



My Beloved Ones,

I greet you with love and joy in the Name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, as we prepare to enter the second week of the Triodion.

Most Orthodox Christians are familiar with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, and how it represents our relationship to our Heavenly Father: we are also Prodigals, who may turn to sin and fall into despair; but our God, who is ever-loving and merciful, waits to welcome us home to the Heavenly Banquet table, if we repent.

One element of the Parable that is not as often discussed however, is that of the Elder Son, who stayed obediently by his father's side, and who, when called to the feast, rejects it. This Son says, *"Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your*

command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!" (Luke 15:29-30)

We are of course filled with happiness to hear the father's response: *"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found."* (Luke 15:31-32) However, I believe we make a very serious mistake, if we look at the parable too simply. Yes, the Father is our God, and we, as sinners, can be welcomed home, but if we do not examine our lives, we can become instead the Unforgiving Elder Brother.

What did the Elder Brother do that was so unforgiveable, many ask? He did not throw away the portion of his father's wealth on earthly pleasures, like his Brother; he stayed and remained dutiful. Truly, his father acknowledges this as a positive thing when he says, *"...all that is mine is yours."* Even so, this love toward the Father does not make the Elder Brother perfect, because he cannot find it in his heart to forgive his brother.

We know just what our Lord said to Peter, when asked if it was necessary to forgive a brother who had committed a sin seven times. *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."* (Matthew 18:22) Clearly, we can see that, for all his obedience to his father's commands, the Elder Brother was just like the Hypocritical Pharisees, our Lord denounces: *"...you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others."* (Matthew 23:23) Indeed, if the Elder Brother's sin can be said, it is that he too, held close to words of his father, but did not always practice them in love.

In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul says, *“If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”* (1 Corinthians:1-3) St. Luke intends for us to receive strength from our Lord’s parable of repentance, but as with the Publican and the Pharisee, we must not fall into prideful thinking of judging our brother, as the Elder Son does here.

My beloved, as we continue our preparation for Great Lent, let us be mindful of the importance of granting forgiveness to our brothers and sisters, as our Father would do for us. Let us remember that our lives as faithful Orthodox Christians matter more when we practice our faith with justice, mercy, faith, and love.

+ALEXIOS

Metropolitan of Atlanta