

**“..THIS YOUR BROTHER WAS DEAD, AND NOW IS ALIVE;” –Biblical Commentary
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Luke 15,1-3.11-32

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ^ù And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

^ù “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ^ù I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’” ^ù And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. ’But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Jesus announces His message, explains His program, and the evangelist Luke writes in chapter 15 that *Everyone came to Him* –literally anyone – *the tax collectors*. The tax collectors are considered the people that are the furthest from God, the excluded, impure for excellence, those that have no hope at all even if they repent and convert.

So the most desperate came to Jesus, those that were the furthest from the religion and God. *“..and sinners were all drawing near to hear him”*. Why? Because they found in Jesus’ message that answer to the need of the fullness of life that everyone carries inside.

Well then, while those excluded from the religion, those despised by society came to listen to Jesus, there are those that protested. The evangelist writes the *Pharisees*, those super-pious, devotees, the zealots of the tradition *-and the scribes*, the official theologians of the teaching, *grumbled*. While those furthest from God listened to Jesus’ word because they saw in His message that which they had waited for, this same message made the spiritually and religious elite, grumble!

“...grumbled, saying,..” and there is so much contempt shown towards Jesus that they avoid mentioning His name, using a derogatory term, this one, this man. *“This man receives sinners and eats with them.”* Here is Jesus’ great crime. Instead of judging, punishing, condemning and keeping a distance from sinners, not only does He welcome them, but He eats with them. Eating together indicates a communal life.

So they are scandalized by Jesus’ behavior. Their God is completely different from the God that Jesus presents. That which the Pharisees and scribes have never understood is that God, rather than occupying himself with being obedient and respecting the laws, is occupied with the happiness of mankind. And this parable of Jesus is for the Pharisees and scribes. Therefore it is not as much a teaching for the community of Jesus’ disciples, as for His adversaries.

It is together with two other parables, that of the lost sheep and the lost money, but the most know, most important and significant is that of the prodigal son.

The parable is quite long and normally the explanation is centered on the return of this son who returns to the father’s house and obtains the father’s pardon even before asking for it, and the father restores him with a dignity, in honour as never before. There is a risk that the elder son takes second place, he represents the scribes and Pharisees to whom this parable is directed.

So this time we overlook the first part, that of the son’s return and arrive at the reaction of the elder son, so from verse 35. The evangelist uses the Greek word *presbitero*, the older or elder, because the elders were, with the high priests and the scribes, members of the Sanhedrin and had the power to judge.

So in fact the reference is to these scribes and Pharisees, to which the parable is directed. *“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.”* What has happened? The house is a house of mourning because the father weeps for the death of the son that had gone away. If in this house, filled with sadness and mourning, there is music and dancing, what could of happened , if not the return of the son?

But he becomes suspicious. The picture ironic and strict that Jesus has of the religious people, for whom any kind of life, joy and happiness is not only not attracts them, but they are suspicious of it. The music in the father’s house, never ! *“And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant,”* He could have understood by himself. *“And he said to him,”* with enthusiasm *“Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound. ”*

So He tells them the reason for joy. Well then the eldest son is not happy nor does he hurry home. But he “.. *asked what these things meant.*” He is actually angry, deeply angry, and “.. *refused to go in.*” the return of the brother, the joy of the father, he is indifferent to them. Now we see that he has reasoned based on the law, justice; what is happening seems unjust to him, so much so that the father has to go out and beg him to enter.

“..*but he answered his father,*” – and here there is a severe picture of a religious person on the part of Jesus - ‘*Look, these many years I have served you,*’ The word ‘to serve’ is not that which we know to mean a service done voluntarily, but the evangelist uses another term that means the service of a slave, therefore he is behaving as a slave in front of his father.

“..*I never disobeyed your command,*” the evangelist uses the same word as for the commandments, “... *yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.*” So Jesus, with these three elements ridicules the behaviour of these religious people. Obedience to the law supported by the scribes and practiced by the Pharisees, makes the people childish, immature and incapable. He towards his father – and here is the behaviour of the scribes and Pharisees towards God – is submissive, servile. He is not a son for his father, but a slave.

And the relationship with the father is based on obedience of his commands and he expects a reward. It is he that obeys God observing his laws, and one expects a reward for his merits. He has not understood the novelty brought by Jesus: the believer is no longer he who obeys God observing his laws, but he who like the Father practices a love like his.

So Jesus ridicules the behavior of the scribes and Pharisees that have remained infantile. “... *you never gave me a young goat,*” but it is all yours, you could take one!

“*But when this son of yours came,*” This eldest son is terrible. Instead of saying “ my brother has returned” he says “your son” keeping his distance. Exaggerated religiosity make one see people with hatred and bitterness, able to annul even the ties of blood. The beam of zeal deforms the sight and one forgets the only thing necessary, love.

“ *But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes,..*” how does he know? It is the malice of the religious people. “...*you killed the fattened calf for him!*” And the father’s reply: “ ‘*Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.*” But as long as one lives a relation with the father – and according to the meaning of the parable with God – made of obedience, one cannot experiment the Father’s love.

For those in which the behavior towards God is based on obedience of his commandments and therefore see a transgression from these commands as a threat of punishment, are never able to experiment God’s free love. Jesus’ God is a God that does not love mankind for his merits, but for his needs. His love is not given as a reward for good behavior, but as a gift for their needs.

They do not understand this. So the father says: “ *It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for...*” and he reminds him of the brotherhood “... *this your brother was dead, and is alive,*” This is the reason for joy, but scribes and Pharisees, used to judge by the law and the rules, do not understand charity, love and compassion of the Father.