

CHAPTER XVIII

The Love of God (IV)

THE GOD OF THE LOST (II)

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

"And he said, A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of thy substance that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country; and there he wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. But when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But while he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and make merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry."

(Luke 15: 11-24)

THE PARABLE OF THE ELDER BROTHER

"Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called to him one of the servants, and inquired what these things might be. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. But he was angry, and would not go in: and his father came out, and entreated him. But he answered and said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, and I never transgressed a commandment of thine; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but when this thy son came, who hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou killedst for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine. But it was meet to make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

(Luke 15: 25-32)

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GOD OF THE LOST (II)

The Parable of the Prodigal Son The Parable of the Elder Brother

"The most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told on our earth,"¹ says George Murray. The appraisal is not extravagant. To judge this parable with our words is futile and sacrilegious—like the attempt to measure the sunrise with the span of our fingers. For it is more than words; it is fashioned from the love which endured Calvary.

No story more instantly touches the nerve of actual life. Let it be read, without any comment or explanation, and it conquers us. Its vivid strokes have caught human history. The boy who has churned his life into a fleshly mess is condemned by it, and saved. The mystic likewise sees in it an epitome of human experience, our return from the far country of visible things to the Father Invisible, the "Dweller in the Innermost." Mark its sure portrayal.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

There is, first, the assertion of self-will: "Give me the portion of thy substance that falleth to me." Home was irksome; its freedom carried restraints. The boy craved a freedom without restraints. The tediousness of his dull brother and the loving rule of his father fretted him. Life beckoned. There were entrancing worlds beyond the disciplines of home. Illusory worlds!—the primeval lie of liberty without law! His father made no attempt to hold him. How could he? Home would not be home to a boy of alien will. He made no immediate attempt to find him when he "took his journey." The

¹ George Murray, *op. cit.*, 163.

boy must first find himself. So he divided unto each son his rightful share.

Aversion of desire soon became apostasy of conduct. "Not many days after"—the resolve was quickly carried into effect. "He gathered all together"—called in all loans, sold all the lands, turned all the jewels into money—and went his carefree way. He chose a "far country"—as far as possible from the old hated restraints. Now he could *live* in unfettered joy!

So the primeval lie became the deed. Why not express ourselves? Why be held in the intolerable bonds of ancient shibboleths mumbled over us by our fathers, mumbled over them by their fathers? Why obey these stale conventions, when the red blood is dancing in our veins? The primeval lie! The delusion that we can destroy laws by denying them! A man can demonstrate his freedom by jumping from a twentieth-floor window. But the law of gravitation is not thereby destroyed; the man is destroyed. Physical freedom is always within limits: "Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his stature?"² Mental freedom is always within limits; a proposition cannot at once be true and untrue. Moral freedom is always within limits; there is a moral law. We may deny it; but wisdom was not born with us. The hard won sanctities of the race are not utterly invalid. The moral findings of long experience are not a vast and foolish blunder. There is a law! For those who can see and hear, the Mt. Sinai of our human nature is not less awesome than the desert Mount; it has its clouds of divine mystery, its thunder voice, its lightening splendors, its inviolable decrees.

Apostasy of conduct became spendthrift folly: "He wasted his substance." At first there was the zest of self-mastery, the abandon of being free. He was whirled along through happy days and sparkling nights. But daily he was "scattering" the substance which not many weeks ago he had "gathered." Living to gratify the moment's whim is a scattering business. It wastes talent which cannot grow except we "scorn delights and live laborious days."³ It disintegrates the will. It throws

² Matthew 6: 27.

³ John Milton, "Lycidas."

the imagination into fever and chaos. It breaks the body. It leads by a *descensus avernus* into wretched bondage.

Spendthrift folly became destitution. "There arose a mighty famine." The outer famine came to mock the inner woe; for nature's moods seem often to accord with the peace or violence of man's desires.⁴ "He began to be in want." His once-radiant spirit was as bedraggled now as his once-radiant clothes. The ancient laws mumbled foolishly from age to age became avenging angels. But he will stick to his poor bargain! The page being blotted, he will blot it more! "So he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country." "Went and pinned himself"—so the phrase runs. In the finality of need he thrust his abject servitude on a Gentile master who sent him to feed swine. "Sent him"—where is now his boasted freedom? Now he is *driven*, and driven to feed swine—a task whose utter shame only a Jew could feel. He tried to feed on the husks of the carob-tree; but, though he filled himself, he did not feed. Swine's food is not for men. "And no man gave unto him." The companions of his revelry all forsook him. Having sucked him dry, they threw him away bitter pith and rind. Even had they remained loyal they could not have restored the vitality which they had drained.

So the primeval lie came home to roost. The man who lives to do as he likes becomes the slave of his likes. Playing miser to his body, coveting the titillations of the flesh, he finds at last that his body masters him and "sends" him "to feed swine." The man who in boasted independence will brook no lordship is whipped along ignominiously by every vagrant mood, and driven by an unrelenting memory. . . .

"But when he came to himself." That is as divine a word as any from the lips of Jesus. Alien from God, we are alien from our veritable selves. It is not a mere manner of speaking

⁴ A classic instance is in Shakespeare's "Macbeth." Lennox thus describes the night on which Banquo was slain, though as yet Lennox knew not of the murder:

"The night has been unruly: where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' the air; strange screams of death,
. . . the obscure bird
Clamour'd the livelong night: some say, the earth
Was feverish and did shake."

which prompts us to say of the irritable or ungenerous mood of a friend, "He is not *himself* to-day." Irritability is unnatural. When the far country has constrained a man in undestined bondage, there is a stirring in his soul—a movement as inexorable as the stars, as splendid as God is splendid—whereby he comes to himself. The man at odds with the austere vision is not the real man. Self-will is not our true self. The far-country can never be our homeland.

Jesus did not make light of sin. He painted its tragic consequence with terrible fidelity. But He could not believe that sin is the act of genuine humanity. "When he came to himself"—such is His final and invincible optimism. Ultimately graft in politics will cease—for it is not consonant with human nature. Ultimately selfishness will wither—for it is parasitical. Ultimately theft and war will be done away—for they outrage the constitution of our spirit. Ultimately the race will come to itself! A man can have no nobler comrade than his truest self: "the light which lighteth every man coming into the world."⁵

A recent commentator has pronounced fictitious the repentance of the prodigal. "Those who make this an example of true repentance," he writes, "read something into the story that Jesus never put there. It is simply the desire of a hungry man for something to eat. True, he thought up a nice little speech about his unworthiness and sinning against heaven, because he imagined that would be necessary in order to win his father's favor."⁶ But surely such an interpretation is the slashing of a sincere and lovely canvas. We may grant that the motive of the prodigal was not unmixed. An utterly unblemished purpose is not in human nature. In spite of our hastiness to question the sincerity of others, when have we surprised ourselves in an ambition absolutely clear? Our best intentions are streaked with base alloy—but they are not all base! Body and soul are marvellously compact together; and that which strikes the body (as for instance, the famine of the far country) does not leave the soul untouched. Education by violence may still educate. The penitence of a sick bed has proved ere this a true penitence. Let it be admitted that hunger drove the boy

⁵ John 1: 9.

⁶ G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

home; the hunger motive, even so, was savingly entangled with memories of a father's love, and with shame for the turpitude which had flouted love.⁷

"Why feedest thou on husks so coarse and rude?
I could not be content with angel's food.

"Harsh tyrant's slave who made thee, once so free?
A father's rule too heavy seemed to me.

"What sordid rags float round thee on the breeze?
I laid immortal robes aside for these.

"What has thy forehead so to earthward brought?
To lift it higher than the stars I thought."⁸

He resolved to cast himself on his father's mercy. He would ask to be made as one of the hired servants. Stripes and chastisement were found, at the last, to be better than sin's bondage; life at home, on any terms, was more joyous than the far country.

The confession was as genuine as the penitence. Pharaoh confessed in the desolation of the plagues; but when the plagues passed he hardened his heart. Saul confessed under the prophet's accusation; but later returned to his headstrong course and perished on his own sword. Judas confessed, casting away the pestilential pieces of silver; but afterwards he hanged himself. The prodigal confessed without excuse or palliation. He pleaded no extenuating circumstance—though he might justly have done so as the story later reveals. He realized that to sin against his father was to sin against his nature's deepest law—"against heaven and in thy sight." His was the very nakedness of true confession.

But he never framed it fully in words. The speech of contrition, prepared and rehearsed as he had trudged home by that same road along which he had once fared forth so eagerly, was never completed. He was not allowed to say, "Make me as one of thy hired servants." For "while he was yet afar off his father saw him." He had watched for him daily. He recognized him even in his rags. He knew the

⁷ Thus Dr. Plummer ("I.C.C.," Luke, p. 375), says categorically that the Prodigal's penitence was as real and decided as his fall.

⁸ R. C. Trench, "Poems."

swing of his step, the lines of his body. Every feature had been treasured in memory, looked at, wept over many times during those weary years. Seeing him at last, the father ran with incoherent joy and kissed the boy again and again. "Bring forth the best robe"—all the marks of the far country must be covered! "A ring on his finger"—token of authority! "Shoes on his feet"—slaves went barefoot, but a son must be shod as befits the family honor! "For this my son was dead and is alive again." There was no word of sharp reproof, no making sure of a sufficient sense of guilt, no requirement of probation, no sentence to quarantine until the disease of sin should have been cured. There was only the fullness of a father's love!

Who, then, is the "*prodigal*" in this story? Anybody given over to gross fleshliness? Yes, and the whole race of men besides—a planet living for externals, and acting the primeval lie of "self-expression." Substance is of many kinds; it is the stuff of personality as well as stocks and bonds. Wasting is of many methods; it is the wasting of mind as well as of body. The far country is far in many directions; it is far in motives rather than in miles. Even in church a man may be an exile from his Father's house.

Who is the "*father*" in this story? He is the picture of God, the most winsome picture ever drawn on earth! This parable is the heart of the gospel. God is eager to forgive utterly, and to restore. For there is no forgiveness except utter forgiveness. To "forgive but not forget" is to refuse to forgive. And there is no forgiveness that does not restore:

"For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of man's mind,
And the Heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind."⁹

When our clever sciences have been forgotten, when all other stories pall, when the earth waxes old like a garment, this story will still be young. It will still have power to untangle our ravelled life. It will still win us to our hearts' true home.

⁹ F. W. Faber, "Hymn."

The Parable of the Elder Brother

Who has not wished that the parable had ended in the welcome to the Prodigal?¹⁰ "They began to be merry"—that is the fitting climax. The Elder Brother is a sudden discord, but without him the story would have been untrue to life. The year has its winter storms, the disciples' band its Judas, the compassion of Jesus for the outcast its dark cloud in the murmuring of the Pharisees: "This man feasteth with publicans and sinners." Jesus was compelled to relate the aftermath to the Prodigal's return so that Pharisees of that and every age might have a mirror whereby to see themselves and God.

The Elder Brother compels us to rearrange our list of cardinal sins. Jesus played similar havoc with the world's list of virtues. In certain items the ethic of Jesus may resemble the ethic which preceded Him, but in one main regard it was revolutionary: it made love the prime requisite and crowning grace of character. "And if I have the gift of prophecy . . . and all knowledge; and if I have all faith . . . and if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor . . . and have not love . . ." ¹¹ Insight, knowledge, faith, philanthropy—the whole gamut of virtues—are nothing without love. There is similar upheaval in our list of sins. The "gross" sins, as seen in the shame of the Prodigal, have been reckoned the most culpable. For these misdeeds we drive women, and occasionally men, out of respectable society. (We even stigmatize their children as "illegitimate," though why children should be so branded passes understanding; for they alone are innocent. Some man or woman is guilty; society at large, in some measure, is guilty; but the child, thrust into life without knowledge or consent, cannot be guilty. The parents may be "illegitimate," but not the child.) Sins of the passions have darkly crowned the list; whereas jealousy, anger, pride and harsh judgment have hardly been counted sins. They are faults, rather; they are unfortunate defects of temper. Such is our appraisal of the cardinal

¹⁰ Pfeleiderer (see "Century Bible," Luke, p. 236) argued that the parable did end at v. 24; but there is little reason to doubt that Luke has supplied the proper context for all three parables (vide Luke 15: 1, 2), and the context shows the necessity for the portrait of the Elder Brother.

¹¹ I Corinthians 13: 2, 3.

wrongdoings. But Jesus said to the self-righteous Pharisees, "The publicans and the harlots go into heaven before you."¹² Jesus treated sins of passion with pity. Let it be said with emphasis that He never condoned such guilt or minimized it. But He met it with mercy, while He treated sins of temper with withering denunciation. The woman of shadowed reputation was forgiven—"Thy faith hath saved thee; go into peace,"¹³ but the hypocrite was called a "whited sepulcher."¹⁴ The Prodigal was welcomed with kiss, and robe, and feasting, but the exclusive pride of the Jews was scorched with a wrath terrible to behold: "It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment. . . ." Perhaps our list of cardinal sins should be rearranged. Perhaps "faults" of temper may be as culpable in certain settings as transgressions of the flesh.

The Prodigal as Jesus has drawn him seems a more attractive figure than the Elder Brother. If one of these men had to be an only companion on a camping trip it is not certain that the majority of men of goodwill would choose the Elder Brother. The Prodigal would give an impression of unstable will, of unsound spiritual health; but he would be generous, enthusiastic, and companionable. It is to be feared that the Elder Brother, while eminently respectable, would be thin-lipped and churlish. Jesus does not suggest that we exonerate the Prodigal; but he does suggest that jealousy and a critical aloofness can be as poisonous as sins called "gross." Perhaps the Elder Brother was a main reason why the Prodigal left home. Perhaps Rudyard Kipling's version of the Prodigal is partly true:

"My father glooms and advises me,
My brother sulks and despises me,
My mother catechises me,
Till I want to go out and swear!"¹⁵

The Elder Brother is drawn sharply as in an etching. We see him returning from his toil on the farm. He heard unaccustomed sounds of dancing and demanded an explanation:

¹² Matthew 21: 31.

¹³ Luke 7: 50.

¹⁴ Matthew 23: 27.

¹⁵ Kipling, "The Prodigal Son (Western Version)." ("Kim," Doubleday, Page & Co.)

"What does all this racket mean?" A servant gave answer eagerly: "Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound." "Oh, how glad I am!" (the answer might have run). "And how happy my father will be! What a load of anxiety off his mind! And that brother of mine (he was always wild, but everybody liked him), is he really safe and sound?" So the Elder Brother *might* have spoken! But, no! his face darkened. He would not go in. When his father came to plead with him, his anger broke into speech, every word more ungenial than the last: "Lo, these many years do I serve thee"—("serve": nothing very filial there!)—"and I never transgressed a commandment of thine"—(reasonably well satisfied with his own integrity!)—"and yet thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends." (But the story has told us that he received his larger share of the estate when his brother went away. And if his idea of a "good time" is to be rid of his father, to carouse with his own cronies, how is he different from the Prodigal?)

The recital proceeded, becoming angrier and harsher in judgment: "But when this thy son was come"—(he did not say "my brother"; he said "this precious son of thine")—"which hath devoured thy living with harlots"—(there was no final proof of that degradation but he was not in any mood to give the benefit of a doubt)—"thou hast killed for *him*"—(black emphasis on "him")—"the fatted calf." This Elder Brother is a lovely spectacle! There he stood angry, petulant, uncharitable, jealous! Can we be sure that while the Prodigal was a sinner, the Elder Brother was a good man albeit with certain defects? Or would it be truer to say that there were two prodigals—one a prodigal in the far country, the other a prodigal at home; two prodigals—one alien from the father's love through sins of passions, the other through sins of temper; two prodigals—one eating the husks of fleshliness, the other eating the rancid food of a sour and sullen mind? Would that be truer? Is our list of cardinal sins in need of revision? Is it clear that in the accurate balances of heaven the sins of those who break the moral code always weigh heavily, and the sins of the respectable always light?

In the parable the Elder Brother is not impressive. In the parable we are ready to hurl stones at him. Out of the parable he is not anathematized. Out of the parable he is held in considerable regard. And, in strict fairness, a certain tribute must be paid him. He was steadily industrious; on the day of rejoicing he came in late from the field. He was conscientious, dependable, and consistent. He was faithful, even if he was not free. He was a just man after a fashion, even if he was not generous. There were no depths in his record, even if there were no heights. He was a man to give stability to the structure of society.

Then wherein was he wrong? He was *ungrateful!* "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine"; but he was not thankful either for his father's comradeship, or for the daily bounty of his home. It never occurred to him that most of his good fortune was by gift and not by merit. His brother was now enjoying one feast of outstanding happiness and welcome, but *he* had sat daily at a table of peace. For his brother a spring of water had been struck suddenly from the rock of destitution, but for *him* a quiet river of water had ever flowed. God had saved *him* from that heat of blood which proved his brother's undoing. God had spared *him* the temptation which would have found the Achilles' heel of *his* "gross" weakness. He might have said of his younger brother and said with truth—but for ingratitude he did not say it—

"O God, Thou knowest I'm as blind as he,
As blind, as frantic, not so single, worse,
Only Thy pity spared me from the curse.

"Thy pity, and Thy mercy, God, did save,
Thy bounteous gifts, not any grace of mine,
From all the pitfalls leading to the grave,
From all the death-feasts with the husks and swine."¹⁶

The respectable, whose names will never form a scandalous headline, rarely pause to give thanks for a clear heredity and the favoring circumstance.

He was *self-righteous*. "Lo, these many years do I serve thee"—dwelling on his faithfulness until he convinced himself

¹⁶ John Masefield, "The Widow in the Bye Street." ("Collected Poems," The Macmillan Company, 1921.)

that he was much abused and very ill-rewarded. "Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment"—an extravagant claim! There is scant room for improvement in any man who is assured of his own virtue. Verily, he has received his reward!¹⁷ Further achievement is possible only in one so conscious of his failings, that he says of the far distant goal: "Not that I have already obtained or am already made perfect, but—I press on."¹⁸ But complacency is not the worst ill that self-righteousness is heir to: there is a more baleful consequence, and therein we see the darkest transgression of the Elder Brother.

He was *loveless*. Home is the place where we lay aside the mask which a hard world compels us to wear. Home is the abode of mutual confidence, the free outpouring of our inmost mind, where joys are doubled by comradeship and pains are halved by sympathy. But the Elder Brother, though always at home, was never at home. He was too convinced of his own merit, too critical of others, too fond of hugging his own supposed hardships, ever to comprehend his father's grief for the lost, ever to comprehend the self-inflicted wreck and torture suffered by his younger brother. Jesus said that if any one "offended" and caused another to stumble, "it were well for him if a millstone were hanged about his neck and he were thrown into the sea."¹⁹ Better not to have been born than to quench the flow of sympathy! Better not to live than not to love!

This ingratitude, this hard self-righteousness, this lovelessness we call a "defect." It is, forsooth, only a strain in the marble. People can harbor these faults, and still be "good" people; but the prodigal is utterly taboo.

Consider the havoc caused by the Prodigal who stayed at home. He spoiled his own life—what a hidden loathsome realm was disclosed by his brother's sudden return, a noisome world beneath his respectable industry. He shut himself off from God's life—how could he pray when held captive by such evil moods? He cast a shadow on his father's life. And

¹⁷ Matthew 6: 5.
¹⁸ Philippians 3: 12.
¹⁹ Luke 17: 2.

as for the Prodigal, what must have been his effect on him? "If this is home," we can hear the younger brother saying, "then I like the far country better."

"I never was very refined, you see?
 (And it weighs on my brother's mind, you see)
 But there's no reproach among swine, d'you see,
 For being a bit of a swine.
 So I'm off with wallet and staff to eat
 The bread that is three parts chaff to wheat
 But glory be!—there's a laugh to it,
 Which isn't the case when we dine."²⁰

Many a man has been driven back to the far country by the lovelessness of the elder brother. "If that is what Christianity means! If that unyielding exclusiveness, that loveless respectability, is what Church makes of a man . . . !" When religion is linked with class pride, or with a capitalistic régime which regards other men as "hands," religion then is almost worse than the blasphemy of the far country. Judged by the havoc of their consequences, there is little to choose between the sin of the younger brother and the sin of the older.

But the story has mercy for both sons. It is a gospel to beckon both the prodigal afar off and the prodigal at home. The father did not reason with his elder son. To argue with him would have confirmed him in stubbornness. He pleaded his love. "Son," he called him; "child"—"boy," the name by which he had called him when he was a little lad running about the farm! "Boy, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. We are one in companionship. We are one in possessions. We must be one in redemptive joy. It was meet that we should make merry, for this thy brother"—("thy brother"—how gentle the reminder!)—"was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found."

Jesus has full right to tell the Parable of the Other Son. Was He not an "Elder Brother" who left home, and went into the far country "to seek and to save that which was lost, and to give his life a ransom for many"?²¹ He trusted only to holy love—and that love can save both the prodigals.

But, meanwhile, let it be clear (lest imagined righteousness should be quick to condemn the "far country") that the Prodigal Son was at home with his father as this story ends; but the Elder Son was outside. No one shut him out. He shut himself out. He would not go in. He was barred from heaven by his lovelessness.

²⁰ Rudyard Kipling, "The Prodigal Son (Western Version)." ("Kim," Double day, Page & Co.)

²¹ Luke 19: 10, Matthew 20: 28.