions and revelations, nor his more extensive usefulness, but *glorified God in him*, which ought to be an example to us, as the reverse of this elder brother.

(2.) Let us now see how *favourable* and *friendly* his father was in *his carriage towards him* when he was thus sour and ill-humoured. This is as surprising as the former. Methinks the mercy and grace of our God in Christ shine almost as brightly in his tender and gentle bearing with *peevish saints*, represented by the elder brother here, as before in his reception of prodigal sinners upon their repentance, represented by the younger brother. The disciples of Christ themselves had many infirmities, and were men subject to like passions as others, yet Christ bore with them, as a nurse with her children. See ~~xxxv~~ 1 Thessalonians 2:7.

[1.] When he would not come in, his *father came out, and entreated him*, accosted him mildly, gave him good words, and desired him to come in. He might justly have said, “If he will not come in, let him stay out, shut the doors against him, and send him to seek a lodging where he can find it. Is not the house my own? and may I not do what I please in it? Is not the fatted calf my own? and may I not do what I please with it?” No, as he to meet the younger son, so now he goes to court the elder, did not send a servant out with a kind message to him, but went himself. Now, *First*, This is designed to represent to us the goodness of God; how strangely gentle and winning he has been towards those that were strangely froward and provoking. He reasoned with Cain: *Why art thou wroth? He bore Israel's manners in the wilderness,* ^{4108} Acts 13:18. How mildly did God reason with Elijah, when he was upon the fret (^{4109}1 Kings 19:46), and especially with Jonah, whose case was very parallel with this here, for he was there disquieted at the repentance of Nineveh, and the mercy shown to it, as the elder brother here; and those questions, *Dost thou well to be angry?* and, *Should not I spare Nineveh?* are not unlike these expostulations of the father with the elder brother here. *Secondly*, It is to teach all superiors to be mild and gentle with their inferiors, even when they are in a fault and passionately justify themselves in it, than which nothing can be more provoking; and yet even in that case let fathers *not provoke their children to more wrath*, and let *masters forbear threatening*, and both show all *meekness*.

[2.] His father assured him that the kind entertainment he gave his younger brother was neither any reflection upon him nor should be any prejudice to him (v. 31): “Thou shalt fare never the worse for it, nor have ever the less for it. *Son, thou art ever with me*; the reception of him is no rejection of thee, nor what is laid out on him any sensible diminution of what I design for thee; thou shalt still remain entitled to the *pars enitia* (so our law calls it), the *double portion* (so the Jewish law called it); thou shalt be *haeres ex asse* (so the Roman law called it): *all that I have is thine*, by an indefeasible title.” If he had not *given him a kid to make merry with his friends*, he had allowed him to eat bread at his table continually; and it is better to be *happy with our Father* in heaven than *merry with any friend* we have in this world. Note, *First*, It is the unspeakable happiness of all the children of God, who keep close to their Father's house, that they are, and shall be, ever with him. They are so in this world by faith; they shall be so in the other world by fruition; and all that he has is theirs; for, *if*

children, then heirs, ~~4817~~ Romans 8:17. Secondly, Therefore we ought not to envy others God's grace to them because we shall have never the less for their sharing in it. If we be true believers, all that God is, all that he has, is *ours*; and, if others come to be true believers, all that he is, and all that he has, is theirs too, and yet we have not the less, as they that walk in the light and warmth of the sun have all the benefit they can have by it, and yet not the less for others having as much; for Christ in his church is like what is said of the soul in the body: it is *tota in toto* — *the whole in the whole*, and yet *tota in qualibet parte* — *the whole in each part*.

[3.] His father gave him a good reason for this uncommon joy in the family: *It was meet that we should make merry and be glad*, v. 32. He might have insisted upon his own authority: "It was *my will* that the family should make merry and be glad." *Stat pro ratione voluntas* — *My reason is, I will it to be so*. But it does not become even those that have authority to be vouching and appealing to it upon every occasion, which does but make it cheap and common, it is better to give a convincing reason, as the father does here: *It was meet*, and very becoming, *that we should make merry* for the return of a prodigal son, more than for the perseverance of a dutiful son; for, though the latter is a greater blessing to a family, yet the former is a more sensible pleasure. Any family would be much more transported with joy at the raising of a dead child to life, yea, or at the recovery of a child from a sickness that was adjudged mortal, than for the continued life and health of many children. Note, God will be justified when he speaks, and all flesh shall, sooner or later, be silent before him. We do not find that the elder brother made any reply to what his father said, which intimates that he was entirely satisfied, and acquiesced in his father's will, and was well reconciled to his prodigal brother; and his father put him in mind that he was his brother: *This thy brother*. Note, A good man, though he have not such a command of himself at all times as to *keep his temper*, yet will, with the grace of God, *recover his temper*; though *he fall*, yet shall he not be utterly cast down. But as for the scribes and Pharisees, for whose conviction it was primarily intended, for aught that appears they continued the same disaffection to the sinners of the Gentiles, and to the gospel of Christ because it was preached to them.