

Garments of Grace: Clothing Imagery in the Bible

Lesson 10: "The Prodigal's New Clothes"

"And the younger of them said to his father. 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them." (Luke 15:12, NKJV)

We look at the parable of the prodigal son and ask "Why did the father do this?" The story is a series of contrasts in how God acts compared to how humans act. To us, it makes no sense, but for God, it is who He is.

"The history of the great conflict between good and evil, from the time it first began in heaven to the final overthrow of rebellion and the total eradication of sin, is also a demonstration of God's unchanging love" (*Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 33).

Like the father of the prodigal son, God the heavenly prodigal was extravagant with his love in pleading with Lucifer, to consider the folly of his ideas. There was even war in heaven, but ultimately God gave Lucifer over to his demands. The parable only tells us what the father did, not the conversations that took place before. No doubt, a loving father would do all he could short of force to convince his son of the folly of his plans, but in the end, he gave his son over to his demands. Why?

What might have happened if the father in anger sent the son away penniless? The rebellious son would have blamed his father for all the calamities. What if the father had set up a trust fund to dole out money each month? This would have bought the son's loyalty, at least until the money ran out, postponing the inevitable lessons the son needed to learn. The father, in wisdom, simply gave his son over to the desires of his heart, and gave him his portion of the inheritance.

Likewise, God finally gave Lucifer over to his desire to prove himself greater than God. God continued to sustain the life of Lucifer and the angels who joined him, and even allowed them access to other worlds. Like the wicked in Romans 1:18, "they became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (vs. 21). The prodigal son speculated that the world offered more fun, no longer seeing that his father's house was the most loving and fulfilling place for him. Because of this blindness, he was as inert and unaware of his true condition as the coin in the parable (Luke 15:8-10). Even the lost sheep was in a better position because it would eventually perceive something was wrong (Luke 15:4-7).

Why did the prodigal father not go to retrieve his son? He had nothing short of force to convince him to return. The son knew the love at home and had rejected it in favor of the world. While parents need to set boundaries for their children, doing this in love demonstrates the seeking love of the Father and the self-emptying love of Christ. The earlier this begins in the child's life, the more likely the child will avoid an empty outward profession based on fear; it's *the heart* that must be won by the truth of His love.

We should not think comparing home with the pigpen brought the prodigal to his senses. The realization was much deeper because it was prompted by the Holy Spirit. He recognized his actions as sin (Luke 15:18), against both his heavenly and earthly Fathers. Such discernment is never the result of self-centered calculation, but it is the gift of the Holy Spirit.

"It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. ... Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life. There must be a power working from within, a new life from above, before men can be changed from sin to holiness. That power is Christ" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 18).

At the moment the prodigal accepted this change, he expressed the repentance placed in his heart by the words "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee'" (Luke 15:18). The fact that he states the same words to his father when they meet indicates that his repentance and confession in fact occurred back in the pigpen. He received the washing of regeneration immediately. Only the confession needed to happen, the heart change had already occurred. The son would never have said "I will arise and go to my father" unless the seeking love of the father that he knew from before had drawn him (cf. John 12:32, 33).

God gave His Son to this world not because a few humans repented and confessed their sins hoping to induce God to save them. The Godhead, because of their self-sacrificing love made this gracious Gift to the human race not because of some old covenant contract where the prodigal race repented, confessed, and made promises to induce its Father God to take them back, but an everlasting promise made by God to the fallen man. True repentance and confession are never the means to manipulate God into accepting us. It is always a response to the love of God demonstrated by His Gift of His Son. "Christ was to identify Himself with the interests and needs of humanity. He who was one with God has linked Himself with the children of men by ties that are never to be broken. Jesus is 'not ashamed to call them brethren'" (*Steps to Christ*, p. 14).

The Bible often tells us to seek the Lord. "Seek the Lord while He may be found" (Isa. 55:6). But the Bible also tells us that the Lord is seeking us: "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). He says He is the Good Shepherd, who seeks His lost sheep. Jesus told how the Good Shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep and sought the one lost sheep (15:4-7). He is like the woman who searched and found her one lost coin (vss. 8-10). Even the parable of the prodigal son tells the same truth: the son did not create love in his father's heart--he walked home only because he knew there was love in that father's heart for him.

The great truth of the 1888 message is that our salvation does not depend on our skill, our strength, our savvy, in finding an elusive God who is hiding from us; it depends on our believing, realizing, comprehending, appreciating, what it cost Jesus to seek and find us. If you work hard trying to find Him, you will naturally be proud of your accomplishment, especially when you consider how few people succeed. But if you realize that "from first to last," it has been Christ's seeking love trying to find you, then your proud heart is melted. And that is the beginning of a genuine Christian experience.

The older brother who continued working for his father did not rejoice at his brother's return. His reaction reveals his misunderstanding of his father's love. It was unconditional. He loved his prodigal son as much as the son who stayed and did the "right" thing. The older son thought this earned for him a special place with his father's. But father's *agape* took the initiative--loving the selfish, vain boys.

The truth of the Gospel teaches *agape* which saves the poor and the unfortunate, rather than condemning them. This is shown in the whole work of Christ for us. Those who are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" as was the prodigal are the very ones whom He came to save. The older brother was just as blind as his brother but for different reasons. The spirit of Satan and of the world is selfishness,--to think only of oneself. In the last days this spirit will become more pronounced in those who refuse the blessings of the Gospel. There will be an even greater necessity for relief of those in distress. The father saw a reason to help his wayward son, but the older brother resented this and probably would have left him in the pigpen.

At the end of time, God will continually use those who have accepted the Gospel blessings to minister to those who are in the pigpen, as well as to those in the position of the older brother. Both were motivated by self-interest. Only their father ministered to both because he was motivated by love, not self.

--Arlene Hill