THE RECEPTION OF SINNERS

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A SERMON
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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON

"But the father said to his servants,
Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet:
and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry."
Luke 15:22-23

LAST Lord's-day we spoke upon the consecration of priests. That theme might seem too high for troubled hearts and trembling consciences, who fear that they shall never be made priests and kings unto God. So glorious a privilege appears to them to hang in the dim, distant future, if, indeed, they reach it at all. Therefore, at this time, we will go down from the elevated regions to comfort those who are seeking the Lord, with the view of helping them in their turn to climb also.

We speak this morning, not of the consecration of priests, but of the reception of sinners, and this, according to our text, is a very joyful business, it is even described as a merrymaking, accompanied with music and with dancing. We very frequently speak of the sorrow for sin which accompanies conversion, and I do not think we can speak of it too often. But yet there is a possibility of our overlooking the equally holy and remarkable joy which attends the return of a soul to God.

It has been a very common error to suppose that a man must pass through a very considerable time of despondency, if not of horror of mind, before he can find peace with God. Now in this parable the father seems determined to cut short that period. He stops his son in the very middle of his confession, and before he can ask to be made as one of the hired servants, his mournful style is changed to rejoicing, for the father has already fallen on his neck and kissed his trembling lips into a sweet silence.

It is not the Lord's desire that sinners should tarry long in the state of unbelieving conviction of sin, it is something wrong in themselves which keeps them there, either they are ignorant of the freeness and fullness of Christ, they harbor self-righteous hopes, or they cling to their sins. Sin lieth at the door, it is no work of God which blocks the way. He delights in their delight, and joys in their joy.

It is the Father's will that the penitent sinner should at once believe in Jesus, at once find complete forgiveness, and immediately enter into rest. If any of you came to Jesus without the dreary interval of terror which is so frequent, I pray you do not judge yourselves as though your conversions were dubious—they are all the more instead of all the less genuine because they bear rather the marks of the Gospel than of the law. The weeping of Peter, which in a few days turns to joy, is far better than the horror of Judas, which ends in suicide.

Conversions, as recorded in Scripture, are for the most part exceedingly rapid. They were pricked in the heart at Pentecost, and the same day they were baptized and added to the church because they had found peace with God through Jesus Christ. Paul was smitten down with conviction, and in three days was a baptized believer. Perhaps the figure is inapt, but I was about to say that sometimes God's power is so very near us that the lightning flash of conviction is often attended at the very same moment by the deep thunder of the Lord's voice, which drives away our fears and proclaims peace and pardon to the soul.

In many cases the sharp needle of the law is immediately followed by the silken thread of the Gospel, the showers of repentance are succeeded at once by the sunshine of faith, peace overtakes penitence, and walks arm in arm with her into yet fuller rest.

Having thus reminded you that God would have penitents very soon rejoice, I want to spend this morning in setting forth the joy which is caused by pardoned sin. That joy is threefold. We will talk about it, first, as *the joy of God over sinners.* Secondly, *the joy of sinners in God.* And thirdly, what is so often forgotten, *the joy of the servants*, for they too rejoiced, for the father said, "Let *us* eat and be merry."

And one of the points of the parable is just this, that as in the case of the lost sheep the shepherd calls together his friends and neighbors, and as in the case of the piece of money the woman calls her neighbors together, so in this case, also, others share in the joy which chiefly belongs to the loving father and the returning wanderer.

I. THE JOY OF GOD OVER SINNERS.

It is always difficult to speak of the ever-blessed God becomingly when we have to describe Him as touched by emotions. I pray, therefore, to be guided in my speech by the Holy Spirit. We have been educated into the idea that the Lord is above emotions, either of sorrow or pleasure. That He cannot suffer, for instance, is always laid down as a self-evident postulate. Is that quite so clear? Cannot He do or bear anything He chooses to do?

What means the Scripture which says that man's sin before the flood made the Lord repent that He had made man on the earth, "and it grieved him at his heart"? Is there no meaning in the Lord's own language, "Forty years long was I grieved with this generation"? Are we not forbidden to grieve the Holy Spirit? Is He not described as having been vexed by ungodly men! Surely, then, He can be grieved, it cannot be an altogether meaningless expression.

For my part, I rejoice to worship the living God, who, because He is living, dose grieve and rejoice. It makes one feel more love to Him than if He dwelt on some serene Olympus, careless of all our woes because incapable of any concern about us, or interest in us, one way or the other. To look upon Him as utterly impassive and incapable of anything like emotion does not, to my mind, exalt the Lord, but rather brings Him down to be comparable to the gods of stone or wood, which cannot sympathize with their worshippers.

No, JEHOVAH is not insensible. He is the living God, and everything that goes with life—pure, perfect, holy life, is to be found in Him. Yet must such a subject always be spoken of very tenderly, with solemn awe, because, albeit we know something of what God is, for we are made in the image of God and the best likeness of God undoubtedly was man as he came from his Maker's hand, yet man is not God, and even in his perfectness he must have been but a very tiny miniature of God. While now that he has sinned he has blotted and blurred that image.

The finite cannot fully mirror the Infinite, nor can the grand, glorious, essential properties of Deity be communicated to creatures, they must remain peculiar to God alone. The Lord is, however, continually represented as displaying joy. Moses declared to sinful Israel that if they returned and obeyed the voice of the Lord, the Lord would again rejoice over them for good, as He rejoiced over their fathers (Deut. 30:9). The Lord is said to rejoice in His works and to delight in mercy, and surely we must believe it. Wherefore should we doubt it?

Many passages of Scripture speak very impressively of God's joy in His people. Zephaniah puts it in the strongest manner, "He will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing." Our God is forever the happy or blessed God. We cannot think of Him as other than supremely blessed. Still, from the Scriptures we gather that He displays on certain occasions a special joy which He would have us recognize. I do not think that it can be mere parable, but it is real fact, that the Lord does rejoice over returning and repenting sinners.

Every being manifests its joy according to its nature, and seeks means for its display suitable to itself. It is so with men. When the old Romans celebrated a triumph because some great general returned a victor from Africa, Greece, or Asia with the spoils of a long campaign, how did the fierce Roman nature express its joy? Why, in the Coliseum, or in some yet more vast amphitheater, where buzzing nations choked the ways, they gathered in their myriads to behold not only beasts, but their fellow men,

"butchered to make a Roman holiday." Cruelty upon an extraordinary scale was their way of expressing the joy of their iron hearts.

Look at the self-indulgent man! He has had a prosperous season, and has made a lucky hit, as he calls it, or some event has occurred in his family which makes him very jubilant. What will he do to show forth his joy? Will he bow the knee in gratitude, or lift a hymn of praise? Not he. He will hold a drinking bout, and when he and his fellows are mad with wine his joy will find expression! The sensual show their joy by sensuality.

Now, God whose name is good, and whose nature is love, when He has joy expresses it in mercy, in lovingkindness and grace. The father's joy in the parable before us showed itself in the full forgiveness accorded, in the kiss of perfect love bestowed, in the gift of the best robe, the ring, and the sandals, and in the gladsome festival which filled the whole house with hallowed mirth. Everything expresses its joy according to its nature. Infinite love, therefore, reveals its joy in acts of love.

The nature of God being as much above ours as the heaven is above the earth, the expression of his joy is therefore all the loftier, and His gifts the greater. Still, there is a likeness between God's way of expressing joy and ours, which it will be profitable to note.

How do we express ourselves, ordinarily, when we are glad? We do so very commonly by a display of *bounty*. When, in the olden time our kings came into the city of London, or a great victory was celebrated, the conduit in Cheapside ran with red wine, and even the gutters flowed with it. Then there were tables set in the street, and my lords, and the aldermen, and the mayor kept open house, and everybody was fed to the full. Joy was expressed by hospitality.

You have seen the picture of the young heir coming of age, and have noticed how the artist depicts the great yard of the manor-house as full of men and women, who are eating and drinking to their hearts' content.

At Christmas seasons, and upon marriage days and harvest homes, men ordinarily express their joy by bountiful provision. So also does the father in this wondrous parable exhibit the utmost bounty, representing thereby the boundless liberality of the great Father of spirits who shows His joy over penitents by the manner in which He entertains them.

The best robe, the ring, the shoes, and the fatted calf, and the "Let us eat and be merry," all show by their bountifulness that God is glad. His oxen and His fatlings are killed, for the feast of mercy is the banquet of the Lord. So unrivalled are the gifts of His gracious hand that the receivers of His favors have cried out in amazement, "Who is a God like unto thee!"

Beloved, consider awhile the Lord's bounty to returning sinners, blotting out their sins like a cloud and like a thick cloud their iniquities, justifying them in the righteousness of Christ, endowing them with His Holy Spirit, regenerating them, comforting them, illuminating them, purifying them, strengthening them, guiding them, protecting them, filling them with all His own fullness, satisfying their mouth with good things, and crowning them with tender mercies. I see in the bounty of God with which He so liberally endows returning sinners a mighty proof that His inmost soul rejoices over the salvation of men.

At glad times men generally manifest some *specialty* in their bounty. On the day of the young heir's coming of age the long stored cask of wine is broached, and the best bullock is roasted whole. So here in the parable we read, "*Bring forth* the best robe," indicating that it had been laid by and kept in store until then. Nobody had used that robe, it was locked up in the wardrobe, only to be brought out on some very special occasion. This was the happiest day that ever had made glad the house, and therefore "Bring forth the best robe," no other will suffice.

Meat is wanted for the banquet. Let a calf be killed. Which shall it be? A calf taken at random from the herd? No, but *the fatted* calf which has been standing in the stalls, and is well fed, and has been reserved for a festival.

Oh, beloved, when God blesses a sinner He shows His joy by giving him the reserved mercies, the *special* treasures of everlasting love, the precious things of grace, the secret of the covenant, yea, He has

given to sinners the best of the best in giving them Christ Jesus and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The best that heaven affords God bestows on sinners when they come to Him. No scraps and odds and ends are dealt out to hungry and thirsty seekers, but in princely munificence of unstinting love the heavenly Father deals out abundant grace.

I would that sinners would come and try my Lord's hospitality. They would find His table to be more richly loaded than even that of Solomon, though thirty oxen and a hundred sheep did not suffice for one day's provision for the household of that magnificent sovereign. If they would but come, even the largest-hearted among them would be wonder-struck as they saw how richly God supplied all their need, according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

"Rags exchanged for costly treasure,
Shoe and ring and heaven's best robe!
Gifts of* love *which knows no measure;
Who can tell the heart of God?
All His loved ones—His redeemed ones,
Perfect are in His abode."

We also show our joy by a *concentration of thought* upon the object of it. When a man is carried away with joy he forgets everything else, and gives himself up to the one delight. David was so glad to bring back the ark of the Lord that he danced before the Lord with all his might, being clad only with a linen ephod. He laid aside his stately garments, and thought so little of his dignity that Michal sneered at him. He was so much absorbed in adoring his Lord that all regard to appearances was quite gone.

Observe well the parable, and think you hear the father say, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on *him*, and put a ring on *his* hand and shoes on *his* feet, and let us eat and be merry, for *this my son* was dead and is alive again." The son alone is in the father's eye, and the whole house must be ordered in reference to him. Nothing is to be thought of today but the long-lost son, he is paramount in the wardrobe, the jewel room, the farmyard, the kitchen, and the banqueting chamber. He that was lost, he that was dead, he being found and alive, engrosses the whole of the father's mind.

Sinner, it is wonderful how God sets all His thoughts on you according to His promise, "I will set mine eyes upon them for good" (Jer. 23:6), and again, "I will watch over them to build and to plant saith the LORD." The Lord thinks upon the poor and needy, His eyes are upon them and His ears are open to their cry. He thinks as much of each penitent sinner as if he were the only being in the universe.

O penitent, for you is the working of the Lord's providence to bring you home. For you the training of His ministers that they might know how to reach your heart. For you the gifts of the Spirit upon them that they might be powerful with your conscience. Yea, for you His Son, His eternal Son once bleeding on the cross, and now sitting in the highest heavens making intercession for you.

I saw, in Amsterdam, the diamond cutting, and I noticed great wheels, a large factory and powerful engines, and all the power was made to bear upon a small stone no larger than the nail of my little finger. All that huge machinery for that little stone because it was so precious! I think I see you poor insignificant sinners, who have rebelled against your God, brought back to your Father's house, and now the whole universe is full of wheels and all those wheels are working together for your good, to make out of you a jewel fit to glisten in the Redeemer's crown.

God is not represented as saying more of creation than that "it was very good," but in the work of grace He is described as singing for joy. He breaks the eternal silence and cries, "My son is found." As the philosopher when he had compelled nature to yield her secret ran through the street crying, "Eureka! Eureka! I have found it! I have found it!" so does the Father dwell on the word, "My son that was dead, is alive again, he that was lost is found."

The whole of Scripture aims at the bringing back again of the Lord's banished, for this the Redeemer leaves His glory, for this the church sweeps her house and lights her candle, and when the work is done

all other bliss is secondary to the surpassing joy of the Lord, of which He bids His ransomed ones partake, saying, "Enter ye into the joy of your Lord."

We also show our joy by *an alacrity of motion*. I quoted David just now. It was so with him. He danced before the ark. I cannot imagine David walking slowly before the ark, or creeping after it like a mourner at a funeral. I often notice the difference between your coming to this place and people going to other places of worship. I remark a very solemn, stately, and somber motion in almost everybody else, but you come tripping along as if you were glad to go up to the house of the Lord. You do not regard the place of our joyous assemblies as a sort of religious prison, but as the palace and banqueting house of the great King.

When anyone is joyous he is sure to show it by the quickness of his motions. Hearken to the father, he says, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and bring hither the fatted calf, and let us eat and be merry." As quickly as possible he pours out sentence after sentence. There is no delay, no interval between the commands.

Might he not have said, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him, and let us look at him awhile, and sit down and prepare him for the next step. And in an hour's time, or tomorrow, we will put a ring on his hand, and then soon we will put shoes on his feet. He is best without shoes for the present, for perhaps if he has shoes on he will run away. As to the festival, perhaps we had better rejoice over him when we see whether his repentance is genuine." No, no, no, the father's heart is too glad. He must bless his boy at once, heap on his favors and multiply his tokens of love.

When the Lord receives a sinner, He runs to meet him, He falls on his neck, He kisses him, He speaks to him, He forgives him, He justifies him, He sanctifies him, He puts him among the children, He opens the treasures of His grace to him, and all in quick succession. Within a few minutes after he has been cleansed from sin, the prodigal is robed, and adorned, and shod for service.

The love of our Redeemer's heart made Him say to the poor thief, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise." He would not let him linger in pain on the cross, but carried him away to Paradise in an hour or two. Love and joy are ever quick of foot. God is slow to anger, but He is so plenteous in His mercy that His grace overflows and rushes on like a torrent when it leaps along the ravine.

Once more, the joy of the father was shown as ours often is by *open utterance*. It is hard for a glad man to hold his tongue. What can dumb people do when they are very happy? I cannot imagine how they endure silence at such times. It must then be a terrible misfortune. When you are very happy you must tell somebody. So does this father. He pours out his joy and the utterance is very simple. "My son was dead, and is alive again, was lost, and is found." Yet, simple as it is, it is poetry.

The poetry of the Hebrews consisted in parallelism, or a repetition of the sense or a part of the words. Here are two lines which pair with each other and make a verse of Hebrew poetry. Glad men, when they speak naturally and simply always say the right thing in the very best manner, using nature's poetry, as does the father here.

Note, also, that there is reiteration in his utterance. He might have been satisfied to say, "This my son was dead and is alive again." No, the fact is so sweet he must repeat it, "He was lost, and is found." Even thus we speak when we are very full of sweet content. The heart bubbleth up with a good matter, and over again and over again we rehearse our joy. When the morsel is sweet we roll it under the tongue. We cannot help it. So the Lord rejoices over sinners, and tells His joy in holy Scripture in varied phrase and metaphor, and though those Scriptures are simple in their style, yet they contain the very essence of poetry.

The bards of the Bible stand in the first rank among the sons of song. God Himself deigned to use poetry to utter His joy, because a more prosaic manner would be all too cold and tame. Hear how He puts it, "As the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee." "I will rejoice in Jerusalem and joy in my people."

We might have been left in the dark about this joy of God. We might have been coldly informed that God would save sinners, and we might never have known that He found such joy in it. But the divine joy

was too great to be concealed, the great heart of God could not restrain itself, He must tell out to all the universe the delight which the exercise of mercy brought to Him. It was meet that He should make merry and be glad, and therefore He did it, for nothing that is meet to be done will ever be neglected by the Lord our God.

Thus, dear friends, have I feebly spoken of the joy of God, and I want you to notice that it is a delight in which every attribute of God takes a share. Condescension ran to meet the son, love fell on his neck, grace kissed him, wisdom clothed him, truth gave him the ring, peace shod him, wisdom provided the feast, and power prepared it.

No one attribute of the divine nature quarrels with the forgiveness and salvation of a sinner. Not one attribute holds back from the beloved employ. Power strengthens the weak, and mercy binds up the wounded. Justice smiles upon the justified sinner, for it is satisfied through the atoning blood, and truth puts forth her hand to guarantee that the promise of grace is fulfilled. Immutability confirms what has been done, and omniscience looks around to see that nothing is left undone.

The whole of deity is brought to bear upon a poor worm of the dust, to lift it up and transform it into an heir of God, joint-heir with the Only Begotten. The joy of God occupies the whole of being, so that when we think of it we may well say, "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me bless His holy name," since all that is within Him is engaged to bless His saints.

This joy of the Lord should give every sinner great confidence in coming to God by Jesus Christ, for if you would be glad to be saved, He will be glad to save you. If you long to lay your head in your Father's bosom, your Father's bosom longs to have it there. If you pant to say, "I have sinned," He equally longs to say to you, by acts of love, "I forgive thee freely." If you pine to be His child in His own house once more, the door is open, and He Himself is on the watch. Come and welcome, come and welcome, and no more delay.

II. I have now to speak of THE JOY OF THE SINNER.

The son was glad. He did not express it in words, as far as I can see in the parable, but he felt it none the less—but all the more. Sometimes silence is discreet, and it was so in this case. At other times it is absolutely forced upon you by inability to utter the emotion, and this also was true of the prodigal.

The son's heart was too full for utterance in words, but he had speaking eyes, and a speaking countenance as he looked on that dear father. As he put on the robe, the ring, and the shoes, he must have been too astonished to speak. He wept in showers that day, but the tears were not salted with grief, they were sweet tears, glittering like the dew of the morning.

What would make the son glad, think you? Why, the father's love, the father's forgiveness, and restoration to his old place in the father's heart. That was the point. But then each gift would serve as a token of that love and make the joy overflow. There was *the robe* put on—the dress of a son, and of a son well beloved and accepted. Have you noticed how the robe answered to his confession? The sentences match each other thus, "Father, I have sinned"—"Bring forth the best robe and put it on him." Cover all his sins with Christ's righteousness, put away his sin by imputing to him the righteousness of the Lord Jesus.

The robe also met his condition. He was in rags, therefore, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him," and you shall see no more of his rags. It was fit that he should be thus arrayed, in token of his restoration. He who is re-endowed with the privileges of a son should not be dressed in sordid clothes, but wear raiment suitable to his station.

Moreover, as a festival was about to begin he ought to wear a festive garment. It would not be seemly for him to feast and be merry in his rags. Put the best robe on him that he may be ready to take his place at the banquet. So when the penitent comes to God, he is not only covered, as to the past, by the righteousness of Christ, but he is prepared for the future blessedness which is reserved for the pardoned ones, yea, he is fitted to begin the rejoicing at once.

Then came *the ring*, a luxury rather than a necessary, except that now he was a son it was well that he should be restored to all the honors of his relationship. The signet ring in the east in former times

conferred great privileges, in those days men did not sign their names, but stamped with their signet upon wax, so that the ring gave a man power over property, and made him a sort of other self to the man whose ring he wore.

The father gives the son a ring, and how complete an answer was that gift to another clause of his confession. Let me read the two sentences together, "I am no more worthy to be called thy son." "Put a ring on his hand." The gift precisely meets the confession. It also tallied with his changed condition. How singular that the very hand which had been feeding swine should now wear a ring. There were no rings on his hands when they were soiled at the trough, I warrant you. But now he is a swine-feeder no longer, but an honored son of a rich father.

Slaves wear no rings. Juvenal laughs at certain freed men because they were seen walking up and down the Via Sacra with conspicuous rings on their fingers, the emblems of their new-found liberty. The ring indicated the penitent's liberty from sin, and his enjoyment of the full privileges of his father's house.

O beloved, the Lord will make you glad if you come to Him, by putting the seal of the Holy Spirit's indwelling upon you, which is both the earnest of the inheritance and the best adornment of the hand of your practical character. You shall have a sure and honorable token, and shall know that all things are yours, whether things present, or things to come. This ring upon your finger will declare your marriage union to Christ, set forth the eternal love which the Father has fixed upon you, and be the abiding pledge of the perfect work of the Holy Ghost.

Then they put *shoes* on his feet. I suppose he had worn out his own. In the East servants do not usually wear shoes at home, and especially in the best rooms of the house. The master and the son wear the sandals, but not the servants, so that this order was an answer to the last part of the penitent's prayer, "Make me as one of thy hired servants." "No," says the father, "put shoes on his feet."

In the forgiven sinner the awe which puts off its shoes is to be overmatched by the familiarity which wears the shoes which infinite love provides. The forgiven one is no longer to tremble at Sinai, but he is to come unto Mount Zion, and to have familiar intercourse with God. Thus also the restored one was shod for filial service—he could run upon his father's errands, or work in his father's fields. He had now in every way all that he could want—the robe that covered him, the ring that adorned him, and the shoes that prepared him for travel or labor.

Now ye awakened and anxious ones who are longing to draw nigh to God, I would that this description of the joy of the prodigal would induce you to come at once. Come, ye naked, and He will say, "Bring forth the best robe." Come, ye that see your natural deformity through sin, and He will adorn you with a ring of beauty. Come, ye who feel as if you could not come, for you have bleeding, weary feet, and He will shoe you with the silver sandals of His grace. Only do but come, and you shall have such joy in your hearts as you have never dreamed of. There shall be a young heaven born within your spirit, which shall grow and increase until it comes to the fullness of bliss.

III. The time has now come for us to dwell upon THE JOY OF THE SERVANTS.

They were to be merry, and they were merry, for the music and the dancing which were heard outside could not have proceeded from one person only, there must have been many to join in it and who should these be but the servants to whom the father gave his commands? They ate, they drank, they danced, they joined in the music.

There are many of us here who are the servants of our own heavenly Father. Though we are His children, we delight to be His servants. Now, whenever a sinner is saved, we have our share of joy. We have joy, first, *in the Father's joy*. They were so glad because their lord was glad—good servants are always pleased when they see that their master is greatly gratified, and I am sure the Lord's servants are always joyous when they feel that their Lord is well-pleased.

That servant who went out to the elder brother, showed by his language that he was in sympathy with the father, for he pleaded with the son upon the matter. And when you are in sympathy with God, my dear brother or sister, if the Lord lets you see poor sinners saved you must and will rejoice with Him.

It will be to you better than finding a purse full of money, or making a great gain in business. Yea, nothing in the world can give you more delight than to see some brother of yours or some child of yours made to rejoice in Christ.

A mother once beautifully said, "I remember the new and strange emotions which trembled in my breast when as an infant he was first folded to my heart—my first-born child. The thrill of that moment still lingers. But when he was 'born again,' clasped in my arms a 'new creature in Christ Jesus,' my spiritual child, my son in the Gospel, pardoned, justified, adopted, saved, forever saved! Oh! it was the very depth of joy, joy unspeakable! My child was a child of God! The prayers which preceded his birth, which cradled his infancy, which girdled his youth, were answered. My son was Christ's. The weary watchings, the yearning desires, the trembling hopes of years were at rest. Our first-born son was avowedly the Lord's."

May every father and mother here know just such joy by having sympathy with God.

But they had sympathy with *the son*. I am sure they rejoiced to see *him* back again, for somehow usually even bad sons have the goodwill of good servants. When young men go away and are a great grief to their fathers, the servants often stick to them. They will say, "Well, Master John was very inconsiderate and gay, and he vexed his father a great deal, but I should like to see the poor boy back again." Especially is this true of the old servants who have been in the house since the boy was born, they never forget him.

And you will find that God's old servants are always glad when they see prodigal children return. They are delighted beyond measure, because they love them after all, notwithstanding their wanderings.

Sinner, with all your faults and hardness of heart we do love you, and we should be glad for your sake to see you delivered from eternal ruin and from the wrath of God which now abideth on you, and brought to rejoice in pardoned sin and acceptance in the Beloved.

We should rejoice for the sinner's sake, but I think the servants rejoiced most of all when *they were the instruments* in the father's hand of blessing the son. Just look at this. The father said to the servants, "Bring forth the best robe." He might have gone to the wardrobe himself with a key and opened it, and brought out the robe himself, but he gave them the pleasure of doing it.

When I get my orders from my Lord and Master on the Lord's-day morning to bring forth the best robe, I am delighted indeed. Nothing delights me more than to preach the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ, and the substitutionary sacrifice of our exalted Redeemer. "Bring forth the best robe." Why, my Master, I might be content to keep out of heaven if You would always give me this work to do—to bring forth the best robe and extol and exalt Jesus Christ in the eyes of the people.

Then he said, "Put it on him." When our Lord gives us grace to do that there is more joy still. How many times I have brought forth the best robe, but could not put it on you. I have held it up, and expatiated on its excellencies, and pointed to your rags and said what a delightful thing it would be if I could put it on you, but I could not. But when the heavenly Father, by His divine grace and the power of the Spirit, makes us the means of bringing these treasures into the possession of poor sinners, oh, what joy!

I should rejoice to bring forth the ring of the Spirit's sealing work, and the shoes of the preparation of the Gospel of peace, for it is a joy to exhibit these blessings, and a greater joy still to put them upon the poor, returning wanderer. God be thanked for giving His servants so great a pleasure! I would not have dared to describe the Lord's servants as putting on the robe, the ring, and the shoes, but as He has Himself done so I am rejoiced to use the Holy Spirit's own language.

How sweet was the command, "Put it on *him*." Yes, put it on the poor trembling, ragged, shivering sinner, "Put it on *him*," even on him, though he can hardly believe such mercy to be possible. "Put it on *him*?" Yes, on *him*. He who was a drunkard, a swearer, an adulterer? Yes, put it on *him*, for he repents. What joy it is when we are enabled by God's commission to throw that glorious mantle over a great sinner. As for the ring, put it on *him*, that is the beauty of it. And the shoes, put them on *him*, that they

are for him is the essence of our joy—that such a sinner, and especially when he is one of our own household, should receive these gifts of grace is wonderful!

It was most kind of the father to divide the labor of love. One would put on the robe, another the ring, and a third the shoes. Some of my brethren can preach Jesus Christ in His righteousness gloriously, and they put on the best robe. Others seem most gifted in dwelling upon the work of the Spirit of God, and they put on the ring. While yet another class are practical divines, and they put on the shoes. I do not mind which I have to do, if I may but have a part in helping to bring to poor sinners those matchless gifts of grace, which at infinite expense the Lord has prepared for those who come back to Him.

How glad those were who helped to dress him I cannot tell. Meanwhile, another servant was gone off out of doors to bring in the fatted calf, and perhaps two or three were engaged in killing and dressing it, while another was lighting a fire in the kitchen, and preparing the spits for the roast. One laid the table, and another ran to the garden to bring flowers to make wreaths for the room—I know I should have done that if I had been there. All were happy. All ready to join in the music and dancing.

Those who work for the good of sinners are always the gladdest when they are saved. You who pray for them, you who teach them, you who preach to them, you who win them for Christ, you shall share their merriment.

Now, dear brethren, we are told that they "began to be merry," and according to the description it would seem that they were merry indeed, but still they only "began." I see no intimation that they ever left off. "They began to be merry," and as merriment is apt to grow beyond all bounds when it once starts, who knows what they have come to by this time.

The saints begin to be merry now, and they will never cease, but rejoice evermore. On earth all the joy we have is only beginning to be merry, it is up in heaven that they get into full swing. Here our best delight is hardly better than a neap tide at its ebb. There the joy rolls along in the majesty of a full spring tide.

"Oh what rapturous hallelujahs
In our Father's home above!
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!
O'er the embraces of His love!
Wondrous welcome—God's own welcome,
May the chief of sinners prove.

"Sweet melodious strains ascending,
All around a mighty flood;
Servants, friends, with joy attending—
Oh! the happiness of God!
Grace abounding, all transcending,
Through a Savior's precious blood."

Let us begin to be merry this morning. But we cannot unless we are laboring for the salvation of others in all ways possible to us. If we have done and are doing that, let us praise and bless the Lord, and rejoice with the reclaimed ones, and let us keep the feast as Jesus would have it kept. For I hope there is no one here of the elder brethren who will be angry and refuse to go in. Let us continue to be merry as long as we live, because the lost are found and the dead are made alive. God grant you to be merry on this account world without end. Amen.

PORTION OF SCRIPTURE READ BEFORE SERMON—LUKE 15:11-32

HYMNS FROM "OUR OWN HYMN BOOK"—548, 1002, 1004

Taken from The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit C. H. Spurgeon Collection. Only necessary changes have been made, such as correcting spelling errors, some punctuation usage, capitalization of deity pronouns, and minimal updating of a few archaic words. The content is unabridged. Additional Bible-based resources are available at www.spurgeongems.org.