

**THE RETURN TO THE
FATHER. SERMONS ON A
PART OF THE PARABLE
OF THE PRODIGAL SON**

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The Return to the Father. Sermons on a Part of the Parable of the Prodigal Son by Thomas Hancock

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THOMAS HANCOCK

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SERMONS

ON A PART OF

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON.

BY

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ERRATA.

Page 10, line 18.—For "a" read "as."

Page 19 (in note).—For "mentes propriæ" read "mentis propriæ."

Page 35, line 15.—For "our" read "onr."

Page 50, line 23.—For "little" read "little."

Page 63 (in note).—For *ἐκ ἀδικίας* read *ἐν ἀδικίᾳ*.

Page 68 (in note).—For "perfectum" read "perfectam."

Page 81 (in note).—For "National" read "a National Church."

THE RETURN TO THE FATHER.

I.

THE CHILD OF GOD DISCONTENTED IN HIS FATHER'S HOUSE.

(FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT, FEBRUARY 18, 1872.)

"And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me."—
S. LUKE IV. 12.

THE proper title of this parable, when it is taken as a whole, is not "The Prodigal Son," but "The Two Sons." Even if we were about to treat it as a whole we should not be quite at liberty to regard it as a story standing by itself. It is one of a group of three parables which our blessed Lord delivered at one time, for one purpose, while He sat surrounded by representatives of three great classes of listeners to the Word of God.

First, Jesus had of course close around Him the adoring circle of His Church in the persons of His chosen Apostles. To them it was a parable of Faith—of the Faith they were about to be sent forth to preach to all the children of God scattered abroad. Secondly, pressing eagerly through the disciples

who had been taught by the Lord not to repel them, "drew near unto Him all the publicans and sinners for to hear Him;" that is, the great world of sinners, who know themselves to be sinners, but in whom (because they are not self-righteous) the Incarnate Word discerns a readiness for repentance and faith. To them—despairing of themselves, and encouraged in their despair by their teachers—it was, above everything, a parable of Hope. Thirdly, this parable was heard by the religious world, or the sinners who think themselves to be the godly and converted, and despise others. Present as critics, not as hungering and thirsting learners, the group of Pharisees stands aloof: having no sympathy with humanity at large, they murmur at the Son of Man for giving welcome to an audience which includes prostitutes and cheats. To them it was certainly a parable of Charity.

Our blessed Lord speaks to all—to the Church, to Mankind at large, and to the Religious Sects. But He begins this series of parables—the Lost Sheep, the Lost Money, and the Two Sons—by a direct appeal to the conscience and reason of the last class. "And He spake this parable *unto them*,"* saying, What man *of you*,† having a hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?" Even they, in the honest activities of their secular life, the most holy and divine thing

* πρὸς αὐτοὺς.

† ἑξ ὑμῶν.

about them, were parables of the God of life. The Father, who saw the children of Abraham in their fathers when they were the slaves of Egypt, regards sin as the dreadful accident, not as the substance, of man's being. The substance of his being is that he is His own child, bought by the blood of His Son Jesus Christ. The primary thought of the Father, as He looks upon the sinners and publicans of the world, is not, "I will damn them, or I will let them damn themselves;" but it is, "I will go forth by My Son and My Spirit in search of them, and bring them back to Myself."

The treatment of the parable as a whole would of course include the history of the elder son as well as of the prodigal. I propose, however, to take, as the subject for the morning sermons on the Sundays in Lent and on Easter Day, the history of the younger son alone. I shall merely say, in passing, that in the two sons, the Fathers of the Church saw with one consent the two peoples of the world at the time of the Incarnation—the Jews in the elder son, and the Gentiles or nations in the younger. Some commentators have supposed the elder son to represent God's first-born creatures the angels, and the younger son to represent mankind; and, since the history of the prodigal is the history of man as man in his relation to the Father, he is of course the pattern of every Jew who goes back to God, as truly as of every Englishman. But we must recollect that our blessed Lord says with emphasis that God's elder children, the angels, do not, like the elder son

in the story, grudge at the reconciliation of sinners to the place which belongs to them as men in the family of God, but rejoice at it. Their joy, indeed, is the burden of each of the two preceding parables.

The prodigal has been recognized by commentators and artists as the hero, so to speak, of this simple and wonderful story: he has been accepted by the universal conscience of penitents as the truest possible picture of themselves, like them, first in their condition as wilful sinners, and then in their condition as penitents. Every saint in Paradise would tell us—"The prodigal's biography is my biography, I am a child of God, I have sinned, I have repented, I have been absolved, I have been restored to righteousness." Every preacher of the Gospel, and every confessor of penitents, has heard in this story the command of God the Father, to hold out to the worst of men the fullest hope and confidence in Him as the Pardoner and the Restorer, and has fallen back upon this story as God's vindication of him for doing so. In the history of the younger son, taken by itself, we have the completest and most unanswerable assertion by the Son of God, of the incomprehensible love of God as Father to every sinner, even while he is a sinner, and of the greatness of the joy with which not only the company of God's angels (as in the two prior parables), but God Himself welcomes every single penitent.

Even, however, with this limitation of our thoughts to the younger son, the shortness of the time we can spend upon this inexhaustible subject will make