



Luke 15:11-24
The Prodigal Son

11 Then He said: "A certain man had two sons.

12 "And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood.

13 "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

14 "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want.

15 "Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.

16 "And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

17 "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!

18 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,

19 "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants." '

20 "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.

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

22 "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.

23 'And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry;

24 'for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

As I said last week, this chapter 15 of Luke contains three of the most beautiful and moving parables in the entire New Testament. It is difficult to think of a chapter that has done more spiritual good to the lost. Certainly, in my life, when I think of my own spiritual experience, nothing sums it up quite as well as the parable of the prodigal son. Prodigal incidentally literally means "squandering or wasteful."

The first two parables in this chapter, the lost sheep and the lost coin, focus on the searching love of God as he seeks and saves the lost, now we have a parable that opens up the human response to God's saving work, and emphasizes the enormity of his salvation.

Christ's parables are "earthly stories with a spiritual meaning" and I really want to endeavor to do justice to both the earthly and the spiritual side of this parable, so we'll be considering them in order. 1) What happens in the parable and 2) What does the parable teach us about Salvation?

1) ***The earthly meaning*** – In the parable we have a wealthy Jewish land owner with two sons. The younger son is obviously straining at the yoke. He feels fettered in his fathers household, he clearly

doesn't want to be under his rule and under his eye, so he demands of his father the portion of the inheritance that would fall to him at his father's death as a gift which according to the Mosaic Law, would be 1/3 of his father's goods.

His father is not obliged to give him this inheritance as an early gift, and clearly dividing up the property and converting it into cash is no easy task, but he does. No sooner does the Son have the money in hand than he packs his bags and moves out heading for a "far country", a place far, far, far away from the watchful eye of his father and a place where he can live without any restraint.

Unfortunately, this story is still lived out in its fundamentals again and again in our own day and age. For me, and for countless others, the far country we are straining at the bit to get to is college. As the end of High school nears they are like racehorses in the starting gate, and once they have their degree, its like the bell rings and the gate opens and bang, they are off and running. And there, instead of being a place where the gifts your parents give you are invested and used wisely in acquiring knowledge, they are frittered away in dissipation and petty debauchery. ***Parents, take note, you can work ceaselessly at giving your child a huge earthly inheritance, but unless you send your child off to college, or the army – or whatever destination they have far away from home – with a regenerate heart it will almost inevitably be another "far country" you are paying to send them to. If their only checks and balances are your oversight what do you expect will happen when that is gone? So first, "bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord."***

Anyway, the younger son does what young men are so wont to do, and he spends all of his inheritance on wine, women, and song and no doubt while he had that money he had plenty of friends to help him do so. ***"With money in your pocket you are wise, you are handsome, and you sing well too."*** But when the money is all frittered away, his "friends" all leave him and he quickly finds himself in want. To add to his troubles, there is a famine in the land and no one wants to help out this high-born foreign wastrel.

He finally gets so hungry, he becomes the servant of a gentile, and takes on a job that would have been both repulsive and humiliating to a Jew, he becomes a swineherd and takes care of unclean animals no doubt working for something only a little above starvation wages. At this point, he is sunk so low that even the carob pods that are fed to the pigs look appetizing to him.

At that point he realizes the sheer awfulness of what he has done in wasting his fathers gifts and how pitiful his condition is, even the meanest of his fathers servants is living better than he is. But instead of just falling into self-pity he says "I will arise and go to my father" so he translates the resolution into action and begins the long journey home.

His father, far from saying "good riddance" has been watching and waiting for his prodigal Son to return, and we read that when he was a great way off the father sees and comes running to meet him. Now no wealthy old man in that culture ran – that alone would have struck Christ's listeners. And he is not running to chew him out and send him packing before the neighbors saw this disgraceful young man, he runs and embraces and then kisses his smelly, rag-wearing, pig-herding, prodigal son.

That already shows the fathers amazing love for his rebellious son, but it doesn't end there, he calls upon his servants to bring out the best robe, and new shoes, and a new signet ring. Jacob gave his special coat of honor to Joseph, the best of his sons, this is a father who gives his robe to the worst and gives him a ring to signify his restoration to his prior position. Far from being a servant, the young man

is once again a beloved son. And his return is celebrated with a feast. *You'd think the kid had returned as the conquering hero from a war, rather than as the man who had wasted away a 1/3rd of the family estate and come home utterly destitute.*

2) So what is the Spiritual Meaning behind this story?

Well the identifying the Father is easy, that is God the Father, and the prodigal is the natural man. This son chafes against the laws of God, he wants nothing to do with him, he will not believe Christ who said *"My yoke is easy and My burden is light,"* so he rebels, he exchanges real freedom for terrible bondage to sin. And perhaps worst of all he takes the wonderful gifts that God has given him and he wastes them. These are things given by the creator to men with which he should glorify him; his physical, intellectual, and spiritual capacities. And what does he do with them? He selfishly wastes them on idols.

It's no coincidence that Jesus here uses the example of man who wasted his inheritance on harlots in this parable, because in the language of scripture, idolatry is always compared to spiritual harlotry as it says for instance in Hosea 1:2 "the land has committed great harlotry By departing from the LORD." And that's what the natural man does, he wastes his God-given gifts on the service of idols. And those idols instead of gratifying him end up consuming and wasting him.

As Trench put it *"He who begins by using the world as a servant to minister to his pleasure, ends up reversing the relationship."*

Any of you who have struggled long term with heart idols or addictions will know the truth of that statement experientially.

That is what happened to the prodigal son, who ended up as a swineherd, sunk to the very bottom. Spiritually starving, hopelessly discontent, without peace. As Is. 57:20-21 puts it "But the wicked are like the troubled sea, When it cannot rest, Whose waters cast up mire and dirt. "There is no peace," Says my God, "for the wicked.""

Now why would God allow that to happen? If God is a God of love and mercy, and if this parable is supposed to show that God is compassionate towards the greatest of sinners, that He seeks and saves the lost, why would anyone would be brought to such a state?

Precisely because God does not want you to go on happily in sin and idolatry for the rest of your life, so he sends you distinct messages. "Hey this is not good" and warnings of the wrath to come. If God brings you low, it is in order that he can build you up on the right foundation. As Jonathan Edwards put it:

"And that it is God's manner of dealing with men, to "lead them into a wilderness, before he speaks comfortably to them," and so to order it, that they shall be brought into distress, and made to see their own helplessness and absolute dependence on his power and grace, before he appears to work any great deliverance for them, is abundantly manifest by the Scripture. Then is God wont to "And have compassion on His servants, When He sees that their power is gone, And there is no one remaining, bond or free." (Deut. 32:36) and when they are brought to see that their false gods cannot help them, and that the rock in whom they trusted is vain."

Edward's goes on to point out that it is that concept of deliverance from a hopeless situation that is the heart of the idea of Gospel, *"And it seems to be the natural import of the word gospel, glad tidings, that it is news of deliverance and salvation, after great fear and distress. There is also reason to suppose, that God deals with particular believers, as he dealt with his church, which he first made to hear his voice in the law, with terrible thunders and lightning and kept her under that schoolmaster to prepare her for Christ; and then comforted her with the joyful sound of the gospel from Mount Zion. So likewise John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Christ, and prepare men's hearts for his reception, by showing them their sins, and by bringing the self-righteous Jews off from their own righteousness, telling them that they were "a generation of vipers," and showing them their danger of "the wrath to come," telling them that "the axe was laid at the root of the trees," etc.*

The Prodigal is made to see his helplessness, he is convicted of his sins and his inability. Now why does that happen? Because God mercifully opens his eyes! He changes his heart, convicts him of sin, makes him believe and then sends him to the only sure source of deliverance.

I was struck several years ago at the way you see the thread of convicting men of sin and then sending them to the unmerited mercy of Christ running through all of the sermons of the greatest reformed preachers in history. In essence telling men to follow the path of the prodigal out of the far country.

And it occurred to me, that of all the false conversions I've seen over the years, people who came into the faith, and then left, or went off into a false religion or sect. There was either a lack either in the initial convicting of sin – i.e. *I never really thought I was a fallen sinner, Christianity was just a value that was added to make an already good life better* or if the conviction of sin occurred, the answer to the problem wasn't fleeing to Christ, it was something else like good works, or a combination of Christ and anything else. Not faith alone in Christ as the savior of helpless sinners. It wasn't the route of the prodigal, and that alone will bring you home safely to the love of God.

What happens when the prodigal returns home? God runs to meet him! Now he knows that the Father is forgiving, but even he has *no idea* how forgiving, how loving God really is. The prodigal *expects* to be treated no better than a servant, and he'd be happy with that, just to be a *servant* in heaven is enough. *I mean think about it, this a man knows that to shine shoes in heaven is infinitely better than to be the richest man in hell.*

And yet God loves so much, that he falls upon the returning sinner, and he showers Him in kisses. God takes away the filthy rags the prodigal is wearing, and he replaces them with a princely robe.

Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the LORD, and Satan standing at his right hand to oppose him.

2 And the LORD said to Satan, "The LORD rebuke you, Satan! The LORD who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is this not a brand plucked from the fire?"

3 Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and was standing before the Angel.

4 Then He answered and spoke to those who stood before Him, saying, "Take away the filthy garments from him." And to him He said, "See, I have removed your iniquity from you, and I will clothe you with rich robes."

God takes away his sins, and enrobes him with the perfect righteousness of Christ, and then he gives the sinner a seal, symbolized by the ring, that says forever – *this is my adopted son, who is called by my name.* This is an inheritance that can never be lost. He is not a servant, but a son, an inheritor of the kingdom.

And there is rejoicing then, for the one who was spiritually dead is now alive, he has eternal life. The one who was lost has been found. There is joy in heaven with the father.

Applications:

1) ***"I will arise and go to my father." – there is the confession and the action of all who would be saved from their sin.***

“ He that thirsts and wants relief from Christ must actually come to Him. It is not enough to wish and talk and mean and intend and resolve and hope. Hell, that awful reality, is truly said to be paved with good intentions. Thousands... perish miserably just outside the harbor. Meaning and intending they live; meaning and intending they die. Oh, no! We must ‘arise and come’! If the prodigal son had been content with saying, ‘How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I hope some day to return home,’ he might have remained forever among the swine. It was when he arose and came to his father that his father ran to meet him, and said, ‘Bring forth the best robe and put it on him.... Let us eat and be merry’ (Luke 15:20–23). Like him, we must not only ‘come to ourselves’ and think, but we must actually come to the High Priest, to Christ. We must come to the Physician. – **J.C. Ryle**

There are so many who at this time of the year, stop in at the house of the father, but never resolve to lodge there. They visit, but then return to the far country. That is heart breaking.

If you today have been given the grace to see your situation, do not think that idols will ever be able to free you from it. I marvel at the number of men and women who look at the Christians and see a life a diameter removed from their own, they see peace, contentment, stability, and yet convince themselves that what they have will eventually be better than all that. That the light yoke is somehow worse than heavy chains - ***"If only I eat enough poison, eventually it will make me well."***

2) **Surely if ever there was a parable that shows that the forgiveness of God is limitless and absolute. It was this one.**

I marvel at Christ's love to me, the ex-prodigal. WHY? He did not say, I will now send the elder brother who was always with me to preach. Paul – persecutor to witness. He trusts those whom he claims.

Paid in full. Don't be discouraged - Simply come: the Lord is not merciless, cruel, or pitiless. On the contrary, He is as He declares Himself to be in His Name: “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth” (Ex. 34:6)! Just as the father of the prodigal son, the Lord runs to meet all who turn to Him from afar. He calls you, manifests Himself to you, and promises not to cast anyone out that comes to Him. Do not let fear restrain you from doing so, but come boldly to the Lord and His goodness. He casts our sins behind His back; He blots them out; He says that though they are sought for, they shall not be found. With no other reason for it but His own infinite goodness, He has prepared a glorious way by which He can make scarlet sins as white as snow and remove our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west.