

## *Introduction*

The parable of the Good Shepherd has been called a little gospel within the Gospel. That's going a bit far; it does not, after all, contain all the riches of Christian doctrine. However, in this parable our Lord is making a moving appeal to us to be converted.

Repent. Be converted. Begin again. These are the three stages of the spiritual life.

Today, to stimulate our repentance, let's look at what the parable teaches us about the evil of sin and the wretched state of the sinner.

We have to admit: if this parable did not contain a hidden meaning that we had to try to find, it would be a most unlikely sounding story.

*A man had two sons.* Which of the two would you wish to be like? One was unable to look after his soul; the other was unable to give his heart. Both saddened their father, both treated him harshly, both failed to recognize how good he was to them—one through disobeying and the other in spite of obeying.

Which of them would you want to be like? The spendthrift or the calculating one? Because there is no third son we can claim a likeness to, we are forced to agree that we are one or the other . . . or perhaps both the one and the other.

They are very strange sons indeed. But we also have to add that they have a very strange father, one who doesn't give a thought to his own dignity and who

doesn't exercise his authority. Why? He does nothing to stand in the way of his younger son's insolence, stupidity, and whims. Not only does he not cut off his allowance, which any of you would have done in his place, but he doesn't even try to reason with him. Just listen to the younger brother: *"Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me."* And he divided his living between them. As simple as that. He lets himself be plundered by the boy without so much as a murmur of protest.

And the end of the story is no more edifying than the beginning. When his older son refuses to come and share the feast, lo and behold, it is the father who goes out to beg him to come in. What sort of house is this, where the children give the orders? When will this father ever say, just for once, "I want you to do this," "I command you to . . ."? This father has brought up his children very badly indeed, as I'm sure you will agree.

But we aren't in any house here on earth. This father who asks instead of ordering, who gives in and cannot say No, who forgives instead of punishing . . . this father has no equal here on earth. It is our Father in Heaven, and St. John has told us his name: "God is love."

We recognize him by the traits shown in the parable: this God who keeps silent and stays in the background, this God who gives and forgives. He has given us just one law: "Thou shalt love." In the Father's house the children do not work for a salary; they are happy to share their father's labors, and their father is happy to share his wealth with them. Their one ambition is to love each other more and more, forever.

This household, which has no equivalent among families here on earth, nevertheless does exist on earth. We belong to it: it is the Church, which, by incorporat-

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ing us into Jesus Christ, has made us God's children. In the Church and through it, we share everything with our brothers and sisters and share everything with our Father in Heaven.

This happy state, begun in us by Baptism, strengthened by Confirmation, increased by the Eucharist, is what we call the state of grace.

Love is the only law in the Father's house.

But love has one condition: freedom. No living being can be forced to love, as no one can be loved by force. Freedom is the condition for love, and love is the endless renewing of freedom. God, who loves us—because he loves us and because he expects love from us and wants nothing but love—has run the great risk of love, and the great risk of giving us freedom.

We are able—alas, we have the power, amazing and woeful as it is—to refuse him or haggle with him over our love. That is the story of the two sons in the parable, the story of sin, our own story.

Let's talk first about grave sin: the sin that makes us lose the state of grace, that destroys God's life in us.