

## IN THE FATHER'S HOUSE THE PRODIGAL SON REMAINS LOVED

### SUNDAY OF THE PRODIGAL SON

By His Beatitude Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev)

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Moscow, Church of the Icon of the Mother of God "Joy of All Who Sorrow"

There was a rich man who had two sons, and the youngest said to him, "I don't want to wait until your death in order to receive my inheritance, but I want to receive it now." Contrary to the normal practice, the father, while still alive, now gives his youngest son the portion of his inheritance which is due to him. The son goes off into a faraway country, where he quickly squanders his inheritance. He then begins to remember about his father's house and how happily and comfortably he had lived there. The prodigal son began to think about returning with repentance to his father's home.

This story can be applied to our own personal lives as an example of repentance because each of us, in some way, has received something from the Lord which we have squandered, *living in debauchery* (Luke 15:13). Each of us can think of something for which we need to repent and ask forgiveness from God.

The parable speaks not only about the youngest son but also about the oldest. In the ancient world the oldest son received the principal portion of the inheritance. He received the main portion while the youngest would receive what remained, which was not very much. For example, if the father was rich in land, then, as a rule, his entire property would be left to his eldest son and not divided among all of his sons. If the father owned a herd of livestock or some other movable or immovable property, it would be passed down to the first-born and the younger ones would receive only a small portion. In the middle ages, if a wealthy man left an inheritance, the entire inheritance went to his oldest son and the younger one received nothing. His choices were to become a monk and possibly to become a cardinal, or to go to war with the hope of being elevated to the rank of general. For many centuries inheritances were distributed in this manner. This helped to preserve the ancestral inheritance. If the wealth was instead divided and distributed into smaller and smaller portions with each succeeding generation, then sooner or later nothing would be left.

Thus, in today's parable, the eldest son was by right the primary son in line to inherit his father's property. For the younger son there remained only a small inheritance which he quickly squandered, having *gone into a far country* (Luke 15:13).

The younger son then returns home. He returns with repentance. He acknowledges that he squandered the wealth which he received in a reckless manner and realizes that he will not have a second chance to receive his inheritance. His father is still alive, and when his father dies the remainder of the inheritance will go to his older brother. The prodigal son returns to his father's house with these thoughts and does not expect his father to receive him as a son, but hopes to at least receive a place in his father's home as a hireling — as one of those people who work in his father's house and receive meals as a recompense.

His father however, receives and accepts him with outstretched arms and with hugs. He restores the returning prodigal to the worthiness of a son, because for the father his son could never be a hireling; he can only be his son.

But the eldest son — who always lived with his father and patiently waited for the father's death in order to inherit everything that was due to him — saw his younger brother as a rival: for now, all of a sudden, the father has decided to give the younger son another inheritance by taking from the portion that lawfully remained and belonged to his eldest son. The elder son refuses to greet and accept the returning prodigal as his brother. He reproves his father for receiving his youngest son with love and ignoring him, the first-born son.

Conflicts such as these occur very often in families: between parents and children and between older and younger siblings. Inheritance disputes sometimes escalate into litigation

and sometimes even lead to crimes, because often for the person seeking an inheritance, earthly goods are more important than love for his father or for his brother. Some people spend their entire lives measuring the people around them according to material categories: how much is this or that friendship worth, how much is a relationship worth with this or that relative, is it necessary to have anything to do with these or those people. Their entire life becomes like a haggling or a market place where their interpersonal relationships with people are valued from the point of view of how useful and profitable they can be, and not by the significance of the relationships by themselves.

There is also the level of our interpersonal relationship with God. People also approach this relationship in various ways. Thus, some feel that they have fulfilled their religious obligation and can therefore expect a reward, and if for some reason they don't receive it, then they murmur and grumble against God. They ask, comparing themselves with others, "Why is it that this or that person lives in debauchery, in a lecherous and impure manner, and yet the Lord helps him while I live a righteous life; I fulfill the commandments and tithe, yet my life, somehow, is not going well?"

The eldest son didn't squander anything. He simply waited for the time when he would receive his inheritance. Then, all of a sudden, the youngest son intrudes on all of this, and then leaves as if he is erased from life. The youngest son returns and the father receives and accepts him as if nothing between them has occurred.

The interpersonal relationship between man and God is based upon laws which are different than the laws which exist between people in the secular sense. Whereas in human relations there is often calculation and benefit, such a situation cannot exist between God and man. In the interpersonal relationship between God the Father and His sons, the sons are all loved by the Father. Some sons are older, some are middle-aged and some are younger. Some receive more of an inheritance and some less, but all of God the Father's children are loved.. The Lord loves all of us — those who have always been with Him and who have always tried to fulfill the Lord's commandments and lived righteously, as well as those who did not keep His commandments and fell into sin, who *left and went into a far country* and there squandered their wealth.

This truth was hidden from the people of the Old Testament but is revealed to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, who showed that God does not behave justly towards people, because His mercy transcends His own justice. According to the earthly statutes of man, whoever breaks the law is punished, for each specific breaking of the law has its own specific measure of punishment — the greater the seriousness of the crime, the more severe the punishment. The interpersonal relationship between God and man it is not like this at all. The Lord forgives people for their sins — the faith of the Church in the Mystery of Confession and the power of repentance is founded on this.

We come to Confession again and again and seemingly confess the same sins each time. Although Confession should be our chance to correct our sins, very often it turns out that we are not freed from them, because we are unable to correct them. We recognize that we have squandered the riches which the Lord has given us and it is with this feeling that we come to God.

Sometimes it seems that the Lord is unable to accept us as His sons, and we hope that we can at least dwell as hirelings in the house of our Father God. However, if our repentance is sincere and heartfelt, then God receives every penitent with love and again and again grants him the opportunity to return and dwell in the Father's house as a worthy son.

***Translated from the Russian by Archpriest Peter Olsen***