



CHAPTER 15: 20-32

The Gospel of
Luke

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An open book with glowing pages, set against a dark background with a blue light beam.

For the Catholic Church, God's Revelation is found in Sacred Tradition, understood as God's Revealed Word handed down by the Living Teaching Authority established by Christ in the Church. That includes both Written Tradition (Scripture) and Unwritten Tradition received from Christ and handed down Orally by the Apostles and their Successors. The Church founded by Christ on Peter, and only that Church, has been Empowered by Christ to 'Interpret' His Teaching Authoritatively in His Name.

Scripture is *Inspired*; *Inspiration* really means that God Himself is the Chief Author of the Scriptures. He uses a Human Agent, in so marvelous a way that the Human writes what the Holy Spirit wants him to write, does so without Error, yet the Human Writer is Free, and keeps his own Style of Language. It is only because God is *Transcendent that He can do this - insure Freedom from Error, while leaving the Human Free. To say He is Transcendent means that He is above and beyond all our Human Classifications and Categories.*

Luke's gospel is a compilation of various interviews with eye-witnesses and close followers of Jesus (Luke 1:1-4). The author, Luke, probably did not become a Christian until several years after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. He is first mentioned (implicitly) in Acts 16:10 (Acts is another book of the New Testament which Luke wrote). He did not, therefore, meet Jesus in the flesh and he himself was not an eye-witness.

Considered one of the most important Catholic theologians and Bible commentators, Cornelius à Lapide's, S.J. writings on the Bible, created a Scripture Commentary so complete and scholarly that it was practically the universal commentary in use by Catholics for over 400 years. Fr. Lapide's most excellent commentaries have been widely known for successfully combining piety and practicality. Written during the time of the Counter Reformation, it includes plenty of apologetics. His vast knowledge is only equaled by his piety and holiness.

Continuation of Luke 15: 20-32

Ver. 20.—*But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him.* Before he had given any expression to his penitence, his father prevented him.

See here God's wonderful loving-kindness towards penitent sinners. "He is wont," says Titus, "in His mercy and pity to anticipate the repentance of men;" and, adds S. Gregory of Nyssa, "when he resolved to repent, his father was reconciled to him." *And had compassion, ἐσπλαγγνίσθη*, was moved with pity at the sight of his misery. *And ran.* In excess of joy, says Euthymius, he waited not for him to draw nigh, but went to meet him, running and thereby showing the greatness of his love.

And fell on his neck, and kissed him. "To fall on his neck," says S. Augustine, "is to lower to his embrace the arm of God, which is Christ; to give the kiss is to comfort by the word of God's grace unto the hope of pardon of sin." But S. Chrysostom says,

pride, envy, and unbelief, showed themselves unworthy of these benefits. Hence they became reprobate, and the Gentiles were chosen in their stead. See S. Matt. xx. 16.

Ver. 31.—*And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.* "The law, the prophets, the oracles of God," says St. Jerome. To this we must add, the worship of the one true God, and faith in Him, in the teachings of the Church, and the benefits arising therefrom. For all these blessings, which were lacking to the Gentiles before the coming of Christ, were the possession of God's people Israel.

The sense is, "Thou, as my son, art at liberty to enjoy all my possessions, as seems to thee good. Thou oughtest not then to envy thy brother, or to take it amiss that out of our common property, I have ordered a calf to be slain, in honour of his return, especially as thou also art invited to the banquet." St. Ambrose. And the Interlinear adds, "All mine is thine, if so be, thou ceasest to envy thy brother," for, says St. Augustine, "desire obtains nothing without want, charity nothing with want, and when we shall have obtained that blessedness, the higher things will be ours to live upon, equal things ours to have fellowship with, the lower things ours to rule;" and he assigns the reason, "for it is thus that all things are looked upon by perfect and immortal children, that each is the possession of all, and all of each." Hence there will arise for the blessed hereafter the perfection of mutual charity and love, and the fullness of glory and of bliss.

Ver. 32.—*It was meet that we should make merry and be glad.* For the most convincing of reasons, because this my son, thy brother, who was dead in trespasses and sins, is now restored to grace and favour, wherefore it behovest thee to take part in our rejoicing, and not to be envious and to murmur against him.

Christ now leaves the Pharisees to apply the parable to themselves. For, says Theophylact, "It is intended to teach that although we may be just, we must not cast off sinners nor murmur because God receives them;" and again, "The Lord speaks as it were after this manner; I beseech you who are righteous and free from reproach, that ye murmur not at the salvation of sons, for this prodigal is still a son."

does the Father receive His Son, for Christ is ever being crucified for them that believe." See also Salmeron (*Tom. vii. Tract. 27 and 28*).

Therefore came his father out and intreated him.—Symbolically, this signifies that God through the preaching of Christ and His Apostles invited the Pharisees and the unbelieving Jews to enter His Church, and therein to partake of the gospel feast, and share in the joy of the faithful. But they refused the invitation from hatred of Christ crucified, and because they were offended that the Gentiles should believe on Him, and they will remain obstinate in their refusal until the coming of Elias at the end of the world. So S. Augustine bids us "admire God's goodness towards His people;" and S. Jerome, "How kind and how merciful a father! He asks his son to share in the joy of the household."

Ver. 29.—*And he answering said, Lo, these many years do I serve thee.* The Syriac has "*servio tibi servitatem*," so the Jews were in bondage to the observance of the law.

Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment. This answer shows the lying arrogance and the ingratitude of the Jews, who boasted of their work done under the law, and forgot the many benefits which God had conferred upon them. They lie when they say they have never transgressed the commandment of God. They transgress often! For, says St. Jerome (Ep. 146), "Is it not a transgression to envy our brother his salvation?" With like arrogancy, the Pharisee justifies himself, and despises the Publican. St. Luke xviii. II. But as St. Augustine and the Interlinear point out, the Jews did not bow down to idols, as the Gentiles did, and therefore, inasmuch as they worshipped the one true God, and Him alone, in this particular they did not transgress the commandment.

And yet thou never gavest me a kid. The fathers explain this symbolically in many ways.

"No blood of prophet or priest has delivered us from the Roman yoke, but for the prodigal, *i.e.*, for the Gentiles, for sinners, throughout the whole world, Thy precious blood was shed." St. Jerome (Ep. 146), "Thou hast never, for my sake, ordered a kid, *i.e.* a sinner who persecuted me, to be slain." Theophylact.

"Thou, O Christ, hast never given me Thyself for my food, because I accounted Thee as a kid, *i.e.*, as a sinner, and a perverter of the Law." St. Augustine.

"The Jews demand a kid: the Christians a lamb. For them Barabbas is set free; for us the lamb is slain." St. Ambrose.

Ver. 30.—*This thy son . . . which hath devoured thy living with harlots.* The Pharisees accuse God of sin, in preferring the unworthy to the worthy, *i.e.*, Gentiles to the Jews, sinners to themselves, as if He had regard to the persons of men; but their accusation is false. For the Gentiles, though sinners, by their repentance and faith made themselves worthy of the gospel and the grace of Christ; but the Pharisees, by their

"The mouth is kissed as that from which the heartfelt confession of the penitent proceeded."

The embrace and the kiss are here set forth as the tokens of pardon and reconciliation, and of especial love and goodwill, as well as of the exultation and joy with which God and His angels regard a sinner that repenteth.

Ver. 21.—*And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned*, &c. He desires, says the Interlinear, that to be done by grace, which he acknowledges himself to be unworthy of by any merit of his own. (See above on ver. 18.) He omits to say, "make me as one of thy hired servants," either because his father, out of love and joy, had cut short his confession, by bidding the attendants "bring forth the best robe," or because his father's embrace and kiss had encouraged him to hope that again he might be acknowledged as a son. "He does not add," says S. Augustine (*Lib. ii. Quæst. Evang. q. 33*), "what he had before determined to say, for after the kiss of his father he most nobly disdained to become a hireling." Titus, however, is of opinion that the words were actually uttered, although S. Luke, has not recorded them.

Ver. 22.—*But the father said to his servant*, &c. "The servants," says Theophylact, "are the angels or the priests," or, according to S. Augustine, the preachers, for by their ministry God reconciles sinners to Himself.

The best robe. The "first" robe, that which he was wont to wear before he left his father's house, for from the repetition of the article *τῆς στολῆς τῆς πρῶτης*, it is clear that some particular garment is indicated.

Hence, in the lives of the Fathers, it is related that a certain Bishop saw in a vision two women who were sinners, clothed, after having made sacramental confession, in white garments and radiant with light. He inquired the cause of this from an angel that appeared unto him, and was told that the women, by their confession and tears, had rendered themselves worthy to be numbered with the elect.

And put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. A ring of gold, *i.e.* the mark of a free and rich or noble man, as also are shoes, for slaves go barefoot, but citizens are shod.

Ver. 23.—*And bring hither the fatted calf.* *τον μῶσχο*, that particular calf which I ordered to be fattened for such a solemn occasion as this. All these things, the robe, the ring, the shoes, and the fatted calf, show the delight of the father, *i.e.* the joy of God and His angels at the conversion of a sinner, and teach us that by the great mercy of God, a penitent is restored to the same, or even a better position than that, which he held before he fell into sin.

But with S. Augustine, S. Jerome, and Bede, we may attach a separate meaning to each.

So we may take the best robe to mean not innocence, for this once lost cannot be regained, but first grace and love. Thus the Interlinear interprets it as, “the robe of the Holy Spirit, which is an earnest of immortal life.” According to S. Ambrose, it is “the cloke of wisdom;” but S. Augustine considers it “the dignity which Adam lost.” By the ring we may understand the express image of God, which some see in one virtue, some in another.

“The ring,” says Bede, “is the seal of our unfeigned faith,” or, according to S. Chrysostom in the *Catena*, the symbol of the seal of salvation, or rather, the badge of betrothment, the pledge of nuptials with Christ. It is “the signet of faith with which the promises are sealed in the hearts of the faithful.” Gloss. “The seal of Christ’s image, and impress of the truth.” Interlinear. “The pledge of the Holy Spirit, because of the participation of grace, which is well signified by the finger.” S. Augustine. See Gen. xli. 42; Jer. xxii. 24; Hag. ii 23.

“On his hand,” *i.e.* by his working, that his faith may be made manifest by his works, and that his works may be established by his faith. Interlinear.

By “the shoes on his feet” is typified promptitude in the exercise of acts of virtue, particularly as regards the preaching of the gospel; for those who are converted greatly desire the conversion of others. Or, as S. Augustine explains, “The shoes are the preparation for preaching the gospel, in order not to touch earthly things,” that, says S. Chrysostom, “a man may walk firmly along the slippery path of the world;” the course of our life is called in Scripture a foot (*pes*).

Again, “the shoes” are the examples of good men, which, as it were, leave footprints, to enable us to follow in their steps.

“The fatted calf” is a figure of Christ, who in the Eucharist feeds the just, and those sinners who are penitent, with His body and His blood, comforting and soothing in a wonderful manner those who have been newly converted as well as those who have long since repented.

Hence the Interlinear says, “Christ is the fatted calf abounding in every spiritual virtue, so that He suffices for the salvation of the whole world.” And S. Chrysostom: “Christ is called the calf because of the sacrifice of His body, and fatted, because He made satisfaction for all.” And Augustine: “The fatted calf is our Lord Himself in the flesh, loaded with insults. The father commands it to be brought, *i.e.* commands Christ to be preached. He also bids them kill it, in allusion to the death of Christ. For He is then killed to each man who believes him slain.”

Let us eat and be merry. God, says Euthymius, is said to eat in proof of His joy. “For,” adds S. Jerome (*Ep.* 146), “there can be no rejoicing if our Father be absent from the feast,” because, says Bede and S. Ambrose, “the food of the Father is our salvation;

the joy of the Father the redemption of our sins.” And according to the Gloss, “The salvation of sinners is the refreshment of God and the saints. Observe also that the calf is slain after that the robe, the ring, and the shoes are provided, to teach us that we must put on the hope of the immortality for which we were created, that we must seal our works with the signet of faith, and preach by the confession of Christ, if we would partake of the heavenly mysteries.”

Ver. 24.—*For this my son was dead, and is alive again.* He was dead by reason of his sins; he is alive again because of his repentance.

Ver. 28.—*And he was angry, and would not go in.* The anger and the murmuring of the elder son is the application of the parable, and is intended to show how justly God rejoices over the conversion of a sinner, and what answer can be given to those who murmur at the consideration shown to those that repent.

“Hence we learn,” says Euthymius, “that God rejoices so greatly over the return of the prodigal, in order that He may provoke others to jealousy.” So also Theophylact, Titus, and S. Chrysostom in the *Catena*; for it is certain that the righteous do not envy penitent sinners the blessings they enjoy, but rejoice greatly and exalt in their happiness. See S. Matt. xx. 11.

Hence we are to understand rather by the murmuring of the elder son, the envy of the Pharisees who murmured against Christ because He received sinners. For this was the occasion as well as scope of the parable, as is clear from the opening verses of the chapter. Similarly also the parable applies to the Jews, who hated the Apostles and murmured against them, because they preached the Gospel to the Gentiles. So S. Ambrose says, “The Jews envied the Gentiles the paternal blessing,” and S. Augustine (*Quæst. Evang.* ii. 33), “He is angry now, and will not go in. But when the fulness of the nations shall have entered in, then the father will go forth that all Israel may be saved.” Again S. Ambrose, “He is called the elder because he envied his brother, and envy causes a man very quickly to grow old.”

He heard music and dancing. That is, as S. Augustine explains, “He heard the Apostles full of the Holy Spirit preaching the Gospel with harmonious voices. He takes one of the prophets to read, and as he searches in it, asks in a manner, why are these feasts celebrated in the Church at which he finds himself not present.” But S. Ambrose says, “He heard the harmony of the Christian people singing with united voice, and raising sweet sounding strains of joy over the salvation of the sinner. But he stands without, for his evil disposition hinders him from entering in;” and the Gloss, “The Church’s symphony is the accord of different ages and varying virtues, whence the chorus and spiritual dance of holy and exultant joy.”

Tropologically, S. Jerome (*Epist.* 146) says, “Daily is this feast kept, daily