



BETHEL  
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# MINISTRY OF THE WORD

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## The Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32, "And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. <sup>14</sup> And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" <sup>20</sup> And he arose and came to his

father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

It has been said that a person's view of God entering adulthood is founded upon their view of their parents. Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16 unite the parent's relationship with their child to the child's covenant relationship with God. In fact Ephesians 6 does this also:

Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."

Now I don't know about you, but this is a scary thought. As our children increase in "wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52), a portion of their concept of God will come from the way we relate to them and treat them. And that is why I believe that one of the greatest negative influences that exists in our society today when it comes to our children is ourselves! And coordinate with this, one of the greatest misrepresentations of God that exists in our world today arises not from Hollywood, television, the mainstream press, liberal commentators or even public schools but from parents.

When was the last time your child disobeyed, rebelled against you, raised their voice, or threw the temper tantrum, how did you respond? Did you

- Threaten them?
- Raise your voice?
- Yell, scream, and get angry?

I doubt that there is a parent here who is not guilty of some if not all of these responses.

When a child is raised in a home in which their rebellion is met with anger, threats and loud voices; if we were raised in a home in which our rebellion was met with anger, threats and loud voices; the conclusion we draw is that God's disposition towards us when we rebel is that, just like mom and dad.

- God must be angry and full of wrath toward us.
- God eventually will "punish" us if we keep it up.
- God is so disappointed that He can't continue to love us.

Is that true? When we persistently sin, is God's disposition towards us one of anger, frustration, and ultimately rejection? How are we to understand our relationship to God when we sin?

The parable of the Prodigal Son helps us answer these questions. The parable was told after the Pharisees and scribes began grumbling over Christ's acceptance of sinners (Luke 15:1-2). Now from the scribes and Pharisees perspective, a "sinner" could expect nothing less than wrath and rejection from God. And thus Christ's acceptance of this sinner implied that God also accepted the sinner and we all know that that is an impossibility! Or is it? We begin with the setting of our text.

Luke 15:11-12, “And He said, ‘A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, “Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.” And he divided his wealth between them”

As is a typical theme today, the story here is of a child seeking to be freed from parental constraint.<sup>1</sup> He is restless and wants to “see the world.” And so in line with Deuteronomy 21:17, this “younger son” requests his share of his father’s estate.<sup>2</sup>

Now what is amazing about this request is that its fulfillment could only come as the estate was broken up and part of it liquidated.<sup>3</sup> This request would have meant the destruction of the father’s house.<sup>4</sup> And yet in this instance, the father was willing to bear that burden, obviously we’re talking more about God at this point than an earthly dad! And that brings us to the squandering of the son’s wealth.

### The Squandering

Luke 15:13-16, “And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country [the implication with the mentioning of the famine is that there would be no one to help this man; all would be fending for themselves], and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him”

Notice some of the particulars of this section:

Luke 15:13, “...went on a journey into a distant country...”

According to ancient records, during this time many Jews were moving away from their homeland such that while only half a million remained in Palestine, over four million Jews were living in the Diaspora. In light of this, the request of this “son” would not have been too shocking. And yet, what begins to raise our suspicion is that Christ says that this boy “journeyed into a distant country.” The implication is that the prodigal, much like Jonah, moved as far away from his home as he dared.

Luke 15:13, “...and there he squandered his estate with loose living.”

The emphasis in this phrase is on the foolishness of the son. He left nothing behind in case his plan should not work out and he should wish to return home. Rather, he spent his money right and left until, in no time, it was gone.

Now according to verses 14-15a, about this time a severe famine hit the land such that “he began to be in need.” And so, he hired himself out to a local farmer.

Luke 15:15, "...sent him into his fields to feed swine."

This would be understood by Christ's listeners as one of the greatest insults for a Jew. For you see, pigs are unclean animals, (Leviticus 11:7)! How degrading and humiliating for a Jew to be found feeding pigs. In fact, one of the sayings current among the Jews in Christ's day at the time was this:<sup>5</sup> "Cursed is the man who rears swine..."

Luke 15:16, "And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating [these were the carob pods of the locust tree given to pigs and eaten by the very poor]..."

Hunger was added to his humiliation as he had nothing to eat. In fact, he was so desperate for food, he not only was willing, but he was "longing" to eat the food of pigs!<sup>6</sup>

Luke 15:16b, "...and no one was giving anything to him."

The clear implication here is that pigs had become more valuable than this Jewish male! And so as a result of his loose living, the prodigal ends up humiliated and hungry. Truly, the boy has come to the end of himself!

## The Conviction

Luke 15:17-19, "But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'"

There are a couple of phrases in this section that are worth noting.

Luke 15:17, "But when he came to his senses..."

The idea is that the son had been reflecting over some time upon his present state and all that led him there. This meditation led to a shocking realization.

Luke 15:17b, "...how many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread..."

In Christ's day, "hired men" were unskilled at a trade and thus at or near the bottom of the social-economic scale. Many of them were not far above beggars. They worked from job to job, many of which lasted no more than a day, and often less. They had no guarantee of work beyond what they might be doing at the time. As such, they would gather in the market place before dawn to be available for hiring (cf. Matthew 20:1-16) much as the day laborers of our day. The emphasis of this passage is on the lowliness of the men working for his father, and yet even these lowly men were cared for! And so as we read in Luke 15:18a, the boy decides to go back to his father's house with this appeal.

Luke 15:18 "...I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight..."

This is not the confession of an unrepentant person seeking further to manipulate and scheme. Rather, these are the words of a broken man! Notice, he knew his sin ultimately was against God and this is where genuine repentance begins! High views of God, accurate views of God lead to repentance and grief over one's sinfulness. Low views of God lead to wantonness and rebellion! Show me a man who willingly sins, and I'll show you a man with a defective view of God!

Walter Chantry, in a book examining Christ's approach toward evangelism, wrote,<sup>7</sup> "Jesus began His message of evangelism by solemnly fixing attention on God's attributes..." this is where true repentance begins! W. S. Plumer added<sup>8</sup> this:

We never see sin aright until we see it as against God... All sin is against God in this sense: that it is His law that is broken, His authority that is despised, His government that is set at naught... Pharaoh and Balaam, Saul and Judas each said, 'I have sinned'; but the returning prodigal said, 'I have sinned against heaven and before thee'; and David said, 'Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.'"

Of the two groups, we know it was only the prodigal and David that were restored! And thus we see here a different "son." His proud and ungrateful disposition is replaced with a "broken and contrite heart" which God does not despise (Psalm 51:17). And this led him to this confession.

Luke 15:19, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."

With this the son accepts the LOWEST position possible in his day: The hireling.<sup>9</sup> And so, because of his actions and his foolishness, this "son" was willing to live not as a son but as a hired man! And isn't this how sin oft-times makes us feel? In light of our sin, we know that we are not worthy of God's blessings... mercies... and graces. When faced with our rebellion, we know we deserve death. And so rather than relate to God as sons/daughters, we walk the path of the alienated servant! But this is where this parable takes an incredible turn for the good.

## The Compassion

Luke 15:20, "And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him."

This perhaps is one of the most incredible verses in Scripture. Notice that the father saw the son was while he was still a long way off. The child obviously had not journeyed very far in his return home (recall that he was in a "distant land"). The implication is that his father was seeking him and coming after him! And it was while the son was away that his father saw him, and felt compassion for him. The father's heart "went out to him." Seeing his son's misery aroused in the heart of the father love; not anger, wrath, or vengeance!

Now the father ran. In Christ's day, it was considered undignified for an elderly man to run; yet, this father runs! At this point, it didn't matter what others thought. His boy was returning; he couldn't be bothered by worldly conventions. He embraced the son. He threw his arms around his son's neck

and passionately embraced his son and kissed him. The father didn't just give him a perfunctory peck on both cheeks as was the custom for greeting someone in that day. Rather, he kissed him over and over and over again! Referencing this repeated kissing, Spurgeon put it this way:<sup>10</sup>

Oh, the past, the past, my father! he might moan, as he thought of his wasted years; but he had no sooner said that than he received another kiss, as if his father said, 'Never mind the past; I have forgotten all about that.'

But then, perhaps, the young man looked down on his foul garments and said, 'The present, my father, the present, what a dreadful state I am in!' And with another kiss would come the answer, 'Never mind the present, my boy. I am content to have thee as thou art.'

'Oh, but,' the boy might have said, 'the future, my father, the future! What would you think if I should ever go astray again?' Then would come another holy kiss, and his father would say, 'I will see to the future, my boy...''

Now I remind you that Christ told this parable to convey the heart of the Father towards His children when they sin. Such is God's disposition toward you this day! Talk about amazing grace! And yet we're not done. For notice, at this point the son had yet even to confess a sin! The forgiveness referenced here was granted even before the son had made confession!

## The Confession

Luke 15:21, "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'"

As this is what the son intended, we are not surprised by his confession. However, there is a "shocker" here. Compare the confession of this verse with the planned confession in Luke 15:18-19. What is missing? In Luke 15:19 and the son's plan to relate to his father as a hired man was stated this way: "I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."

Why? The father did not give his son the chance to say it! In fact, far from being as a "hired man" the father ordered a celebration.

## The Celebration

Luke 15:22-24, "But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry"

There is much implied here in how the father dresses his son that is missed on account of an unfamiliarity with the culture of Christ's day.

Luke 15:22, "...best robe..."

This was a status symbol (cf. Genesis 41:42). In the eyes of the father, his son was most important, and so this rebellious boy was clothed with the “best robe.”

Luke 15:22, “...ring on his hand...”

This most likely was a signet ring (cf. again Genesis 41:42) which was an indication of authority, royal authority. The father is saying, “Not only are you my son [by virtue of the robe], but to you I give authority over my house.”<sup>11</sup>

Luke 15:22, “...sandals on his feet...”

The significance is that in Christ’s day slaves did not wear sandals. That the father puts sandals on his son’s feet indicated that his son was not to be treated as a slave, but, as he really was, HIS child! There is no talk of second class citizen’s in God’s Kingdom! Regardless of the life you have lived as a believer, you always have been and remain a son!

Luke 15:23, “...fatted calf...”

In Christ’s day, the diet of most Jews rarely contained meat; it was too expensive (recall the meal Jacob made that tempted Esau... stew!). As such, the slaughtering of a fattened calf occurred on very special and rare occasions on account of very special guests. In essence, the father is saying to his son that there is no one more important in all the world than him!

Now why the bestowed honor? Because “...this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found” (v. 24). When the son rebelled against his father, the emotions involved were akin to the emotions surrounding the death of a child. But now that the son had returned, it is as if the father had received his son back from the dead! Accordingly we are not surprised to read of the father in this parable rejoicing! For indeed, his son had come back to life!

The focus of the parable shifts at this point to the older brother.<sup>12</sup> Yet, here we see nothing less than the heart of the Father toward His children when they sin. What is God’s disposition toward you when you sin? It is NOT wrath and anger, BUT love, pity, mercy, and compassion! Does our sin forfeit our status before God? Absolutely not!

Now brothers and sisters, I dare say that there is not a more important message for us today. We enter this world as sinners with the obligation of gaining God’s acceptance through law keeping this rightfully becomes our paradigm/default programming (Genesis 2:15-17). But then, by the grace of God our eyes are opened to the fact that we cannot be saved in this manner. One sin is all it takes to condemn me before God. One violation of the law is enough to sentence me to hell for eternity.

Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death...”

So we cry out to God in despair who leads us to the cross of Christ where we see that (1) Jesus died on behalf of our sin, (2) the righteous was executed in place of the unrighteous, the just for the unjust, 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18. And by God’s grace, we embrace Christ as our Lord and

Savior!

We need to realize that the paradigm that governed our thinking before the cross is not changed by salvation. While we have been saved by grace, there nevertheless remains the propensity on our part to believe that God's continued favor is conditioned by what we do, say, think, or desire. This is why Paul exhorted the Romans to be "transformed by the renewing of their minds" (Romans 12:2)! And so, while we have been saved by grace we nevertheless believe that just like my relationship with my parents in which their favor was conditioned by my conduct, if I don't...

- Think the right thoughts.
- Do the right things.
- Believe the right things.

God's disposition toward me will change, and rather than being the God of grace, He will become the God of wrath and we will content to relate to Him as a hireling!

Now amazing as this may sound, that is how most of us relate to God. We sin once, twice, and three times but we know that God knows that we really aren't that bad of a person. But then we sin again, and again, and again and soon we are confronted with a horrible truth: maybe I'm not as good as I thought. And if I'm thinking this, you know God is thinking this. From here the Christian goes down one of two paths:

- Either they "try harder" to be good- only to fail in the end.
- Or they give up and so relate to God as servants/slaves and not sons- knowing they could never be good enough to please God.

And so across America and the world we find two kinds of Christians: Those who are deceived into thinking that God is happy with them because of what they have done. Those who are deceived into thinking that God is disappointed with them because of what they have done. Both of which are a gross perversion! Yet today in this parable we see good news.

- If you think that you are bad, cheer up! You're worse than you think!
- Yet as wretched, vile, and wicked as each and everyone of us truly are, in Christ...
  - We are beautiful to God!
  - We are His beloved children!
  - We are ones in whom God is well-pleased!

Romans 5:8-10, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

Isn't that the message of this parable? The Prodigal in his hungry, faint, and wretched state, having come a very long way, had not much heart in him. His hunger had taken all energy out of him, and he



was conscious of his guilt such that he had hardly the courage to face his father. And yet, upon the kiss of his father, he knew that all fears and doubt were groundless- His Father Loved Him!<sup>13</sup>

Will you embrace this truth as profoundly as you embrace the doctrine of God's Sovereignty? You must see this morning that this is not a choice! Orthodoxy demands such a confession!

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is a rather interesting concept here. See the command for a man to "...leave his father and his mother..." (Gen. 2:24) does not imply a physical separation, just a spiritual one. "Leave" carries the idea of leaving with a view toward establishing another covenant family/unit. And thus, it was very common for extended generations to live on the same land, work the same business, and even sleep in the same dwelling, and yet be in perfect harmony with Gen. 2:24.

That obviously is the relationship between the Father and the sons in this particular parable. While the sons obviously were adults (the younger son would never have been allowed to leave his father's household if he wasn't an adult), they nevertheless lived in the same house as their father and worked the same land. N.B. Because marriage usually occurred for Jewish males between 18 and 20, it has been suggested that this boy was no more than 17 years of age. Yet, because exceptions to the above age span can be found, the above age suggestion for this boy obviously is not conclusive.

<sup>2</sup> In this case, the share probably was 2/9 of the property. Had the father died, the share would have been 1/3 in accordance with Deut. 21. Yet in the case where the father had yet to have died, the share obviously would be less, approximately 2/9 of the family wealth- see I. Howard Marshall's treatment in the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* on Luke, p. 607.

<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen, *Luke*, NTC, pg. 753.

<sup>4</sup> Rabbinic law maintained that the land of just such a liquidation would become the property of the purchaser, but the previous owner could live on it till his death. See Leon Morris' commentary on *Luke*, TNTC, p. 263.

<sup>5</sup> *Baba Kamma* 82b; cf. SB I, 492f.; cf. 448-450. Cf. also Hendriksen, *Luke*, NTC, p. 753 and Ahikar 8:34 syr.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall quotes an ancient source which said, "When the Israelites are reduced to carob pods, then they repent" (*Luke*, NIGTC, p. 609). From this we get a sense of the desperate situation of the prodigal.

<sup>7</sup> *Today's Gospel Authentic or Synthetic*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> *The Pursuit of Holiness*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>9</sup> See my comments in v. 17 on the "hired men."

<sup>10</sup> *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 37, p. 656.

<sup>11</sup> cf. also 1 Mac. 6:15; Jos. Ant. 12:360; Est. 3:10; 8:8.

<sup>12</sup> As I have stressed throughout this series, a parable is a vehicle carrying a message. As such, it is both dangerous and unwise to apply the particular elements of a parable without Biblical warrant.

On what basis then do we have here to divide this parable and apply it in two different ways: a sermon this week on Lk. 15:11-24 and a sermon next week on Lk. 15:25-32? The answer to this question is found in the actual message of this parable.

The message of this parable is brought out when we observe the context. In Lk. 15:2, the Pharisees and scribes are described as grumbling against Christ for His treatment of the sinner. Thus, the parable of The Prodigal Son serves to exhort the Pharisee and Scribe with the message that, "God accepts the sinner and so should you. And yet you haven't, because you yourself- just like the second son- are prodigal!"

Now it is obvious that this is a two sided message: (1) of the Love of God for the sinner, and (2) of the prodigal nature of the religious leaders themselves. From this perspective, I have chosen here to address each of these separately with the hope that with each sermon, THE one message of the parable will be maintained and upheld.

<sup>13</sup> Now don't misunderstand. I am not saying here that God delights in the sins of His people. Rather, I am saying that God delights in their repentance and brokenness- for it is then that He fills us with Christ!

Now based on this we ask, "Is there any point at which God stops welcoming us in our repentance?" Only when our repentance is not that of contrition and regret, but worldly sorrow: the sorrow that arises on account of being caught or the desire to "appease God" (cf. 2 Cor. 7:9-10). And yet, let us notice that even if the child of God repents with such worldly repentance, God's punitive wrath and anger is not kindled- we still are a child of God and thus His child. However, let us also notice that if the child of God repents with such false repentance, restoration will not be forthcoming since true repentance has not yet occurred (cf. 1 Jn. 1:9).

## **VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO**

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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### **About the Preacher**

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