
The story of the Prodigal Son is one of the masterpieces of the world's literature. The story is short, but its every word makes it perhaps the most humanly touching story ever told. The characters are sketched from life; they seem to be actual persons as we read the vivid descriptions of the casual youth who never realizes how badly he has treated his father until he is perishing from want; the puritanical elder brother who has no use for him, and the father who smothers his son’s remorse with a tender welcome, and sets everyone in the house feasting and dancing because the ne’er-do-well has at last returned home. The story of the prodigal son who insisted upon his share of his inheritance and then wasted it in wanton living, finally returning in repentance and remorse to find his father’s warm and forgiving welcome is a familiar and heartening story. But the parable does not end here as the father receives his lost son in rejoicing and joy. There is another parable, or rather a continuation of the first one which is appended, which changes the happy mood of the story. For in the second parable we read of the elder brother who does not at all share his father’s enthusiasm in receiving the wastrel, but considered it unjust to give him such a splendid reception, and resented his father’s showing favor to the son who had disappointed him. Thus we have in contrast to the forgiving spirit of the father, the stern unforgiving attitude of the elder brother who stayed at home and worked while the younger son wasted his inheritance. The parable off the elder brother makes a discord in the story, and destroys the happy harmony; and yet it is this discordant note which makes the story so true to life. This gives the realistic touch to the scene.

Although the attitude of the elder son does not compare favorably with the forgiving attitude of the father, it is the son’s feelings which we would expect to find, and even when we know that his unforgiving spirit is wrong, we cannot help but feel a sympathy for him. This is the son who stayed at home and helped his father on the farm while the younger brother was out sowing his wild oats. It is conceivable that the elder son may have had impulses to go out into the world and lead a life of pleasure and enjoyment, but instead he stayed at home and stuck to the hard routine of the farm life. Perhaps the older son would not be so attractive a character as the younger; it is curious but often true that the ne’er-do-well is often much better company than the very respectable person who never does anything wrong. Perhaps the elder son was of this type, the tight-lipped, stern puritan who views the world about him from his vantage point of staid self-respectability with an attitude of critical aloofness. But even if this were so, we cannot help but sympathize with his resentment when we see him coming home after a hard day in the fields to find the whole household celebrating the return of the prodigal. His resentment was so strong that he refused to go in and join the festivities. When his father came out to entreat him, he gives vent to his anger.

“Here I have been a perfect slave to you for all these years,” he complains. “I have never disobeyed any of your orders. And yet you have never provided a party for me so that I could
enjoy myself with my friends.” But now he becomes more bitter in his complaint as he considers the younger brother. He does not even acknowledge that he is his brother, but says, “when this thy son has come (this precious son of yours) who has wasted his inheritance with harlots you kill the fatted calf for him.” We see how quick this older son is to accuse the prodigal of the lowest degradation although there is no evidence from the story that this is how he wasted his money. Note how true to life this accusation is, how readily we accuse people when we are jealous of them.

The older son does not make a very agreeable spectacle as he complains of his father’s favoritism. As he shows his colors in the parable we lose patience with him and are ready to condemn him. Even though we feel some sympathy for him, we see that his sense of justice is too stern to be really just and we see that his attitude is wrong. His idea of just desserts is an example of justice without mercy; according to strict justice he may be right, but the truly just man is also merciful. We feel sympathy for the man, however, simply because so many of us are like him; most of us except in our better moments view life from the same point of view as this man. And yet we see that his attitude is wrong even as in our own lives we sense that similar attitudes are wrong when we indulge them. Such men make for stability in society; they are the ones who never do any harm in society, never commit crimes, always live correctly; and they are the ones also who may never do any good as they live only to themselves. If there are no depths in such characters there are no heights also; but they are the consistent and dependable ones who hold society stable.

The older brother’s attitude was wrong first of all because he was ungrateful. The father had to remind him that he had always enjoyed the benefits of the home. “Son thou art ever with me, and everything I have is thine.” The elder son had gotten the idea that he earned his good fortune by his own merit, forgetting that he had always enjoyed the kindness of his father. While the younger son was enjoying a feast after long months of hunger, the elder brother had enjoyed daily a table of plenty. He had forgotten that he had been spared the sufferings of the younger, the temptations which led the youth astray; instead of being grateful for his own good fortune however, he condemned his brother. It is so easy to condemn from the safe vantage point of respectability. Then, too, the older brother was wrong because of his feeling of self-righteousness. He felt that he had always done the right thing and was deserving of reward; that is why it was so easy for him to feel very much abused and ill-rewarded, because he rated his righteousness so highly. But the fault of the older brother shows itself most glaringly in his lack of a feeling of love toward others. He was too convinced of his own merit, too critical of others, too much interested in his own hardships to consider what his brother had endured and to forgive him and show him love. He was too much interested in himself and his own interests to consider his brother with kindness. And thus he closed his heart to him and shut himself away from the celebration to brood upon the injustice of his treatment. The unforgiving spirit in him shuts him apart from his friends and family, because he refuses to open his heart to them. Because he will not forgive, he shuts himself away and must be alone.

We can see that the elder son’s unforgiving attitude was wrong, and we recognize that such an attitude makes everyone unhappy, especially the person who holds the attitude, since it cuts him off from those whom he should forgive. And yet we must admit that sometimes it is very hard to
forgive others when we feel that an injustice has been done to us. Sometimes the scars of the injuries that have been caused are too deep to forget and forgive easily, but usually the sense of injustice we feel is, as in the parable, more imagined than real. If the elder son had realized more clearly the advantages he had been enjoying, and could imagine more sympathetically what the younger son had suffered, he might have forgiven his brother and joined the happy welcoming party. Instead of this, he exaggerated his hardships, nursed his grievances until they became so large that he could not see anything else. Thus he imagined his injuries so great that he could not bring himself to forgive.

This is what forgiveness means essentially. We forgive when someone has done us an injury either directly or indirectly, and when we say we forgive, we mean that the injury done is not severe enough to make us forever resentful, that we have the power to heal the wound and hide the scar and live as before. To forgive means to overlook the injury and to cease to blame the offender. Thus before we can forgive, we must heal the injury. That is why it is so hard to forgive sometimes when the injury is so severe that it does not seem possible to heal it. Forgiveness does not mean ignoring the trouble caused; the forgiving spirit doesn’t tolerate any kind of injustice and forget the consequences. The trouble must first be cured, the injury healed, and then there is a basis for a new beginning. The father could forgive his son when he saw that he had repented and returned home with a changed heart. The trouble had been cured, the son had learned his lesson and was now grateful to his father and ready to take his place as a true son. The father, seeing this, could receive his son with joy and live as if nothing had happened. But the other son with his self-centered interests felt that he had been treated unjustly, that the return of the prodigal only aggravated the injustice, and so he could not bring himself to forgive. It is interesting to note that the father who had most reason to harden his heart was eager to forgive, while the older son who had little cause to complain since his brother had not injured him was the unforgiving one. So often in real life this is the way of forgiveness. Imagined injuries cause more hard feelings than real ones. There are those rare individuals who go through life with a trusting air, never expecting people to take advantage of them, and never feeling that they are being injured. Curiously enough, people with this attitude of mind are seldom abused, and when they are, they are so inclined to minimize the injury that forgiveness comes easily to them. There are others, however, who make themselves and everyone else miserable by always expecting that people will take advantage of them. They view with suspicious eyes everything and everybody about them, always expecting that something is going to happen to hurt them, that someone is going to take advantage of them. And these are the people who are always nursing grouches, who feel that the whole world is against them, conspiring to bring them misery. And such people find what they are looking for; they do find misery, and find it hard to forgive all the people who are responsible.

The difference between these two ways of thinking is centered obviously in the initial attitudes of the two types of view. The essential attitude which the first point of view holds and the second lacks is a feeling of trust and love towards one’s fellow man, a feeling which goes beyond self interest and considers humanity as a whole. A wise monk once defined love in this way; he called it a feeling of trust in which the individual leaves himself open to be hurt, never bothering to protect himself, for he has faith that he will not be injured. And strangely enough people with this attitude are not injured soften as those who are always defending themselves against real and
imagined hurts. This is not merely a matter of attitude, of overlooking the unpleasant things; people who have this feeling of trust inspire a similar kindly feeling in those they meet. Just as a young and trusting child can be safe in the roughest company, for no one would have the heart to harm him, so the trusting spirit makes people ashamed to take advantage of him. With this attitude of love which moves away from self-interest, the individual has an armor against injury and a power to forgiveness, for it is this love which prevents or heals the injuries which make forgiveness difficult. As father in parable and son: "He drew a circle to shut me out - Heretic! Rebel! A thing to flout - But love and I had the wit to win - We made a circle and drew him in."

It is good to think in these days on these parables showing the forgiving and the unforgiving spirit, for as the present war progresses to its end, the world’s people are concerning themselves more and more with the problem of the war-guilt, how to treat these countries who were responsible for it. More and more we hear the cry of revenge on these people, and the soberer voices that would seek a basis for reclaiming them are drowned out. The problem is not an easy one; for whole countries of people have suffered injuries which can never be forgotten and are too deep to heal. It is natural how a deep injury and grief changes to a feeling of revenge, and such a feeling is to be expected. Shakespeare in his play Macbeth illustrates this feeling of revenge. When Macduff is informed that his wife and children have been killed by Macbeth, his grief at first can find no words; he cannot believe the horrible news and his friends have to repeat over and over that all have been killed and none are left. But then his grief gives way to anger and revenge; it acts as a whetstone to his sword, and enrages instead of stunning his feelings. And so he goes off to seek vengeance. Many a Russian must have similar feelings today.

And yet when we consider social guilt on a large scale, and seek revenge wholesale, how can the guilty ones be separated from the innocent? There are those who would deny innocence to any in this case, and would make every one of the enemy pay for the war crimes. But revenge on this scale is certainly not justice, and even if it were, it is much too dangerous a spirit to let loose in the world. When feelings of vengeance run wild, there is no stopping them; like a prairie fire they set everything afire. We have a good historical example of this in the French Revolution, when the peasants’ revenge began to work itself out, they guillotined certain nobles; soon however they ran out of guilty ones to kill and began slaughtering innocents. Before the bloody purge was over and spent its fury, the revolutionists were killing each other. Revenge may be a natural impulse, but it is decidedly not a good one. Just because it is natural to feel a certain way, it does not follow that such an attitude is good. The impulse to revenge has been civilized in our common law so that criminals are punished not out of a spirit of revenge but in order to prevent crime. When a murderer is put to death by the state it is done not to make him pay for the crime and satisfy a feeling of revenge on the part of the injured party, but in order to prevent such crimes from recurring.

Wholesale revenge is unthinkable for a civilized people. But it is just as unthinkable from a realistic point of view that the guilty should be automatically forgiven. And it will not be an easy process to separate the guilty from the innocent. Group sins can involve the individual to such an extent that he must share the guilt of the group often although he is innocent as an individual. Individuals are caught up by the group and forced to do things which from the group standpoint are permissible but wrong from the individual standards. Thus a man can kill while he is in an
army, and violate the law pertaining to individuals with impunity. The problem is very complex. The guilty should be punished in order to prevent a recurrence of the injuries they caused but it will be difficult to find the guilty. The clue to the solution of the problem, how we can forgive, is found in the parable. The prodigal was forgiven when he repented and turned from his evil ways and returned to his father. This can be the only basis for forgiveness, for only then will the injuries be healed.

But if instead of the forgiving spirit of the father who made it possible for the repentant prodigal to return to his old life, these people find the unforgiving spirit of the elder brother, there will be no basis for a peaceful world to come. The Christian impulse is to help those who have erred, even those who do not deserve help according to the standards of the elder brother. And the Christian believes this impulse is right, for he has been taught by Jesus that all men can be good; he has seen the power of redemption through Christ. This faith in man which was taught by Jesus must never be forgotten in these days. It is on the basis of this faith that the returning prodigal was received by the father; it must be on this basis of this faith in man that the world’s children finally come together in peaceful living under their Father which is in heaven.