

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT PRINCIPLE AND THE GREAT CORRELATE

I will arise and go to my father. The Prodigal's words express a termination of any relationship he might have had with anything or anyone in and of the far country. This was his cross that terminated all his attachments to the far country. He had joined himself to a citizen of that country but now he had broken that relationship. He hated that life and wanted no more of it. Jesus expressed the crucial essence of this Prodigal experience when he said, *He who loves his life loses it, but he who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal.* (John 12:25). That, precisely, was the prodigal's decision. Without it he could never obtain salvation and could never rise to his father's house. This is the Great Principle enunciated and illustrated by Jesus, and only by Jesus, to which we all must conform if we are to participate in the resurrection at the last day.

We likewise see the Great Commandment at work here. The Prodigal turned to his father in love, loving him with all his heart, soul, mind and strength as demonstrated by his leaving everything that might have bound him to the far country, counting it no more than trash if only he might be reconciled to his father. These two things inevitably go together, the Great Commandment and the Great Principle, and together they comprise a Great Correlate by which all God's children must rise to Him. While we remain bound to life in the far country, which is this world, we have not loved God and we cannot arise and go to him. The Great Principle informs us that we, exactly like the Prodigal, must hate our lives in this world or we cannot be saved. The Great Correlate therefore correlates this love and this hate, and we must have both.

Putting it into yet other words: the love for God is like the love of a babe for its mother. The hatred of life in this world is like the hatred of the babe for the arms of a stranger as it cries and stretches little arms toward its mother and away from the stranger. This was the prodigal's decision on the day that he resolved to return, which he expressed by saying, *I will arise and go to my father.* The life of the far country, which he at first loved passionately and rushed to join, he had next to learn to hate. Then he was free to love his father and full of desire to join him again in his father's house. So, this Great Correlate is a love/hate correlate.

The Choice

The Great Correlate mandates an absolute choice between life in this far country, with all its temporal values and relationships, and life in the Father's house, with its corresponding eternal values and relationships. The parable teaches us that the gospel is essentially a family matter as I specified above. We can be committed to the family of man on the earth, or to the family of God in his house, but we cannot commit to both at once.

A choice is mandatory. When we attempt to combine them, the Father cannot accept us. This accounts for all of Jesus' hard sayings about relationships. This is why he was careful to say, *If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple* (Luke 14:26). This is

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why he was careful to say, *Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven.* (Matthew . 23:9)

The Absolute Either/Or

There is no compromise, no adaptation and no exception. Can a wise wife receive back into her bosom the husband who has violated the marriage bond while he yet maintains the violation? Will she forgive and accept him while he remains enthralled by the seductress? Neither does the Father accept us while our hearts remain attached to this world. *Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also* (Matthew 6:21). With these words Jesus mandates an absolute disjunction. Our hearts, in love with this life, set on the things of this world and treasuring them, do not even want to arise and go to the Father. That necessarily includes all earthly relations, especially the familial and matrimonial ones. Had the Prodigal remained attached to any part of the far country he would have remained lost. Had he arisen to go to his father and there recited his repentance and confession with full fervor, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and am no longer worthy to be called your son, and then added, "If I return to your house, will you permit me to go back now and again to the far country?" Could his father have accepted him? Absolutely not! His father had permitted him to go out into the far country with no strings attached; he could not and would not accept him back with strings. The choice is intrinsically either/or.

The Absolute Truth

The above is the obvious explanation of my contention that Jesus, and only Jesus, represents the absolute Truth. All so-called truth that incorporates earthly values, bonds and influences has nothing to do with Jesus and is the negation of his Gospel of Truth. When the clerics teach or preach that following Jesus will heal family rifts and contribute to security in the life of this world or when they represent the 'life abundant' promised by Jesus as being fulfilled in this "far country," they are preaching what men love but what God hates. They are mired in the swamp of relativity and know nothing of the absolute issues set before us by our Elder Brother. Jesus' Gospel therefore requires an absolute disjunction from life in this world. He was not satisfied with teaching that we must deny earthly ties and treasures. In asserting his Great Principle, he chose hate, the strongest word possible to establish Truth in the absolute. *He who hates his life in this world will save it for life eternal.* Only the hatred of life can lead us to the absolute Truth, for everything else retains some affection or connection to that life, and is therefore relative. It can never represent absolute Truth, but Jesus manifested Truth in the absolute. He is the only one who does so, and is ipso facto the only one who can lead us to the Father. The prodigal finally learned through hard experience to hate his life in the far country so that when he arose to go to his father, he left everything behind yet he left nothing of value. His whole heart went with him, because all that he treasured lay in his father's house. He had learned by hard experience that personal fulfillment was not to be had in the 'far country.'

The Absence of the Father

Hard times came to the far country. The famine enveloped him, and the prodigal son fell into a most unhappy state. He was hungry, dirty, naked and shoeless. He had condescended from the status of extravagant swinger to that of a starving serf and the agony was prolonged until he greatly despaired. His present was painful, his future bleak and a mood inspired by a sense of his own failure and seeming worthlessness enveloped him. The dismal days dragged on and there was no relief – and the hunger constantly gnawed at his gut.

Through it all, his father did absolutely nothing for him, nor did anyone else. As the parable expresses it, *no one gave him anything.* The parable leaves us to conclude that, no matter what

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petition he may have directed to his father, the response could only have been absolute silence. No prayer, petition or messenger could have prevailed upon the father to do anything for him until he had settled upon his resurrection, that is, his great resolution; *I will arise and go to my father*. And even then the best robe, the shoes and the banquet – all were realized by the astonished prodigal only after he arrived at the father's house.

It was not that the father was not interested in his prodigal nor that he ceased to love him, for these things never failed. In a human situation such as is depicted by the parable, the parent never ceases loving the child and never ceases to grieve for the errant offspring. The prodigal's father could be so joyfully happy on his return only because he had been so sorrowful in his absence. Yet he did nothing for him while he remained in the far country. Why didn't his father give aid? Why did he not send money to buy food? Why didn't the father use his influence with the 'citizen of that country' so as to prevail upon him to give the young man a raise, or a promotion, or a better job?

Why does God allow bad things to happen to people, even to good people? This question has occupied the greatest minds among the philosophers, not one of whom has supplied the race with a satisfactory answer. The true and final answer lies in this parable. The father did not help the prodigal because, to the father, he was dead and he was lost. *This, my son, was dead, and is alive, he was lost, and is found*. He was dead to his father and he was lost to his father. When the curtain of death drops between you and others, it is impossible that they can do anything for you. That is the ultimate consequence of death for it cuts off all recognition or communication or inter-relationship. There is nothing we can do for the dead, for those who, to us, have died. We may grieve that we did not do more while they lived in this world, but they died and left us with, perhaps, guilty consciences. It is an incontestable fact that we can do nothing for them now. The father could do nothing for the prodigal while he remained, lost and dead, in the far country.

So, in like manner, God does not intervene in the world. He does not intervene in this *far country*. He does not because he cannot. He cannot because we are in the realm of the dead. That is our habitat and for as long as we are here, the Father can do nothing for us but grieve. This fact of death before God also has a more fundamental explanation involving free will, which I return to below. But for now, we need only consider the fact of God's absence from the world, of his inactivity in the world and of his silence to the cries of pain from the children of this world. Remember that the prodigal received his relief only in the father's house, not immediately after his resolve to arise and go to his father, and not while he remained in the far country. God is aware of our need. He cares for us and, as we learn from the prodigal son, he grieves for us in our absence from him. Still, he does nothing in particular in response to any plea we may raise to him while we remain committed to this life and to this world.

An Example

The situation of the prodigal son, and our situation in this world, can be likened to a more modern parent-child drama that focuses on an incorrigible teen-ager. He plays hooky, runs with a wild bunch, does drugs, refuses to do chores, stays out all night and in general causes the parent much grief. Finally, as a last resort, the parent casts the child out of the home, hoping by this radical action to get the child's attention and crack the incorrigibility. At this point the child is essentially dead with respect to the parent, and the grief of death is the grief experienced as the parent sadly contemplates the plight of the child. There is one gain for the parent in this all-too-often-repeated story: at last there is tranquility in the home. There is no more quarreling, no more bitter resentment from an offspring and no more long, sleepless nights of worry, wondering when the child might return. Yet, deep inside, the parent hurts more than ever. What could I have done differently? Where did I go wrong? Why could I not maintain a good relationship with my child? So the parent will grieve, the parent will pray, the parent will yearn – but one thing the parent cannot and must not do is go out into the world and give things to the child to assist him or her to live in the world. To the parent, the child is dead, and the child knows that nothing more

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can be expected from the parent for so long as the wild life continues. Tough love must prevail.

There is only one salvation for this relationship, which comes when the child, like the prodigal son, resolves to take wise action saying, I will arise and go to my parents. Even so, the parent cannot go into the world with aid for the repentant offspring but must wait to see the child coming up the road – hungry, ragged, penitent and sick. Then, at last, the parent can rush out to embrace and care for one who lives again. So, likewise, we are on our own in this world. Our Father cannot and does not intervene, however dire our straits or however much we like to think otherwise.

Conclusion

The Parable of the Prodigal Son wonderfully illustrates both the Great Commandment and the Great Principle, and therefore also the Great Correlate. Yet it so easy to read the parable very carefully and see in it only repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation with no relevance to the either/or choice of this world or the next, of the father on earth or the Father in heaven or any of the many other implications that emanate from it. This testifies to the careful selectivity that the churchmen through the centuries have applied to the words of Jesus. They hear what they like and block out the rest. He said it. It is planted there in the heart of the gospels and it will not go away. You face it now and you will face it at the Judgment. Read it again:

He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life (John 12:25)