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## General audience: Jesus' logic is not that of punishment and reward

Vatican City, 11 May 2016 – Today's general audience, as the Pope indicated before beginning his catechesis, was celebrated in two locations: in St. Peter's Square, where 20,000 people were gathered, and in the Paul VI Hall where sick pilgrims were able to follow Pope Francis' words via the maxi screens installed there, and were greeted by the Pope and by all those present in the square at the beginning of the audience, dedicated to the parable of the prodigal son, or as Francis defines it, "of the merciful Father".

"Let us begin at the end", said the Pope. "That is, from the joy of the father, Who says:

'Let us eat and celebrate, for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found'. With these words the father interrupts his younger brother in the moment in which he is confessing his guilt: 'I am no longer worthy to be called your son'. But this expression is unbearable to the heart of the father, who instead hastens to restore to his son the signs of his dignity: his fine robe, his ring, his shoes. Jesus does not describe an offended or resentful father, a father who says to his son, 'You will pay me for this'. ... On the contrary, the only thing that matters to the father is that this son is before him, safe and sound. ... Certainly, the son is aware that he has made a mistake, and acknowledges this: 'I have sinned ... treat me as one of your hired servants.' But these words dissolve before his father's forgiveness. The embrace and the kiss of his father make him understand that he has always been considered a son, in spite of everything. This teaching of Jesus is important: our condition as children of God is the fruit of the love of the Father's heart; it does not depend on our merits or our actions, and therefore no-one can take it away from us."

The parable encourages us never to give up hope. "I think of mothers and fathers, apprehensive when they see their children drift away from them, embarking on dangerous roads. I think of parish priests and catechists who at times ask themselves if their work is in vain. But I think also of those who are in prison, to whom it seems as if their life is over; those who have made mistaken decisions and are not able to look to the future; all those who hunger for mercy and forgiveness, and believe that they do not deserve it. ... In any situation of life, I must never forget that I will never cease to be the son of God, to be the son of a Father Who loves me and awaits my return."

But in the parable there is also another son, the eldest, who also needs to discover the mercy of the Father. "He has always stayed at home, but he is so different from his father! His words lack tenderness: 'Look, these many

years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command. ... But when this son of yours came... We see his disdain; he never says 'father', he never says 'brother'; he thinks only of himself and he boasts of always staying next to his father and of having served him, yet he has never lived this closeness with joy."

The eldest son is also in need of mercy. "The righteous, or those who believe themselves righteous, also need mercy", emphasised Francis. "This son represents us when we ask ourselves if it is worth the effort to work so hard if we then receive nothing in exchange. Jesus reminds us that one does not stay in the house of the Father for compensation, but because one has the dignity of being co-responsible sons. It is not a question of bargaining with God, but rather of following Jesus Who gave Himself on the cross, without measure."

"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours", says the father to his eldest son, since "his logic is that of mercy. The younger son thought he deserved punishment for his sins, while the elder son expected compensation for his services. The two brothers do not speak to each other, they live different lives, but they both reason according to a logic foreign to Jesus: if you do good you receive a prize, and if you are bad you are to be punished. ... This logic is subverted by the words of the father: 'It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found'. The father has recovered his lost son, and now he can also restore him to his brother! Without the younger son, the elder son too ceases to be a brother. The greatest joy for the father is to see that his sons recognise each other as brothers."

"The sons can decide whether to join in their father's joy or to reject it. They must ask what their own wishes are, and what view they have of life. The parable ends inconclusively: we do not know what the elder son decides to do. And this is an inspiration for us. This Gospel reading teaches us that we all need to enter into the house of the Father and to participate in His joy, in His feast of mercy and fraternity."

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