

## Luke: 15:11–32

### From Catena Aurea:

11. And he said, A certain man had two sons:

12. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

13. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

14. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.

15. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

16. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.

**AMBROSE.** St. Luke has given three parables successively; the sheep which was lost and found, the piece of silver which was lost and found, the son who was dead and came to life again, in order that invited by a threefold remedy, we might heal our wounds. Christ as the Shepherd bears thee on His own body, the Church as the woman seeks for thee, God as the Father receives thee, the first, pity, the second, intercession, the third, reconciliation.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. de Patre et duobus Filiis.) There is also in the above-mentioned parable a rule of distinction with reference to the characters or dispositions of the sinners. The father receives his penitent son, exercising the freedom of his will, so as to know from whence he had fallen; and the shepherd seeks for the sheep that wanders and knows not how to return, and carries it on his shoulders, comparing to an irrational animal the foolish man, who, taken by another's guile, had wandered like a sheep. This parable is then set forth as follows; But he said, A certain man had two sons. There are some who say of these two sons, that the elder is the angels, but the younger, man, who departed on a long journey, when he fell from heaven and paradise to earth; and they adapt what follows with reference to the fall or condition of Adam. This interpretation seems indeed a lenient one, but I know not if it be true. For the younger son

came to repentance of his own accord, remembering the past plenty of his father's house, but the Lord coming called the race of man to repentance, because he saw that to return of their own accord to whence they had fallen had never been in their thoughts; and the elder son is vexed at the return and safety of his brother, whereas the Lord says, There is joy in heaven over one sinner repenting.

**CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA.** But some say that by the elder son is signified Israel according to the flesh, but by the other who left his father, the multitude of the Gentiles.

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Quæst. Ev. l. ii. qu. 33.) This man then having two sons is understood to be God having two nations, as if they were two roots of the human race; and the one composed of those who have remained in the worship of God, the other, of those who have ever deserted God to worship idols. From the very beginning then of the creation of mankind the elder son has reference to the worship of the one God, but the younger seeks that the part of the substance which fell to him should be given him by his father. Hence it follows, And the younger of them said unto his father, Give me the portion of goods which falleth to me; just as the soul delighted with its own power seeks that which belongs to it, to live, to understand, to remember, to excel in quickness of intellect, all which are the gifts of God, but it has received them in its own power by free will. Hence it follows, And he divided unto them his substance.

**THEOPHYLACT.** The substance of man is the capacity of reason which is accompanied by free will, and in like manner whatever God has given us shall be accounted for our substance, as the heaven, the earth, and universal nature, the Law and the Prophets.

**AMBROSE.** Now you see that the Divine patrimony is given to them that seek; nor think it wrong in the father that he gave it to the younger, for no age is weak in the kingdom of God; faith is not weighed down by years. He at least counted himself sufficient who asked, And I wish he had not departed from his father, nor had had the hindrance of age. For it follows, And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ut sup.) The younger son set out into a distant country, not locally departing from God, who is every where present, but in heart. For the sinner flees from God that he may stand afar off.

**AUGUSTINE.** (in Ps. 70.) Whoever wishes to be so like to God as to ascribe his strength to Him, (Ps. 59:9.) let him not depart from Him, but rather cleave to Him that he may preserve the likeness and image in which he was made. But if he perversely wishes to imitate God, that as God has no one by whom He is

governed, so should he desire to exercise his own power as to live under no rules, what remains for him but that having lost all heat he should grow cold and senseless, and, departing from truth, vanish away.

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Quæst. Ev. lib. ii. qu. 33.) But that which is said to have taken place not many days after, namely, that gathering all together he set out abroad into a far country, which is forgetfulness of God, signifies that not long after the institution of the human race, the soul of man chose of its free will to take with it a certain power of its nature, and to desert Him by whom it was created, trusting in its own strength, which it wastes the more rapidly as it has abandoned Him who gave it. Hence it follows, And there wasted his substance in riotous living. But he calls a riotous or prodigal life one that loves to spend and lavish itself with outward show, while exhausting itself within, since every one follows those things which pass on to something else, and forsakes Him who is closest to himself. As it follows, And when he had spent all, there arose a great famine in that land. The famine is the want of the word of truth.

It follows, And he began to be in want. Fitly did he begin to be in want who abandoned the treasures of the wisdom and the knowledge of God, and the unfathomableness of the heavenly riches. It follows, And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) One of the citizens of that country was a certain prince of the air belonging to the army of the devil, whose fields signify the manner of his power, concerning which it follows, And he sent him into the field to feed swine. The swine are the unclean spirits which are under him.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) The husks then with which the swine were fed are the teaching of the world, which cries loudly of vanity; according to which in various prose and verse men repeat the praises of the idols, and fables belonging to the gods of the Gentiles, wherewith the devils are delighted. Hence when he would fain have filled himself, he wished to find therein something stable and upright which might relate to a happy life, and he could not; as it follows, And no one gave to him.

**CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA.** But since the Jews are frequently reprovèd in holy Scripture for their many crimes, how agree with this people the words of the elder son, saying, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment. (Jer. 2:5, Isa. 29:13.) This then is the meaning of the parable. The Pharisees and Scribes reprovèd Him because He received sinners; He set forth the parable in which He calls God the man who is the father of the two sons, (that is, the righteous and the sinners,) of whom the first degree is of the righteous who follow righteousness from the beginning, the second is of those men who are brought back by repentance to righteousness.

**BASIL.** (Esai. 3, 23.) Besides, it belongs more to the character of the aged to have an old man's mind and gravity, than his hoar hairs, nor is he blamed who is young in age, but it is the young in habits who lives according to his passions.

**TITUS BOSTRENSIS.** The younger son then went away not yet matured in mind, and seeks from his father the part of his inheritance which fell to him, that in truth he might not serve of necessity. For we are rational animals endowed with free will.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ut sup.) Now the Scripture says, that the father divided equally between his two sons his substance, that is, the knowledge of good and evil, which is a true and everlasting possession to the soul that uses it well. The substance of reason which flows from God to men at their earliest birth, is given equally to all who come into this world, but after the intercourse that follows, each one is found to possess more or less of the substance; since one believing that which he has received to be from his father, preserves it as his patrimony, another abuses it as something that may be wasted away, by the liberty of his own possession. But the freedom of will is shewn in that the father neither kept back the son who wished to depart, nor forced the other to go that desired to remain, lest he should seem rather the author of the evil that followed. But the youngest son went afar off, not by changing his place, but by turning aside his heart. Hence it follows, He took a journey into a far country.

**AMBROSE.** For what is more afar off than to depart from one's self, to be separate not by country but by habits. For he who severs himself from Christ is an exile from his country, and a citizen of this world. Filty then does he waste his patrimony who departs from the Church.

**TITUS BOSTRENSIS.** Hence too was the prodigal denominated one who wasted his substance, that is, his right understanding, the teaching of chastity, the knowledge of the truth, the recollections of his father, the sense of creation.

**AMBROSE.** Now there came to pass in that country a famine not of food but of good works and virtues, which is the more wretched fast. For he who departs from the word of God is hungry, because man does not live on bread alone, but on every word of God. (Matt. 4:4.) And he who departs from his treasures is in want. Therefore began he to be in want and to suffer hunger, because nothing satisfies a prodigal mind. He went away therefore, and attached himself to one of the citizens. For he who is attached, is in a snare. And that citizen seems to be a prince of the world. Lastly, he is sent to his farm which he bought who excused himself from the kingdom. (Luke 14:18.)

**AMBROSE.** But he feeds those swine into whom the devil sought to enter, living in filth and pollution. (Matt. 8, Mark 2, Luke 8.)

**THEOPHYLACT.** There then he feeds, who surpassed others in vice, such as are panders, arch-robbers, arch-publicans, who teach others their abominable works.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ut sup.) Or he who is destitute of spiritual riches, as wisdom and understanding, is said to feed swine, that is, to nourish in his soul sordid and unclean thoughts, and he devours the material food of evil conversation, sweet indeed to him who lacks good works, because every work of carnal pleasure seems sweet to the depraved, while it inwardly unnerves and destroys the powers of the soul. Food of this kind, as being swines' food and hurtfully sweet, that is, the allurements of fleshly delights, the Scripture describes by the name of husks.

**AMBROSE.** But he desired to fill his belly with the husks. For the sensual care for nothing else but to fill their bellies.

**THEOPHYLACT.** To whom no one gives a sufficiency of evil; for he is afar from God who lives on such things, and the devils do their best that a satiety of evil should never come.

**GLOSS.** Or no one gave to him, because when the devil makes any one his own, he procures no further abundance for him, knowing him to be dead.

15:17–24

17. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!

18. I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

19. And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

20. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

21. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

22. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:

23. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry:

24. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

**GREGORY OF NYSSA.** (Orat. in mul. peccat.) The younger son had despised his father when first he departed, and had wasted his father's money. But when in course of time he was broken down by hardship, having become a hired servant, and eating the same food with the swine, he returned, chastened, to his father's house. Hence it is said, And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, but I perish with hunger.

**AMBROSE.** He rightly returns to himself, because he departed from himself. For he who returns to God restores himself to himself, and he who departs from Christ rejects himself from himself.

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Quæst. Ev. lib. ii. qu. 33.) But he returned to himself, when from those things which without unprofitably entice and seduce, he brought back his mind to the inward recesses of his conscience.

**BASIL.** There are three different distinct kinds of obedience. For either from fear of punishment we avoid evil and are servilely disposed; or looking to the gain of a reward we perform what is commanded, like to mercenaries; or we obey the law for the sake of good itself and our love to Him who gave it, and so savour of the mind of children.

**AMBROSE.** For the son who has the pledge of the Holy Spirit in his heart seeks not the gain of an earthly reward, but preserves the right of an heir. These are also good husbandmen, to whom the vineyard is let out. (Matt. 21:41.) They abound not in husks, but bread.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) But whence could he know this who had that great forgetfulness of God, which exists in all idolaters, unless it was the reflection of one returning to his right understanding, when the Gospel was preached. Already might such a soul see that many preach the truth, among whom there were some not led by the love of the truth itself, but the desire of getting worldly profit, who yet do not preach another Gospel like the heretics. Therefore are they rightly called mercenaries. For in the same house there are men who handle the same bread of the word, yet are not called to an eternal inheritance, but hire themselves for a temporal reward.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. de Patre et duobus Filiis.) After that he had suffered in a foreign land all such things as the wicked deserve, constrained by the necessity of his misfortunes, that is, by hunger and want, he becomes sensible of what had been his ruin, who through fault of his own will had thrown himself from his father to strangers, from home to exile, from riches to want, from abundance and luxury to famine; and he significantly adds, But I am here perishing with hunger. As though he said; I am not a stranger, but the son of a good father, and the brother of an obedient son; I who am free and noble am become more wretched than the hired servants, sunk from the highest eminence of exalted rank, to the lowest degradation.

**GREGORY OF NYSSA.** (ubi sup.) But he returned not to his former happiness before that coming to himself he had experienced the presence of overpowering bitterness, and resolved the words of repentance, which are added, I will arise.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) For he was lying down. And I will go, for he was a long way off. To my father, because he was under a master of swine. But the other words are those of one meditating repentance in confession of sin, but not yet working it. For he does not now speak to his father, but promises that he will speak when he shall come. You must understand then that this “coming to the father” must now be taken for being established in the Church by faith, where there may yet be a lawful and effectual confession of sins. He says then that he will say to his father, Father.

**AMBROSE.** How merciful! He, though offended, disdains not to hear the name of Father. I have sinned; this is the first confession of sin to the Author of nature, the Ruler of mercy, the Judge of faith. But though God knows all things, He yet waits for the voice of thy confession. For with the mouth confession is made to salvation, since he lightens the load of error, who himself throweth the weight upon himself, and shuts out the hatred of accusation, who anticipates the accuser by confessing. In vain would you hide from Him whom nothing escapes; and you may safely discover what you know to be already known. Confess the rather that Christ may intercede for thee, the Church plead for thee, the people weep over thee: nor fear that thou wilt not obtain; thy Advocate promises pardon, thy Patron favour, thy Deliverer promises thee the reconciliation of thy Father’s affection. But he adds, Against heaven and before thee.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ubi sup.) When he says, Before thee, he shews that this father must be understood as God. For God alone beholds all things, from Whom neither the simple thoughts of the heart can be hidden.

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Quæst. Evan. l. ii. qu. 33.) But whether was this sin against heaven, the same as that which is before thee; so that he described by the name of heaven his father's supremacy. I have sinned against heaven, i. e. before the souls of the saints; but before thee in the very sanctuary of my conscience.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ut sup.) Or by heaven in this place may be understood Christ. For he who sins against heaven, which although above us is yet a visible element, is the same as he who sins against man, whom the Son of God took into Himself for our salvation.

**AMBROSE.** Or by these words are signified the heavenly gifts of the Spirit impaired by the sin of the soul, or because from the bosom of his mother Jerusalem which is in heaven, he ought never to depart. But being cast down, he must by no means exalt himself. Hence he adds, I am no more worthy to be called thy son. And that he might be raised up by the merit of his humility, he adds, Make me as one of thy hired servants.

**GREGORY OF NYSSA.** (ubi sup.) Now this prodigal son, the Holy Spirit has engraved upon our hearts, that we may be instructed how we ought to deplore the sins of our soul.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. 14. in Ep. Rom.) Who after that he said, I will go to my father, (which brought all good things,) tarried not, but took the whole journey; for it follows, And he arose, and came to his father. Let us do likewise, and not be wearied with the length of the way, for if we are willing, the return will become swift and easy, provided that we desert sin, which led us out from our father's house. But the father pitieth those who return. For it is added, And when he was yet afar off.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) For before that he perceived God afar off, when he was yet piously seeking him, his father saw him. For the ungodly and proud, God is well said not to see, as not having them before his eyes. For men are not commonly said to be before the eyes of any one except those who are beloved.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. 10. in Ep. Rom. Greg. ubi sup.) Now the father perceiving his penitence did not wait to receive the words of his confession, but anticipates his supplication, and had compassion on him, as it is added, and was moved with pity.

**GREGORY OF NYSSA.** His meditating confession so won his father to him, that he went out to meet him, and kissed his neck; for it follows, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. This signifies the yoke of reason imposed on the mouth of man by Evangelical tradition, which annulled the observance of the law.



**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. de Patre et duob. Fil.) For what else means it that he ran, but that we through the hindrance of our sins cannot by our own virtue reach to God. But because God is able to come to the weak, he fell on his neck. The mouth is kissed, as that from which has proceeded the confession of the penitent, springing from the heart, which the father gladly received.

**AMBROSE.** He runs then to meet thee, because He hears thee within meditating the secrets of thy heart, and when thou wert yet afar off, He runs lest any one should stop Him. He embraces also, (for in the running there is fore-knowledge, in the embrace mercy,) and as if by a certain impulse of paternal affection, falls upon thy neck, that he may raise up him that is cast down, and bring back again to heaven him that was loaded with sins and bent down to the earth. I had rather then be a son than a sheep. For the sheep is found by the shepherd, the son is honoured by the father.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) Or running he fell upon his neck; because the Father abandoned not His Only-Begotten Son, in whom He has ever been running after our distant wanderings. For God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. (2 Cor. 5:19.) But to fall upon his neck is to lower to his embrace His own Arm, which is the Lord Jesus Christ. But to be comforted by the word of God's grace unto the hope of pardon of our sins, this is to return after a long journey to obtain from a father the kiss of love. But already planted in the Church, he begins to confess his sins, nor says he all that he promised he would say. For it follows, And his son said unto him, &c. He wishes that to be done by grace, of which he confesses himself unworthy by any merits of his own. He does not add what he had said, when meditating beforehand, Make me as one of thy hired servants. For when he had not bread, he desired to be even a hired servant, which after the kiss of his father he now most nobly disdained.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (non occ.) The father does not direct his words to his son, but speaks to his steward, for he who repents, prays indeed, but receives no answer in word, yet beholds mercy effectual in operation. For it follows, But the father said unto his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him.

**THEOPHYLACT.** By the servants (or angels) you may understand administering spirits, or priests who by baptism and the word of teaching clothe the soul with Christ Himself. For as many of us as have been baptized in Christ have put on Christ. (Gal. 3:27.)

**AUGUSTINE.** (de Quæst. Ev. l. ii. q. 33.) Or the best robe is the dignity which Adam lost; the servants who bring it are the preachers of reconciliation.

**AMBROSE.** Or the robe is the cloke of wisdom, by which the Apostle covers the nakedness of the body. But he received the best wisdom; for there is one wisdom which knew not the mystery. The ring is the seal of our unfeigned faith, and the impression of truth; concerning which it follows, And put a ring on his hand.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ut sup.) Or the ring on the hand is a pledge of the Holy Spirit, because of the participation of grace, which is well signified by the finger.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ubi sup.) Or he orders the ring to be given, which is the symbol of the seal of salvation, or rather the badge of betrothment, and pledge of the nuptials with which Christ espouses His Church. Since the soul that recovers is united by this ring of faith to Christ.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) But the shoes on the feet are the preparation for preaching the Gospel, in order not to touch earthly things.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. de Patre et duobus Filiis.) Or he bids them put shoes on his feet, either for the sake of covering the soles of his feet that he may walk firm along the slippery path of the world, or for the mortification of his members. For the course of our life is called in the Scriptures a foot, and a kind of mortification takes place in shoes; inasmuch as they are made of the skins of dead animals. He adds also, that the fatted calf must be killed for the celebration of the feast. For it follows, And bring the fatted calf, that is, the Lord Jesus Christ, whom he calls a calf, because of the sacrifice of a body without spot; but he called it fatted, because it is rich and costly, inasmuch as it is sufficient for the salvation of the whole world. But the Father did not Himself sacrifice the calf, but gave it to be sacrificed to others. For the Father permitting, the Son consenting thereto by men was crucified.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) Or, the fatted calf is our Lord Himself in the flesh loaded with insults. But in that the Father commands them to bring it, what else is this but that they preach Him, and by declaring Him cause to revive, yet unconsumed by hunger, the bowels of the hungry son? He also bids them kill Him, alluding to His death. For He is then killed to each man who believes Him slain. It follows, And let us eat.

**AMBROSE.** Rightly the flesh of the calf, because it is the priestly victim which was offered for sin. But he introduces him feasting, when he says, Be merry; to shew that the food of the Father is our salvation; the joy of the Father the redemption of our sins.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (ut sup.) For the father himself rejoices in the return of his son, and feasts on the calf, because the Creator, rejoicing in the acquisition of a believing people, feasts on the fruit of His mercy by the sacrifice of His Son. Hence it follows, For this my son was dead, and is alive again.

**AMBROSE.** He is dead who was. Therefore the Gentiles are not, the Christian is. Here however might be understood one individual of the human race; Adam was, and in him we all were. Adam perished, and in him we all have perished. Man then is restored in that Man who has died. It might also seem to be spoken of one working repentance, because he dies not who has not at one time lived. And the Gentiles indeed when they have believed are made alive again by grace. But he who has fallen recovers by repentance.

**THEOPHYLACT.** As then with respect to the condition of his sins, he had been despaired of; so in regard to human nature, which is changeable and can be turned from vice to virtue, he is said to be lost. For it is less to be lost than to die. But every one who is recalled and turned from sin, partaking of the fatted calf, becomes an occasion of joy to his father and his servants, that is, the angels and priests. Hence it follows, And they all began to be merry.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) Those banquets are now celebrated, the Church being enlarged and extended throughout the whole world. For that calf in our Lord's body and blood is both offered up to the Father, and feeds the whole house.

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25. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

26. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

27. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

28. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

29. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

30. But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

31. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

32. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) The elder son is the people of Israel, not indeed gone into a distant country, yet not in the house, but in the field, that is, in the paternal wealth of the Law and the Prophets, choosing to work earthly things. But coming from the field he began to draw nigh to the house, that is, the labour of his servile works being condemned by the same Scriptures, he was looking upon the liberty of the Church. Whence it follows; And as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing; that is, men filled with the Holy Spirit, with harmonious voices preaching the Gospel. It follows, And he called one of the servants, &c. that is, he takes one of the prophets to read, and as he searches in it, asks in a manner, why are those feasts celebrated in the Church at which he finds himself present? His Father's servant, the prophet, answers him. For it follows; And he said unto him, Thy brother is come, &c. As if he should say, Thy brother was in the farthest parts of the earth, but hence the greater rejoicing of those who sing a new song, because His praise is from the end of the earth; (Is. 42:10.) and for his sake who was afar off, was slain the Man who knows how to bear our infirmities, for they who have not been told of Him have seen Him. (See Isa. 53:4; 52:15.)

**AMBROSE.** But the younger son, that is the Gentile people, is envied by Israel as the elder brother, the privilege of his father's blessing. Which the Jews did because Christ sat down to meat with the Gentiles, as it follows; And he was angry, and would not go in, &c.

**AUGUSTINE.** He is angry even also now, and still is unwilling to enter. When then the fulness of the Gentiles shall have come in, His father will go out at the fit time that all Israel also may be saved, as it follows, therefore came his father out and entreated him. (Rom. 11:26.) For there shall he at some time an open calling of the Jews to the salvation of the Gospel. Which manifestation of calling he calls the going out of the father to entreat the elder son. Next the answer of the elder son involves two questions; for it follows, And he answering said to his father, Lo these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment. With respect to the commandment not transgressed, it at once occurs, that it was not spoken of every command, but of that most essential one, that is, that he was seen to worship no other God but one, the Creator of all. Nor is that son to be understood to represent all Israelites, but those who have never turned from God to idols. For although he might desire earthly things, yet sought he them from God alone, though in common with sinners. Hence it is said, I was as a least

before thee, and I am always with thee. (Ps. 7, 22.) But who is the kid which he never received to make merry upon? for it follows, Thou never gavest me a kid, &c. Under the name of a kid the sinner may be signified.

**AMBROSE.** The Jew requires a kid, the Christian a lamb, and therefore is Barabbas released to them, to us a lamb is sacrificed. Which thing also is seen in the kid, because the Jews have lost the ancient rite of sacrifice. Or they who seek for a kid wait for Antichrist.

**AUGUSTINE.** But I do not see the object of this interpretation, for it is very absurd for him to whom it is afterwards said, Thou art ever with me, to have wished for this from his father, i. e. to believe in Antichrist. Nor altogether can we rightly understand any of the Jews who are to believe in Antichrist to be that son.

And how could he feast upon that kid which is Antichrist who did not believe in him? But if to feast upon the slain kid, is the same as to rejoice at the destruction of Antichrist, how does the son whom the father did not entertain say that this was never given him, seeing that all the sons will rejoice at his destruction? His complaint then is, that the Lord Himself was denied him to feast upon, because he deems Him a sinner. For since He is a kid to that nation which regards Him as a violater and profaner of the Sabbath, it was not meet that they should be made merry at his banquet. But his words with my friends are understood according to the relation of the chiefs with the people, or of the people of Jerusalem with the other nations of Judæa.

**JEROME.** (in Ep. 21. ad Damasum.) Or he says, Thou never gavest me a kid, that is, no blood of prophet or priest has delivered us from the Roman power.

**AMBROSE.** Now the shameless son is like to the Pharisee justifying himself. Because he had kept the law in the letter, he wickedly accused his brother for having wasted his father's substance with harlots. For it follows, But as soon as this thy son is come, who hath devoured thy living, &c.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) The harlots are the superstitions of the Gentiles, with whom he wastes his substance, who having left the true marriage of the true God, goes a whoring: after evil spirits from foul desire.

**JEROME.** (Ubi sup.) Now in that which he says, Thou hast killed for him the fatted calf, he confesses that Christ has come, but envy has no wish to be saved.

**AUGUSTINE.** But the father does not rebuke him as a liar, but commending his steadfastness with him invites him to the perfection of a better and happier rejoicing. Hence it follows, But he said to him, Son, thou art ever with me.

**JEROME.** (ubi sup.) Or after having said, "This is boasting, not truth," the father does not agree with him, but restrains him in another way, saying, Thou art with me, by the law under which thou art bound; not as though he had not sinned, but because God continually drew him back by chastening. Nor is it wonderful that he lies to his father who hates his brother.

**AMBROSE.** But the kind father was still desirous to save him, saying, Thou art ever with me, either as a Jew in the law, or as the righteous man in communion with Him.

**AUGUSTINE.** (ubi sup.) But what means he that he adds, And all that I have is thine, as if they were not his brother's also? But it is thus that all things are looked at by perfect and immortal children, that each is the possession of all, and all of each. For as desire obtains nothing without want, so charity nothing with want. But how all things? Must then God be supposed to have subjected the angels also to the possession of such a son? If you so take possession as that the possessor of a thing is its lord, certainly not all things. For we shall not be the lords, but the companions of angels. Again, if possession is thus understood, how do we rightly say that our souls possess truth? I see no reason why we may not truly and properly say so. For we do not so speak as to call our souls the mistresses of truth. Or if by the term possession we are hindered from this sense, let that also be set aside. For the father says not, "Thou possessest all things," but All that I have is thine, still not as if thou wert its lord. For that which is our property may be either food for our families, or ornament, or something of the kind. And surely, when he can rightly call his father his own, I do not see why he may not also rightly call his own what belongs to his father, only in different ways. For when we shall have obtained that blessedness, the higher things will be ours to look upon, equal things ours to have fellowship with, the lower things ours to rule. Let then the elder brother join most safely in the rejoicing.

**AMBROSE.** For if he ceases to envy, he will feel all things to be his, either as the Jew possessing the sacraments of the Old Testament, or as a baptized person those of the New also.

**THEOPHYLACT.** Or to take the whole differently; the character of the son who seems to complain is put for all those who are offended at the sudden advances and salvation of the perfect, as David introduces one who took offence at the peace of sinners.

**TITUS BOSTRENSIS.** The elder son then as a husbandman was engaged in husbandry, digging not the land, but the field of the soul, and planting trees of salvation, that is to say, the virtues.

**THEOPHYLACT.** Or he was in the field, that is, in the world, pampering his own flesh, that he might be filled with bread, and sowing in tears that he might reap in joy, but when he found what was being done, he was unwilling to enter into the common joy.

**CHRYSOSTOM.** (Hom. 64. in Matt.) But it is asked, whether one who grieves at the prosperity of others is affected by the passion of envy. We must answer, that no Saint grieves at such things; but rather looks upon the good things of others as his own. Now we must not take every thing contained in the parable literally, but bringing out the meaning which the author had in view, search for nothing farther. This parable then was written to the end that sinners should not despair of returning, knowing that they shall obtain great things. Therefore he introduces others so troubled at these good things as to be consumed with envy, but those who return, treated with such great honour as to become themselves an object of envy to others.

**THEOPHYLACT.** Or by this parable our Lord reproves the will of the Pharisees, whom according to the argument he terms just, as if to say, Let it be that you are truly just, having transgressed none of the commandments, must we then for this reason refuse to admit those who turn away from their iniquities?

**JEROME.** (ubi sup.) Or, in another way, all justice in comparison of the justice of God is injustice. Therefore Paul says, Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (Rom. 7:24.) and hence were the Apostles moved with anger at the request of the sons of Zebedee. (Matt. 20:24.)

**CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA.** Which we also ourselves sometimes feel; for some live a most excellent and perfect life, another off time even in his old age is converted to God, or perhaps when just about to close his last day, through God's mercy washes away his guilt. But this mercy some men reject from restless timidity of mind, not counting upon the will of our Saviour, who rejoices in the salvation of those who are perishing.

**THEOPHYLACT.** The son then says to the father, For nothing I left a life of sorrow, ever harassed by sinners who were my enemies, and never hast thou for my sake ordered a kid to be slain, (that is, a sinner who persecuted me,) that I might enjoy myself for a little. Such a kid was Ahab to Elijah, who said, Lord, they have killed thy prophets. (1 Kings 19:14.)

**AMBROSE.** Or else, This brother is described so as to be said to come from the farm, that is, engaged in worldly occupations, so ignorant of the things of the Spirit of God, as at last to complain that a kid had never been slain for him. For not for envy, but for the pardon of the world, was the Lamb sacrificed. The envious seeks a kid, the innocent a lamb, to be sacrificed for it. Therefore also is he called the elder, because a man soon grows old through envy. Therefore too he stands without, because his malice excludes him; therefore could he not hear the dancing and music, that is, not the wanton fascinations of the stage, but the harmonious song of a people, resounding with the sweet pleasantness of joy for a sinner saved. For they who seem to themselves righteous are angry when pardon is granted to one confessing his sins. Who art thou that speakest against thy Lord, that he should not, for example, forgive a fault, when thou pardonest whom thou wilt? But we ought to favour forgiving sin after repentance, lest while grudging pardon to another, we ourselves obtain it not from our Lord. Let us not envy those who return from a distant country, seeing that we ourselves also were afar off.

### **From Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture:**

#### **15:11–24 The Prodigal Son and His Merciful Father**

##### **The Parable Calls the Pharisees to Rejoice Over the Repentance of Sinners.**

Cyril of Alexandria: What is the object of the parable? Let us examine the occasion that led to it so we will learn the truth. The blessed Luke had said a little before of Christ the Savior of us all.... The Pharisees and scribes made this outcry at his gentleness and love to people. They wickedly and impiously blamed him for receiving and teaching people whose lives were impure. Christ very necessarily set before them the present parable. He clearly shows them that the God of all requires even him who is thoroughly steadfast, firm, holy, and has attained to the highest praise for sobriety of conduct to be earnest in following his will. When any are called to repentance, even if they have a bad reputation, he must rejoice rather and not give way to an unloving irritation because of them. Commentary on Luke, Homily 107.

##### **Identifying the Two Sons.**

Cyril of Alexandria: It is the opinion of some that the two sons signify the holy angels and us earth dwellers. The elder one, who lived soberly, represents the company of the holy angels, while the younger and



prodigal son is the human race. Some among us give it a different explanation, arguing that the older and well-behaved son signifies Israel after the flesh. The other son, who chose to live in the lust of pleasures and moved far away from his father, depicts the company of the Gentiles. Commentary on Luke, Homily 107.

### **The Two Sons Represent Two Peoples.**

Peter Chrysologus: "He had two sons," that is, two peoples, the Jews and the Gentiles. Prudent knowledge of the law made the Jewish people his older son, and the folly of paganism made the Gentile world his younger son. Just as surely as wisdom brings distinguished gray hairs, so does foolishness take away the traits of an adult. Morals and not age made the Gentiles the younger son. Not years but understanding of the law made the Jews the older son. Sermon 5.

### **Why the Younger Son Deserved to Lose the Privileges of a Son.**

Peter Chrysologus: "He divided his means between them." The son is as impatient as the father was kind. He is weary of his father's own life. Since he cannot shorten his father's life, he works to get possession of his property. He was not content to possess his father's wealth in company with his father, and he deserved to lose the privileges of a son.

Let us make some inquiries. What reason brought the son to such actions? What bold prospect raised his spirits to make so startling a request? What reason did he have? Clearly the Father in heaven cannot be bounded by any limit, or shut in by any time, or destroyed by any power of death. The son could not await his father's death to get his wealth, so he conceived the desire to get his pleasure from the generosity of his father while he was still alive. The father's bounty proved that the insult lay in his request. Sermon 1.

### **To Leave the Father is to Depart from Oneself.**

Ambrose: You see that the divine inheritance is given to those who ask. You should not think that the Father was guilty because he gave to the younger son. There is no frail age in the kingdom of God nor is faith weighed down by years. He who made the request surely judged himself worthy. If only he had not departed from his Father, he would not have known the hindrance of age. After he went abroad, he who departed from the church squandered his inheritance. "After," it says, "leaving his home and country, he went abroad into a distant country." What is farther away than to depart from oneself, and not from a

place?... Surely whoever separates himself from Christ is an exile from his country, a citizen of the world. We are not strangers and pilgrims, but we are “fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God,” for we who were far away have come near in the blood of Christ. Let us not look down on those who return from a distant land, because we were also in a distant land, as Isaiah teaches. “To them that dwelled in the region of the shadow of death, light has risen.” There is a distant region of the shadow of death, but we, for whom the Spirit before our face is Christ the Lord, live in the shadow of Christ. The church therefore says, “Under his shadow I desired and sat down.” Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.213–14.

### **Choosing the Wasteful Realm of Lustful Passion.**

Augustine: That younger son in your Gospel did not help himself with horses, or chariots, or ships, or fly away on visible wings or journey by walking. Through prodigal living in a distant region, he wasted what you, a kind father, had given him as he set out. You were kind in making him this gift, yet kinder still to him when he returned in need. To be in the realm of lustful passion is the same as to be in the realm of darkness, and that is the same as to be far away from your face. Confessions 1.18.

### **The Prodigal Suffers Starvation.**

Ambrose: “A mighty famine came there in that country.” It was not a famine of fasts but of good works and virtues. What hunger is more wretched? Certainly whoever departs from the Word of God hungers, because “man lives not by bread alone but by every word of God.” Whoever leaves treasure lacks. Whoever departs from wisdom is stupefied. Whoever departs from virtue is destroyed. It was fitting that he begin to be in need, because he abandoned the treasures of wisdom and the knowledge of God and the depths of heavenly riches. He began to want and to suffer starvation, because nothing is enough for prodigal enjoyment. He who does not know how to be filled with eternal nourishment always suffers starvation. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.215.

### **The Citizen is the Prince of This World.**

Ambrose: “He went and attached himself to one of the citizens.” Whoever attaches himself is in a snare. That citizen is the prince of this world. He is sent to the farm bought by the man who excused himself from the kingdom. He feeds the swine, those into which the devil sought to enter, those he cast into the sea of the world as they lived in filth and foulness. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.216.

### **A Bed Among Swine.**

Peter Chrysologus: "He went and joined one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his farm to feed swine." This is the experience that comes to one who refuses to trust himself to his father but delivers himself to a stranger. He flees from a most generous provider and endures a severe judge. A deserter from affection, a refugee from fatherly love, he is assigned to the swine, sentenced to them, and given over to their service. He wallows in their muddy fodder. The rush of the restless herd bruises and soils him so he perceives how wretched and bitter it is to have lost the happiness of peaceful life in his father's house. Sermon 1.

### **Empty of Nourishment.**

Ambrose: There are those who interpret the swine as being the flocks of demons, the husks as the lack of virtue of worthless people and the boastful words of those who cannot do good. By the empty allure of philosophy and the noisy applause for eloquence, they show ostentation rather than any usefulness. These cannot be lasting pleasures. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.217.

### **Despite His Sin, the Spirit Does Not Depart from the Son.**

Philoxenus of Mabbug: It was the same with the younger son who squandered his property and wasted his father's property living among prostitutes. Despite all this, he did not lose his honorable title of son. In the land of captivity, having rejected his father, he rather remembered, "How many hired servants are at this moment in my father's house who have more than enough bread, but here am I perishing from hunger." He was still a sinner. He had sinned to such an extent that he had thrown to the winds with his misdeeds the entire inheritance he had received from his father. He still called God his father. This indicates that the grace of the Spirit, which authorizes him to call God Father, did not depart from him.

We are unable to employ this term of address and call God Father, except through the authority of the Holy Spirit who is within us. It is well known that those who have not yet become God's children by the holy rebirth of baptism are not authorized to use this term. They are not permitted to say, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name." The apparent reason for this is that the Holy Spirit is not yet within them to give them this authorization. It is well known to all that, when they approach the holy mysteries, the newly baptized all repeat this prayer with confidence in accordance with the tradition

handed down by our Lord, and then they proceed to the holy mysteries. On the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit 1.

### **To Return to the Father's House.**

Ephrem the Syrian:

Jacob led out his sheep

And brought them to his father's home;

A symbol for those with discernment,

A parable for those with perception

Is to be found in this homecoming:

Let us too return to our Father's house,

My brothers, and do not become

captivated with desire

For this transient earth

—for your true city is in Eden.

Blessed indeed is that person

Who has seen his dear ones in its midst.

Hymns on Paradise 14.7.

### **The First Confession Seeks Reconciliation.**

Ambrose: "Father," it says, "I have sinned against heaven, and before you." This is the first confession before the Creator of nature, the Patron of mercy, and the Judge of guilt. Although God knows all things,

he awaits the words of your confession.... Confess, so that Christ may rather intercede for you, he whom we have as an advocate with the Father. Confess, so that the church may pray for you and that the people may weep for you. Do not fear that perhaps you might not receive. The advocate promises pardon. The patron offers grace. The defender promises the reconciliation with the Father's good will to you. Believe because it is the truth. Consent because it is a virtue. He has a reason to intercede for you, unless he died for you in vain. The Father also has a reason for forgiveness, because the Father wants what the Son wants. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.224–25.

### **Repeating the “Our Father”.**

Peter Chrysologus: He now comes back to his Father and cries, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.” Every day in its prayer, the church testifies that the younger son has returned to his Father's house and is calling God his Father. [The church] prays, “Our Father, who art in heaven,” “I have sinned against heaven and before you.” Sermon 5.

### **A Son Through Baptism.**

Ambrose: “I am no more worthy to be called your son.” Cast down, he should not exalt himself that the merit of his humility may raise him. “Make me as one of your hired servants.” He knows there is a difference between sons, friends, hired servants and slaves. You are a son through baptism, friend through virtue, hired servant through labor, and slave through fear. Friends can even come from slaves and hired servants, as it is written, “You are my friends, if you do the things that I command you. I do not now call you servants.” Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.227.

### **Running, the Father Initiates the Reconciliation.**

Ambrose: Christ chooses those who stand. Rise and run to the church. Here is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He who hears you pondering in the secret places of the mind runs to you. When you are still far away, he sees you and runs to you. He sees in your heart. He runs, perhaps someone may hinder, and he embraces you. His foreknowledge is in the running, his mercy in the embrace and the disposition of fatherly love. He falls on your neck to raise one prostrate and burdened with sins and bring back one turned aside to the earthly toward heaven. Christ falls on your neck to free your neck from the yoke of slavery and hang his sweet yoke upon your shoulders. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.229–30.

### **Overlooking the Son's Transgressions.**

Peter Chrysologus: "He fell on his neck and kissed him." This is how the father judges and corrects his wayward son and gives him not beatings but kisses. The power of love overlooked the transgressions. The father redeemed the sins of his son by his kiss, and covered them by his embrace, in order not to expose the crimes or humiliate the son. The father so healed the son's wounds as not to leave a scar or blemish upon him. "Blessed are they," says Scripture "whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered." Sermon 3.

### **The Father's Actions Show the Blessings of the Incarnation.**

Peter Chrysologus: The father runs out from far away. "When we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The Father runs out. He runs out in his Son, when through him he descends from heaven and comes down on earth. "With me," the Son says, "is he who sent me, the Father."

He "fell upon his neck." He fell, when through Christ the whole divinity came down as ours and rested in human nature. When did he kiss him? When "mercy and truth have met each other, justice and peace have kissed." "He gave the best robe," that which Adam lost, the everlasting glory of immortality. "He put a ring upon his finger." That is the ring of honor, the title of liberty, the outstanding pledge of the spirit, the seal of the faith, and the dowry of the heavenly marriage. Hear the apostle: "I engaged you to one spouse, that I might present you a chaste virgin to Christ." "And sandals on his feet, etc." This is so that his feet might be in shoes when he preached the gospel, for "how beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace." Sermon 5.

### **Restoring Him to Sonship.**

Peter Chrysologus: "Give him a ring for his finger." The father's devotion is not content to restore only his innocence. It also brings back his former honor. "And give him sandals for his feet." He was rich when he departed, but how poor he has returned! Of all his substance, he does not even bring back shoes on his feet! "Give him sandals for his feet" that nakedness may not disgrace even a foot and that he may have shoes when he returns to his former course of life. Sermon 3.

### **The Father Welcomes the Prodigal to the Divine Feast as a Son.**

Athanasius: Then he shall get up, come to his father, and confess to him, "I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me like one of your hired servants."

When he confesses like that, he will be considered worthy of more than that for which he prayed. His father neither takes him in like a hired servant nor treats him like a stranger. Oh no, he kisses him as a son. He accepts him as a dead man come back to life again. He counts him worthy of the divine feast and gives him the precious garment he once wore.

Now there is singing and joy in the father's home. What happened is the result of the Father's grace and loving kindness. Not only does he bring his son back from death, but also through the Spirit he clearly shows his grace. To replace corruption, he clothes him with an incorruptible robe. To satisfy hunger, he kills the fatted calf. The Father provides shoes for his feet so that he will not travel far away again. Most wonderful of all, he puts a divine signet ring upon his hand. By all these things, he begets him anew in the image of the glory of Christ. Festal Letter 7.

### **Christ Sacrificed at the Father's Command.**

Peter Chrysologus: "And he killed for him the fattened calf." About that David sang: "And it shall please God better than a young calf, that brings forth horns and hoofs." The calf was slain at this command of the Father, because the Christ, God as the Son of God, could not be slain without the command of his Father. Listen to the apostle: "He who has not spared even his own son but has delivered him for us all." He is the calf who is daily and continually immolated for our food. Sermon 5.

### **Zechariah's Temple Offering.**

Irenaeus: According to Luke, having a priestly character, the Gospel began with the priest Zechariah offering incense to God. The fatted calf was already being prepared which was to be sacrificed for the finding of the younger son. against heresies 3.11.8.

### **Adam, Lost in Sin, Now Found in Christ.**

Ambrose: The Father rejoices "because my son was dead and has come to life again. He was lost and is found." "He who was, is lost." He, who was not, cannot be lost. The Gentiles are not, the Christian is,

according as it is written above that, "God has chosen things that are not, that he might bring to nothing things that are." It is also possible to understand here the likeness of the human race in one man. Adam was, and we were all in him. Adam was lost, and all were lost in him. Exposition of the Gospel of Luke 7.234.

### **15:25–32 The Elder Brother and His Merciful Father**

#### **The Elder Son Does Not Represent Israel.**

Cyril of Alexandria: If anyone says that the virtuous and sober son signifies Israel according to the flesh, we cannot agree to this opinion. In no way is it fitting to say that Israel chose a blameless life. Throughout the whole inspired Scripture, we see them accused of being rebels and disobedient....

I think it is right to mention this also. Some refer to the person of our Savior as that fatted calf that the father killed when his son was called to conversion.... If any one imagines that the virtuous and sober son means the physical Israel, how can Israel honestly say that he never gave him a kid? Whether we call it calf or kid, Christ is to be understood as the sacrifice offered for sin. He was not sacrificed only for the Gentiles but also that he might redeem Israel, who by reason of his frequent transgression of the law had brought great blame on himself. The wise Paul bears witness to this, saying, "For this reason Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people by his blood, suffered outside the gate." Commentary on Luke, Homily 107.

#### **The Jews Now Stand Outside the Gentile Church.**

Peter Chrysologus: The older brother, the older son coming from the field, the people of the law, hears the music and dancing in the Father's house, yet he does not want to enter. "The harvest indeed is abundant, but the laborers are few." Every day we see this same thing happen with our own eyes. The Jewish people comes to its Father's house, the church. It stands outside because of its jealousy. It hears the harp of David echoing, and the music from the singing of the psalms, and the dancing carried on by so many assembled races. It does not wish to enter. Through jealousy, it remains outside. In horror, it judges its Gentile brother by its own ancient customs, and meanwhile, it is depriving itself of its Father's goods and excluding itself from his joys. Sermon 5.



**The Elder Son is Always with the Father.**

Peter Chrysologus: The Father steps outside and says to his son, "Son, you are always with me." How is he with his son? In the person of Abel, Enoch, Shem, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and all the holy men from which stems Christ's Jewish lineage read in the Gospel when it says, "Abraham begot Isaac, Isaac begot Jacob," and so on. Sermon 5.

**Christ Was Born for the Elder Son.**

Peter Chrysologus: "All that is mine is yours." How is this? The law, prophecy, temple, priesthood, sacrifices, kingdom, and the gifts are for you. This is the greatest gift of all: Christ was born. Since you through your jealousy wish to destroy your brother, you are no longer worthy to possess your Father's banquets and joys. Sermon 5.