

CHAPTER IV

SOME TROUBLESOME SAYINGS

Matthew 6:5-8

Certain sayings of Jesus, primarily concerning the Father's care for us and instructions on prayer, do not at first glance correlate well with the implications of the Parable of the Prodigal Son as set forth above. Matthew 6:5-8, the instruction to pray in secret, concludes, *and your Father who sees in secret will reward you*. This suggests that the Father will answer such prayer by giving what we ask, but that is not what is said. With Jesus, reward comes in the Father's house as it did for the prodigal son, and it is there that we will be rewarded. He continues by warning against multiplying words, concluding, *for your Father knows what you need before you ask him*. This, of course, is perfectly consistent with the parable. God knows our needs as we can assume the prodigal's father knew the prodigal's needs.

The thinking here is similar to that of the segment on anxiety in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:25-34) and in Luke (12:22-31), which also closes with the assurance that *Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all*. Here, one of the metaphors is that of the birds of the air (Luke, ravens), of whom Jesus reminds us that *they neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns, and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?* He also calls on the birds to instruct us in his exhortation to fearless confession of our faith, in Matthew 10:36-23 (Luke 12:2-9). *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows*. These exhortations are meant to assure us of God's love and concern and of the fact that God knows all about us and values us very highly. They are not meant to assure us that He will rush to supply our physical needs or protect us from injury if we are persecuted for our faith. Jesus intended that these words should encourage us to trust Him for the ultimate outcome, regardless of the circumstances.

His example was the birds of the air. The Father feeds them, but how does he do this? Does he come down and cover them with his hand, personally proffering seeds to each little beak? No, certainly not. He feeds them through the normal course of nature and according to his laws of nature, just as he provides for every other creature. As creator, He is the one who is ultimately responsible for the natural order that generates and sustains us; therefore it is in this capacity that He feeds us.

We should also note that the birds do not get fed apart from their own efforts; they must scratch for their food, seeking it diligently. It doesn't come to them ready prepared, on a platter – unless, of course, one supplies them with a bird feeder full of birdseed, but that is man, not God. This is precisely what God does not do! And while we are examining the birds and watching them in the trees, we are also very likely to see one or two squirrels. These creatures do, very definitely, gather into their "barns" the nuts and acorns they will need for the sparse season ahead. God feeds them, to be sure, according to the laws of nature and not by miracles of direct divine intervention, and not without some effort on their part. The same is true with us. God delights to see us praying to him and trusting him for the necessary things and he will, as Jesus has assured us, reward us.

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Nevertheless, when the famine comes, the birds and squirrels will die – and so will we if we have not prepared. My conclusion is that in these verses there is no promise or expectation that our needs will be met in any other than the normal ways. We are dependent upon God. All good things come from Him, according to the course of nature and the ways of creation, and we should give thanks to Him continually for them. He wants us to do this. He even wants us to pray to him that he will give us the necessary things because this acknowledges our recognition of our dependence upon him. So Jesus instructed his disciples, in the Lord's Prayer, to petition the Father saying, *Give us this day our daily bread* (Matthew 6:11). All this confirms and acknowledges our relationship to him as dependent children. But in no sense does it signify that God will intervene directly in the course of nature to supply our needs. His children have no privileged position and no special source of supply while they remain in this world.

Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount

We must add the passage on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, following the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 7:7-11, Luke 11:9-13): *Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!* Luke's version follows the teaching of the Friend at Midnight (Luke 11:5-8), in which a man gives his friend what he wants, not because of the friendship, but because of his importunity – his persistent pounding on his door at midnight. In some respects this resembles the Parable of the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-8), in which a certain widow was continually petitioning the judge for vindication against her adversary. The judge honors her complaint, not because of justice, but because she was wearying him with her supplications. In conclusion Jesus says: *And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will vindicate them speedily* (Luke 18:7,8).

If your son asks for bread, will you give him a stone? If for a fish, a serpent? *Much more*, continued Jesus, . . . *will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!* The implication is that the Father will give us not less than we ask, nor what we ask, but much more than we ask. We ask for earthly things, our basic needs, our daily bread, but the Father gives us bread from heaven (John. 6:32f). Luke's version (11:8) has, instead of 'good things' as in Matthew, *the Holy Spirit*. This is the prime example of the good things Matthew version promises.

These sayings all have a central import. If men, being evil, know how to give good gifts to their children; if the judge, being unjust, nevertheless grants the widow's petition; if a friend's request is granted not on the basis of friendship, for the sleeper is very aggravated but nevertheless grants the friend's request because of his persistence, will not our Father, who dearly loves us, much more grant our petition and give us good things?

These are fine examples of the rabbinical *qal va-homer* argument, called in western culture the *argument a fortiori*, literally, light and heavy. As explained by Hyam Maccoby, (The Mythmaker, p 64-67) the argument goes like this: *If something is known about one thing, which has a certain quality in a relatively light form, then it must be true all the more so for some other thing that has the same quality in a relatively heavy form.* Thus, if a man, a judge, or a friend, who relates to petitioners in a relatively light form, grants good things to those who ask, then God, who possesses great love towards his children and therefore relates to them in a relatively heavy form, will all the more so grant good things in response to their requests. These verses are consistent with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, in which the 'citizen of that country,' who possessed a relation to the Prodigal in a relatively light form, had granted the prodigal's petition for a job to help meet his great need. All the more so, then, does the father of the prodigal, who relates to him in a heavy form, grant the petitions of his son for good things in his house. That is

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all these sayings tell us. They do not tell us that God will intervene in the world to smooth out our way if only we ask him. Yes, he will help us; he will hear us, and he will vindicate us. However, apart from his supply through natural means, this response of the Father is not realized in Truth until the Judgment at the Last Day. We must continue to scratch for our worms as long as we are here.

Faith to Move Mountains

There is another set of sayings that does not conform so readily to the Parable of the Prodigal Son and its implications. This includes the saying in conclusion of the story of how Jesus healed an epileptic boy after the disciples had failed. Then the disciples said, *Why could we not cast it (the demon) out?* (Matthew 17:14-21, Mark 9:14-29). Jesus' answer, according to Matthew, was, *Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move hence to yonder place," and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.* This saying is similar to Luke 17:6, where the Lord responded to the disciples petition, *Lord, increase our faith!* By saying, *If you had faith as a grain of mustard seed, you would say to this sycamine tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea.' and it would obey you.* Similarly, in the incident of the Withered Fig Tree (Matthew 21:20-22, Mark 11:20-25), Jesus explained to the astonished disciples, *Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and never doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, "Be taken up and cast into the sea," it will be done. And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith. Mark's version is even more explicit: Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses* (Mark 11:24,25).

Conditions for Answered Prayer

Believe that you receive it, and you will. This saying, taken at face value, gives full discretionary power to the children of God concerning anything whatsoever they may want. All that is required is that they petition their Father in heaven believing they will get what they ask and, in the case of a petition for forgiveness, that they also forgive those that trespass against them. But surely there is something wrong in taking these words at face value? Note first that these astonishing results do not require great faith, only mustard seed faith. Surely, among all the persons of faith that have inhabited the earth since Jesus came and uttered these words, there must have been a few who had mustard seed faith? But no one has moved a mountain, or even a sycamine tree, and cast it into the sea with either the command or the prayer of faith – not even Jesus. Such an astounding event, like the eruption of Vesuvius, would be in recorded history. Jesus did do some astonishing things, including the healing of the epileptic boy, described as casting out a demon.

He is clear in teaching that the disciples, had they had even mustard seed faith, could have cast the demon out of the boy – therefore their problem was a lack of faith. Today we know that epilepsy is usually caused by some abnormality, such as a lesion, in the brain of the victim. The popular idea was that a demon was invading the body of the victim and needed to be cast out. Jesus did not take issue with the popular notion, though he may have known the real cause and removed it with a word; such was the power of his faith. The malady was surely a mountainous obstacle in the life of the epileptic boy, but that cannot be what Jesus intended to say. In specifying *this mountain* he was designating a nearby mount, or hill, towards which he could gesture to make his point. And neither did Jesus uproot trees and cast them into the sea. His experience with trees was limited to the fig tree that he blighted with a word – a pretty remarkable feat but yet not so much so as uprooting it and casting it into the sea.

These thoughts aside, we have yet to deal with his promise, a promise that is unreasonable on its face, and that, as near as we can tell, has not been fulfilled in any case. *Whatever you ask in*

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prayer, believe that you receive it, and you will. (Mark 11:24,25). Had the Prodigal Son known this, he could have solved his hunger problem, and any other problem, simply by petitioning his father for food, a nice home, a comfortable income – he would not have had to humble himself by returning home in abject humiliation. Could it be that this promise is a redaction product, words applied to Jesus by some later disciple who understood him in that way, but who was nevertheless mistaken? Redaction is to be considered, but I very much doubt that it applies in this case. These promises are too well attested in all the synoptic gospels and too much in accord with the character of Jesus and of the Father. So I have to confess that I do not understand this as well as I would like to, but I am nevertheless fairly content with the following explanation.

First, consider that this promise, made by Jesus, was nevertheless not good even for Jesus on at least one occasion. In Gethsemane, when he asked the Father in prayer, *Let this cup pass*, the cup did not pass. In spite of a prayer that was repeated three times according to Matthew and Mark, the cup did not pass. He asked something in prayer and he did not receive it. Was it because he did not really believe it would pass? Or could it have been that Jesus' death was a special case, one in which the promise of answered prayer did not and could not apply?

Certainly Jesus in Gethsemane is a special case to which normal rules might not apply, and therefore the promise may have been inapplicable to him for this reason. Lack of faith was not a consideration, for Jesus had never found it difficult to muster faith to accomplish whatever was needed. But I think that there is something else about the Gethsemane prayer that will help us resolve this difficult question. It is this: Jesus concluded his petition with the qualification, *Not my will, but yours be done*.

I believe that the will of the Father is always the determining factor, so that we must apply another qualification to the promise in addition to the two applied by Jesus. These two are, first, believe that you will receive it, and second, forgive if you have anything against any one. A third one is this: it must be the will of the Father. He cannot violate his will to answer our prayers, without regard to our faith and forgiveness. If we want what he does not want, even if we append the petition, as did Jesus, with, *Not my will, but yours be done*, we will not receive what we ask, even as Jesus did not receive what he asked in Gethsemane.

Isn't it God's will that his children be fed? Therefore, if anyone is in the position of the prodigal son, starving, surely our Father will want us to have food? Therefore, the hungry child need only pray to the Father, asking for food and believing the Father will supply it, and forgiving everyone who has transgressed against him, and the food will appear!

This is not convincing. It seems reasonable until we stop to consider that if this were the general rule with prayer, and if the children of God in this world applied it consistently (as they surely would) they would never go hungry regardless of conditions around them or their industry or lack thereof. This would not go unnoticed by the starving non-believers in a famine situation and we can assume that all of them would rush to convert. The same would apply in any other circumstance of need or desire, and would result in a world filled with believers for the wrong reasons – to get something for themselves in this world.

Remember that Jesus said, *Whatever you ask . . .* Let us ask, therefore, that our homes never burn, that we never suffer grief, that we never have an automobile accident, that our children never stray, that we never become ill – well, you see the problem. We are led to the reasonable conclusion that God's children in this world may sometimes starve, have accidents or become ill and die without regard to their prayers because it is God's will. God's children must deal with their human catastrophes on the same basis as others in this world. Otherwise, his plan for our salvation would become a contradiction. The prodigal's father did nothing to feed him until he came home. Then he slew the fatted calf! The famine in the far country gripped everyone there, the prodigal son and his employer, the good and the bad, the righteous and the unrighteous without discrimination. Yet apart from the famine the prodigal would not have returned to his

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father. So, we have added a third condition to Jesus' promise: what we ask must be the Father's will.

There other conditions, not stated in the immediate context of the promise but contained in the overall message of Jesus and which therefore must be assumed to apply to the promise. I can readily think of two more, the fourth and the fifth. The fourth is that one must be a true child of the Father. That is, when Jesus delivered the promise to his disciples, he was speaking to persons who truly qualified as children of God – to persons who are not, like the rebellious Prodigal, dead to the Father. This is a presumed condition for all Jesus' promises, as is indicated in the language of the promise from Mark: *And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against any one; so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses* (Mark 11:24,25). So we see that Jesus is assuming that those to whom he is issuing such a wonderful promise are the children of God who can rightly address him as 'Father.' This is then, surely, one of the essential qualifications of a promise-claimer. It pops up again and again in the gospels. We have referred to another such passage above, where it is assumed that the people to whom he is speaking are children of the Father: If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:11). Note the clear comparison of the human father-child relation with the divine father-child relation.

The fifth qualification is that one must qualify as a disciple of Jesus to claim his promise. He was speaking to his own disciples when he issued his promise, using the second person pronoun, you. But he elsewhere defines the qualifications for discipleship and they are rigid and exacting. We find them, in the fewest words, in Luke 14:25-35): *Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, 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. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple . . . So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.* We can be sure that the multitudes, after hearing this, began to thin remarkably. Who hates ones earthly family? Or one's own life? Who willingly takes up and bears anything resembling the cross of Jesus? Who renounces everything? Yet these are the precise qualifications for discipleship. The hatred of even his own life is the Great Principle to which I referred above, and is central to the whole conception of Jesus. Everything else, including the renunciation of all things in and of this world springs from this fundamental attitude that Jesus has established as basic to his whole message.

Why must one hate one's own father? In Matthew 23, Jesus says: *Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 23:9). Here is one statement of the reason: God does not accept us as his children, or count himself as our Father, while we are counting a man on earth as our father. We see then, that the qualifications for becoming children of God are integrally related to the qualifications for discipleship. At their root they are one and the same, and in their essence call upon us to cut our family ties with earth if we are to establish family ties with heaven. Is your treasure here or in heaven? Is your heart set on the earthly or the heavenly? Always with Jesus it is, between these two, earth and heaven, either/or. It is never both/and.

How does one qualify as a child of God? Recall that we are examining the necessary qualifications of those who would claim Jesus' promise, Whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you will receive it, and you will (Mark 11:24). Now we begin to see that those who would claim this promise must conform to some extremely difficult qualifications. Since becoming a true disciple is one qualification, and becoming a child of the Father is another, let us ask, as we did for discipleship, what one must do to be an assured child of God? I have already listed one requirement: renunciation of earthly parentage. *Call no man on earth father, for you have one Father who is in heaven.*

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A second one has to do with exhibiting the character of God. One who is a child of God has inherited His character. Jesus focused on this in the Sermon on the Mount, in the teaching on loving enemies: *You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Matthew 43-48, Luke 27,28,32-36).

There is a statement in this saying that is central to all that I have said about the prodigal son and the implications of his father not having reached out to help him while he remained in the far country. Just this: *for he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.* The Father in heaven treats us all alike, without discrimination – the evil and the good, the just and the unjust and his children and the children of this world. That is because he loves us all alike, even when we may be, like the prodigal in his early experience in the far country, both dead and lost to him. Furthermore, if we are his children in Truth, we imitate him in this respect by loving our enemies as well as our friends.

A Contradiction

Do you see a seeming contradiction looming here? If he treats all alike, both his children and the children of this world, how is it that he promises to give his children whatever they ask of him? If he does not make this promise to everyone, then can he be free from discrimination?

It is a valid question, and the answer should also be apparent. Those who are truly his children are those who have learned to value only the heavenly, and therefore they will not ask him for earthly things. That is, not for things beyond forgiveness and one's daily bread. The prodigal son knew this inherently, and therefore he did not ask his father to send money over to the far country; he did not ask him to provide him with better living conditions or a better job. It was not in him to ask for those things because he had learned the hard way not to value such things, not even life itself as lived in the far country. He only hoped for something to be given him after he returned to the father's house; so Jesus' promises are always in terms of a reward in the Father's House. As God's children, if we are in Truth God's children, when we stand in prayer and ask whatever we will so as to receive it according to our faith, we will ask for nothing more than the status of a hired servant in the Father's house. If that is not where our hearts are, where our values and our treasures lie, we are not qualified to claim the promise of answered prayer. It is for this reason we have not seen, do not see, and will never see, mountains and trees rooted up and cast into the sea in answer to a prayer. Those who are not qualified to claim such a promise can't claim it, and those who are qualified won't claim it.

Summary

It would be a distraction, for present purposes, to continue this discussion of Jesus' promise of answered prayer, though much more can be added to further enlighten our perceptions of what we can expect from the Father in heaven, and when we can expect it. Here I seek only to express the significance of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, believing that it contains, as in a nutshell, the essence of the message of Jesus. The Prodigal had transgressed against the will of the Father by asserting his independence and going to the far country to make a life for himself. There he failed, and soon found himself in dire straits. His father gave him no assistance and he was on the point of starvation when he came to his happy conclusion, which amounted to a hatred for his life in that country.

This is in perfect accord with Jesus' expression of what I have termed the Great Principle, *He*

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who loves his life loses it, but he who hates his life in this world will keep it for life eternal (John 12:25). The prodigal counted all his far country aspirations as nothing more than dung and, in a flash of insight, suddenly discovered that all that he treasured was in his father's house. There is where his heart suddenly resided! This is the import of Jesus' injunction about treasures, *Do not lay up treasure on the earth . . . but lay up treasure in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also* (Matthew 6:21). All this is implicit in the words of the prodigal's resolve: *I will arise and go to my Father* (Luke 15:18).

The parable presents the father as having a great love and concern for the son, and a great grief while the son dwelt in the state of deadness and lostness. This all changed when the son learned to hate his life in the far country and resolved to go to his father's house, and we can see the father's love expressed in his great joy because the son who was dead is alive, who was lost is found. This perfectly illustrates the forgiving love of the Father in heaven, who gives us much more than we ask. We ask for earthly things; he gives us heavenly things!

I draw from this the conclusion that we cannot expect special treatment from the Father for so long as we remain in this world. The prodigal received nothing material from his father while he remained in the far country because this is not the will of the Father, who cannot give us what is contrary to his will for us. The Father treats all alike in this world through the operation of the normal processes of nature – that is, as Jesus elsewhere taught, *He causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall* (Matthew 5:45) on both the good and the evil. This at first appears to be contrary to certain sayings of Jesus on answered prayer, which I examined above and came to the following conclusions:

- 1. The promise of answered prayer is subject to certain conditions: (1) the petitioner must believe that what is asked will be received; (2) the petitioner must forgive others their debts and trespasses; (3) the request must be according to the will of the Father; (4) the petitioner must be a bona fide child of the Father, and (5) the petitioner must qualify as a disciple of Jesus, according to the strict qualifications listed in the gospels.
- 2. The Father gives good things to those qualified petitioners who ask, though not necessarily what is asked. What he gives will be better – heavenly things instead of earthly things.
- 3. Qualified petitioners do not ask for mountains to be cast into the sea. Like the prodigal son, they will ask only for a place in the Father's house. Nothing can be better than that! That is what Jesus himself received as a result of his faithfulness. Those who would literally move mountains do not qualify to claim the promise; those who qualify do not ask for mountains to move. Those who qualify for the abundant life of Eternal Glory do not petition the Father for life in this world.
- 4. The prayer promises of Jesus are therefore perfectly consistent with the Parable of the Prodigal Son and all its implications.