

SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON
Luke 15:11-32
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Today is the third Sunday in the preparatory cycle of services before we enter into the Great Fast. On Zacchaeus Sunday we learned that the first step is that we must want to struggle in the Christian life to be better Christians and to grow closer to Christ and the Church. Therefore, the first lesson is the necessity to have the desire. On the Sunday of the Publican and the Pharisee, we learned that we must avoid pride and hypocrisy, but instead cultivate an attitude of humility and repentance when we fast, pray and keep the traditions of the Church. We must approach God and our neighbors in an honest and nonjudgmental way. Today on the Sunday of the Prodigal Son we learn about the love and forgiveness offered to us sinners by our merciful Father in Heaven.

In today's parable we heard about two brothers who lived with their father. The youngest of the two decides to ask for his inheritance and then goes off on his own "into a far country." The father is filled with love and kindness for his two sons, so he grants the request of his son. The older son remains faithful to the father and continues to work and serve in his father's household. The younger son takes the money gifted to him and goes off into a faraway land and squanders his inheritance in loose living and debauchery. When the money runs out, naturally all of his so-called friends who were glad to spend his money with him, now abandon him, and he survives by working for a stranger and taking care of his master's pigs. Having enjoyed himself like a pig, he now in fact finds himself living with pigs in reality. In his father's house, even the servants always have an abundance of food in a home permeated by generosity and love. Now he is always hungry, and he would even be glad to eat the food that is given to the pigs, but no one offers him anything. He is now sorry for his sins. The expression used in the Gospel is that he "came to himself." In other words, he comes to his senses. He is sorry that he succumbed to the temptation of sinful earthly pleasures. He is sorry that he abandoned his father and brother. He is sorry that he has squandered his father's hard earned money and thrown away his inheritance. Filled with remorse, he decides to return to his father and beg him to allow him to return. He has no expectations that things will be as they were, but hopes that perhaps his father will allow him to at least work as one of the lowest of the servants in his father's household. That would be exponentially better than the life he is now living with the pigs.

The father sees his son from afar off as his son is returning home. The father is filled with great joy and runs out to meet his son. He greets him with tears of happiness and embraces him with love. He is happy that his son is now home and safe. No doubt he was very distraught and worried about his son all the time. He restores his son to the former place that he held as the youngest son of his father. All is forgiven. He has him dressed in a new robe, new shoes are put on his feet, and a ring is placed on his finger as a token of celebration, restoration and reconciliation. The fatted calf, who is saved for only very special occasions, is ordered to be slain and prepared for a festive meal. There is a great celebration on the occasion of the return of the son to the father.

All of us in our lives, in one way or another, are like the prodigal son. Every time we sin we stray outside of the safe and sacred boundary of our Heavenly Father's household. Sadly, some have imitated the prodigal son by totally abandoning our Heavenly Father's sacred Household, and no longer go to church at all. Many have strayed into a life of sinful pleasures and debauchery, and have chosen to live with pigs instead of to live in love, purity and holiness with the Father and the saints. Just like the father in today's parable, our Heavenly Father grieves for us whenever we go astray, and He always yearns for and awaits our return, because He loves us so much. And when we "come to ourselves," when we come to our senses, when we are humbled, repent and return to the Father with remorse and sorrow for our sins, our Heavenly Father eagerly embraces us with warmth, joy and love. He restores us to our place in

the heavenly household. Just like a parent who never stops loving his child, even should he or she go astray, our Father in Heaven likewise never stops loving us. The prodigal son had no expectation to be fully restored to his former place of honor, having grievously sinned and succumbed to selfish and evil temptations. However, God in Heaven is always ready and willing to show us His mercy, love and forgiveness. God is ready to restore us to our former place in the Church, as long as we are sorry for our sins, and are willing to struggle with our sinful ways, and pursue righteousness, purity and love.

The older brother is indignant and angry because not only has the father restored his prodigal brother, but he has made a great party and celebration in his honor. No such celebration has ever been made for him, who has always remained faithful and obedient to his father. The father, with tender love and kind gentleness, tries to explain to his older son about forgiveness and reconciliation. He entreats him not to be angry and indignant, but to be happy for his brother's return. He is grateful for his steadfast obedience and faithfulness. "But you see," he tells him, "your brother was dead {spiritually} and now he is alive once again. He was lost, but now he is found. So please don't be angry, but let us be happy that he has returned." The thief on the cross who repented never went to the temple to pray. He never fasted. He never gave alms to the poor or tithes to the temple. He was a thief and a robber. However, in the last few moments of his earthly life he sincerely repented and was shown mercy and forgiveness by the Lord and received into the Heavenly abodes. The Christians who fast, struggle, pray and give alms their entire lives should rejoice when a sinner repents, and not begrudge the acceptance of a sinner, even if he comes to the Lord at the eleventh hour, not having been with the Heavenly Father from the first hour. We see this illustrated in the homily of St. John Chrysostom which is always read in every Orthodox Church on Pascha. Whether we fasted from the first hour, the sixth hour, the eleventh hour, or even if we have not fasted at all, let no one who comes to the Lord go away hungry. It is the Pascha of the Lord, the table is laden, and no one at the table should be sad, for God receives the heart of everyone who comes to Him with love, humility, sincerity, and repentance, even if it is at the last few moments of one's life. God is love. God is forgiveness. God is mercy. God came to save, not to judge. "Greater love than this hath no man." No one should ever be afraid, or feel hopeless to come to the Lord. If we come with faith and love and repentance, then God will receive us. No one will ever be turned away. Of this we can be certain. Amen.

