

The Fatted Calf

By Anand Peter

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32, particularly Luke 15:29-32

Verily I say unto you, They have their reward (Matthew 6:2).

Like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which I cherish, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is known within and outside the biblical teachings. Both are applied liberally in literary circles and in everyday conversation. The focus, however, generally revolves around the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son himself. Though both parables may read as straightforward, we learn many invaluable lessons from these and other parables of our Lord. He sowed the seeds during His short ministry using these parables, so that His disciples could reap the harvest when the time became right.

I do not intend to make you weary by narrating again the story of the prodigal younger son. Today, I am focusing on Luke 15:29-32. We will look at the father and the elder son. If you ask me who was wronged in this parable, I would say it was the father. More than the wealth squandered away by the insolent son, the father suffered the breach in their relationship, and the separation from a son he loved so much. We see him handle the situation with love, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control towards both his sons. The elder son's lamenting did not cause any bitterness in him. This is precisely what Jesus has gone through from the time man fell from His grace. He continues to suffer for humankind to return to Him.

We are not like the prodigal son alone, unfaithful to God's unfathomable love and compassion; we are like the elder son too, demanding our pound of flesh. Paraphrased, we hear the father telling the elder son, "Do not be so short-sighted, lest you become as greedy and foolish as your brother. All that we have here is yours, so keep your eyes on the bigger picture and the greater reward."

In comparison to his brother, on a casual reading, the elder son looks to be righteous. That is the way we feel about ourselves as Christians. In life, we go through the motions of living as Christ taught us. At the same time, we look for our reward. Many a time, the reward we look for could be appreciation and a pat on the back from fellow Christians, to be honoured by society as 'better Christians.' Those are the 'fatted calf' we want in reward. The purpose of our faithful Christian service is not for a pat on the back or the approval of others. Otherwise, we are no different from the Pharisees, who did their works before men, and thus, as Christ declared, "Verily I say unto you, They have their reward" (Matthew 6:2). We would be no better than the elder son.

The sinful and inappropriate attitudes of both sons had brought dishonour upon the father. But the father's willingness to forgive them both provides hope for all, just as our merciful Father in heaven is compassionate towards us. While the narrative ends without revealing what happened to the two brothers, it is worthwhile to imagine that there was reconciliation all around, between the two brothers and, most importantly, between the father and his sons. The breach in the relationships was healed, and the honour of the family was restored.

Our reward is not of this world, but in the Kingdom of Jesus. Our reward is the compassion and forgiveness we receive from Jesus. Our reward is the redemption that Jesus obtained for us by paying a heavy price: His life.

Amen.