

God's Unfathomable Mercy

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Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His mercy endures forever. Hello to all my brothers and sisters in Christ joining us on this Pray More Healing Retreat. I'm Father Ricardo Pineda with the Fathers of Mercy, and I'm so excited to share with you this reflection on God's unfathomable mercy. Jesus uses so many different words in the Diary of Saint Faustina to refer to His mercy: infinite, inexhaustible, inscrutable, inconceivable, unimaginable, but more than any other word, He keeps coming back to this one, unfathomable. As He says things like, "Your sins are but a drop in the ocean of my mercy." Or, "My mercy is so great that no mind, be it of man or angel, will be able to fathom it throughout all eternity." That's what I'm talking about. Let's begin with a prayer.

Opening Prayer

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Lord God, Father of mercy, we praise you as love itself, as mercy itself. We thank you for being so ready to have mercy on us, to take our misery to heart, especially by sending us your heart, your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to save us from sin and make us your beloved sons and daughters. Help us now, Father. Bless us with ears to hear, with eyes to see ever more clearly your merciful love for us. Help us to be able to abide in that love, your peace, your joy, and to help others be able to adore your unfathomable mercy. We ask this in the name of Jesus through the intercession of Mary, our Mother, St. Joseph, our guardian angels, and patron saints, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Welcome Back

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been 10 years since my last confession." "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been 30 years since my last confession." "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been over 50 years since my last confession." Welcome back. Welcome home, beloved son or daughter of God. Welcome back to the sacrament of God's mercy. I love it. When people ask me, "Father, what is your favorite part of being a priest?" I like to say that besides celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, holding God in my hands every single day in the Eucharist, my other favorite part of being a priest is hearing confessions, helping reconcile the sons and daughters of God with their Heavenly Father in confession.

After having gone to confession so many times myself, after having wept many tears of sorrow and contrition for my own serious sins committed, especially in my teenage years, after having wept many tears of love and joy each time I let it sink in that even after those sins, that God still loved me, that He still wanted me as His son, I couldn't help but desire to help others have that same beautiful encounter with God's mercy.

Luke 15

And so I'm so excited to guide you in reflecting on the best image that Jesus gives us of His mercy in the parable of the Prodigal Son found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 15. You've heard it before. A man had two sons, and the younger said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the inheritance that's to come to me." That's basically like spitting in his father's face. That's like saying, "You're as good as dead to me, Dad." Because normally it was after the death of the father that the sons would receive the inheritance. And he takes the money, goes off to a far-away country, and he squanders it. That's what the word prodigal means, to squander. He wastes it all on loose living, and then he finds himself in dire need when famine hits.

A Symbol of Restoration

Now, this is what happens to us when we sin. We squander the inheritance of our free will. We abuse it. We disobey God in thought, word, or deed, or omission. And it's possible even to squander the inheritance of sanctifying grace, that divine life that God put in our souls at baptism. It's possible to lose it. This is expressed in the parable when the father says, "My son was dead and has come to life again." He actually says it twice, the second time to the older brother, "Your brother was dead, and has come to life again."

And this can sound like just a strong metaphor, but in truth, this is expressing what the Catholic Church teaches, that when we commit a mortal sin with those three conditions, it's grave matter, a serious offense, full knowledge, I know it's that serious, and full consent of the will, I choose to do it anyways, then what happens? We die spiritually. We lose that sanctifying grace, that divine life in our soul. And our soul needs to be raised from the dead. We need that divine life anew. This is what happens when we repent of our sins in confession.

This is symbolized in the parable by the robe. When the father tells the servants, "Quickly, bring the finest robe and put it on him." This symbolizes the restoration of dignity. On one level, human dignity, because animals don't wear clothes, or usually don't. But even greater than that, the restoration of divine dignity, of sharing in God's life, of being clothed again with Christ.

A Symbol of Reconciliation

This is one reason confession's so amazing, because it's possible for there to be resurrection. If a soul confessed mortal sins, and God working through me, I absolve them of those sins, then when they leave, I'm flexing in there. I'm like, "Yeah, oh yeah. So awesome." Feels so great, like a superhero. But not only does God's mercy offer us resurrection through confession, also it offers reconciliation with the most tender, patient love of God.

This is expressed in the parable when it says the son was going back to his father, "and while he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him." "A long way off." That means his father was looking for him. He was waiting for him. He was longing for him to come home. We can imagine the father every day looking outside the window. "Oh, is that my son?"

Every time a new figure comes into view. But as it gets closer, "Oh no, it's not him." But today, "Oh yes, it's him! It's my son! Oh, he's coming home." And he can't contain himself. He's got to run out to his son, and it says, "he embraced him and kissed him." But some translations are better than others. I read this in the Spanish once, which means he threw his arms around him, like literally hanging on his neck, and he covered him with kisses. So I imagine this father, you know, he's running out to meet his son, and maybe as he gets to him, he ends up slipping. And then he's like, oh, he's like laughing as he's holding onto his son's neck, and he's just covering him with kisses.

This is like when a father or mother loses their child at the store or at the fair, and they turn around, and all of a sudden panic hits. "Where's my baby? Where's my son? Where's my daughter?" And they're running all around, and if they turn up, then finally they're like, what do they do? They scoop them up and the child like, "Oh Mom, Dad, what are you doing? Everybody's watching." "Well, I almost lost you. You're not going to get away from this love anymore, right?"

And some of the images, some of the paintings, they depict this so well. I saw an image once where the prodigal son has this longer hair, and it's all greasy. It looks like he hasn't bathed in weeks, if not months. And he doesn't have a shirt. And you see how dirty he is and how skinny he is. You can see the bone of his spine. He's all emaciated from starving to death. And as he takes the next step, you see how weak he is. It looks like he's about to fall down dead. And the father is looking all tall and strong and clean. He has this beautiful white garment. And I'm looking at that image of the son, and I'm thinking, "Ooh, don't touch him until he takes a bath. Probably smells like a pig too, right?"

An Offering of Liberation

But this father is just so overjoyed to be able to hold his son again and cover him with kisses. And we can imagine what the prodigal son must have been thinking in that moment. "I never knew, I never knew he loved me like this. I never knew he loved me this much. How could I ever have left this?" And this is the kind of mercy that's waiting for us there in confession. This is symbolized by the ring. When the father says not only the robe, but, "Put a ring on his finger." What does the ring symbolize? Well, the rings at that time would have had the family seal. And so everyone seeing the son walk through the house with that ring on his finger would recognize he is the beloved and honored son of his father.

Besides resurrection, reconciliation, confession offers us liberation. It offers us freedom from the tyranny of the devil, from slavery to sin. Before we sin, when the temptation's going on, the devil acts like he's our best friend. "Oh, go on, do it. It's going to feel so great. And everyone else is doing it. Go on. And God, he'll understand. God wants you to be happy, right? This is going to make you happy. So go on, do it." And then after we sin, he turns on us. He becomes like our worst enemy, our accuser. "After everything God's done for you, you went and did this? Don't you think that God could ever love you again, or that he would ever love you the same. Oh no, you're so dirty, you're so horrible." And this is where the prodigal son arrived, the sense of his dignity. So, Lord, when it says that he hired himself out to one of the local citizens to tend swine.

For Jews, pigs are unclean animals. They wouldn't even want to be in the same town as pigs. And yet here he is serving them. And it says, he was so hungry that he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but no one would give him any. That's what it says in the English. "No one would give him any." I read this in the Spanish once, and it was even worse. See, when we hear that phrase, "no one would give him any," that doesn't necessarily sound strange. I mean, who of us is going to offer pigs food to another human being? "Oh, and if you get hungry while you're working, well, you can always have some of the pig's food." No, we wouldn't say that, right? That's a grave insult. But what did it say in the Spanish? "He longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed."

Which means they would not let him. Do you catch the difference there? They would not let him. It's one thing to be so hungry that we're looking at the pig's food and we're like, "Oh, even that's starting to look good." But who of us would bring ourselves to actually try to eat it? But when we hear that phrase, "they would not let him," what does that convey? That he is so hungry that when they're not looking, he's like, "All right, I'm going for it." And he starts trying to eat the pig's food, because he is literally dying of hunger. And they see him and they're like, "What are you doing? That's not for you. That's for the pigs. Stop that." In this sense, like you're worth less than pigs. Who cares if you die?

And this is where our sins can take us. We can be so weighed down by our sins that we're believing lies of the devil. Like, "I'm no good. I'm a loser. I'm let worth less than pigs. Life's for other people." The prodigal son was buying into the lies of the devil. We find out when he's rehearsing his confession. He says, "I will rise and go to my father, and I shall say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as you would one of your hired workers or one of your servants.'"

We see it right there. He's believing, "I'm not worthy to be my father's son. I'll be lucky if he even treats me like a servant. I'll never be better than that." But what happens when he goes back to his father and he's saying that confession after he pronounces those words? "I am not no longer worthy to be called your son." The father interrupts him. He doesn't let him continue, because the father has heard enough. "Oh no, don't you go there. Don't you say that, that you're not worthy to be my son. You're my son. You'll always be my son. My beloved son. Quickly bring the sandals."

Why the sandals? Because slaves or servants at that time, they didn't wear shoes. But my son is going to wear shoes so that he can feel it on the soles of his feet, that he is free, that he doesn't have to live by that nightmare of the past. "No, put the sandals on his feet. Slaughter the fatted calf and let us celebrate with a feast."

A Beloved Son and Daughter of God

This is God's mercy waiting for us in confession. We can imagine someone might ask in confession, "Father, I've already confessed this sin, but I feel like I need to say it again. Is that okay?" Two possibilities here. One possibility is that the person trusts in the mercy of God, they believe they've been forgiven, and they also forgive themselves, but because of their great love for God, they want to renew the sorrow for that sin that offended him. This is a good thing. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be consoled." Especially that means mourning for our sins. But it would be a different case if the person feels like, "I

have to say it again and again, because I'm not sure that God's really forgiven me." And I would try to lead that person to understand that those thoughts come from lies of the devil.

Lies such as, "Oh, well, someone who commits that sin, oh, this doesn't deserve to be forgiven." Or, "Oh sure, yeah, God forgave you, but don't you forgive yourself. Don't you forget how dirty, shameful, and filthy you are." And so I would encourage that person to repeat with me, and you can do it now as you're watching this, "In the name of Jesus, those are lies of the devil. I am a beloved son or daughter of God." "In the name of Jesus, those are lies of the devil. I am a beloved son or daughter of God." Yes, proclaim that truth to yourself.

When We Doubt if God is Merciful

Now, if even with that we're still doubting whether God is merciful enough to forgive us for the things that we've done, a few considerations can help. First, there's the realization that God did not have to create us, right? God from all eternity has known everything we will do, good and bad. And this doesn't violate free will. It's not future to God, right, what past, present, future is to us. God is eternal. He's outside of time.

So yes, He knows it all at once. And from all eternity, knowing the sins we would commit, He has decided, "Yes, I want this one." He has decided that you are worth creating, that you are worth redeeming, worth dying for. And He's not going to change His mind. If we think about it, after any sin we commit, God could zap us out of existence, but He doesn't. And He's not going to do that, because Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God is perfect. He does not change. And we can be assured of His unchanging love. Every single moment we exist is evidence that God wants us, that He has looked at us from all eternity and said, "Yes." He's so ready to take away those sins.

Second thing to recall is that God loves us not because of what we've done, but because of who He is. Because God is love, as Saint John tells us in his first letter, chapter four, verse eight, "God is love." And we might change our good or bad behavior, but who God is, that's never going to change. So yes, He loves us not because of what we've done, what we do, but because of who He is.

Third consideration is God hates our sin, because He loves us so much. Because He cares about us so much. He doesn't want us to harm ourselves. No matter how good sin might feel, it harms us. We're harming ourselves. It's beneath our dignity. We're desecrating ourselves. It's dehumanizing. So God, we don't want to imagine Him, oh, so angry at us and ready to destroy us. No, He hates the sin. He wants to destroy the sin. He's just so ready to get that out of our life so that we can move on, so we can begin again. Now, some are afraid of the sacrament of confession.

Good point to remember here is that a good priest only wants your peace. A good priest wants to bestow on you God's mercy, freedom, healing. He's ready to rejoice with you, to be rid of these sins. We're not in there judging you. "Oh my goodness, what a horrible sin. What a horrible person. I can't believe they did that." No, I hear those sins as if they were my sins. St. Augustine said, "Were it not for the grace of God, there go I." I recognize that these could be my sins if it weren't for the grace of God. So I am rejoicing with you just as much as if it were me being freed from those sins.

"Oh, what if the priest recognizes my voice or he knows it's me coming again?" Well, first of all, when I hear a voice that I think I've heard before, I always give the benefit of the doubt. It could be somebody who sounds just like that person or confesses in a similar way. Never going to say, "Is that you?" No, no. And if it's a priest who might know you, again, a good priest, he's so happy that you want to get these sins out of your life. And he's so happy to be able to help you do that, to take them away. If you have ever had a bad experience in confession, if a priest maybe yelled at you or belittled you, made you feel like dirt, on behalf of the Church, I beg your forgiveness.

It's a great thing to pray for our priests that they will be good instruments of God's mercy. Confessional seal, another thing that can give us some more confidence, recognizing that the priest, because he hears those sins as God's representative, he cannot repeat any of those sins that he has heard in confession under pain of mortal sin himself and excommunication. And yes, priests have died rather than reveal sins they heard in confession.

Prepare For Your Confession

A good thing to help get rid of some of that fear also is good preparation. We want to examine our conscience before we go to confession. To help you do that, there are these beautiful brochures put out by the Fathers of Mercy, "Examination of Conscience for Adults and Teens." You can find these on our website, fathersofmercy.com. You can download them for free on your device, or you can print them out. We have English and Spanish. And when you open that up, you find a big list of sins that we might have committed. Some people say, "I don't have any sins." Well, try to get through the whole list, and there'll be something to bring.

Good to memorize how to begin confession. Either, "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned," or, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been so long since my last confession, and these are my sins." And then we list the sins. We can take these in there with us. Hopefully we've looked at it beforehand. Don't examine your conscience in there in confession. Prepare before. Mark them maybe, so that you can go through the list, how many times we might have committed these sins. And then afterwards you can rip it up.

Don't bring your phone in there. Every phone is a microphone. It can be tapped into, that can threaten the seal of confession. So if you're using that examination on your phone, write it on a separate sheet of paper, the sins. Leave your phone with someone else. And then again, you can rip up that paper afterwards as you rejoice.

Struggling With Scrupulosity

Now, for those who might struggle with scrupulosity, this is that OCD with a religious manifestation where we tend to believe that venial sins are mortal sins or things that aren't sins at all, that they really are sins. And this can lead us to think we need to be going to confession every single day, or even several times a day, or we're all anxious, we can't be at peace. A few considerations that I have found seem to bring peace to those who struggle with this. First is realizing not all of our thoughts are our thoughts.

Again, not all of our thoughts, everything that enters into our head, not all of them are our thoughts, because the demons can throw things in there to try to tempt us. They can evoke memories or images from the past. So just the fact that it's going through our mind doesn't mean it's properly speaking our thought. It doesn't become so until we deliberately choose to give it our attention, that, "Oh yes, I want and I'm going to think about this."

But as long as it's against our will, then it remains a temptation. You can imagine someone who's thinking, "Oh, I have all these blasphemous or angry or impure thoughts. I must be so horrible a person." Well, no, because they're not necessarily ours. A corresponding point that goes along with this is, sin is in the will. Sin is in the will. The choice of the will to think the thought, to do the action, that's where the sin starts.

So however strong the temptation might be, or even if we feel ourselves attracted to that thought that's coming to mind, just the feeling of being attracted, or a feeling of guilt, that doesn't mean we have sinned. Again, sin is in the will. I love Father Mike Schmitz's definition of sin, "God, I know what you want. I don't care. I want what I want." That part, "I don't care." That's key, right? That's the choice to totally just rebel against God. And the fact that a scrupulous person is afraid or worried about offending God, that means they don't want to offend Him. And so they can be at peace.

The Mercy of God Saves Us

A key thing to remember here, hit Save, it is not rules, but the mercy of God that saves us. Again, it is not rules, but the mercy of God that saves us. Of course, we try to follow the rules, right? And try not to sin. But it's not our perfect behavior that's going to save us. No, we all fall into sin. It's the mercy of God. So as long as we're continuing with that attitude of repentance, then we can live at peace. If you're interested in more on scrupulosity, you can research Ten Commandments for Those Who Struggle with Scrupulosity. That can be very useful. There's so much more we could say on God's mercy, but hopefully this is enough to encourage you not to run from the sacrament of confession, but rather to run to the sacrament of confession.

If you're not already doing it, challenge from this talk is to go to confession at least once a month. That's what our Blessed Mother counseled at Fatima. That's what St. John Paul II counseled. He said frequent confession. "Oh, what do you mean by that?" He said, "Once a month to regularly receive God's mercy." It's been my joy to share this reflection with you. I've been praying for you. Please pray for me. And I hope you will join me for the other reflections during this Pray More Healing Retreat.