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The Story of the Prodigal Son

Remarks on Luke 15

'Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and the scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." So He spoke this parable to them'.

Luke 15:1-3

Seeking and Receiving Sinners

The Lord Jesus was criticized by the religious leaders for His contact with “sinners.” The Pharisees were self-righteous and had no idea of God’s grace in seeking and receiving sinners. In direct response to their charge against Him, Christ told three parables that explained the gospel of God’s grace: the story of the lost sheep; the story of the lost coin; and the story of the lost son. The first two highlight God’s work in *seeking* sinners but the third parable highlights God’s grace in *receiving* sinners. All three emphasize His joy in saving sinners.

In the story of the lost sheep, the Christ is giving His critics an object lesson illustrating His present mission in seeking lost sinners and having contact with them—the very thing they were condemning Him for. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one sheep. The joy of God in one sinner who repents is contrasted with the miserable narrowness and hypocritical self-righteousness of the Pharisees and other religious types. The second parable of the woman searching with a lamp for one lost coin, is essentially the same lesson but perhaps is pointing to the mission of the Holy Spirit in seeking sinners. But the third parable reveals to us the heart of God as a Father who is filled with joy and compassion in receiving sinners.

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all involved in the mission of grace to save lost sinners as we see in these three parables, as well as in many other parts of the New Testament. But it is the parable of the “prodigal son,” which the Lord Jesus gives the most attention to: a story about a lost son, a bitter and self-righteous brother, and a loving Father.

The Departure

A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give to me the portion of goods that falls to me.” So he divided to them his livelihood (Luke 15:11-12). When we think of the parable of the “prodigal son” our attention is generally drawn to the younger son who asks for his inheritance and wastes it on immoral living. This fact obviously explains the name often given to this parable: “The Prodigal Son.” The term *prodigal* means, profligate, wanton, reckless etc. which are apt descriptions of the younger son’s behavior. And it is true that the center-piece of the story is his journey into the “far country” where he squandered his inheritance. But this is not the main point of the parable—only its background.

The important lesson that the Lord Jesus is stressing to His listeners is not the profligate, riotous life of the lad in question, but the extravagant love of his father despite the rebellious, foolish ways of his son. A secondary theme emerges as well: the hard, unforgiving attitude of the elder son. The lesson is to show God’s large heart, His disposition of grace in contrast to the legal harshness and hypocrisy of the Pharisees typified by the elder son! We can be certain that the parable had a profound impact upon Christ’s religious opponents and upon the sinners who listened to Him that day!

When the boy asked for his share of the inheritance, he was in effect saying that his father was as good as dead. Normally, the inheritance would only be given upon the death of the father. The callous selfishness is shocking, but it is a true picture of every sinner! The prodigal was as guilty the moment he crossed his father’s threshold as he was when in the “far country.” Man is not a sinner because he sins, rather he sins because he is a sinner. It is not God who is alienated from man but man who has departed from God—“All have sinned.”

Spending and Serving

And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all ... he began to be in want (Luke 15:13-14). The younger son gathered together his newly inherited riches and left his father's farm for the bright lights of a "far country," a place that offered more opportunity to fulfill all his desire for pleasure and excitement. He was thinking that fulfilling the desires which God has prohibited—the lure of the flesh—would bring happiness and fulfillment. This has been Satan's lie and man's folly since the foundation of the world.

A major theme in the Book of Proverbs is the wisdom that keeps us from the paths of sin. In Proverbs, the nature of sin is often shown to have this deceitful character—holding out a promise it can never fulfill (Prov. 5:3, 4). It is very attractive, sweeter than honey, but its end is bitter. The charm of sin is gone in the committing of it, as another has said, "Sin is attractive as a prospect, but hideous in retrospect." This is why they are called, "deceitful lusts" (Eph. 4:22).

The "far country" is Satan's land, a place that is morally at a distance from God's presence. In the far country, the prince of the world leads men on, through their lusts, to destruction and wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). "But when he had spent all ... he began to be in want." That's the thing about Satan's country, there is no giving there, only spending, "And no one gave him anything" (v. 16). The young man was learning that you cannot enjoy what money can buy when you disregard that which money can never buy. He thought he was free from serving on his father's farm only to be forced to work for a "citizen of that country" (v. 15). We all are serve something; we are either slaves of sin and Satan, or slaves of righteousness and God (Rom. 6:16).

The work of God in the sinner

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!" (Luke 15:17). By this point in the course of telling the parable, those listening to the words of Christ would have been incensed. Such a boy! He took his father's money, spent it on the party life and prostitutes (v. 30), and then descended to groveling with the swine—an unclean animal!

He should be cut off from the family forever, if not stoned to death (Dt. 21:18-21). He had dishonored his father's name and his generosity. In the society of Christ's

day, where shame and honor is part of the cultural fabric (as it still is in many parts of the world), the listeners would have had strong feelings. On top of this, the self-righteousness and traditionalism of the Pharisees was about to be exposed. They would shortly be in for a big shock as the story took a sudden turn in its outcome.

“But when he came to himself.” He came to himself before he came to his father. This is the true nature of biblical repentance. Repentance is literally “a change of mind.” It is the judgement of my sin in the light of grace. It will lead to some practical change that may or may not be observable to others depending upon the nature of the sin and the circumstances of the person repenting. But it is *not* an outward change in itself (although that may occur) but something inward in our relational attitude before God. The prodigal realized that back in his father’s house there was an abundance of food—there was *goodness* in his father’s house. This is the work of God in the soul. “Do you despise the riches of His goodness … not knowing the goodness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4). And so the young man realized where his behavior had led him and would soon learn the astounding riches of his father’s grace.

A Servant or a Son?

I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants” (Luke 15:18). The young man arose from his situation with a determination to return to his father—this act was the fruit of repentance. He had realized his hopeless condition, and recognized the good things of his father’s house.

He prepared a confession which he would rehearse to his father when he got home. He will say, “I have sinned” which was true; but the last clause, was not. The prodigal’s hope was at most to be like one of the hired servants. This was not in accordance with the greatness of his father’s heart—but he did not know this as yet and was unsure what his reception would actually be upon arrival.

This is a very common condition among Christians. They are converted and have turned to God but they are stuck in Romans chapter 7. Although they are born again, they are under the law and don’t have complete deliverance and peace as to their acceptance and standing before God. To be practically under the law is to be in the place of servant-hood. Paul makes this clear in Galatians when the Christians were putting themselves under the law. He teaches that this state “does not differ

at all from a slave" (see Gal. 4:1-7). Throughout this epistle he contrasts this condition with that of sonship.

As the prodigal drew closer to his father's house, his apprehension and fear increased. There was a real work in his heart, he recognized the goodness in his father but there was not yet full assurance. How true to the experience of most believers at some point in their experience! "*Trembling, we had hoped for mercy—some lone place within the door.*" May you know the peace of God and full assurance today!

The Love of God

And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him (Luke 15:20-21). The father expressed his love and compassion to his son before he even had made his confession. He fell on his neck and kissed him while the young man was still in his filthy rags of the far country. The father could smell the odor of the swine which still clung to the clothes of his boy. What a picture!

People have a wrong view of God that's due to either a faulty theology or simply due to our alienated hearts or both. When Satan came to our first parents he questioned God's love—if He really loved you He wouldn't hold anything back from you; He knows if you partake of this tree you'll be like Him (Gen. 3:3-6). They listened to the voice of the serpent which in effect said, "God doesn't *really* love you, does He?" Man has been alienated from God ever since, and the heart of man shrinks back from God.

But the Bible says, that while we were sinners Christ died for us; God's love was manifested to us through the propitiation of Christ (Rom. 5:8; 1 Jn. 4:9, 10). How hard it is for the heart of man, even believers, to accept this! It has been said that "the source of all our problems as sinners and as saints, is the lack of confidence we have in the love of God for us." In the Lord's parable, this unfathomable love and grace of God towards sinners is pictured by the father on the neck of his son, dirty clothes and all. There would have been stunned silence from Christ's listeners, in fact we do not hear them speak again in chapter 15. How interesting to see that the prodigal's father cuts him off in mid-speech, not allowing him to utter any word now about being a hired servant (v. 21). Sonship was his place by grace, and it is our place as well.

Sonship and Justification

But the father said to his servants, “Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet (Luke 15:22). The father ran to meet his returning son—there would be no talk of being a hired servant but the full privileges of sonship was what was in the father’s heart.

This very thing is brought out in the first chapter of Ephesians when Paul writes that we have been predestined “to the adoption of sons … according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace” (Eph. 1:5, 6). Sonship was not a necessity for us, we would have been pleased to be servants but according to His will and grace the Father has made us sons.

The prodigal’s father brings out the “best robe” and puts a “ring upon his hand.” These were not part of the original inheritance but something the father had hidden away in reserve. Had it been part of the original inheritance the son would have squandered it as well. Man in his sin has forfeited his place in the original paradise—we can never go back to that. But since sin came in through Adam, God has now brought out something much higher. We have an intimate connection with the Last Adam and an eternal inheritance reserved for us in the heavenly paradise.

The prodigal, although forgiven, could not enter the house in the garments of the far country. And he could not provide his own robe but it was given to him. This is a picture of the doctrine of justification. The believer has been declared to be righteous, which is more than mere forgiveness. Christ is our righteousness and we stand in Him, in perfect acceptance before God. The ring is a picture of our eternal glory with Christ, we are secure in Him (1 Pet. 1:4; 5:10). The sandals testify of sonship; servants did not wear shoes in the household. This is all according to “the riches of His grace”!

Let the Party Begin

“Bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” And they began to be merry (Luke 15:23-24). If the Pharisees and scribes were not shocked by this point in the parable (the return of the prodigal and the embrace of his father), they were about to hear even more things to challenge their criticism.

Their spiritual worldview was like many others even today, especially those who are in some way “religious,” whether Christian or otherwise. The thinking goes like this: “If you are good, and religious you’ll go to heaven, if you’re bad and irreligious you’ll go to hell” But what this mindset failed (and still fails) to understand is:

- (1) all are sinners, and there are none righteous (Rom. 3:10, 23);
- (2) that “God is love,” which is manifested in His attribute of grace;
- (3) God has made a provision for sin and has satisfied His justice through the cross of Christ.

The common view fails not only to understand the magnitude of man’s sin and his lost estate, it also has no idea the height and depth of the love of God or of His surpassing glory. In Christ’s parable, this view is represented by the older son who enters the scene in the final part of the parable.

But before that happens, the father had more in store for his repentant son. He throws a party and says, “Let us eat and be merry.” What shall we say of the extravagant grace of God! The One who said, “Let us make man” also says to His fallen creature, “Let us make merry”! What a contrast too, in the food which Satan provides, “the pods the swine ate” and the food that God gives, “The fatted calf.” There is no record in this parable of the party ever ending. Throughout the “ages to come” we will stand in awe of the “exceeding riches of His grace.” The party has only just begun.

The Elder Son Outside the House

Now his older son was in the field. And as he came he drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant (Luke 15:25-27). The story of older son in Christ’s parable often does not get the attention it deserves for it is in reality the point of the parable! The Lord Jesus is answering His critics, the Pharisees and scribes who condemned Him for receiving and even eating with sinners. The point was to show the love and grace of God, His joy at receiving repentant sinners in contrast to their hard and graceless hearts. They had a legalistic view of salvation only made worse by the fact that they were hypocrites (Mt. 23:13).

The elder son was *near* the house but not *in it* and in fact he never enters the house in the parable. This is indicative of the position of the Jews under the Mosaic system—they were “near” and the Gentiles were “afar off.” But Paul makes clear in this passage that Jew and Gentile were both equally under wrath (Eph. 2:3, 17).

The Jewish nation was positionally near to God but just as guilty as any Gentile (Rom. 3:1; Rom. 9:4). The older son was working in the “field” when he heard the music coming from his father’s house. And like Cain, who brought to God the “fruit of the ground,” the elder son’s own works of self-righteousness blinded him to the necessity of grace.

The older son asked a servant the meaning of the music. His father had been in mourning the whole time the younger son was wayward—no sound of music was heard during that time but now, suddenly, there’s music! His lack of discernment in this shows the incapacity of the natural heart to appreciate the worship which flows from the knowledge of sins forgiven. The older son had never left for the far country but he was nevertheless, still outside his father’s house.

The Elder Son’s Anger

But he was angry and would not go in. He said: “Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave a young goat ... But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured our livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him” (Luke 15:28-30 NKJV). The older son in this parable is clearly angry. He came to the house but *would not go in*.

Clearly, this was at the very least, a mark of disrespect towards his father. His first reaction, besides his anger, was that he pleads, on the basis of his own righteousness, a claim to the father’s blessing. His attitude and character completely epitomizes the Pharisees in particular and worldly religion generally. Just like the Jewish people who rejected Christ, “being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness” (Rom. 10:3).

The anger of the older son is real. How the flesh fights the idea that it is lost and has no righteousness of its own! Notice he calls his brother, “This son of yours” and points out that he had sinned with “harlots.” How often when sharing the gospel we hear, “Do you mean that *I*, who am a church goer and faithful to my wife will go to hell, yet *he*, who was an evil person all his life and accepts Christ will go to heaven, it’s not fair!”

We see this anger played out in the story of Isaac and Ishmael. Regarding this Paul writes, “He who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit” (Gal. 4:29). In the account, Abraham, made a “great feast” for Isaac just like the father in the Lord’s parable. This festivity manifested Hagar

and Ishmael's hatred for Isaac (Gen. 21:8-10). In Galatians Paul uses this as an allegory to teach us the incompatibility of legalism with grace. This is the very thing which is highlighted in Christ's parable.

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