

## Revisiting the Story of the Prodigal Son

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Hello, my name is Father Taylor Reynolds from the Diocese of Alexandria, Louisiana and I'm very honored and blessed to be here with you in this "Pray More Retreats". I will be offering four talks on this retreat concerning the different mysteries of forgiveness and suffering. My first talk will be the prodigal son. Second talk will be on how do we forgive. My third talk will concern suffering. My fourth talk will go over saints, who themselves have suffered and so my first talk today is going to be that reflection and a meditation on the prodigal son. Before I dive into that talk, let us dive into the heart of the Father through prayer.

### Opening Prayer

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. God our heavenly Father, we thank You and we praise You for revealing Your heart to us. We may call You Father. We may know ourselves as Your children. We pray, Lord, that as we enter to this Gospel story, we may come to see the heart of the Father that stands waiting for us when we turn to it. We pray that Jesus, Your Son, may reveal to us what it means to be beloved of the Father. We pray, Lord, that in this Gospel we may see our proper response when we sin, which is to come back to You. We pray, Lord, that we may not despair or be ashamed, but may always turn to You, confident of Your love. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

### Heaven is the Love of God

So again, today on this first talk, I wanted to enter into the beautiful Gospel of the Gospels, the story of the prodigal son, which we consider it kind of the quintessential of Jesus' parables. All of Jesus' parables give us a little hint of heaven. You know, what will heaven be like? And what is heaven like right now? This Gospel is the most beautifully designed in all of its intricate parts, its intricate points, but also in its great overview, the great structure of this story, of this parable, gives the entire image of salvation history, the entire image of heaven and earth. This parable is seated within Luke chapter 15, which is the great Gospel of mercy, which, again, it gives the story of the 99 righteous sheep and the one who goes astray, the woman who seeks after the lost coin, all these images that reflect God's love for us and it reflects the image of heaven and there's a very beautiful, again, Gospel point.

There's a very beautiful verse in verse seven of chapter 15 and it says that there is more rejoicing in heaven over the one sinner who repents than the 99 who do not need repentance, and this is a beautiful image to remind us of heaven and earth's connection. That heaven is not separated from us. Heaven is not unconcerned with the affairs of earth. Heaven is all the more drawn into the activities of earth. The saints in heaven when they reached heaven, did not stop being concerned about the affairs of earth. They did not become disinterested. No, they became ever more involved. You know, the saints in heaven want there to be more saints. Heaven reflects the love

of God. Heaven has become really the love of God, again, kind of shimmering, silhouetted on all the saints and the angels and so we see that heaven is a reality that is constantly around us, constantly concerned with our life and this is going to be something I'm going to talk about later on whenever I talk about the saints, but that is, again, first image for us in our own lives to reflect on with heaven. Heaven is this greater reality.

The saints have never stopped being who they were. They became more of who they were when they entered into heaven and so we look at that. We look at that reality here and now that they are all wanting us to reach heaven. You know, all of us who are struggling here below are not alone. You know, we have a great companionship of people who are concerned for us, who love us, again, imaging and reflecting the love that God has for us.

## **The Prodigal Son**

But then it's at verse 11 that we enter into that story of the prodigal son. You know, and this is a beauty beautiful, again, parable that it starts off, it says that the father, there was a man who had two sons. Anytime that the Scriptures talk about a father having two sons, two brothers, we right away are drawn into the image of, again, salvation history of the Jews and the Gentiles, both of them coming from the same Father, God being the Father of both, and we have, again, the one who is faithful, we can look at that as the Jews and the one who went astray, the one who didn't do the Father's will, which is the Gentiles and how, again, God, in His plan, is desiring to bring all of them together back into his home. That He, God the Father, wants to draw them together and to be Father to bring them into his household.

So that becomes, again, one of the first layouts of this story and then, again, we have going into the prodigal son himself. He was the younger son. The older son was the one who had more of the inheritance. He was given the greater portion of the Father's inheritance. The younger son had less. So, the younger son goes and asks the father for his share. Again, this is essentially an image where the younger son is declaring the father is dead as, you know, no concern to the son. You know, he is basically saying, "Give to me what I'll receive when you die because you're already dead to me, essentially," and the father, again, complies. The father gives to him that portion and immediately he goes off and uses it you know, vainly. He enters into sinful life. He gives up on all these other practices. He is invested now in a life of sin and debauchery.

You know, again, this is an image for the Gentiles. This is an image for those who had gone off and done, you know, all the idolatrous practices and then it says very beautiful, says that coming to himself, you know, this image, metanoia, that he realized where he was. That he was starving. He was in the, you know, the pig pen. He was in need of the father. He lacked so much. He'd given up on so much and he gives the first accusation of himself. He gives that accusation. He says, you know, "I will go to my father, and I will say, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you and I no longer deserve to be called your son.'" This gives for us, personally, an image of the kind of the dynamic of sin.

You know, first of all, the devil plays two roles. The devil is the tempter, but he is also the accuser. The devil is so good at the very beginning of telling us that it's not a sin. He is so good of hiding that reality of kind of, you know, painting it in this beautiful light, of gilding the action,

you know, so that we're led into it. You know, we're led into this life, these actions, because it seems so good. It doesn't seem anything wrong with it, but then ironically, the second we commit that sin, the devil changes roles and the devil brings to the forefront how evil it was, how wrong it was, how much it was a sin, and how much we are sinners to try and guilt us, to try and keep us stuck in that place of sin that, you know, we can't go to the Father. We're too ashamed. You know, we're too despicable. We've disappointed him too much, there's no way we can go to him, you know? And so that is the devil's dynamic. To lead us into sin, but then ultimately to keep us stuck there, you know, which we have to keep in mind in our own life whenever we are struggling with sin. The devil will be the first one to tempt us into sin, but he's also going to be the first one to try and keep us there. You know, and both of those are logics of the devil and we have to resist.

## **Analysis of The Prodigal Son**

And then, of course, the son does go home. He does go to the father and as he is going home, it says that why he was still far ways away, the father saw him and was moved with compassion and this is, again, a beautiful word that the Gospels use only a few times that's very powerful every time they use it. He was moved with compassion. It's a very physical term. He has physically moved. There is some reality that happens in him. You know, this is the image, again, how God's love in Jesus has become flesh. You know, he has allowed himself to become physically moved. I mean, that's overwhelming to reflect upon and that God, again, allowed himself to be moved. And he, the father, he ran to meet the son. He runs to meet him, and it says he embraced him. In the original Greek, it literally says he kind of collapses onto his shoulder. He allows himself to become weak. You know, in a sense, it's that image kind of Jesus collapsing on the cross, you know, that weakness that he experienced, that he allowed himself to enter into and, again, the son then enters into his kind of argument. He enters into the three kind of accusations of the son's sin that we'll kind of analyze.

You know, the first, again, he says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and I have sinned against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as you would one of your hired servants." So that's that first accusation of the son's sins that his actions have the ability to strip him of his dignity. You know that our actions or our failure to act can in some way, determine who we are. It can strip us of our dignity. It can strip us of our worth, of our goodness. You know and that's that son's first analysis. That he has lost all worthiness, all goodness, all honor, and dignity because of his actions. You know, this thought that my actions can change who I am. You know, it's a very big weight to carry. You know, that would be what would happen if our sins could change who we were.

And then we have, later on, we have the slaves and their analysis, that's the second one. The slaves' kind of accusations of the brother. You know, it says the older brother hears the sound of merry men. He comes over and he asks the slave what's going on. They say, you know, "Your father has killed the fatted calf because your brother has been received with joy. He has found him safe and sound." And so, again, it was kind of this image that sin is a wandering. You know, sin is the sinful reality of not following the path, sinful reality of, you could say, as you know, missing the mark and that's how they analyze the sin. That, you know, there's a goal, there's a direction you're supposed to be on, and you've gone off of it, you know? That reality that, you

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know, again, you're supposed to kind of lead your own life and you're supposed to guide your own path and that if you veer off, you know, you've been lost. You know, you're gone and so that's the second analysis, the slaves' analysis.

The third then becomes kind of the weightiest and it is the older brother. You know, the older brother who then at this point, he refuses to come in. He really, at this point, refuses to acknowledge his brother as his brother, you know, and the father goes out to him and he says, "You know, but when this, your son, who has swallowed up your inheritance in harlots and debauchery, you know, for him, you slaughter the fatted calf. You know, I, who have been faithful, you know, you don't even give me a single kid, you know?" And so, it's this kind of comparison that my faithfulness, you know, sets this bar and this is the image of wholeness, this is the image of goodness and look at what he is. Again, look at his actions, how his actions have compared with mine, and how they have fallen short. You know, again, this image that holiness is something that I determine.

Holiness is something that I can make by my faithfulness. You know, and because of his unfaithfulness, he has lost and so this is that third analysis, that third analysis that he is not willing to embrace the brothers as his brother, which, unfortunately, sometimes we fall into as well. You know, we who are moving on a path of trying to grow in virtue, trying to grow in holiness, trying to be ever faithful, you know, we can look at those other people, those, you know, the people that have not done all that we have done, they have not, you know, fulfilled the things we have done. They've not lived the life we have thought of, and we say, "Well, why do they deserve it? Why do they deserve, you know, heaven? Why do they deserve any of those goodness? You know, it doesn't make sense." It doesn't make sense to our kind of logical mind that they should not receive when we think we deserve it.

You know, and this then becomes the beautiful part of the Gospel. This is a very, very beautiful part of the Gospel. The father says, "My son, my child," again, used that term that he's a child. You know, reminding him that he is still in that relationship with the father. He's never lost it. He says, "All that I have is yours," you know and it's this reminder to the older brother that as much as the prodigal son, the older brother's also in need of mercy because the older brother, again, fell into that thought that, "I have merited the father's love and because of what I've done, I have been good enough to receive it. I've been faithful enough," but the father says, you know, "All that I have is yours. It's never been lacking. I have never not given it to you. When you were not faithful, it was still there. When you were faithful, it was there."

It's that reminder, again, that before he can become the brother, he has to become the son again. That he has to see the unconditional love of God. The older brother has to see that unconditional love of God that nothing, no faithfulness, no air will stop the father from loving. The father has always loved the same. You know, which is a reminder for us as well. God loves us the same. Our dignity is always there. It's never lost. It's never taken away. You know, we are always the children of the Father. His loves always the same. Now our actions can change and fluctuate, our actions can be pleasing or displeasing, but it never changes who we are and so we reflect on that through the image of the older brother that he is as well in need of mercy. They're both in need of mercy.

## **A Reflection of Unconditional Love**

And then we have the final analysis, the analysis of the father of the prodigal son's sins and again, he says, you know, "This, my son, was lost and has been found. He was dead and is now alive." Again, he was always the son when he was lost or when he was found, when he was dead, when he was alive. You know, the father has always loved him. Even when his actions did change something in him, you know, the actions change the son. It didn't change the relation of the father and the son though. You know, our sins are a personal act that can wound us, that can affect us, that can, you know, debilitate me, but it will never change that relationship between me and the father. It'll change me, but it'll never change the father. It'll never change God and so that's that beautiful reality, that conversion is now it's just coming back to where the father has always been. Never been the father leaving his place. It's been us leaving it.

So that becomes that beautiful reflection on unconditional love that God has never stopped loving us. God has always loved us and so we're invited now, especially on this Lent to see this beautiful light. You know, sometimes we look at our practices and our Christian walk as the older brother and says, "Well, I have to do this in order to merit the father's love for me because if I don't, I'm going to lose the father's love for me. You know, I'm going to fail. If I fail on this, I lose his love. If I'm faithful, I keep it." You know that image needs mercy. He needs to encounter love that is unconditional as much as the prodigal son who does sin, who does do wrong, but is reminded that, you know, the father's love overcomes all things, can embrace all, can draw him back to himself.

You know, and this is where we, as Christians, are called, again, to see everyone as brothers by first seeing ourself and all people as children. You know, the Father is the Father and that's what makes us sons, that's what makes all of us brothers and sisters and we're all in need of the mercy of God. So, again, as we enter into this point now, as we, again, reflect on this beautiful Gospel of mercy, again, we start off with this image of the prodigal son because it becomes the archetype of our relationship with God the Father, of all salvation history, again, of heaven and earth that are always, again, in the heart of the father. You know, God who embraces heaven and earth. Heaven, which, again, becomes this perfect image, that perfect image in heaven of where the saints now see us, even though we're sinners, even though we're doing wrong, even though we're struggling, they still see us as brothers and sisters. They have reached that perfect level of seeing us as the father sees us, of imitating the father's heart, of, again, them not being separated from us, but as it says, you know, there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than the nine who don't need it.

You know, the saints who are so concerned with us reaching heaven, that they will do everything that they'll pray for us. They will journey with us. They will offer us their example so we can come to heaven because that increases their joy. That increases, again, the love of the Father. It increases, again, all that are embraced by the love of God.

## **Closing Prayer**

So, we now, again, turn back to the Father as we pray. *In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. God, our heavenly Father, we thank You for Your unconditional love,*

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*which embraces us, which renews us, which restores us. Lord, we pray that as we continue to embark on this journey of conversion, we may never take our eyes off of You who's so loving and so good. Pray that Your son, Jesus, may inspire us by his suffering and death, giving us the grace to come back to You. Pray the saints and angels who constantly look upon us and cheer us onto victory may be our companions. Pray the blessed mother may be a mother to us to nurture us, especially we pray that may all mighty God may bless you, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen. God bless you, my brothers, and sisters. Thank you for joining.*