

## **Twenty-Fourth Sunday day in Ordinary Time C/2016**

The readings of this Sunday talk about the grandeur of the love of God and his mercy. They show that God has a heart that forgives and lets be touched by the supplications of the just. They invite us to open our hearts to the grace of reconciliation by asking forgiveness of God for our sins.

The first reading describes the first sin of Israel as a nation. It shows how in the desert, they gave up to idolatry by fabricating a golden calf and worshiping it as their God. It also shows how, thanks to the intercession of Moses and in faithfulness to their forefathers, God forgave them.

This text helps us understand the stakes of today's Gospel as Jesus speaks of the love of God that surpasses human sins. First of all, the Gospel starts by mentioning the complaints of Pharisees and Scribes over Jesus' custom of welcoming sinners and outlaws.

Then, it gives Jesus' response under the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. The Gospel highlights in all the parables the joy of the loving heart of God who forgives and welcomes back sinners. It expresses that joy under the figure of the farmer who found his lost sheep, the woman who found her lost coin, and the Father who jubilates at the return of his lost son.

In the last parable in particular, the Gospel enters into details in explaining the whole story about the two brothers and their dad. It states, first, what happened to the youngest son, by showing how he asked his father his share of estate and went away. It also shows that, after having squandered his inheritance abroad with prostitutes and finding himself in dire misery, the young son decided to return back home.

Then, the Gospel describes the event of his return and the attitude of his father who, without judging him, welcomed him with joy and organized a feast for him. After that, the Gospel describes the attitude of the oldest son who, upset by the attitude of his father, did not want to celebrate the return of his brother. The Gospel ends by describing the way the father, in his mercy, tried to persuade his oldest son to accept the return of his brother and to celebrate him.

What do we learn from this Gospel? Today, I want to talk about God's mercy and human justice. However, given that all the parables talk about the love of God and the joy of finding what was lost, I will focus mostly on the parable of the prodigal son.

Let me start with an example from life. Suppose that we are in a tribunal and a criminal is brought into the presence of judges for the hearing. Let us suppose also that his parents and relatives have come for the same reason.

What would be the attitude of both parents and judges? I believe that it will be totally different. In fact, the judges will consider strictly the law and decide whether the accused is guilty or not of the crime for which he was charged. The parents, on the contrary, will be looking for the extenuating circumstances which can help their son reduce his guilt. These two attitudes symbolize God's way of looking at human beings and the human way of judging human beings. Those ways are reflected in the attitude of Pharisees and Scribes as described in today's Gospel.

In fact, in the parable under consideration, the father is not concerned by the fact that his son was a bad boy who went away and squandered his money. His real concern is about the wellbeing of his son. That is why he welcomes him with joy and offers a feast for him. That is how God treats us. He does not lock us in our faults. He rejoices when we come back to him and decide to reconcile with him. In other words, the youngest son might have violated the law and done bad things. However, what is important now is not what he has done, but his decision to come back home and his willingness to change. In that perspective, how could his father refuse him a second chance, especially now that he wants to do better and correct what he did wrong?

What Jesus wants to tell us with this parable is that God is a Father who truly loves the sinners that we are. When we change and repent of our sins, he welcomes us. For that reason, he forgives anyone of those who repent and wants to reconcile with him.

From this vision, let us draw some consequences. First, like the father who did not prevent the son from making a bad choice for his life, God lets us free to do whatever we want with our life. For that reason, we are responsible for our life and of the misery following it when we make bad decisions.

Second. Like the youngest son who experienced hunger and misery after having left the wonderful house of his father, so are we when we abandon God and go wandering far from his love.

Third. If sins keep us far from God, they do not, however, destroy the love he has for us. For that reason, God is ever ready to forgive us whenever we come back to him with our whole heart.

However, unlike God who forgives any wrong done, human beings are harsh with their peers. They look only at the law. They want that it might be applied at any cost even when someone has given evident signs of changing his life.

That is the attitude of the oldest son. Dwelling in legality, he refuses to enter the celebration's hall. Of course, he has valid arguments, because of his faithfulness to his father. But, what he does not see is that his brother has become wiser than before; he has changed.

Moreover, he has never understood that his fidelity is a great blessing someone can have in his life. In other words, our faithfulness can never be used to exclude people to approach God as though we are the only ones who deserve to be considered God's children. That is why I believe that between justice based simply on duty and obligation, which is defended by the oldest son, in this Holy Year of Mercy, we have to opt for the justice of love defended by the father. Justice of love cares for the good each one needs for his recovery and salvation. At the same time, I believe that for anyone burned with remorse and guilt for the wrong done in the past, this is a consoling message. May we take advantage of the bounty and return home, where we belong. God bless you all!

**Exodus 32: 7-11, 13-14; 1 Tim 1: 12-17; Luke 15: 1-32**



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Contact: [www.mbala.org](http://www.mbala.org)

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