

“The Parable of the Lost Son” – 1-3

Luke 15:11-32

CXVII.-CXIX. Expositions of the Gospel According to Luke

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And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs 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 more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ ²⁰ 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. ²¹ 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.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it

on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

The Parable of the Prodigal or Lost Son is among the most beloved of all the parables. J. C. Ryle calls it “the most full and instructive” of the parables.¹ It has been called an *Evangelium in Evangelio*, a “Gospel within the Gospel!” William Barclay calls it “the greatest short story in the world.”² B. B. Warfield regards it as “a gem of story-telling, which must be pronounced nothing less than artistically

¹ Ryle, II:185.

² Barclay, 211.

perfect,” and notes, “Probably no passage of the Scriptures is more widely known or more universally admired.”³

It is the third of three parables that Jesus taught to explain His attitude and that of heaven toward “tax-gatherers and sinners” (Lk 15:1-3). He is like the shepherd and the woman, seeking the lost and rejoicing when they are found (vv 7, 10). Similarly, he is like the father who rejoices at the return of the lost son.⁴

Helmuth Thieliche describes this third parable as the parable of “the waiting Father.”⁵ Because he waits, unlike the searching shepherd or woman, the effect is to shift attention from the father to the actions of the Lost Son, traditionally called the “Prodigal,” meaning “one who is recklessly wasteful.” While the first two parables emphasize the divine side of salvation (the seeking love of God), this one “sheds a clear light also on the human side,” says Geldenhuys.⁶ We follow the “Prodigal” son as he demands his inheritance, leaves his father for a “distant country,” squanders his wealth, reaches the lowest point of degradation, comes to his senses, repents, and returns. Only then does the father come back into our view as he eagerly forgives and restores the Prodigal, and with his restoration, emphasizes the common theme, says Warfield, of “joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.”⁷ Then the scene shifts yet again, this time to the elder brother, another kind of sinner, as he angrily objects to the celebration for his returning brother.

³ Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Savior of the World: Sermons preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary*; (New York and London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), 3, 4.

⁴ “The central figure is the father,” Marshall points out, “just as in the previous parables the shepherd and housewife stand at the center.”

⁵ Cited in Ibid. Warfield: “What we know as the “seeking love of God” is absolutely absent from the dealing of the father with the son as here depicted”, *Savior of the World*, (11).

⁶ Geldenhuys, 406.

⁷ Warfield calls this “the dominate note of the discourse”, *Savior of the World* (19). It is where the parable ends (v. 32).

The Parable of the Lost Son “completes the trilogy of these parables of grace,” says Plummer.⁸

Marshall maintains that the point of this parable (like those preceding it) is to “illustrate the pardoning love of God that cares for the outcasts.”⁹ This is the “one great fact” with which it is concerned, agrees Morris.¹⁰ Marshall explains: “The parable is ultimately concerned to justify the attitude of God to sinners.” In doing so it also “justifies the attitude of Jesus Himself, since he is able to defend himself and his attitude to sinners by appeal to the attitude of God.”¹¹ The attitude of God towards sinners explains the ministry of Jesus with sinners. It also makes the point, says Morris, “that those who reject repentant sinners are out of line with the Father’s will.”¹² That is, the attitude of God ought to be that of all those, like the Pharisees, who follow God.

The younger son corresponds to the tax collectors and sinners of verse 1, the older son to the scribes and Pharisees of verse 2. The parable has something to say to both kinds of sinners, the “tax collectors and sinners” (the younger brother), and to “scribes and Pharisees” (the elder brother) as it tells us about the love of the father towards both.

The Lost Son

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. 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.” (Luke 15:11, 12)

⁸ Plummer, 371.

⁹ Marshall, 604

¹⁰ Morris, 239.

¹¹ Marshall, 604.

¹² Morris, 240.

The younger son may have been about 17 years old, since marriage normally occurred in the first century Middle East at about 18-20, and he appears to be unmarried. He asks for his “share of the property” or “estate” (NASV), that is his inheritance. There is nothing unusual or dishonoring in modern western civilization in children leaving home to go to the city to pursue careers and success (v 13). However, in Jesus day this also would have been considered shameful. Jewish law allowed a son to request his portion of the inheritance prematurely. Yet, the request, says Green, is “highly irregular” and “strikingly presumptuous.” It is a “shocking breach of the familial ties” and signals “his rejection of his family.”¹³ The younger son is abandoning his responsibility to take care of his father as he grows old. Wright claims, “it was the equivalent of saying ‘I wish you were dead.’”¹⁴ Several years ago a pair of spoiled brothers from Beverly Hills actually killed their parents in order to get their inheritance immediately. That evil act is the implied attitude of the younger brother in the parable. He gathers his wealth, presumably by selling the property (yet another dishonoring act), its liquidity allowing him to journey to “a far country.”¹⁵

Still today in traditional societies the father’s response is incomprehensible. He “divided his property” and gave the younger son his share. He should have beaten him or thrown him out, these traditional cultures would say. Instead the father distributes the inheritance without protest. “There is a depth of mystery already built into the story,” says Wright, “before the son ever leaves home.”¹⁶ By requesting his share, the younger son forfeited his right to “any further claims on the father’s estate.”¹⁷ (cf. verses

¹³ Green, 580.

¹⁴ Wright, 187.

¹⁵ *sunago* “has the sense ‘to turn into cash’” (Marshall, 607).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marshall, 607

19, 31). Once the father gave to the younger son his portion of the inheritance, he would have assigned what remained to the elder son.

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. (Luke 15:13)

The younger son, the lost son, the prodigal, provides a vivid picture of the degraded sinner. Jesus is describing the sinners and tax-collectors, the unobservant and morally degraded, the irreligious and socially ostracized.

First, he flees from the father. He collected “*everything*,” indicating there is finality to his leaving. He left nothing behind, nothing for which to ever return. He means to leave and never come back. He finds no pleasure in fellowship with his father. Given where he goes and what he pursues, we can guess that he finds life in the father’s house restrictive, confining, suffocating, boring. His desire is to leave him and go to a “far country,” traveling “as far away as possible from the watchful eye of his father,” says Geldenhuys.¹⁸ He wants independence. There, in the far country he will be free at last, free to choose his friends, free to experiment, free to do what he wants, free to be whoever he wants to be. No more parental cross-examining, no more Sundays in church, no more “home by midnight,” no more rules or chores.

¹⁸ Geldenhuys, 406.

The lost son, like the lost sheep and lost coin, is a picture of the lost soul. He runs from God. He aims to get as far away from God and reminders of God as he can. He thinks he can only be happy apart from his Maker. He thinks he can only find fulfillment in rebellion against God's word. He thinks he knows better what is best for him than the all-wise and all-good God. Of course it is an illogical flight.

Ultimately one cannot escape the omnipotent and omniscient and omnipresent God. Yet that doesn't mean that he won't try. He flees God, the people of God, the church, the word of God, accountability, responsibility, conscience. Off to a "far country" he goes, where he makes new friends, picks up new habits, a new lifestyle, and speaks a new language. There, where no one knows him, where he enjoys anonymity, where he can be autonomous, where he escapes the expectations of others. He has a new life without restriction, without negative comment, without disapproval, and without need to answer to anyone.

Second, he sows the flesh. The younger son "squandered" (*diaskorpizō*), or wasted his money on "reckless" (*asōtōs*), or "loose living" (NASB), "on dissolute pleasures."¹⁹ Phillips renders it, "He squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance." It indicates "unrestrained sensuality and spendthrift extravagance."²⁰ No doubt he had "fun." He was living it up. He "partied." He enjoyed himself. Jesus classifies this as a waste. It is not just sinful. It is wasteful, a squandering of resources on unworthy, foolish, and evil ends. It is interesting that today "wasted" is a common euphemism for extreme intoxication, one that is more accurate than perhaps its users realize.

Yet this is what the lost soul wants to do. All those things that he couldn't do at home because of the restrictions that God, and the people of God, and a "Christian" home, laid upon him, he now does with

¹⁹ Marshall, 608.

²⁰ Zahn in Geldenhuys, 411.

abandon. He holds nothing back. He has the money. He has the time. He finds the environment and companions. He gratifies his every lust. Every itch is scratched. Every appetite is satisfied. He drinks to drunkenness; he purchases the services of prostitutes (v. 30); he “sows the flesh,” thinking that this is really living, this is what real life is all about. He deprives himself of nothing. He “spent everything” in pursuit of pleasure.

Yet, third, he reaps what he sows. The Apostle Paul writes:

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:7, 8)

His life apart from his father, apart from responsibility and accountability, his life in sin, turns out to be not so wonderful after all. It looked like fun. It looked exciting. But it took its toll. “Sin is a hard master,” says Ryle.²¹ Jesus says,

And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. (Luke 15:14)

Marshall points out that the phrase “when he had spent” (*diapañāō*, to spend), “may have the connotation of wasteful spending.”²² “Two disasters struck him simultaneously,” Morris observes.²³ He

²¹ Ryle, II:182.

²² Marshall, 608.

spent all of his money. Then a famine hit the land, and “the realities of life hit him.”²⁴ For a time he was able to live in an unreal world, supported by daddy’s money. However, when the money ran out, his dream world, his fantasy, was shattered. He had no job. He had no savings. He had no family. He had had a good time. He was now utterly unprepared for the contingencies of life. “A severe famine arose.”

Money was tight. Food was scarce. There was no help (verse 16). He “began to be in need.”

So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. (Luke 15:15)

He gets a job on the farm of a rich foreigner. Jews were not permitted to keep pigs (see Luke 8:32ff.) Marshall explains that “Feeding (pigs) was an unclean occupation (Luke 11:7), and thoroughly degrading for a Jew . . . feeding swine was thus about as low as a Jew could go.”²⁵ Only one in “desperate straits” would even consider such a job.²⁶ He has fallen into “the cruelest and most hateful forms of bondages and spiritual famine,” says Geldenhuys.²⁷ “To a Jew,” says Warfield, “degradation could not be more poignantly depicted.” Warfield then reconsiders his judgment: “Yes, it could: There was one stage worse and that stage was reached.”²⁸

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. (Luke 15:16)

²³ Morris, 241.

²⁴ Marshall, 608.

²⁵ Ibid., 609

²⁶ Morris, 241.

²⁷ Geldenhuys, 407.

²⁸ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 25.

“Pods” are carob pods, the commentators identified as “the fruit of a Palestinian tree, used for fodder and eaten only by very poor people.”²⁹ He longs to eat even these. “The lost son not only herded the swine; he herded with them,” observes Warfield. His cravings could not be satisfied. He ate “from the swine’s own store.”³⁰ The madness of sin can be seen in the prodigal’s continuing attempts to find satisfaction apart from Father. Having consumed his wealth in reckless living, having been reduced to feeding pigs in a “far country,” he is not yet ready to return to God. He instead yearns to satisfy his cravings with “the pods that the pigs ate” (verse 16). Whatever slop with which the hogs are fed, he is ready to eat. He is not yet ready to return to God. He will instead plunge further and further into degradation, humiliation, and excess. He will do it all and try it all, however dehumanizing, in order to satisfy his appetites. He plunges again and again into the world’s counterfeits. Yet it’s futile. Satisfaction eludes him. There is “no one” to help.

“Whatever friends the young man had had in the days of his wealth had melted away,” says Marshall.³¹ He was alone, isolated, abandoned, and despairing. The point? “Our Lord means to paint degradation in its depths,” says Warfield,³² indeed the very “nadir of degradation.”³³

The Prodigal presents a straightforward picture of the lost soul. The “far country” looked so attractive! Yet it proved to be a mirage. “The way of the transgressor is hard,” say the Proverbs (13:15). He has sown the flesh, now he is reaping destruction. “By what a man is overcome, by that he is enslaved,” says the Apostle Peter (2 Peter 2:19). His wealth, his energy, and probably his health have all been

²⁹ Marshall, 609.

³⁰ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 25.

³¹ Marshall, 609.

³² Ibid.

³³ Marshall, 609.

consumed. Rather than enjoying the dignity and abundance of service in the father's household, he is in bondage to poverty amongst swine. What begins as a thrill becomes a tyrant. He provides an eloquent rebuttal of the "sin has no consequences" message broadcast constantly by Hollywood. The party drinker becomes a drunk, the drug user becomes an addict, the promiscuous becomes the abused and burned out cynic. The *party* becomes a *prison*.

Yet another celebrity suicide has taken place this past week. Yet another man who "had it all," as the world counts "all:" fame and fortune, popularity and influence, all the experiences, all the pleasures, all the comforts that the world has to offer. Yet overcome by depression, he kills himself at the age of 63. Bradley Delp, lead singer of the band "Boston", in a similar position seven years ago in terms of worldly wealth, wrote in his suicide note at the age of 55, *Jai une ame solitaire*, "I am a lonely soul." Life apart from father, life without God does not work. It is a dead end.

Jesus' point is that the sinners with whom He mingles and whom He seeks are, in Warfield's terms, "bad past expression and past belief."³⁴ Jesus does not water down in the least their degradation. "No depths are left beneath the depths which He portrays here for us," says Warfield.³⁵ The Prodigal represents what sin aims to do, where it is headed up to this point. Note that the Pharisees and scribes would agree completely with Jesus' portrayal of the "sinners." They live like swine. They are unclean and foul. Jesus does not whitewash their condition. Sin has reduced them to the pig sty. Jesus never waters-down the evil of sin. At the same time, this lost and desperate prodigal represents those with whom Jesus mingles, those with whom He loves, who are listening to Him, and those whom He seeks to save.

³⁴ Warfield, *Savior of the World*, 25.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

The Returning Son.

Only when he reaches the bottom, the point of utter deprivation, total degradation, complete futility and despair, does he begin to turn around.

“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!’”

(Luke 15:17)

One day he wakes up. He “came to himself” or “came to his senses” (NASV). “Every sinner is morally and responsibly insane,” says Spurgeon.³⁶ Sin is a madness whereby we choose the worst and reject the best. He “came to himself,” is an expression which may reflect a Semitic expression meaning “to repent.” Why he wakes up at a given moment is not revealed. The prior two parables would have us understand that it was due to the searching initiative of God. That emphasis is missing here. Another point is to be made. What is it? Here Jesus is highlighting the human perception and action. Jesus is describing the experience of the returning prodigal. What is that experience?

First, he *remembers*. He realized the fullness of his father’s household. After eight years of college and seminary dorm life, I got my first apartment. I shared it with a couple of pastoral interns. First trip home after several months I pulled open my parents’ refrigerator and was amazed. Our apartment refrigerator had a milk bottle, a bottle of ketchup, and maybe some chilled water. Mom and dad’s was full to

³⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, “The Prodigal’s Climax,” *The Treasury of the New Testament*, Volume II, (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, n.d.), 12.

overflowing. Our cupboards had one box of cereal and another of stale crackers. Theirs was stocked full. This kind of contrast is what the prodigal is experiencing. He remembers in this context of need not the deprivations of his father's house, but it's plenty; not its limitations but its fullness; not what it lacks or is missing but its abundance. He awakens to his poverty and degradation. Pigs were fed, but he was not. Perhaps he came to realize that in the far country "pigs were more valuable than he," as Morris puts it.³⁷ He reflects that his father's hired hands had "more than enough," which means even "to have an abundance of," says Marshall.³⁸ This heightens his sense of depravation. He ponders life amongst swine and compares it with life with father, and the lights go on. "What am I doing?" he asks. Look at what I have become! "The terrible recollections of a misspent past," Spurgeon encourages us to realize, "may be the means of leading you to a new life."³⁹ Hardship has a way of doing this. "Want rekindles what his revelry had extinguished," notes Plummer.⁴⁰ Life with Father is not so bad. Indeed life with Father is rich and full. Life with Father is good. Life with Father means plenty. Taste and see that He is good (Ps 34:8). "Feast on the abundance of (His) house" and "drink from the river of (His) delights (Ps 36:8). Come to His house and "gaze upon the beauty of the Lord" (Ps 27:4). Life with Father means Jesus will satisfy the hunger and quench the thirst of my soul (Jn 6:35).

Second, he *recognizes* his present condition. "I perish," he says. He considered where he was, groveling in a pig sty, penniless, dressed in rags, covered with stench. He recognized how he got there, his flight from his father, his reckless lifestyle, his foolish wasting of his wealth. Tell us: how has it worked out in the "far country"? Is life there what you anticipated? Has it lived up to expectations? The glamor

³⁷ Morris, 241.

³⁸ Marshall, 609.

³⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, "The Prodigal's Climax," in *Treasury of the N. T.*, II:14.

⁴⁰ Plummer, 374.

of that world has gone. The mirage of excitement has vanished. He recognizes that what the world promised it failed to deliver. The gild has gone from the carnal life. We must come to this if we would be saved. The devil, and the world that serves him, would enslave and destroy us. As lusts are fed, the law of diminishing returns sets in. More and more is needed to set the same “high,” whether induced by alcohol, drugs, pornography, promiscuity, success, power, or fame. Sin drags us lower and lower into the cesspools and sewers, the pig-sties and feeding troughs of the world. Recognize sin’s trajectory. The promise of excitement, pleasure, fun, happiness, and fulfillment terminates in temporal ruin and eternal damnation. “I perish,” he says, if he continues on his present course. He recognizes, as we must recognize, that life without Father is a dead end.

Third, he *resolves* to change his course. “I will arise and go,” he says (verse 18). He had hope of his father’s mercy, allowing him to return at least with the status of a hired hand. He arose from the filth. He said goodbye to the pigs and their slop. He determined to go. He took action.

So he determines to leave his life of rebellion and excess and return to his father.

I will arise and go to my father (Luke 15:18a)

“I will arise,” he says, the word “arise” suggesting he had been asleep until then. He awakens from his spiritual lethargy. Marshall notes that “the youth is determined to act swiftly and decisively.”⁴¹ He wants out. He wants to go home. He’s had enough. He sees the foolishness of his decisions and the

⁴¹ Ibid.

wickedness of his behavior, and so is determined to leave his once-chosen way of life and return home. His experiment with life without Father has failed.

Jesus is teaching the scribes and Pharisees that this is what the sinners and tax gatherers are doing. They are rising from the pig sty and *going home to Father*. How can the religious community not rejoice in this development? How can they not welcome them into the company of God's people? Of course it may be awkward to sit by them in the synagogue. However, the awkwardness, if any, should be social not spiritual. We are all sinners of one sort or another. We might ask the Apostle Paul's question, "Who regards you as superior"? (1 Cor 4:7, NASB). Welcome them. Rejoice with heaven. Embrace them.

Jesus is also teaching the tax collectors and sinners that this is what they must do. God is pursuing them, Jesus taught them in the previous two parables. Yet they must come to their senses. They must recognize their degraded condition. They must resolve to change.

There is a sense in which each one of us must come to see this. Sin is enticing. It is seductive. However, sin has consequences. It promises what it cannot deliver. It promises freedom and fun, and what it delivers is bondage and pain. When we break God's laws, those laws break us. Finally lost souls must come to see this. Sin must come to be seen as evil, as darkness, as slavery, as degrading, as noxious and, finally, repudiated, and abandoned.

The restored son

Many of us will know what it is to have a wayward child. Many will know what it is for a son or daughter to reject the family, to reject the faith, to travel to the "far country" and spend his or her

spiritual and material resources in “reckless” behavior. Many of us will know the profound heartache this brings. None of us is exempt from the possibility of a prodigal, from the pain this causes, or the yearning of the heart to see that lost child return.

If that prodigal returns from the world’s fleshpots, from its moral and intellectual sewers and pigsties, what will that return look like? As we move along from the *returning* son to the *restored* son we shall see. The restored son illustrates that of which the repentance consists, over which heaven rejoices, mentioned in the previous two parables (verses 7, 10).

1. *He surrenders to his father’s authority.* Spurgeon sees “I will ... go to my father,” as “the true turning point in the prodigal’s life story.”⁴² The prodigal is keenly aware of his distance from home. He is separated from his father, even alienated from him. He has lived apart from him for a season. He has walked away from his father. Now he walks back to him.

Yet, what does father represent? His father represents authority. He represents restrictions. He represents limitations. He represents accountability. He represents everything he fled. When he left home he was all about his autonomy. He was pursuing personal independence and self-determination. “Now,” says Spurgeon, “he is willing to be as much under rule as a hired servant, he has had enough of being his own master, and is weary of the distance from God which self-will always creates.”⁴³ Now he is willing to be not merely a son under his father’s authority, but a slave (v 22). His view of his father has been completely transformed. “Before he would have said, ‘I have a right to do as I like with my own;

⁴² C. H. Spurgeon, “The Turning Point,” in *The Treasury of the New Testament*, Volume II, (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, n.d.), 21.

⁴³ Spurgeon, “The Turning Point,” *Treasury of the N. T.*, II:23.

who is to dictate how I shall spend my own money?”⁴⁴ He sees home now as a place of abundance and security rather than restriction and discontent. “He yields up his cherished freedom, his boasted independence, his liberty to think and say and do whatever he chose, and he longs to come under loving rule and wise guidance.”⁴⁵

So it is with lost souls. We may perhaps have fled from God and His searching eye. We were glad to be rid of Him, and apart from His people and His church. We have sought refuge in the “far country,” where we can be our own person and define our own identity and pursue our own understanding of fulfillment. Yet one day we wake up and realize that this way of life is not working. A deep discontent settles in. We realize we are far from God. We realize we have been fleeing God for all of our lives. So the heart turns towards God.

The lost Son negotiates no terms or conditions. He is undaunted by the inevitable embarrassment that return involves. He isn’t restrained by the shame that he will endure. He is undeterred by the disgrace that awaits him. No doubt he realizes the contempt of his older brother who will greet him. Still, he returns. Still, the place of the servant is good enough for him. “No secret opposition to his father’s rule lingers in his soul, he is completely subdued, and lives at his father’s feet.”⁴⁶ When a prodigal returns to the Father, his surrender will be complete.

2. *He confesses his sin.* Turning to his father involves departing the “far country” and the life he lived there, and acknowledging the error of his ways. We can speak of *surrendering* to father and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 24.

repenting of sin separately in order to analyze them, but in practice they are one act. They are inextricably bound together. Turning from sin (repentance) and to Christ (faith) are two aspects of a single act. He leaves the far country, that way of life, that circle of friends. “He did not go,” says Spurgeon, “with the harlot on his arm and the wine cup in his hand, and say, ‘I will take these with me, and go to my father’ . . . These were all left, and though he had no goodness to bring, yet he did not try to keep his sins and come to Christ.”⁴⁷ He renounces it all, turns his back on it and heads for home. As he does so, he confesses his sin.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.” (Luke 15:18b)

Leon Morris regards the Prodigal’s confession a classic.

“He expressed sorrow not only for what he had lost but for what he had done: he had sinned. He recognized that his sin was first against God . . . (he) had also sinned against his father and he saw this.”⁴⁸

He has gone from the self-sufficient pride of one who flees home to a willingness to take the lowest place back in his father’s household. He confesses without excuses and without qualifications. “Sinner, if you would be saved,” Spurgeon warns, “you must come clean from your high places, and acknowledge your iniquity.”⁴⁹ No more mitigating factors. No more extenuating circumstances. No more rationalizations.

⁴⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, “Bread Enough, and to Spare,” in *The Treasury of the New Testament*, Volume II, (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, n.d.), 20.

⁴⁸ Morris, 242.

⁴⁹ Spurgeon, “Turning Point”, *Treasury of the N. T.*, II:23.

Many confessions primarily express regret for the *consequences* of sin rather than regret for the *sin itself*. “I’m sorry that you got hurt;” “I’m sorry that I have caused so much trouble;” or worse, “I’m sorry that you took offense;” or worst of all, “I’m sorry that I got caught.” The prodigal, by comparison, acknowledges guilt and is willing to accept the consequences:

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.” (Luke 15:19)

He realizes and admits that he “is morally unfit to be regarded as a son,” says Marshall.⁵⁰ After the earlier settlement of the inheritance upon his departure to the “distant country,” he has no further claims on his father. The most that he can hope for is to be given the position of a servant. Even that, given his rejection of his father, would be a gracious gift. What makes this confession so profound (and exemplary for us) is the full embracing of both the guilt and consequences of sin. He has squandered his share of the estate. So he makes no claim on what remains. He has deeply offended and hurt his father. So he makes no claim on the privileges of sonship. He is unworthy, he realizes, to continue as a son in his father’s household.

When we are gripped by the spirit of repentance, we will turn away from our sin to confess our sins without excuses, without explanations, and with a full accepting of consequences. He doesn’t say to his father, “I was wrong, but you were wrong for putting so much pressure on me. You should have given me a little more freedom and then I wouldn’t have rebelled.” He doesn’t say, “You favored my elder

⁵⁰ Marshall, 609.

brother. Resentment built up. I couldn't stand it any longer and had to get out." He doesn't say, "My creepy elder brother, Mr. Perfect, was always picking on me. I had to get out of the house." When a lost soul returns to God there is no attempt to shift blame to anyone else. No, he owns the guilt as his. He shifts it to no one else.

As for consequences, he has forfeited his privileges and grasps his unworthiness. This too is an aspect of true repentance. "I am no longer worthy," he says. We are not worthy of admission into God's household. We are not worthy of heaven. We deserve rejection. We deserve condemnation. We deserve hell, and when we come to our senses, we realize it. The "I'm a good person" outlook vanishes. The "I've tried to live a moral life," plea is silenced. We realize that we are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under his table, or touch the hem of His garment, or loosen the strap of His sandal (Mt 15:27; Mk 5:28; Jn 1:27; cf Gen 32:10; Mt 8:8; Lk 17:10). I can make no claim upon God. I have nothing with which to bargain with Him. I deserve eternal banishment.

3. *He pleads for mercy.* A true spirit of repentance will grasp the extent of the punishment that is deserved and plead not for what is fair or just, but only for mercy. "Treat me as your hired servants." He offers no prior examples of commendable behavior. He points to no exemplary virtue to consider. He asks not that the years of service before his journey be taken into consideration. He appeals not to any good works during his time in the "far country." He's not saying, "I've been bad, but you should see how evil they are over there." No, just let me be a hired servant. That would be grace enough. Given the shame, given the humiliation I have brought to the family, I ought to be banished for life. So, let me be your servant. Let me be no more than that. I don't even deserve a position as a servant. I deserve permanent exile. Yet I plead, let me be your servant.

So it is with the restored soul. He pleads only for mercy. He is undeserving. He is even ill-deserving. He deserves condemnation. He deserves rejection... He deserves damnation, and *he knows it*. "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13) His only hope for restoration is the kindness of the Father.

This, brethren, is what the cross is all about. In Jesus Christ God is saving and restoring hopelessly lost sinners. He is pardoning sinners. This is the pilgrimage of the prodigal, the journey of the lost soul back to God. This is the path of restoration. Those who travel it find a Father who eagerly and immediately forgives and restores the repentant. There is mercy enough for every lost soul and any lost soul. There is grace enough for each one of us. Reconciliation with God is available to all who will turn from their sin and return to the Father. Do not delay. He is eager to restore all of those who will call out to Him in Jesus name.