

THE PRODIGAL SON TEACHES US HOW TO REPENT CORRECTLY

—by Nikiforos Theotokis—

With the parable of the Prodigal Son, the God-man Jesus Christ showed us what constitutes true repentance and confession. If we closely examine this example and compare it to the way we repent and confess nowadays, we will discover that the two are as far apart as the heaven is from the earth.

The prodigal son initiated his repentance by “coming to himself” (Lk. 15:17). This indeed is the starting point of true repentance; without making this first step, no one arrives at repentance. How can we repent if we do not come to know our sins? How can we discover our sins if we do not bring to mind all our deeds? How can we examine our thoughts if we do not collect our thoughts and thoroughly search ourselves?

The prodigal son distanced his mind from sinful thoughts and confined it to the contemplation and examination of himself. When he examined his state, that is, his thoughts, his words, and his actions, he immediately noticed all his sins. He quickly understood Whom he had saddened and from Whom he had been separated; from what height he had fallen and into what depth he had been submerged. He saw the filth of his transgressions and he sensed the stench of his sins; he perceived the deprivation of divine grace and the destruction of his soul. “Having come to himself,” he remembered his innocent and virtuous original state, and he recalled the glory, honor, and divine wealth enjoyed in abundance by all them who serve God and reside with Him. “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough to spare, and I perish with hunger!” (Lk. 15:17).

Today, who starts to repent by first turning his mind to himself in order to examine his life and conduct? Who first breaks his mind away from carnal thoughts and secular preoccupation in order to examine his conscience and carefully consider all the sins he has committed with his mind, words, and actions? Who believes that through his sins he has rendered himself unworthy of the heavenly kingdom and worthy of eternal condemnation? Who compares his own personal state to the life and blessedness of the righteous? No one! Today, everyone simply says, “I’m going to my spiritual father to confess.”

Now take a look at the way he repented. Consider what the prodigal son did after first preparing himself: “I will arise,” he declared, and “I will proceed to my father” (Lk. 15:18). Did you hear what he said? “I will arise!” Don’t think he said “I will arise” because he was sitting down. He was not seated upon the rock of virtue but had actually fallen and was laying deep within the filthy pit of

sin. “I will arise,” denotes his decision to flee and completely desist from sin, and to return to God. Thus, having said “I will arise,” he immediately added, “and I will go to my father.” Listen to how he also prepared for his confession: “I will say to him: father, I have sinned against Heaven and before thee. And I am no longer worthy to be called thy son.” Moreover, he even thought of the words he would use to ask God for forgiveness: “Make me as one of thy hired servants” (Lk. 15:19).

I wonder, do we say with resolve, “I will arise,” (as the prodigal son did) prior to confessing? That is, do we decide to completely desist—once and for all—from our sins before we go to confession? No! On the contrary, when people say “I am going to confess,” some continue to hold on tightly to others’ belongings, some securely shut hatred and jealousy within their hearts, some continue to criticize and slander their fellow man with their lips, some do not sever their unlawful extra-marital and pre-marital relationships, while others persist associating with persons who stir up the desire of the flesh. Prior to confessing, we do not examine or try to recall our sins, we make no resolution and have no intention to stay away completely from sin, we do not think of what we will say nor do we prepare in any other way necessary in order to repent and confess. How questionable is the forgiveness of our sins after such an apathetic confession!

“But God is infinitely compassionate,” you will argue. “While the prodigal son was still a distance away, He ran out to greet him, embraced him, and kissed him. Then He gave him all His divine gifts—He even slaughtered the fatted cow for him.” Yes, all this is indeed true and unquestionable. But, where did you learn all this? You undoubtedly heard this from the Gospel. Why then do you only notice God’s infinite compassion while ignoring the way with which the sinful person repented?

You heard that God showed unconditional mercy to the prodigal son; however, you also heard from the same Gospel how the prodigal son obtained such mercy. You heard that he “came to himself,” he carefully considered all his sins, he was deeply grieved by the absence and deprivation of God’s grace, he prepared himself prior to repenting and confessing, he abandoned sin, and he returned to God. If you take note of only God’s mercy and compassion while ignoring the imperative preparation required for repentance, you resemble a person who looks only at the top and final rung of a ladder while remaining oblivious to the rest. Such a person raises his leg to place it on the final rung and imagines that he will immediately climb to the top of the ladder; unfortunately, instead of climbing up the ladder, he falls and comes smashing to the ground.

God’s mercy is infinite. However, God shows His compassion to them who become worthy of his mercy. If you repent like the prodigal son, you will

also receive the remission of your sins and the divine gifts, just as he did. Before proceeding to confession, come to yourself like the prodigal son, collect your mind and thoughts that have been dispersed amongst the vain and sinful pleasures of the flesh, consider all your sins and the circumstances that surround your sins. Understand Whom you have saddened and realize how many blessings you have deprived yourself of. Make the decision (with all your heart and soul) and be determined to abandon sin and return to God. Prepare the words you will use to make your confession, attain a humble and contrite heart, and pour forth tears from your eyes. Proceed to the spiritual father prepared in this manner. Announce your sins without making excuses. Do not criticize others for your faults, but blame only yourself. Say, “I have sinned before Heaven and against God.” My beloved brothers, this is the model and standard of repentance and confession, which the God-man Jesus Christ set forth in His Gospel with the parable of the Prodigal Son.