

Luke 15:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

Analysis

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. The prodigal's actual confession mirrors his rehearsed speech (v. 19) but gets interrupted before he can propose becoming a hired servant. His confession contains three crucial elements: acknowledgment of sin "against heaven" (εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν, eis ton ouranon), recognizing that sin is ultimately against God; confession of sin "in thy sight" (ἐνώπιόν σου, enōpion sou), acknowledging personal offense against his father; and declaration of unworthiness for sonship.

The phrase "I have sinned" (ἥμαρτον, hēmarton) uses the aorist tense, indicating a decisive, completed action—genuine acknowledgment, not excuse-making. The dual direction of his sin—"against heaven" and "in thy sight"—reflects the theological truth that all sin is both vertical (against God) and horizontal (against others). David's confession in Psalm 51:4, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned," emphasizes sin's primary offense against God, even when it harms others.

Significantly, the father interrupts before the son can complete his planned request to become a hired servant (compare v. 19). Grace overtakes penance. The father's actions (vv. 22-24) demonstrate that God's forgiveness is not earned through self-abasement but freely given to the genuinely repentant. True repentance acknowledges unworthiness, but God's response transcends our expectations—He restores us to sonship, not servitude.

Historical Context

In Jewish understanding, sin was primarily offense against God's covenant, His law, and His holiness. The son's confession "against heaven" uses a Jewish circumlocution for God—"heaven" often substituted for the divine name out of reverence. His recognition of both vertical and horizontal dimensions of sin reflects proper Hebrew theology. The public nature of his offense (violating family honor, wasting inheritance among Gentiles) would require equally public confession and reconciliation in first-century Jewish culture.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the son's confession model the essential elements of genuine repentance before God?
2. Why does the father interrupt the confession before the son can propose earning his way back as a servant?
3. What does the dual nature of sin—against heaven and against people—teach about the comprehensive offense of rebellion?

Interlinear Text

εἶπεν	δὲ	αὐτῷ	ὁ	υἱός	Πάτερ	ἥμαρτον	εἰς	τὸν
said	And	unto him	G3588	son	Father	I have sinned	against	G3588
G2036	G1161	G846		G5207	G3962	G264	G1519	
οὐρανὸν	καὶ	ἐνώπιόν	σου	καὶ	οὐκέτι	εἰμὶ	ἄξιος	
heaven	and	in	thy	and	no more	am	worthy	
G3772	G2532	G1799	G4675	G2532	G3765	G1510	G514	
κληθῆναι	υἱός	σου						
to be called	son	thy						
G2564	G5207	G4675						

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 51:4 (Sin): Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

Jeremiah 3:13 (Sin): Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the LORD.

1 Corinthians 8:12 (Sin): But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ.

Psalms 143:2 (Parallel theme): And enter not into judgment with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified.

Romans 2:4 (Parallel theme): Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?