

## THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON

For many (including myself), the “heart” of this encyclical is Pope John Paul’s elucidation of the parable of the prodigal son. It exemplifies how forgiveness is central to mercy, and how justice is not sufficient to express the attitude of God the Father toward his children, as seen in the figure of the father in the parable to his prodigal son. In justice, the son should have been accepted back into his own father’s house as a hired servant, as he understood. This certainly would have been “a great humiliation and source of shame” (5.5). The son had not only squandered his inheritance but he had hurt and offended his father by his conduct, and he was ashamed of it. Pope John Paul astutely observes that we must have an “exact picture of the prodigal son’s state of mind ... to understand exactly what the mercy of God consists in” (6.1).

The father of the parable is “faithful to his fatherhood, faithful to the love that he had always lavished on his son” (6.1). He not only welcomes the “lost” son home but is also filled with joy and calls for a feast. The joy of the father overcomes the shame of the son.

This is critically important because today many reject the concept of mercy as being degrading or demeaning to the one who receives it. True mercy respects the dignity of the person. The father realizes that his son has been “saved” by his return, and he rejoices because he loves the son. As Pope John Paul comments:

Mercy—as Christ has presented it in the parable of the prodigal son—has the interior form of love that in the New Testament is called *agape*. This love is able to reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin. When this happens, the person who is the object of mercy does not feel humiliated, but rather found again and “restored to value.” (6.3)

Rather than offending human dignity, mercy restores human dignity by revealing to the person the full truth about himself: that despite his struggle or failure, he is forgiven, loved, and accepted by God and by others who act in mercy. This realization by a person is also an experience of conversion, which is “the most concrete expression of the working of love and of the presence of mercy in the human world” (6.5). As the Holy Father concludes this chapter,

mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all forms of evil existing in the world and in man [cf. Rom. 12:21] ... Mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission. (6.5)

**The Legacy of John Paul II: The Central Teachings of His 14 Encyclical Letters**, by Alan Schreck, Emmaus Road Pub. © 2012. Chapter 2: Dives in Misericordia “Rich in Mercy”, P 18 - 19