

#### FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT (2025 - C)

In today's Holy Gospel, we hear the beautiful Parable of the Prodigal Son, and just as with any parable there is always a message behind the story, so too there is a message for us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

In fact, this parable was our Lord's response to the Pharisees and scribes who were the self-proclaimed servants of God. These men had come to hear Jesus, and they were appalled at what they saw, they were appalled that our Lord would have anything to do with the tax collectors and sinners who gathered around Him to listen to His every word. So, Jesus used this parable to explain God's great mercy and His love for sinners. In this story, the Father represents God. The younger son represents sinners, and the older son represents the Pharisees and scribes.

The parable begins with a man who has two sons, and we know that the man was a well-to-do landowner because he had many servants.

Now the younger son went to his father and demanded that he receive his share of the inheritance. According to Jewish custom, this would have been one-third of the estate. The older brother would have received two-thirds. Now it's true that the Father could have divided his estate before he died, but that was not normally done. So, the younger son's request here was unusual. Nevertheless, the father went ahead and did as his son demanded.

So, when the younger son received what was coming to him, he left his father's house and went off to another country where he wasted all of the money on parties and prostitutes and wine.

This son was not only greedy and lazy and disrespectful, he was also prodigal. That is, he was wasteful and extravagant. He was the kind of person who would buy a round of drinks for everyone at the bar and throw his money to the wind.

However, there came a time when his money ran out. That was also when all of his so-called friends abandoned him. Furthermore, we are told a famine came over the land, and food became costly. So now this lazy man was not only forced to work just to eat, but the only job he could find was feeding pigs. For a Jew, there was almost nothing more humiliating. Pigs were an unclean animal. The rabbis had a saying, "Cursed is the man who rears swine."

Not only that, but in return for his work, he was only given husks of the carob tree to eat. That was food for animals. In our times, it would be like someone reduced to eating dog food to survive.

Before all this, the man he never been in need. He was rich, but now he had nothing. As he thought about this, it became clear to him that he had made a mess of his life. He had insulted his father; he had wasted all of his money, and now he was in a distant country where no one cared whether he lived or died. In his humiliation and shame, he began to think of his home and his father and his family and life he had abandoned.

Finally, he resolved to go home, but he also realized that he could not just go home as a son. As he thought about what he had done, he did a very hard thing. He became very honest with himself, and he admitted that he had done wrong. So, he resolved that he would return as a slave to work on his father's land.

As he journeyed back, he kept rehearsing over and over again a little speech he had thought up. It went like this: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired workers."

However, as he was coming up the road and before he had even come close to the house, his father saw him. Then the old man got up and ran to his son, the son he had given up for dead. He hugged his son and kissed him, and he cried tears of joy.

Now the son was even more embarrassed, and he began his little speech, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you, I no longer deserve to be called your son ..." But his father wouldn't hear of it; he wouldn't let him finish.

Seeing his worn clothes, the father ordered his servants to bring out the finest robe and new shoes and a beautiful ring. The father also ordered that the grain fed calf be killed and that a feast be prepared. With tears in his eyes, the father told everyone, we are having a celebration because the son of mine who was lost, whom I believed was dead, this son of mine has returned home.

Now, when the older son (who represents the Pharisees in this story), saw all of this, he became very angry. He questioned his father's actions. He said, I have always obeyed you. I have worked hard for you. Why do we celebrate for this ungrateful, worthless son of yours – notice here that he does not refer to his as his brother?

In reply, the father said, all that I have is yours, but now we must celebrate because your brother who was thought dead is alive; he who was lost has been found.

This teaching of Jesus is a beautiful illustration of God's mercy. What a wonderful example of His love! Even in the face of insult and arrogance and pride, we are told that God is willing to forgive our sins when we humbly ask for His pardon.

I once knew a priest who said this parable is misnamed. He said that it should really be called the parable of the prodigal father because it was the father who was most lavish and kind.

In the son we see a man who was disrespectful and ungrateful. We see someone who had only cared about himself and no one else. Yet when this son came to his senses and returned home, he hardly had time to apologize before his father restored him to his former position.

How rich is God's mercy! How generously He bestows His forgiveness upon those who ask for it! We need to remember here that there is nothing we have done that is beyond God's mercy. God will never refuse to forgive as long as we are sorry and resolve to amend our lives. That is the message of this parable.

So now in the midst of the Season of Lent, it's a very good time for us to be honest with God. Now is a very good time for us to follow the example of the prodigal son who confessed to his father that he had sinned. We too should do the same and confess our sins in the great Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. So, let me make a few remarks about this Sacrament.

Confession is part of our Catholic faith and practice. Confession comes from Jesus, and it is in this Sacrament that we receive His mercy. In Confession, we are just like the prodigal son who humbly approached his father and asked for forgiveness. When we approach God in this way, God forgives, and He restores us to that "new creation" in Christ we became when we were baptized.

Confession is about being honest with God. Suppose for a moment that the prodigal son had returned home and instead of asking for forgiveness had acted as if nothing had happened. Suppose he had come up the road and when his father met him, he had said, "Hi dad, what's for dinner?" if that were so, the older son would have been entirely justified in his opinions about his brother.

So, confession is about honesty; it's about our relationship with God. It's about truth in advertising. When we go to Confession we say, "Bless me father for I have sinned ..." In doing so, we are simply being honest with ourselves and with God. On the other hand, someone who sins and doesn't go to Confession, would be like the son returning home as arrogant and rude as when he left.

Now, many people use the Sacrament of Penance at least before Christmas and Easter and that's a good thing. However, it's also true that many people today haven't been to Confession for some time, even for years. Well, you need to go. Jesus wants you to go. That's why He gave us this Sacrament. He doesn't want you carrying around the guilt of your sins. The Father wants you to go. He wants to bestow His mercy upon you, but He can't do so unless you confess your sins.

There can be a lot of reasons why someone might not go to Confession. Maybe there was some big sin they are too embarrassed to Confess. If that is so, think about the prodigal son. If he could ask for pardon so, can you.

Maybe someone had a disagreement with a priest. Well, Lent is a time for forgiveness and reconciliation. Maybe you haven't been for so many years you have forgotten how to go. Don't worry, the priest will help you start again. Maybe you were never taught about the importance of confession and so you haven't been since you were confirmed or married. Now is the time to learn more and to start using this great Sacrament.

We all need to use this Sacrament regularly, especially in our times when we are surrounded with so many temptations to sin. Popes go to confession. Bishops go to confession and so do I and so do the rest of our priests and deacons. You should do likewise.

We are all sinners, but we are all God's children as well. To be forgiven, all we need do is take a small step towards God, and He will do the rest. So then, just like the prodigal son, let us return to God our Father confessing our unworthiness that we might experience His mercy and be raised up by our God who is truly a prodigal Father. Amen.