

# THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

Rev. Dr. Talmage Discourses on An Interesting Subject.

How the Mother Would Greet the Prodigal's Return--The Father's Greeting of the Wanderer--God Is Represented as the Father--The Dr. Draws Some Lessons From the Parable.

A despatch from Washington says:—Rev. Dr. Talmage preached from the following text: "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him."—Luke xv. 20.

I have often described to you the going away of this prodigal son from his father's house, and I have showed you what a hard time he had down in the wilderness, and what a very great mistake it was for him to leave so beautiful a home for such a miserable desert. But he did not always stay in the wilderness; he came back after a while. We do not read that his mother came to greet him. I suppose she was dead. She would have been the first to come out. The father would have given the second kiss to the returning prodigal; the mother the first. It may have been for the lack of her example and prayers that he became a prodigal. Sometimes the father does not know how to manage the children of the household. The chief work comes upon the mother. Indeed; no one ever gets over the calamity of losing a mother in early life. Still, this young man was not ungreeted when he came back. However well appareled we may be in the morning when we start out on a journey, before night, what with the dust and the jostling, we have lost all cleanness of appearance. But this prodigal, when he started from the swine trough, was ragged and wretched, and his appearance, after he had gone through days of journeying and exposures, you can more easily imagine than describe. As the people see this prodigal coming on homeward, they wonder who he is. They say: "I wonder what prison he has broken out of. I wonder what lazaretto he has escaped from. I wonder with what plague he will smite the air." Although these people may have been well acquainted with the family, yet they do not imagine that this is the very young man who went off only a little while ago with quick step, and ruddy cheek, and beautiful apparel. The young man, I think, walks very fast. He looks as though he were intent upon something very important. The people stop. They look at him. They wonder where he came from. They wonder where he is going to. You have heard of a son who went off to sea and never returned. All the people in the neighborhood thought the son would never return, but the parents came to no such conclusion. They would go by the hour, and day, and sit upon the beach, looking off upon the water, expecting to see the sail that would bring home the long-absent boy. And so I think this father of my text sat under the vine looking towards the road on which his son had departed; but the father has changed very much since we saw him last. His hair has become white, his cheeks are furrowed,

## HIS HEART IS BROKEN.

What is all this bountiful table to him when his son may be lacking bread? What is all the splendor of the wardrobe of that homestead when the son may not have a decent coat? What are all the sheep on the hillside to that father when his pet lamb is gone. Still he sits and watches, looking out on the road, and one day he beholds a foot traveller. He sees him rise above the hills; first the head and after awhile the entire body; and as soon as he gets a fair glance of him he knows it is his recreant son. He forgets the crutch, and the cane, and the stiffness of the joints, and bounds away. I think the people all around were amazed. They said: "It is only a footpad. It is only some old tramp of the road. Don't go out to meet him." The father knew better. The change in the son's appearance could not hide the marks by which the father knew the boy. You know that persons of a great deal of independence of character are apt to indicate it in their walk. For that reason the sailor almost always has a peculiar step, not only because he stands much on shipboard amid the rocking of the sea, and he has to balance himself, but he has for the most part an independent character, which would show itself even if he never went to the sea; and we know from what transpired after, and from what transpired before, that this prodigal son was of an independent and frank nature; and I suppose that the characteristics of his mind and heart were the characteristics of his walk. And so the father knew him. He puts out his withered arms towards him; he brings his wrinkled face against the pale cheek of his son; he kisses the wan lips; he thanks God that the long agony is over. "When he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell

on his neck, and kissed him." Oh, do you not recognize that father? Who was it? It was God! I have no sympathy with that cast-iron theology which represents God as hard, severe, and vindictive.

## GOD IS A FATHER

—kind, loving, lenient, gentle, long-suffering, patient, and He flies to our immortal rescue. Oh, that we might realize it to-day. A wealthy lady in one of the eastern countries was going off for some time, and she asked her daughters for some memento to carry with her. One of the daughters brought a marble tablet, beautifully inscribed; and another daughter brought a beautiful wreath of flowers. The third daughter came, and said, "Mother, I brought neither flowers nor tablet, but here is my heart. I have inscribed it all over with your name, and wherever you go, it will go with you." The mother recognized it as the best of all the mementoes. Of that to-day our souls might go out towards the Lord Jesus Christ, towards our Father—that our hearts might be written all over with the evidences of His loving-kindness, and that we might never again forsake Him. Lord God, this day be Thy Holy Spirit more upon our affections!

ceives the sinner back again? Give me a plummet with which I may in the first place, I notice in this text, the Father's eyesight; in the second place, I notice the Father's haste; and, in the third place, I notice the Father's kiss.

To begin: the Father's eyesight. "When he was yet a great way off his father saw him." You have noticed how old people sometimes put a book off on the other side of the light. They can see at a distance a great deal easier than they can close by. I do not know whether he could see well that which was near by, but I do know he could see a great way off. "His father saw him." Perhaps he had been looking for the return of that boy especially that day. I do not know but that he had been in prayer, and that God had told him that that day the recreant boy would come home. "The father saw him a great way off."

I wonder if God's eyesight can descry us when we are coming back to him? The text pictures our condition—we are a great way off. That young man was not farther off from his father's house, sin is not farther off from holiness, hell is not farther off from heaven, than we have been by our sins away off from our God; aye so far off that we could not hear His voice, though vehemently He has called us year after year. I do not know what bad habits you have formed, or in what evil places you have been, or what false notions you may have entertained; but you are ready to acknowledge, if your heart has not been changed by the grace of God, that you are a great way off—aye, so far that you cannot get back of yourselves. You would like to come back. Aye, this moment you would start, if it were not for this sin, and that habit, and this disadvantage. But I am to tell you of

## THE FATHER'S EYESIGHT.

"He saw him a great way off." He has seen all your frailties, all your disadvantages. He has been longing for your coming. He has not been looking at you with a critic's eye or a bailiff's eye, but with a Father's eye; and if a parent ever pitied a child, God pities you. You say: "Oh, I had so many evil surroundings when I started life." Your Father sees it. You say: "I have so many bad surroundings now, and so it is very difficult for me to break away from evil associations." Your Father sees it, and if this moment you should start heavenward—as I pray you may—your Father would not sit idly down and allow you to struggle up towards Him. Oh, no! Seeing you at a great way off, he would fly to the rescue. How long does it take a father to leap into the middle of the highway if his child be there, and a swift vehicle is coming, and may destroy him? Five hundred times longer than it takes our heavenly Father to spring to the deliverance of a lost child. "When he was a great way off his Father saw him."

And this brings me to notice the Father's haste. The Bible says he ran. No wonder. He did not know but that the young man would change his mind and go back. He did not know but that he would drop down from exhaustion. He did not know but that something fatal might overtake him before he got up to the door-sill; and so the father ran. The Bible, for the most part, speaks of God as walking. "In the fourth watch of the night," it says, "Jesus came unto them walking on the sea." "He walketh upon the wings of the wind." Our first parents heard the voice of the Lord walking in the garden in the cool of the day; but when a sinner starts for God, the Father runs to meet him. Oh! if a man ever wants help, it is when he tries to become a Christian. The world says to him: "Back with you. Have more spirit; don't be hampered with religion. Time enough yet. Wait until you get sick. Wait until you get old." Satan says, "Back with you; you are so bad; that God will have nothing to do with you;" or, "You are good enough, and need

no Redeemer. Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." Ten thousand voices say: "Back with you."

## GOD'S A HARD MASTER.

The church is a collection of hypocrites. Back into your sins; back to your evil indulgences; back to your prayerless pillow. The silliest thing that a young man ever does is to come home after he has been wandering." Oh, how much help a man does want when he tries to become a Christian. Indeed, the prodigal cannot find his way home to his father's house alone. Unless some one comes to meet him he had better have strayed by the swine-troughs. When the sea comes in at full tide, you might more easily with your broom sweep back the surges than you could drive back the ocean of your unforgiven transgressions. What are we to do? Are we to fight the battle alone, and trudge on with no one to aid us, and no rock to shelter us, and no word of encouragement to cheer us. Glory be to God, we have in the text the announcement: "When he was yet a great way off, his father ran." When the sinner starts for God, God starts for the sinner. God does not come out with a slow and hesitating pace. The infinite spaces slip beneath His feet, and he takes worlds at a bound. "The father son." Oh, wonderful meeting, when God and the soul come together. "The Father ran." You start for God and God starts for you, and this morning and this house is the time and the place when you meet; and while the angels rejoice over the meeting, your long injured Father falls upon your neck with attestations of compassion and pardon. Your poor, wandering, sinful, polluted soul, and the loving, the eternal Father, have met.

I remark upon the father's kiss. "He fell on his neck," my text says, "and kissed him." It is not every father that would have done that way. He would have scolded him, and said: "Here, you went off with beautiful clothes, but now you are all in tatters. You went off healthy, and come back sick and wasted with your dissipations." He did not say that. The son, all haggard, and ragged, and filthy, and wretched, stood before his father. The father charged him with none of his wanderings. He just received him. He just kissed him. His wretchedness was a recommendation to that father's love. Oh, that father's kiss! How shall I describe the love of God?—the ardour with which he re-fashions this sea. Give me a ladder with which I can scale this height. Give me words with which I can describe this love. The apostle says in one place, "unsearchable;" in another, "past finding out." Height overtopping all height; depth plunging beneath all depth; breadth compassing all immensity. Oh, this love!

## GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD.

He loves you. Don't you believe it? Has He not done everything to make you think so? He has given you life, health, friends, home—the use of your hand, the sight of your eye, hearing of your ear. He has strewn your path with mercies. He has fed you, sheltered you, defended you, loved you, imperturbed you all your life long. Don't you believe He loves you? Why, this morning, if you should start up from the wilderness of your sin, He would throw both arms around you. To make you believe that He loves you, He stooped to manger, and cross, and sepulchre. With all the passions of His holy nature roused, He stands before you to-day, and would coax you to happiness and heaven. Oh, this father's kiss! There is so much meaning, and love, and compassion in it; so much pardon in it; so much heaven in it. I proclaim Him the Lord God, merciful, gracious, and long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth. Lest you would not believe Him, He goes up to Golgotha, and while the rocks are rending, and the graves are opening, and the mobs are howling, and the sun is hiding, He dies for you. See Him! See Him on the Mount of Crucifixion, the sweat on His brow tinged with the blood exuding from His lacerated temples! See his eyes swimming in death! Hear the loud breathing of the Sufferer as He pants with a world on His heart! Hark to the fall of the blood from brow, and hand, and foot, on the rocks beneath—dropl! dropl! dropl! Look at the nails! How wide the wounds are! Wider do they gap as His body comes down upon them. Oh this crucifixion agony. Tears melting into tears. Blood flowing into blood. Darkness dropping on darkness. Hands of men joined with hands of devils to tear apart the quivering heart of the Son of God! Oh! will He never speak again? Will that crimson face never light up again?

## HE WILL SPEAK AGAIN;

while the blood is suffusing His brow, and reddening His cheek, and gathering on nostril and lip, and you think that He is exhausted and cannot speak. He cries out until all the ages hear him: "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do!" Is there no emphasis in such a scene as that to make your dry eyes weep, and your hard heart break? Will you turn your back upon it; and say by your actions what the Jews said by their Him down. Love opened the gate. Love led to the sacrifice. Love sheltered the grave. Love lifted Him up in the resurrection. Sovereign love. Omnipotent love. Infinite love. Bleeding words: "His blood be on us, and on our children? What does it all mean, my brother, my sister? Why, it means that for our lost race there was a Father's kiss. Love brought love. Everlasting love.

"Oh, for this love let rocks and hills, Their lasting silence break; And all harmonious human tongues The Saviour's praises speak." Now, will you accept that Father's kiss? The Holy Spirit asks you to. The Holy Spirit comes to you this

morning with His arousing, meeting, alarming, inviting, vivifying influence. Hearer, what creates in thee that unrest? It is the Holy Ghost. What sounds in your ears to-day, the joys of the saved, and the sorrows of the condemned? It is the Holy Ghost. What influence now tells thee that it is time to fly, that to-morrow may be too late; that there is one door, one road, one cross, one sacrifice, one Jesus? It is the Holy Ghost. Don't you think He is here? I see it in those solemn looks. I see it in those tearful eyes. I see it in those blanched cheeks. I see it in the upturned face of childhood and the earnest gaze of old age. I know it from this silence like the grave. The Holy Ghost is here, and, while I speak, the chains of captives are falling, and the dungeons of sin are opening, and the prodigals coming, and the Father is running, and angels are shouting, and devils are trembling. Oh, it is a momentous hour. It is charged with eternal destinies. The shadows of the eternal world flit over this assemblage. Hark! I hear the songs of the saved. I hear the howling of the damned. Heaven and hell seem to mingle, and eternity poises on the pivot of this hour. Thy destiny is being decided. Thy doom is being fixed. The door of mercy, so wide open, begins to close. It trembles on its hinges, and soon will be shut. These go into life, and those go into death; and these have begun the march to heaven, and those have commenced to die. These have begun to rise, and those have begun to sink. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Woel! Woel! It seems to me as if the judgment were past. I imagine it is past. I imagine that all the sentences have been awarded, the righteous enthroned, the wicked driven away in his wickedness. Shut all the gates of heaven. There are no more to come in. Bolt all the gates of darkness—no more to be allowed to come out. Hark! the eternal ages have begun their unending tramp! tramp!

## BATTLE FIELD POST OFFICES.

How Tommy Atkins Gets His Letters in War Times.

At one time it was impossible for our troops engaged on active service in a foreign land to receive and despatch letters, says the London Daily Mail.

But now all that is changed, and no matter where he goes, or in what numbers, "Tommy" is almost as certain of receiving his letters as you are here in England. Every non-commissioned officer and man in the 24th Middlesex Rifle Volunteers is a postal employe, most of them being sorters or postmen in the London postal districts, each district having its own company.

The "Army Post-office Corps" is the "M" Company of the 24th. The "L" Company is the Field Telegraph Corps attached on active service to the Royal Engineers.

About 130 men are already on their way to the Cape, and more will follow if required.

It was in the Egyptian campaigns of 1882-5 that the War Office authorities first made use of these London volunteers for active service. And ever since the manoeuvres were commenced on Salisbury Plain the 24th have always done the field post-office work, as well as attending to the volunteer training camps at Aldershot, Shorncliffe, etc.

When a camp is moving the post-office is always one of the first away, and the first thing "Tommy" does on arriving on the camping ground is to look for the red and white flag, showing the position of his post-office, the great link that connects him with his dear ones at home. One can easily picture the grimy, powder-blackened, perhaps blood-stained soldiers, storming their post-office after some bloody battle, anxious to inform, those at home of their safety or the death or disablement of a chum. The Post-office Corps is very popular with "Tommy Atkins," who looks upon them as the only means of relieving the mental anguish of a dearly loved mother, wife or sweetheart.

The quantity of postal matter for the troops is already enormous, and to an ordinary observer it would seem impossible for a hundred men or so to deal with it; but so skilled is your London sorter or postman that it only requires some six of them to look after seven or eight battalions; besides, each man is a highly efficient soldier, and the London press was unanimous in its praises of the 24th Middlesex, as the steadiest and most efficient of the whole fifty-one battalions of infantry present at the last royal review in Hyde Park.

On foreign service the men wear the Engineer uniform; at home the same as the Rifle brigade. The full strength of the corps is about 1,200 men, under the command of Colonel Raffles-Thompson.

## CHANCE OF ATHLETES.

Farmer—Yes, I want a man. Are you a good jumper?  
Applicant—Jumper? Well, yes.  
You could jump a barbed-wire fence without much trouble, is'pose?  
Um—I s'pose so.  
Well, that's all right then; you'll do. You see some of our bulls is a leetle wild.

## A BARGAIN.

Tess—Isn't she a peculiar girl? She wouldn't look at him when he was rich, but now, after he's lost all his money, she accepts him?  
Jess—O, well, you know how crazy every woman is to get anything that's reduced.

## PRESCRIBING FOR THE EMPEROR.

Position of the Most Celebrated Physician in China.

The responsibilities of a physician are never light, but surely one who has to prescribe for a patient whom he may neither question or touch, and upon whom he hardly dares to look for fear of a serious breach of etiquette, finds himself in a hard place. This is the condition of a Chinese doctor who is called upon to attend the emperor. A Shanghai correspondent gives a curiously interesting story of the enforced attendance of Chen Lien-Fang, the most celebrated native physician in China, upon the emperor.

In October an imperial edict directed the governors and viceroys to send physicians of distinction to the capital, and Chen Lien-Fang was ordered to report to the grand council. The account of his experience was given by himself.

A few days after his arrival at Peking he was summoned to an audience. That audience was certainly formidable. Entering the presence of the sovereign on his knees, he crossed the apartment in that position to the place where the emperor and the dowager empress were seated at opposite sides of a low table on a dais.

The emperor looked pale and listless, had a troublesome irritation of the throat, and was evidently feverish. The empress, who struck the physician as an extremely well-preserved and intelligent woman, seemed solicitous about the patient's health, and careful for his comfort.

As it would have been a serious breach of etiquette for the doctor to ask any questions of his majesty, the empress proceeded to describe his symptoms, the invalid occasionally signifying confirmation by a word or a nod.

During the monologue the doctor, following the customary procedure at imperial audiences, kept his eyes fixed on the floor. Finally, at the command of the empress, and still kneeling, he was permitted to place one hand upon the emperor's wrist. This was no feeling of the pulse, but simply the contact of the flat of the hand first with one side of the wrist and then with the other. This accomplished, the empress continued her recital of the patient's sufferings.

She described the state of his tongue and the symptoms of ulceration in the mouth and throat, but as it was not permissible for the doctor to examine these for himself, he was obliged to make the most of a somewhat unprofessional description. As he pertinently observed, it is difficult to look at a patient's tongue when his exalted rank compels you to keep your eyes fastened on the floor.

The empress having concluded her remarks on the case, Chen Lien-Fang was permitted to withdraw, and to present to the grand council his diagnosis, together with advice as to future treatment. These were subsequently communicated officially to the throne. The physician prescribed certain tonics of the orthodox native type, and suggested the greatest possible amount of mental and physical rest.

## KAFFIR LYING.

A Whole Race With no Knowledge of Truthfulness.

The Kaffir makes an interesting study. You cannot understand him all at once. It requires time, and a good deal of it. A new arrival thinks the Kaffir is a born prevaricator of the truth, and has his reasons for so thinking.

Suppose you catch a "boy" committing a misdemeanor. Ask him what he has been doing, and he will look up in your face a picture of innocence, and reply, "Ikona, baass"—a plump denial. Tell him you saw him do it, threaten him with punishment, he will still persist in maintaining his innocence. He will still plead ignorant of the misdeed, and mutter in astonishment or fear, "Ikona baass." In fact he knows nothing whatever about it. If the offence be one that cannot be overlooked, you proceed to administer reproof—with the foot, if you are not particular, and wish to be impressive. What does he do? If he is a raw "boy," and not used to it, he runs off with a terrified look on his face; if he is used to it, he retires precipitately with a satisfied smile, not necessarily because he has got the thrashing, but because he no longer has to look forward to it.

The only explanation of the systematic lying of the native in the face of the most convincing proof is that the native mind is totally unable to form a conception of what we understand by truthfulness.

The ethical system of the Kaffir is of a most rudimentary character. His difficulty in grasping the ethics of white people is only equalled by the difficulty which the ordinary European experiences in comprehending the standard of ethics recognized by the Kaffir. Thus inability probably accounts in great measure for the sometimes rather harsh way in which many Europeans treat the blacks under their charge.

## SOUNDING SO.

Mack O'Rell—That man is very ungrateful to Dame Fortune.  
Luke Warme—In what way?  
Mack O'Rell—Why, he found a diamond in the street the other day, and gave what he said.  
Luke Warme—Can't imagine.  
Mack O'Rell—This is hard back.