

The parable of the Prodigal Son is well known. Someone who is prodigal spends or gives lavishly and foolishly. This certainly describes the son who asks for his share of the inheritance. It is as if he wished his father were dead so he could have access to the money. The father is also prodigal. He knows his younger son well enough to realize he will spend money foolishly. But the father is lavish with his money and gives it away freely. He is also lavish with his mercy and holds nothing against his son who “squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation” (Lk 15:13).

Each baptized person is a son or daughter of God the Father. Through baptism, we receive a rich inheritance, the promise of eternal life. It is due and payable at the end of our lives. We cannot cash it in early like the prodigal son. However, we too can squander our inheritance on a life of dissipation. Through sin, we can turn from God and throw away the promise of eternal life.

Sadly, we see this often through neglect. A person wants to have their child baptized. They promise to raise the child in the faith at the time of baptism, but they do not follow through. “For the grace of Baptism to unfold, the parents’ help is important. So too is the role of the godfather and godmother, who must be firm believers, able and ready to help the newly baptized - child or adult on the road of Christian life... The whole church community bears some responsibility for the development and safeguarding of the grace given at Baptism (CCC 1255).

Baptism offers tremendous grace. All sins are forgiven and any punishment that may be a result of sin is wiped away. “In those who have been reborn nothing remains that would impede their entry into the Kingdom of God, neither Adam’s sin, nor personal sin, nor the consequences of sin, the gravest of which is separation from God” (CCC 1263).

Baptism does not take away the struggles in life. A person must still deal with suffering, illness, death, and weaknesses of character. We are still inclined to sin. When we fail, the prodigal Father in heaven is waiting for us to seek mercy through the confession of our sins to a priest. With a heartfelt confession, we are born again through the grace of this sacrament.

Returning to our Gospel, we see parallels between the parable Jesus tells and the sacramental life of the church. “Quickly, bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet” (Lk 15:22). A white robe is one of the signs of baptism. We see the outward purity of the garment and it helps us more readily understand the inner and hidden reality of grace. The ring is a sign that the son’s inheritance is restored. “This son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found” (15:24). The son has shown contrition and is truly sorry for his sins. His inheritance is restored. With our own confession of sin and the granting of absolution, we too are restored to our royal inheritance. In the Gospel story, they enjoy a banquet and celebrate a feast. With serious and grave sin forgiven, we are welcomed back to the Eucharistic Feast of the Mass.

The story ends on a sad note. The older brother is bitter. He does not like the prodigal ways of his young brother nor the lavish forgiveness of his father. The father sees this pride and hurt and reaches out to offer the older son reconciliation as well.

There is more than one way to lose an inheritance. Our heavenly Father has lavished his mercy upon us. In turn, he asks us to forgive others. That may take swallowing a little pride, but as we put things in perspective, we can better appreciate all the prodigal Lord has done for us ... and the little but important ways He asks us to pay it forward.