

August 25, 2002
Saints Bartholomew and Titus

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

"I have acquired Thy testimonies by inheritance," prayed the Psalmist, clearly grateful for that legacy. Alas, such opulent legacies are not always cherished. Few sins, indeed, are so common, and fewer still, perhaps, so distressing, as the squandering of birthrights.

The Bible is very concerned about this sin. For example, the various warnings that fill the Book of Proverbs, especially those concerned for discipline among young men, are based on the fear that a son's goodly inheritance may be lost because of a failure to recognize its worth. In truth, Holy Scripture records examples of such loss. One thinks of the sons of Eli (1 Samuel 2:12-17,22-25), the sons of Samuel (8:1-5), the son of Hezekiah (2 Kings 21), and so on. These were all foolish young men who, failing to recognize the worth of their birthright, squandered it recklessly. The Bible gives more ample treatment to two such young men, whose cases, I suggest, warrant comparison: Esau in Genesis 25 and the younger son in the Lord's parable in Luke 15:11-32.

First, we note that both of these young men enjoyed the fortune of good and godly fathers. Esau, the eldest son of Isaac, ostensibly stood in the direct line of the divine promises made to Abraham, while in the household of the other man's father, even the hired servants had "bread enough and to spare."

Second, both of these young men were utter fools, the very sort about whom the Book of Proverbs has so much to say, none of it very good, and, being fools, both young men treated their heritage with disrespect. We know that Esau was a "profane person . . . who for one morsel of food sold his birthright" (Hebrews 12:16), while the other "gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living" (Luke 15:13).

Third, in due course both young fools came to regret their mistakes. It is in respect to those regrets, however, that our comparison between the two of them must be modified into a significant contrast. Whereas one of those men simply regretted his loss, the other genuinely repented of his sin.

We may start with Isaac's eldest son, of whom Holy Scripture tells us, "Thus Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:34). He certainly regretted the loss of that birthright. There was no sign, however, that he ever assumed responsibility for it. It was always Jacob's fault, not his. "He took away my birthright" (27:36), Esau complains of his younger brother. Never do we perceive in Esau an awareness of himself as a sinner. Thus, blaming someone else for his loss, Esau never found his way to repentance.

If Esau espoused any recognizable theology, it was the theology of "cheap grace," which claims godly favor without godly repentance. Having bargained off his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup, Esau imagined that he could turn around and procure the blessing of the firstborn with a plate of venison. Having treated so lightly the legacy of his father, he traipsed in carelessly for what he fancied to be an easy blessing. Esau never reflected that he had sinned against his father on that day when, to satisfy a moment's hunger, he had contemned his father's legacy. Esau spoke not a syllable of regret for any loss except his own. And now it was too late. The birthright was gone; the blessing of the firstborn was gone, and Esau "was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears" (Hebrews 12:17).

Not like Esau was that younger son in the parable, for his was genuine repentance. When his folly drove him to the dire straight of destitution (as the Book of Proverbs, page after page, had warned that it would), the young man did not take to blaming other people for his plight. He did not start expressing jealousy and bitterness toward his brother, for example, nor complaining of his father's discipline, or some possible shortcoming in his own education. On the contrary, we are told that "he came to himself" (Luke 15:17), and, coming to himself, he realized that he had sinned, and the responsibility was entirely his. His was, moreover, a twofold sin, an offense against both God and that man whom God had given him to be his father: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:21). Such is the voice of genuine repentance, that "fear of the Lord" which, according to another Psalm, is "the beginning of wisdom."

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