

***The Prodigal Son:
A Young Man Who Came To Himself
And Came Home To His Father***



Hosted by the Southaven Church of Christ
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Dedication

It is an honor to dedicate this lectureship book to Robert R. Taylor, Jr., and his beloved wife Irene. They are sterling examples of what every Christian couple strives to be. Only heaven knows the souls that have been strengthened and saved by their steadfast and sacrificial service.

I have known and respected brother and sister Taylor for all of my preaching life – about 25 years. Knowing them has enriched my life and my preaching tremendously. It has always been extremely humbling to see them in the audience whenever I was preaching. On those occasions I have always felt that brother Taylor and I needed to trade positions. Even though I had studied the topic in preparation for presenting it, I knew that he could do a better job with it than I could, even off the cuff. He has forgotten more than I will ever know; and, if you have ever listened to him, then you know that he doesn't forget very much. He has spent his life learning the Scriptures that he might do them and teach them (Ezra 7:10). For over fifty years, and likely more now, it has been his practice to read the entire Bible through each year and to read the New Testament through each month (Taylor 171-72). He reads about twelve chapters per day, three from the Old Testament, and nine from the New Testament (170). For nearly sixty years, and perhaps more now at this writing, he has committed to studying at least six hours per day (169). In addition to his reading, he tries to commit ten new verses to memory each day (172). God's word dwells in him richly (Col. 3:16). Irene revealed that in family devotionals their daughter Rebecca and son Tim would play a game with their father which involved reading a verse from some undisclosed place in the New Testament. Brother Taylor was then challenged to give the Scripture reference for the mystery verse. Furthermore, he was challenged to quote the verse that preceded it and the verse that followed it. Irene couldn't remember a time when the children ever stumped him (131-32).

In addition to enriching my life and preaching, brother Robert R. Taylor, Jr., has enriched my vocabulary. From hearing him preach and reading his books and articles, I have learned words like *prolific*, *stalwart*, and *erudite*. I think that it is appropriate that I now use those words to describe him and her.

Prolific

Prolific means “fruitful” or “productive” (“Prolific”). It would be hard to imagine more productive or fruitful lives than those of brother and sister Taylor. They are good soil. They have brought forth an hundredfold and they aren’t done yet (Mat. 13:23; cf. John 15:5, 8). Nothing but leaves may be true of some, but it has never been true of them (Mark 11:13).

The influence of brother and sister Taylor has been felt near and far. In addition to doing a tremendous local work, including approximately thirty-five years with one congregation, they have blessed congregations across the country. Brother Taylor conducts about ten meetings per year and speaks on about twenty-five lectureships (Taylor 172). In 2007, when his biography was written, he had preached in more than 400 meetings and appeared on some 600 lectureships. At that time (2007), he had preached more than 6,000 radio sermons and appeared on more than 500 television programs (6). Sister Taylor is also a regular speaker on ladies’ programs and lectureships.

I have always heard that the branch that bears the most fruit is the one that is bent the lowest to the ground. Of no couple has this ever been more applicable than of Robert and Irene Taylor. Humility has been a central characteristic of their lives. I imagine it is with great difficulty that they read and hear these words. However, brother Taylor could quote you the Scripture that gives me the authority to do it (Rom. 13:7), and, I might add, the one before it and the one after it.

It is hard to pick up a lectureship book without Robert R. Taylor, Jr.’s name being attached to at least one chapter. He has graced each of the Power books, including this one, with a well-written manuscript.

Our books have been made infinitely better by each manuscript bearing his name. Although brother Taylor keeps a tremendously busy speaking and writing schedule, his manuscript is usually the first to cross my desk. In addition to all the contributions that he has made to lectureship books across the brotherhood, he has also penned more than thirty books of his own (Taylor 7). He has just about completed his own commentary set on the New Testament. I believe that there are only seven exceptions at present. It is my fervent prayer that he will finish the remaining books so that I can have a complete New Testament commentary of the highest scholarship. Then, I hope that he will add to the four volumes that he has already penned on the Old Testament.

Stalwart

Stalwart refers to one marked by “outstanding strength and vigor of body, mind, or spirit” (“Stalwart”). That definition fits brother Taylor perfectly. He has been, and continues to be, one of God’s mighty men (2 Sam. 10:7; 2 Sam. 16:6; 2 Sam. 17:8; 2 Sam. 20:7; 2 Sam. 23:8). He is a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3-4; Eph. 6:10-17). He has warred a good warfare (1 Tim. 1:18) and has fought a good fight (2 Tim. 4:7). He has earnestly contended for the faith (Jude 3) and has strongly defended the gospel (Phi. 1:17). The sword of the Spirit cleaves to His hand (2 Sam. 23:10). He has been a faithful friend of truth and an able adversary of error (Gal. 2:4-5).

The fight that most of us best know brother Taylor for is the fight for reliable translations of the Bible. He took the baton from one of his heroes, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., and he has carried it well. At a critical time, in the middle of the 1970s and 80s, brother Taylor stepped up to warn brethren of the dangers of the modern versions. Although some labeled him as too negative, it is hard to overestimate the positive effects that came from those lectures (Taylor 186). Many brethren, congregations, and schools heard the clarion call of caution and remained with reliable translations of the Bible as a result of his work. I remember hearing many of these lessons during my school years at MSOP. Brother Taylor’s book on the subject continues to be a ready reference for brethren fighting this battle. Still today, I

know of no better book to recommend on the dangers of the modern versions. Although it is smaller in size than brother Wallace's book, it is not one whit behind it in any other way.

When brother Hugo McCord translated the Greek term *monogenes* as **only** or **unique** in his translation of the Scriptures, brother Taylor was again called upon to stand in the gap (Eze. 22:30). Brother Taylor ably pointed out that the Greek term *monogenes* was a compound term (Taylor 187). Brother McCord was only translating a part of the word, and in doing so, was casting reflection upon the virgin birth of Jesus. Brother Taylor ably pointed out that Jesus was the only begotten of God (John 3:16). Although brother McCord had an earned Ph. D., brother Taylor was not intimidated (188). He ably defended the deity of our Lord.

Every step of the way, sister Taylor has been a quiet source of strength and encouragement for him. She has held up his weary arms to ensure that battles were won (Exo. 17:12; Gen. 2:18). He would be the first to tell you that he could not have done it without her.

Erudite

The term erudite refers to one who is "learned" or a "scholar" ("Erudite"). In humility, brother Taylor would likely shun the description of scholar; however, it is readily acknowledged by all who know him.

As evidence of his being a scholar, please consider that he has conducted Open Forums and Question and Answers for many lecture programs, including the Power lectures. He has never failed to give a simple, studied, Scriptural answer. Many of us have benefited greatly from these sessions. Again, he has ably followed in the footsteps of two of his heroes and friends, Guy N. Woods and Garland Elkins.

As further evidence of his being a scholar, please consider what other great students of the Scriptures have said about him. In the preface to his biography, Curtis A. Cates, wrote, "Robert R. Taylor, Jr., is a true gentleman, an outstanding Bible scholar, and a 'preacher's preacher.' No person is more worthy of being the subject of a biography than brother Taylor. At first, I admired him from a distance through his distinctive writings; during four decades since

then, I have come to admire him greatly as a towering influence for truth in our generation” (Taylor 11). He further noted that brother “Taylor has a deep, keen mind,” “an amazing grasp of the Word, and the breadth and depth of genuine scholarship” (14). Those who have sat at the feet of brother Cates know what high praise these words are. Brother Cates is no slouch in the Scriptures himself. He is as scholarly as they come.

In like manner, of brother Taylor, Garland Elkins wrote, “As a result of his much study, his love for the truth, and his knowledge of it, he has become a mature Bible scholar. Christ said that His Word could never be destroyed (Mat. 24:35); but if it could be, it is my judgment that Robert R. Taylor, Jr., could come as near rewriting the New Testament by memory as well as any man I know” (Taylor 9). High praise indeed, and I might add, well deserved. As you know, brother Elkins is no novice when it comes to the Scriptures. In my opinion, it is one scholar calling another scholar the same.

For sure, sister Taylor must not be left out of this discussion. She, too, is a great student of the word. At one of the sessions at the MSOP lectures several years back, brother Keith Mosher jokingly introduced brother Taylor by relating the following: “Someone asked Irene how it felt to be married to a Bible scholar. She replied, ‘I don’t know. You’ll have to ask Robert’” (Taylor 208-9). Of course, sister Taylor never said that; but nonetheless, the ladies who have sat at her feet will attest to her knowledge of the word of God.

As I conclude this dedication, I must say something about brother Taylor’s role as a closer. He is the Mariano Rivera of Bible lectureships. Baseball fans will readily recognize the name Mariano Rivera as the New York Yankees closer. Rivera has spent his entire 17 year career with the Yankees (boo) and is considered one of the greatest closers in MLB history. He is most noted for his consistency and calm, placid demeanor. His postseason performances are legendary. He holds the MLB records for postseason saves and ERA. Amazingly, he primarily throws only one pitch – a sharp-breaking mid-90s cut fastball (“Mariano Rivera”). Although batters have seen the pitch countless times, they very seldom ever get any good wood on it. He almost always gets the save. Many of the details noted about

Rivera remind me of brother Taylor. Although brother Taylor didn't spend his whole career with one team (congregation), he spent most of it with one—the Ripley, TN congregation. Like Rivera, brother Taylor's role has often been that of a closer. For years, he has closed out the MSOP and Power lectures. Like Rivera, he, too, is known for his consistency and calm, placid demeanor. You might even say that he, too, has only one pitch. Sorry, I just couldn't resist. Personally, I love the pitch. Brother and sister Taylor are role models for all in marriage and in ministry. It is to this wonderful couple that this lectureship is lovingly dedicated.

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Acknowledgments

Ambrose once observed that “no duty is more urgent than that of returning thanks.” I agree. We never want to be negligent or tardy in this duty (Luke 17:17-18; Rom. 1:21). Therefore, it is to this urgent business that we now turn ourselves.

Each year, up until this year, the list of those acknowledged has grown. This year, I am determined to shorten the list. Please understand that this does not mean that fewer individuals are involved in helping with the lectureship. If anything, more and more individuals get involved each year. Also, please do not think that I am unthankful for anyone’s help. I am extremely thankful for every contribution, no matter how big or small. I realize that big doors often swing on small hinges. I am simply streamlining this part of the book by limiting the acknowledgements to those who are specifically connected with the production of the book. All others will be acknowledged at the end of the lectureship itself.

First, I would like to thank the Southaven elders for spending the money to produce this book. As you likely know, money is limited and needs are many. I thank them for continuing to see that the truth is propagated and preserved by the production of a book such as this one.

Second, I would like to thank April Meacham. It is a delight to work with April. We have great fun in corresponding back and forth regarding manuscripts. She is a source of great help and encouragement in my life. April does the real work in producing the book. She does the painstaking proofing and typesetting. She decipheres what writers meant to say but didn’t know how to say—at least not in a grammatically correct form. April is one of the most patient and compassionate people I know. Do you know how rare these traits are in a grammarian? For example, just look at Keith Mosher. I am just kidding, brother Mosher. You are very patient and compassionate, too, especially to ex-students who work at Southaven

and who make comments about you in books like this. Seriously, producing a book like this is very tedious and time-consuming work. April knows this as well as anyone. She has shown great compassion and patience in giving me the time and space needed to work things out, especially this year. Her compassion has made a huge difference (Jude 22). Without April, there might be a book although I have my doubts about that. However, I can say with certainty, that whatever book was produced, it would not have had the quality that this one does.

Third, I would like to thank Shelley McGregory and Wanda Waldon, the secretaries at Southaven. Daily, I am thankful for them. They make my life easier during lectureship season and throughout the year. I could not ask for them to do more. They are worthy of much more credit than they receive.

Fourth, I would like to thank Paul Sain and the staff at Sain Publications. Paul is a dear friend—in spite of the fact that we publish books together. Many friendships could not survive this, but ours has. I appreciate the patience with which he waits and the speed with which he produces. He excels both as a preacher and a publisher. p.s. I have to save nice things about him or else I won't get this book back on time.

Fifth, I would like to thank the preachers who have contributed to this year's book. They were given a very difficult task. The editor, who wishes to remain unidentified, asked them to write on a very narrow topic with a very tight time frame. Somehow, they accomplished the task assigned them.

The book that you hold in your hand is the product of many people, principally the people listed above. I express my sincere thanks to them. It is my prayer that this book will cause men to love the Parable of the Prodigal Son even more. To God be the Glory.

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CHAPTER 1

The Prodigal Son: A Young Man Who Came To Himself And Came Home To His Father

Wade Webster

At twenty-two verses, the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the longest parable that Jesus ever told. It may also be the most loved. It certainly attains to the first three. Robert Smith, in **Handfuls on Purpose**, called it “the prince of parables,” Trench called it “the pearl and the crown of all the parables,” and Charles Dickens praised it as “the finest short story ever written” (Butler 508). I am convinced that you will come to agree with their assessments the more that you study this parable.

The Rebellion of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-16)

The parables of Jesus were always based on things that could happen and often were based on things that had happened. It is interesting that the Parable of the Prodigal Son begins with “a certain man” (King James Version, Luke 15:11). The word certain adds an interesting element to the parable. Jesus did not merely say that “a man had two sons.” He said that a “certain” man had two sons. Was this parable based on an actual event? We do not know. But, it is certainly a possibility. At least, we know that it has happened thousands of times since. Some even suggest that the parable was based on a well-known story that was told among the rabbis. However, if it was, Jesus gave a very different ending to it. The prodigal son did not come home to condemnation. He came home

to compassion. Furthermore, at the end of the story, it is the elder brother who represents the Pharisees, and not the younger brother who represents the publicans and sinners, who is standing on the outside. I am pretty sure the Jewish rabbis would not have ended the story that way.

Someone observed that there are actually three sons in the parable: the prodigal son, the proud son, and the perfect son. Of course, the third son is the Son of God who is telling the story (McGee 186). Let us listen to Him as he tells this story.

The Prodigal's Demand

And the younger of them said to his father,
Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth
to me. And he divided unto them his living.
(Luke 15:12)

Please note that it was the son that approached the father about dividing the inheritance, rather than the father that approached the son. Had the father approached the son, it would have been a very different matter. There would have been no shame in that. Although the goods were generally divided when the father died, or at least thought to be approaching death, it was the father's prerogative to divide his goods at any time that he wanted to do so.

The request of the younger son for the inheritance to be divided before the death of the father was far from respectful. In fact, it could not have been more disrespectful (Butler 511). It was as if the prodigal son was telling his father that he was tired of waiting on him to die (512). By his actions, the younger son brought shame upon the whole family and especially upon his father (MacArthur 47). The father would have especially borne scorn for having reared such an ingrate.

Please note that Luke records that the father "divided unto them his living" (Luke 15:12). The word translated as living "is a translation of bios, the Greek word for life" (MacArthur 52). The father divided his life to his sons. He gave them everything. It seems likely that

the inheritance which both boys received was substantial. After all, clues within the parable suggest that their father was very wealthy. For example, we read of hired servants, fancy clothes, jewelry, and a calf fattened for special occasions. MacArthur especially noted that a fattened calf, available for use at any time, was the “kind of luxury only a very wealthy family could afford” (48-49).

According to Jewish law, in the case of two sons, the elder son received two parts of the inheritance and the younger son received one part (Deu. 21:17). Thus, the older son received two-thirds of the father’s inheritance and the younger son received one-third. Likely, the younger son liquidated his inheritance for the equivalent of pennies on the dollar (MacArthur 57). Dunam notes that “gathered all together” (Luke 15:13) had the meaning of “having sold everything off” (135). The prodigal son cared nothing about the sacrifices that his father and forefathers had made in order to obtain the holdings. He cared nothing about keeping the property in the family. He simply wanted cash to fund his journey to the far country. The prodigal son’s actions could not have been more calloused.

The Prodigal’s Departure

And not many days after the younger son
gathered all together, and took his journey...
(Luke 15:13)

It seems clear that the younger son already had his travel plans at the time that he demanded his inheritance. What little delay there was between getting the goods and going to the far country was likely due to the need to liquidate his inheritance. Once he had the cash, the prodigal son hit the road. One can only imagine the father’s heartbreak as he watched his son walk away. No doubt, the father knew that the son had a hard road ahead. He gave him his request, but he knew that leanness would likely follow (Psa. 106:14-15).

No doubt, the father hoped against hope that when his son lost everything, he would wake up. He prayed that his son would live

long enough to come to his senses and to come home. Thankfully, this father's prayer would be answered.

The Prodigal's Destination

...into a far country...(Luke 15:13)

Like Jonah of old, the prodigal son determined to flee as far from his father as he could (Jon. 1:3). Jonah's destination had a name—Tarshish; the prodigal son's did not. It seems clear that the prodigal son wanted more than to be out of his father's house. He wanted to be out of his father's sight.

The Jews listening to this parable would have readily understood the far country to have been Gentile country (MacArthur 57). They would have understood it to be a place where God and His will were not sought (Psa. 10:4), a place where pagan passions prevailed (Eph. 2:3; Rom. 1:18-32). Evidently, this is what the prodigal son wanted. After all, when he got there, that is what he did. He wasted his substance in riotous living (Luke 15:13).

The Prodigal's Dereliction

...and there wasted his substance... (Luke 15:13)

The prodigal son showed extremely poor stewardship of what he had been given (cf. Luke 16:1-4). What it had taken his father and forefathers years to accumulate, he went through in a moment. The Greek word translated as *wasted* means to scatter abroad. Winnowing wheat is sometimes used to picture the term. When wheat is winnowed, the wheat and the chaff are thrown up into the air to separate the two. The heavier wheat falls to the ground and the lighter chaff is blow away. In much the same way, the prodigal son threw his money around. In a short time, like the chaff, it was gone. Gary Inrig said that the prodigal "scattered his money like a sower scatters seed" (17). What was the prodigal son sowing? Wild oats, of course (Gal. 6:7-8).

In the long ago, Solomon, one of the richest men to ever live, declared, “Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven” (Pro. 23:5). Like the chaff in the wind or an eagle to the sky, the prodigal son’s substance flew away.

When the prodigal’s goods increased, there increased also those to eat them. Solomon declared, “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity. When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?” (Ecc. 5:10-11). As long as the money lasted, the prodigal son was surrounded by people. However, when the money was gone, there was no man to help him (Luke 15:16).

The Prodigal’s Debauchery

...with riotous living. (Luke 15:13)

Riotous living is living without restraint. Peter wrote, “For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Pet. 4:3-4; cf. Eph. 5:18). Please note the expression excess of riot. This is riotous living. It is that which is characterized by the things listed—lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries. In today’s vernacular, it would include social drinking, modern dancing, and fornication. Please note the reference within the passage to the excess of wine. This does not mean that a little wine is acceptable. It rather refers to the fact that excess is naturally connected with wine. By nature, wine lessens inhibitions and leads to excess. It does not have to be connected with riotous living, but it usually is.

It is interesting to note that the elder brother charged his younger brother with wasting his living with harlots (Luke 15:30). Although

we do not know how he obtained this information, or even if it was true, it certainly falls under the description of riotous living. It is worthy of note that the father does not correct the elder brother on this point. MacArthur suggests that if the charge had been false, Jesus would have pointed it out. After all, it would have further shown the hard heart of the elder brother, who represented the Pharisees in the parable (61).

The Prodigal's Destitution

And when he had spent all...(Luke 15:14)

No doubt, the prodigal left home with pockets full of cash. Likely, he believed that he could eat, drink, and be merry for many years, if not forever (Luke 12:13-21). However, the money did not last as long as he thought. As already noted, he was winnowing it like wheat.

It should be noted that riotous living is expensive living. Concerning wine, which is a key ingredient in riotous living, Solomon wrote, "He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man: he that loveth wine and oil shall not be rich" (Pro. 21:17). Two chapters later, he wrote, "Be not among winebibbers; among riotous eaters of flesh: For the drunkard and the glutton shall come to poverty: and drowsiness shall clothe a man with rags" (Pro. 23:20-21). In addition to the physical costs of riotous living, there are societal, emotional, and spiritual costs.

The Prodigal's Danger

...there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. (Luke 15:14)

When the prodigal son took his journey to the far country, he probably did not plan on a famine. If he did envision a famine, which I doubt, he did not envision a long or "mighty" one. Like many people today, he had not prepared for a rainy day or, as was likely the case

here, a rainless day. Not only was he personally facing hard times, but so was the country that he had made his home. He thought that the grass was greener in the far country; but now, it was much browner (McGee 179).

Likely, things were much harder for the prodigal son in the far country than they would have been for him in his own country under the same circumstances. As you know, provisions were made for strangers and for the poor in the land of Israel (Ruth 2). However, no such provisions would have been made in the far country. In the far country, it was every man for himself. The mighty famine in the land posed a very real danger for the prodigal son. As the text makes clear, it was difficult for him even to find work.

The Prodigal's Desperation

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. (Luke 15:15-16)

With his money gone, and a mighty famine in the land, the prodigal son was forced to find a job. Evidently, it was with some difficulty that he did so. Likely, the famine had dried up the jobs along with the earth. The term *joined* carries with it the idea of glue (cf. Mat. 19:5-6). It seems that the prodigal found a wealthy landowner and stuck to him like glue until he gave him a job (MacArthur 72). MacArthur noted that the term *citizen* likely spoke of Roman citizenship. It referred to a “privileged person” or a “wealthy foreigner” (71).

Not only did the prodigal have to take a job, he had to take the only job available. After all, beggars cannot be choosers. He had to take a job slopping hogs.

Pig-slopping was not a desirable job for anyone. MacArthur noted that it “required no skill whatsoever.” It was a job that was

generally given to the mentally and socially deficient (73). This young man who had all the promise in the world and who had been the life of the party was now in a job reserved for those who were mentally and socially deficient. Furthermore, there could not have been a job more detestable for a Jewish boy than this job. The prodigal's taking this job shows just how desperate he was.

I think that it is interesting that this boy who had been wallowing for months in the mire of sin was now forced to slop hogs. Daily, he was forced to smell their stench and to watch their wallowing in the mire. No doubt, as he stomped through the mud and the muck slopping the hogs, the mire splashed into his eyes and into his mouth. It was on his hands and in his hair. It was caked on his clothes and underneath his fingernails. He was forced to face firsthand the prodigal or pig-like lifestyle that he had been living since he left his father's house. It is interesting that Peter would later describe other prodigals in this same way (2 Pet. 2:22). Amazingly, over time, the prodigal came to see the position of the pigs as superior to his own. They had food, albeit husks, and he did not (Luke 15:16).

The Pharisees would have been glad for the story to end here, with the prodigal son in the pigpen. After all, that is where he deserved to be, as far as they were concerned. Of course, the Lord was not satisfied to leave him there. The Lord wanted to get the prodigal son back to the father's house (Inrig 17-18).

The Repentance of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17-19)

Probably, the only regret that the prodigal son had when he left home was that he had not left sooner. He was fully confident that he would be happy in the far country; and, perhaps, for a short time, in a worldly sense, he was. After all, there is pleasure in sin. However, the pleasures of sin are seasonal (Heb. 11:25), and the season is very short.

One day, as he slopped the hogs, the prodigal found himself hungering for the husks he was feeding them. His belly was empty, but his heart was full, full of regret, that is. That day, his eyes turned toward home. Like Jonah, in the belly of the fish, he looked back in

the direction from which he had come and from which he might reasonably expect help (Jon. 2:1-7).

His Reason

And when he came to himself... (Luke 15:17)

There is a certain madness and blindness connected with sin (Ecc. 9:3; 2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:26). For a time, the prodigal son was taken in by the devil's travel brochure (Heb. 3:13). He was blinded by the bright lights of the far country. However, he eventually came to see the far country for what it was—a pigpen instead of a playpen.

Once the prodigal son came to himself and started thinking soberly, coming home to his father was not far behind. The far country no longer held the appeal that it once did. He now longed for home.

His Remembrance

...he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! (Luke 15:17)

Although the prodigal son found a job in the far country, it was not a very good one. It evidently did not pay very much. After all, as he fed the hogs, the prodigal son found himself wanting to fill his belly with the husks that the swine were eating (Luke 15:16). He was hungry, really hungry. Suddenly, the prodigal son remembered the hired servants of his father. He remembered how well his father's servants were paid and how much bread they had. He recalled that they had bread and to spare. Soon, the thought would enter his mind to go back and work for his father. His father had "many" hired servants. He hoped that his father would take on one more—him.

Amazingly, it was the memory of his father and how well his father provided for his hired servants that motivated the prodigal

son to begin the process of going home. It was the remembrance of his father's goodness that brought him home (Rom. 2:4). How much difference a little time makes. The prodigal son likely left home resenting his father's commands, but now his heart remembers his father's care.

In the sixteenth chapter of Luke, Jesus told about a rich man who lifted up his eyes in torment and called out to his father Abraham. Abraham called upon him to remember how good his life had been. He said, "Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things" (Luke 16:25). I can almost hear Abraham doing that with the prodigal son in the pigpen. For the rich man, it was too late. However, for this young man, it was not. He had not yet died although he was nearing it. The gulf had not yet been fixed for him (Luke 16:26). There was a great distance between him and his father, but the gap could be closed. The prodigal son still had time to go to his "father's house" (Luke 16:27).

Memory is a very powerful motivator. It can instantly take us back to a better time and place. Although the prodigal son was not physically home yet, in his mind he was already there. He was lost in thought. He was remembering the comforts of home. Mentally, the prodigal son may have been remembering the smell of fresh baked bread. Maybe he was recalling how soft or how big the rolls were. He could see the butter glistening on top. Perhaps he could almost taste them. For a moment, he forgot that he was standing in a pigpen slopping hogs. How differently he now saw his father's house. It was not the restrictive and suffocating place that he thought it was the day that he struck out for the far country.

His Resolution

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

The prodigal, now in his right mind, knew what needed to be done. He knew that he had already spent too much time in the far country. He knew that he needed to get up and get going. He knew that he needed to leave the far country for the father's house. He was

resolved no longer to linger, charmed by the world's delights. Things that were higher, things that were nobler, these things had allured his sight.

Like the church at Ephesus, the prodigal son needed to remember from whence he had fallen, repent, and do again the first works (Rev. 2:5). How humbling it must have been for the prodigal son to return to his father. He had left home so proudly; now, he was returning so humbly.

His Responsibility

...and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned
against heaven, and before thee. (Luke 15:18)

The prodigal son took responsibility for his own actions. He did not accuse his father of being a “hard man” (Mat. 25:24) or of driving him to the far country. Furthermore, he did not accuse his father of favoritism or unfairness. As you know, his elder brother would later do so (Luke 15:28-30).

The prodigal did not plan on going home and telling his father, “You have sinned.” In like manner, he did not plan on going home and saying, “We have both done wrong. Let’s clear the air.” He planned on going home and saying simply, “I have sinned” (cf. Exo. 10:16; Num. 22:34; Jos. 7:20; 1 Sam. 15:24; I Sam. 15:30; I Sam. 26:21; 2 Sam. 12:13; 2 Sam. 19:20; 2 Sam. 24:10; 2 Sam. 24:17; 1 Chr. 21:8; I Chr. 21:17). He was going to take full responsibility for his actions.

It should be noted further that the younger son did not blame his older brother for his actions. He did not say, “My brother is a hypocrite,” or “My brother is arrogant.” Obviously, both of these things were true. However, they would not have taken the responsibility off the shoulders of the prodigal son. After all, every man must answer for himself (2 Cor. 5:10).

Please notice also that the prodigal did not plan on adding the conditional word *if* to his confession. He did not plan on saying, “If I have sinned” or “If I have said or done anything that has offended anyone.” He knew that he had sinned. He knew that he had said and

done things that were wrong. He was not hedging on his confession. It seems to me that many people today could learn a thing or two from him in this department. It is interesting to note that under the Mosaical law, if a man did that which was forbidden by God, even if he did it in ignorance, he was held accountable. The law declared that he had “certainly” trespassed against the Lord (Lev. 5:17-19). There was no doubt about it.

Finally, it is worthy of note that the prodigal son had sinned both against heaven and his father. They were naturally linked together. After all, it was God that commanded children to honor their parents (Exo. 20:12; Deu. 5:16; Eph. 6:2). It is interesting that heaven is listed first. First and foremost, the prodigal’s sin was against his heavenly Father. I am reminded of David’s statement in the fifty-first psalm. We read, “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest” (Psa. 51:4; cf. 2 Sam. 12:13). Had David not sinned against Bathsheba, Uriah, his wife, the nation, and a host of others? Obviously, he had. However, first and foremost, his sin was against God (cf. Gen. 39:9). The same holds true regarding the prodigal son.

His Remorse

And am no more worthy to be called thy
son: make me as one of thine hired servants.
(Luke 15:19)

The prodigal son no longer felt entitled. He no longer felt as if the father owed him something. He no longer was making demands of his father or speaking of what was rightfully his (Luke 15:12). Please note that the “give me” before he left home (Luke 15:12) became “make me” when he returned home (Luke 15:19). The prodigal son humbly confessed that he was not worthy to wear his father’s name. No doubt, the Bible student is reminded of Jacob’s prayer to God as he prepared to meet his brother Esau. We read, “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou

hast shewed unto thy servant; for with my staff I passed over this Jordan; and now I am become two bands” (Gen. 32:10; cf. Luke 7:6-7). In like manner, the prodigal did not feel worthy of the least of his father’s mercies.

The prodigal son did not come home requesting to be a son again although that is how he would be received. For that matter, he did not even come home requesting to be a slave. Although few, slaves had some rights and privileges. At least, they had some security. Hired servants had no privileges or security. They were hired from day to day. The prodigal son was simply asking to work for his father. At least in his father’s house, he would not have to slop hogs.

His Return

And he arose, and came to his father... (Luke 15:20)

The prodigal son did not merely resolve to get up and go home, he actually did so. He followed through with his resolution. Sadly, many do not. How often have we visited an erring member and heard them say, “I’ll be there Sunday.” However, when we looked for them, we could not find them. They did not follow through with their resolution. Someone has noted that the journey of a thousand miles begins with one step. To his credit, the prodigal took the first step.

Inrig noted that “there is no harder place to go” than back to “where you have failed” (19). I believe that there is great truth in this statement. The prodigal went back to where he had failed and faced his failures head on. How hard it must have been to come home smelling like a pig and wearing the rags of failure (19). Yet, he did.

The Restoration of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:20-32)

When the prodigal son came to himself, it was just a matter of time before he came home. He took a single step and made the

journey of a thousand miles. No doubt, as he made this journey, he thought about what he would find when he got home. Would he find condemnation or compassion? Would the door be slammed in his face? Would his father talk with him at all or send a servant to merely shoo him away? What would his brother's reaction be? What would the people of the town whisper about him as he walked past? Likely, these were all thoughts running through his mind. Was he ever tempted to turn back around? We do not know.

Whatever the prodigal son's expectations were as he made his way home, they were far exceeded in a good way by his father. In his wildest dreams, he never could have imagined his father doing what he did. Perhaps the only part of the return that was as he expected was the reaction of his elder brother. Likely, that is the reaction he expected across the board. However, it is not what he found, at least, not with the father. Let us examine the surprise ending that Jesus gave to the story.

A Pitiful Father

The prodigal's father was pitiful in a good way. He was full of pity for his son. Inrig noted that the three parables of Luke 15 "tell us not so much about a lost sheep as a seeking shepherd, not so much about a lost coin as a searching woman, not so much about a lost son as a loving father" (13). I think that he is right. In fact, many think that the parable should be called the Parable of the Loving Father. For sure, the parable paints a wonderful picture of him. Someone noted that the prodigal lost everything in the far country except his father's love (Wiersbe, *Classic* 34).

Someone imagined the following scene: One day the prodigal knocked on the pig farmer's door and declared, "I'm going home to my father."

The pig farmer replied, "Your father will take one look at you and one whiff of you, and send you back."

"Sir," the prodigal answered, "You don't know my father."

It is in this portion of the parable that we come to know the prodigal's father. I can assure you that we will not be disappointed.

The Compassion

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. (Luke 15:20)

Although the prodigal son left no indication that he was ever coming home when he left for the far country, the father never stopped looking for him to do so. He hoped against hope in the return of his son. Then, one day, his hope was realized. He saw someone coming down the road. Could it be? Were his eyes playing a cruel trick on him? No, it was him. It was really him. He could recognize that stride anywhere. He knew that silhouette. Even clothed in rags and covered with mud, that was his boy. Every feature of his son had been treasured in memory (Dunam 139). Even a great way off, he knew that it was his son. D. L. Moody noted that the father was looking through the telescope of his love (Wiersbe, *Classic* 46).

The first emotion that the father felt was compassion. Even though his son had tarnished the family name, the father's heart was moved with compassion for his son. In the far country, the prodigal son "learned the meaning of misery; but back home" he discovered "the meaning of mercy (Wiersbe, *The Bible* 236)." Someone noted, "Condescension ran to meet the son, love fell on his neck, grace kissed him, wisdom clothed him, truth gave him the ring, peace shod him, wisdom provided the feast, and power prepared it" (Wiersbe, *Classic* 145).

The father did not wait for his son to reach the house. He did not force his son to take every painful step. He did not make his son wait at the gate. He shortened the distance by running to meet his son. It was unheard of in that day for a man of the father's stature and means to run. However, the father did not care. He gathered up his garment in his hands and ran as fast as he could to see his son.

When the prodigal's father reached him, he fell on his neck and kissed him. Although the translators did their best to capture the

emotion, the Greek is far more expressive than the English. Literally, the father hugged him down. In other words, the father embraced his son with such emotion that they both went to the ground. Then, the father kissed him again and again (Butler 540-41). Anyone else would not have touched the boy. However, the father did not hesitate to lavish love upon him.

Mary Lu Walker had a son who left home without telling anyone where he was going. For some time there was no contact with his family. Finally, after weeks, a telephone call came, and a question, "Can I come home?" Out of that question, came the following song, entitled *Runaway Song*:

If I ran away today, if I made you cry,
If I traveled far and wide and never told you why,
But if I found the times were hard,
And I was all alone,
Could I still come home to you,
Could I still come home?
Could I knock upon your door,
And would you let me in?
Would you be glad to see me, even though I'd been
So long, So long away from home,
So long, So long away from home,
If you ran away today, if you made me cry,
If you traveled far and wide
And never told me why,
But if you found the times were hard,
And you were all alone,
I'd hope that you'd come home, my child,
I'd hope that you'd come home.
You could knock upon my door;
I'd run to let you in. I'd be so glad to see you
No matter where you'd been.
So glad, so glad to have you home,
So glad, so glad to have you home. (Dunam 140-41)

The Clothing

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. (Luke 15:21-22)

Although the son started his prepared statement to his father, he did not get to finish it. He got through the repentance but not to the request. Before he made his request to be a hired servant, his father revealed that he was being restored as a son. The servants were sent to fetch three items of clothing: the best robe, a ring, and shoes. Each item represented the full restoration of the son. The robe was “a fine stately garment” that came “down to the feet.” It was “the kind worn by kings” (Butler 541). The ring bore the family emblem or name. It was pressed in wax to seal letters and legal documents. The sandals were significant because servants did not wear sandals (543). The sandals were a clear indication that the prodigal son was not going to be a servant. Gire noted the following: “For the son’s lost dignity, the father bestows on him a robe of honor. For his bare servant’s feet, he puts on them the sandals of a son. For the hands that squandered an entire inheritance, he gives a signet ring that reinstates the son’s position of authority in the family business” (Swindoll 129).

It is interesting to note that “everything the younger son had hoped to find in the far country, he discovered back home: clothes, jewelry, friends, joyful celebration, love, and assurance for the future” (Wiersbe, *The Bible* 236). Can you imagine the shock that the prodigal son must have felt at the response of his father? Instead of receiving condemnation, he received compassion. Instead of a cold shoulder, he received a warm embrace. Instead of a slap, he received a kiss. Instead of being made a servant, he was reinstated as a son. The prodigal son received mercy and grace. He received mercy in

that he did not get what he deserved—condemnation. He received grace in that he got what he did not deserve—restoration.

The Celebration

And bring hither the fatted calf, 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. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.
(Luke 15:23-25)

As noted earlier in this study, a calf fattened for discretionary use was a sign of great wealth. In this parable, it may also be a sign of great hope. Although we are not told why the father had the calf in the stall, we are told how he used it. He used it to celebrate the homecoming of his son. Generally, fattened calves were kept for happy occasions like weddings. Although this was not a wedding, it was a happy occasion. What happier occasion could there have been than the resurrection or recovery of a son? Please note that the father spoke of his son as having been dead, but now alive again; and, as having been lost, but now found. Could it be that the father had the calf fattened for just such an occasion? It is possible; however, if so, then the father was hoping against hope. After all, the prodigal son had given him no reason to believe that he was ever coming home.

MacArthur noted that it was not uncommon in that day and time for a father to hold a funeral for a child who had acted as the prodigal son did (46). This was seen as a way for the father to preserve some of his honor. Personally, it is hard for me to imagine this father doing that. After all, when the prodigal son came home, he readily accepted him. There was no probationary period or reluctance to receive him. Furthermore, how others perceived him seemed to be the last thing on the father's mind.

It is interesting that loss goes up with each parable in Luke 15. It begins with 1 in 100 (Luke 15:4), then it is 1 in 10 (Luke 15:8), and

finally, it is 1 in 2 (Luke 15:11). It begins with a lamb, then it is silver, and finally, it is a son (Griffith 241-43). Obviously, if the recovery of an animal and a coin were celebrated, and they were (Luke 15:5-6; Luke 15:9), then certainly the recovery of a son should be. After all, the son possessed an immortal soul worth more than all the world (Mat. 16:26).

I am convinced that we do not rejoice nearly enough when a prodigal comes home. We sing “O Happy Day” when someone is baptized, but nothing when someone is restored. Please do not misunderstand me. I think that we should rejoice when someone is baptized. I believe that there is Bible for that. However, it is also a happy day when someone is restored. We should sing then, too. There is also Bible for that. Read the fifteenth chapter of Luke and tell me that there is not (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10). Sometimes, we act more like the elder brother than we realize. Although we do not refuse to come into the house (the church house), likely because we are already there, we do refuse to stay. We rush to eat, watch television, or take a nap instead of staying around to encourage the brother or sister who has responded. Is it any wonder that so many who respond fall back into sin? Although our reaction is not anger like the elder brother’s, it is equally despicable. Our emotion is indifference. We feel nothing at all. A greater contrast could not exist between heaven and earth. The angels in heaven are rejoicing (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10), but the saints on earth are not responding at all. Can you imagine what the angels must be thinking as they look in on our reaction?

A Proud Brother

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is actually the Parable of the Prodigal Sons. It is the story of two sons, not one. It is the story of one son who rebelled outwardly and one who rebelled inwardly (Butler 547). For sure, through much of the parable, the elder brother appeared to be the good son. However, he was not. The later part of the parable reveals that he was every bit as rebellious as his younger brother. His sins just appeared more respectable than his brothers. We tend to judge promiscuity far more harshly than we judge pride.

However, they were both equally despicable to God. Although the elder brother did not demand his inheritance like his brother, he had the same lack of respect for his father (Luke 15:29-30). Furthermore, he took his own trip to the far country although he went there mentally, rather than physically.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the prodigal son represented the publicans and sinners (Luke 15:1-2) and the elder brother represented the Pharisees. The sins of the publicans and sinners were much easier to see than the sins of the Pharisees. On the surface, the Pharisees appeared righteous. However, they were hypocrites or whited sepulchres (Mat. 23). It is easy to miss the fact that they, too, were in the far country. In fact, at the end of the parable, the prodigal son is safe and sound in the father's house. However, the elder brother is still away. He is on the outside and probably is not even looking in. The parable ends with the father's invitation for him to come to the feast. However, all indications are that he did not do so. No doubt, many readers would have preferred for the parable to have ended on a happier note. They would have preferred for the parable to have ended with the return of the prodigal son (Butler 547). However, there was still a son in the far country that needed to come home. The father loved him every bit as much as he loved his other son. He was waiting to run to him also. However, it does not appear that He ever got the chance to do so. In this portion of the parable, we come to know the elder brother.

The Anger

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. (Luke 15:25-28)

On the surface, the elder brother again appeared to be the good son. After all, we see him coming from the fields. Once again, he has been plowing while his brother has been partying even though the partying this time was right (Luke 15:32), not riotous (Luke 15:13). While it is commendable that the elder brother had been in the field, it is not nearly as commendable as it at first seems. In fact, it may have been more self-serving than anything. After all, the ponderosa now belonged to him. When the father gave the prodigal his portion, he also gave the elder brother his (Luke 15:12). Everything that the father had was now the elder brother's (Luke 15:31). The one thing that we can be sure of is that the elder brother was not in the field out of love for his father. He resented having to serve and would soon tell his father so (Luke 15:29). I nrig noted that "the awful possibility is that we, too, can be in the Father's fields as servants, but not really in His house as sons or daughters" (26).

When the prodigal son heard the music and dancing, he inquired of one of the servants what the celebration was all about. Although the servant did not say anything about the robe, the ring, or the sandals, he did say enough to enrage the elder brother. It should be noted that the anger of the elder son seems to have been directed far more at his father than at his brother. Please do not misunderstand me. I know that the elder brother did not love his younger brother. In fact, I am convinced that he was more grieved at the news of the killing of the fatted calf than he would have been at the news of the death of his brother. The elder brother showed his anger by boycotting the banquet. The elder brother's actions remind me of Jonah. It is interesting that Jonah is both the prodigal son and the elder brother, rolled into one. He is rebellious and tries to run away like the prodigal, and he is angry and unforgiving like the elder brother. As you recall, Jonah gets angry at God for pardoning Nineveh when she repents (Jon. 4:1-2). Furthermore, he sets up a booth on a hillside outside of the city (Jon. 4:5). He will not go in. Does this sound familiar? It should. After all, that is what the elder brother did. Wiersbe noted how strange it was that the elder brother

could speak peaceably to a servant boy but not to his father or of his brother (*The Bible* 237).

Also, please consider how Jonah showed far more grief over the death of the gourd vine than he did at the slated destruction of thousands in Nineveh (Jon. 4:6-11). Again, the elder brother seems to do the same with the fatted calf.

The elder brother's anger and failure to forgive hurt many people. First and foremost, it hurt him. After all, to be forgiven, we have to forgive (Mat. 6:12; Mat. 6:14-15); and to receive mercy, we have to show it (Jam. 2:13). Second, the elder brother's anger and failure to forgive hurt his father. The father loved both of his sons. He wanted to have both of them safe and sound under his roof. However, just as he got his youngest son home, the older son refused to come into the house. The father had to leave the celebration of the younger son's return to confront the elder brother's withdrawal. How often do elders and preachers have to do the same today? It is important to note that the father did not show preferential treatment either way. He went out to meet the elder son as he had gone out to meet the younger son. Although the elder son accused the father of favoring the younger son, it was not true. The words that the elder son said to his father must have cut the father as deeply as the words that the younger son had said to him at the beginning. Third, the elder brother hurt his younger brother. Although we are not told the reaction of the younger brother to his older brother's refusal to join the festivities, it is reasonable to conclude that it hurt him. The younger brother was trying to put the past behind him and the elder brother was determined not to let him do it. The elder brother is so angry that he will not even call the prodigal his brother. In speaking to his father, he simply refers to the prodigal as "thy son." Wiersbe noted that "everybody in the chapter experienced joy but the elder brother" (*The Bible* 237).

Can you imagine what would have happened if the elder brother had met the prodigal son before he reached the father? (Hughes 145). Likely, he would have told him that he was not wanted. He would have quickly sent him back in the direction of the far country.

The Arrogance

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment. (Luke 15:29)

It is interesting to consider how the elder brother saw the world. It is very telling. It clearly shows his arrogance.

First, consider how the elder brother saw his father. The elder brother answered his father's plea for him to come into the feast with the word *Lo* or look. He could not have been more disrespectful or condescending. Can you not just hear the Pharisee in him? He clearly thought that he saw things more clearly than his father did. He was going to set his "old man" straight. He was going to be "a guide of the blind," "a light of them which are in darkness," and "an instructor of the foolish" (Rom. 2:19-20). He was going to teach his father a thing or two about how the world worked.

Second, consider how the elder brother saw the prodigal son. The elder brother did not even acknowledge the prodigal son as his brother. He told his father, "This thy son" (Luke 15:30) rather than "This my brother." It should be noted that the father did not let the elder brother's words go unchecked. He corrected him by declaring, "This thy brother" (Luke 15:32). Furthermore, please note that the elder brother cast his brother in the most negative light possible. He spoke of how the prodigal son had devoured his father's living with harlots. For sure, harlots were consistent with riotous living (Luke 15:13). However, we would not know this detail if it were not for the elder brother. Although the prodigal son had come home and confessed his sin, the elder brother had not forgiven him. We see in the elder brother's actions some of the callousness of Cain (Gen. 4:9) and some of the indifference of Joseph's brethren (Gen. 37:27).

Third, consider how the elder brother saw himself. The elder brother saw himself as a hired servant, rather than as an honored son. He spoke of the "many years" that he had served or slaved for his father. He clearly thought of his father as a "hard" master (Mat.

25:24). It is amazing that the prodigal son came home requesting to be a hired servant while the elder brother was at home feeling like one all along. Not only did the elder brother see himself as a servant, he evidently saw himself as the perfect servant. After all, he claimed that he had not “transgressed” “at any time,” his father’s “commandments.” Amazingly, at that very moment, he was disobeying his father’s command to come to the feast. Wiersbe noted that the elder brother “openly announced the sins of his brother, but he could not see his own sins” (*The Bible* 236). Perhaps, like another Pharisee in one of Luke’s later parables, he thanked God that he was not like other men (Luke 18:9-14; cf. Mat. 7:1-4). Of course, in the parable before us, the elder brother was thanking God that he was not like his brother.

Likely, you recall that Jesus told another parable of two sons (Mat. 21:28-32). In fact, this other parable is usually called the Parable of the Two Sons. The two parables, The Parable of the Prodigal Son and the Parable of the Two Sons, are similar in several ways. First, both parables involve two sons. Second, both parables involve an openly rebellious son and an inwardly rebellious son. Third, the openly rebellious son in both parables repents, while the inwardly rebellious son does not. Fourth, the sons in both parables represent the publicans/sinners and the Pharisees. In the Parable of the Two Sons, the defiant son who eventually repents represents the publicans and sinners, while the son who professes obedience, but does not give it, represents the Pharisees. Fifth, both parables end with the same message—publicans and sinners go into the kingdom before Pharisees. In the Parable of the Two Sons, this message is plainly stated. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it is plainly seen. The prodigal son is ultimately the son that did his father’s will and not the elder brother. The prodigal son repented and came home, while the elder brother would not even acknowledge that he had done anything wrong (Luke 15:29).

The Accusation

...and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I
might make merry with my friends: But as soon

as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:29-32)

The elder brother accused his father of favoritism, of giving things to his younger brother that he had never given to him, namely, a fatted calf and a party. However, such was not the case. The father had not shown favoritism. The elder brother received his inheritance at the same time that the younger brother received his. We read, “And he divided unto **them** his living” (Luke 15:12). Furthermore, according to the law, at the time of this division, the elder brother received a double portion of his father’s goods. Everything that the father had was now his and had been since the prodigal son left. He could have killed a calf and had a party anytime that he wanted to do so.

Furthermore, the elder brother misrepresented the banquet. He painted it as a party for the prodigal and his pals. However, it was not. It was not the prodigal who put the party together. It was the father. It was the father’s party. Look at the two previous parables. It was the shepherd that invited his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him when he had found his sheep (Luke 15:6). It was the woman who called her friends and neighbors to celebrate with her when she had found her coin (Luke 15:9). The parallel is that it is the father who called his friends and his neighbors to celebrate with him when he found his son. It was not the prodigal’s party, but the father’s. It was meet or right for the father to do what he did. After all, the occasion called for it. The father would gladly have done the same for the elder brother, that is if he ever came home.

Conclusion

As we close our discussion of the Parable of the Prodigal Son, it is important for us to remember why Jesus told this parable, and the

two that preceded it, in the first place. He told these parables because the Pharisees and scribes were murmuring over the fact that the publicans and sinners were welcomed by Jesus (Luke 15:1-2). They murmured because Jesus ate with publicans and sinners (Luke 15:2). Like the elder brother, the Pharisees and scribes ignored the fact that the publicans and sinners had come home confessing their sins and changing their ways. The parable was told to get the Pharisees, the elder brother, to come into the feast and to join the celebration.

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The Rebellion Of The Prodigal Son

CHAPTER 2

Why Are We Losing So Many Of Our Youth

Caleb Glenn Colley

There is an apostasy problem when one Christian leaves the Lord and forsakes His church. There seems to be an apostasy epidemic among our youth now. I do not know why so many young people leave, but I think there are some good indicators and thus a way to fix the problem substantially. Here are two ways I might locate and study such indicators. First, I might survey what the Bible says about the maintenance of faith during child development. I recommend this exercise. However, while I naturally will discuss some such passages here, this study will not be a textual survey.

Second, I might revisit the good, Bible-based literature our brotherhood has produced relative to this topic. Previous writers have effectively posited reasonable suppositions as to why young people leave and written about things parents “owe” their children, i.e., things without which the children might well be lost (e.g., Thompson [1993, 1995]; Naylor; Jenkins). Furthermore, we have been made aware of the threats society and culture pose to the family and the future of the church. One lectureship book contains eight lessons on various societal threats toward the home (Sain), and surely each danger is significant. I am grateful that our brethren have not ignored these kinds of issues.

I have chosen a third approach. As I have no special insights into youth ministry, child rearing, or anything close, I think the best way I can characterize a solution to the problem is by discussing a series of counterfactuals (“if-then” statements) and imagining what circumstances might have led me to leave the faith. I, like all other

Christians (and even Jesus Himself; cf. New King James Version, Mat. 4:1ff), can imagine having not remained faithful to the Father. While I certainly have made mistakes, I never became a prodigal, and reflection on my own childhood and adolescence suggests that there were a number of factors that served to keep me from apostasy. I am discussing myself not because my case is special or unique, but because I know my own history best. However, I believe that the safeguards I have in mind are probably absent in the cases of many Christian young people.

Of course, there are some things in life which have no bearing on the issue. For example, if my grandmother had given me Double Mint gum rather than Trident, and I had left the Lord, we would see no connection between my choice of gum and my apostasy (even though I am grateful that she got me started on Trident). However, the Bible teaches that there are other things which are safeguards, and it makes sense to think of the lack of these things as explanatory for apostasy. Here, I will focus on safeguards that are external to the individual Christian, although we could just as well think about internal safeguards, such as purity of heart (Phi. 4:8). Furthermore, the lack of any external safeguard does not restrict one's responsibility for sin—we all will be held responsible for our own actions (2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Cor. 4:5; cf. Eze. 18:20).

1. If my mother had not been there to address my questions, and I had left the Lord, her absence would help explain why I left.

Fathers are important too, and my own father is “the best there is”—he has done and is doing his job remarkably well. However, in my youth I probably asked my mother more probing questions about the validity of New Testament religion, simply because my mother was the primary care-giver for my sister and me. Put simply, I had questions, and she was there. For example, I remember vividly where I was when I asked my mother how we knew that the Bible was from God. (I could take you back to that restaurant at this moment and probably to the very room where we were sitting.) Now, I was about nine years old and was not a skeptic in the philosophical sense. I just

recognized that the Bible is mostly a book of stories, and wondered why we were convinced that the Bible had a radically different origin from that of other story books at our house. My mother gave me several good answers, and prompted me to study the issue further. Somebody else could have taken me to the restaurant, but only one person could have handled my question in the way my mother did.

This was not an isolated incident. I asked lots of questions (many after I obeyed the Gospel), and my mother was regularly there to guide me as I found the answers. I dislike thinking about what might have happened to me if my parents had generally delegated their parental responsibilities. What would I have heard had I asked a babysitter or a pre-school attendant such important questions? If seeds of skepticism had been planted and allowed to grow when I was nine, what would my belief system look like in graduate school?

My parents sacrificed so that my mother could give me the gift of her time, and I believe that if she had been absent, and I had left the Lord, her absence would illuminate at least part of the reason why I left. Of course, my conclusion is neither novel nor surprising, because we have Titus 2:1-5:

But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed.

The key word for our purposes is *homemakers*, translated “keepers at home” in other versions. A woman’s own children form one category of people who might blaspheme the Word of God if she fails to fulfill

her role as a homemaker (2:5). But what did Paul mean when he said that married women are to be “homemakers”? I believe he meant something very similar to what we typically mean when we use the expression today.

The Greek word translated “keepers at home” is “oikourous.” This word is derived from two Greek words. The first, “oikos,” means a house, a dwelling, or, by metonymy, a household or family. The second, “ouros,” refers to a keeper, watcher or guardian, i.e., one who has the oversight and responsibility for something. Thus, the basic significance of “oikourous” is that of a “housekeeper,” that is, one who watches over a household and family, seeing to it that all members are cared for, and all things maintained in good order. “Oikourous” is used only in the New Testament in Titus 2:5; therefore, in seeking to accurately discern its meaning we must look to the Greek literature of the New Testament era. There, the word “oikourous” meant watching or keeping the house. It was employed in reference to a watchdog and to a rooster, but more germane to the context of Titus 2:5, “oikourous” also meant keeping at home, and was employed as a substantive, “housekeeper,” to indicate the mistress of the house. Furthermore, it was specifically used in praise of a good wife. Interestingly, “oikourous” is utilized contemptuously of a man who refused to go out to war, designating him a “stay-at-home” man. The verbal form, “oikoureo,” meant to watch or keep the house. It was used of women to indicate those who were at home to watch over the affairs of a household, and of men

to designate those who stayed at home to avoid military service. Other closely related words such as 1) “oikourema,” meant keeping the house and staying at home, and was used to refer to women as the “stay-at-homes”; 2) “oikouria,” referred to women as those employed in the work of housekeeping; 3) “oikourios,” meant the wages or rewards for the work of keeping the house, but also designated, significantly, keeping children within the doors of the house, i.e., keeping them at home. (Einwechter)

Now, some couples suffer severe and unusual financial hardships and are unable to have the mother to rear the children and keep the home. This should be the exception rather than the rule, because no one can substitute for what a mother can do (in cases of parental absence or spiritual negligence, other Christians must do their best to provide resources to ground the faith of the young).

I fear that in the vast majority of cases where the mother leaves the home to work for substantial periods of time, she does so merely to provide more material luxuries rather than to meet the necessities of life. This motivation represents a warped view of luxury, if we are to take the Bible seriously. The greatest luxury parents can provide their children is time with their mother. Unfortunately, our culture has either a very low view of motherhood or of the Scriptures or (likely) both.

2. If my parents and other faithful brethren had not encouraged my questions about religion, and I had left the Lord, the lack of encouragement I received would help explain why I left.

When I began asking questions about the reasons for our faith, my parents engaged me in discussion rather than ending the discussion by saying something like, “We just believe it because we believe it,” or, “We believe it because that’s what the Bible says.” To say that we believe something because we believe it is just to restate

that we believe something, and even children can see through that. To say that we believe something because the Bible says it is more informative and even profound but still not very instructive to a young person who is deciding what to believe, because it begs at least two questions: “How do we know the Bible teaches it?” and “How do we know the Bible is right?” In other words, my parents might have chosen to end the discussion quickly, but they could not have thereby put a stop to my questions. If I had grown to believe that New Testament Christianity did not have good answers to my questions, then I would have been likely to leave the Lord.

If we were to ask the typical teenager in our brotherhood how she knows the Bible is the Word of God, or why she thinks Jesus is the Son of God, would she be able to give a constructive answer? If not, it is probably not because she has never asked herself these kinds of questions, but rather because no one has encouraged her to engage in critical discussion about religion. At some point, somebody is going to criticize our young people’s faith, and the only way I see to prepare them is to engage them beforehand in critical thinking about their religion.

Colin MacLeod teaches philosophy at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. He has proposed that parents practice “Socratic nurturing” as they rear their children. Socratic nurturing “places emphasis on raising children in ways that facilitate the development of robust powers of critical reflection” (MacLeod 315). Of course, there are limits to how much autonomy we can give little children, but MacLeod wants parents to avoid forcing a particular view upon children when possible, especially as they develop their reasoning skills, and instead invite “informed, critical deliberation” (317). We might say that MacLeod wants parents to rear little inquisitors. He is careful to note that Socratic nurturing does not mean parents cannot promote a particular religious view to their children (316; cf. 324). MacLeod’s approach, insofar as I have characterized it, is Biblical (although MacLeod would probably deny this assessment, as he is a professed atheist [317]). If we believe our faith is rationally defensible and are prepared to carry out its defense, we should welcome and

nurture our children's inquisitiveness. Here is a brief explanation of why I think we ought to adopt something like Socratic nurturing more widely:

God communicates to us in modern times exclusively through His written Word, the Bible (see Miller). So, we can determine what God wants us to believe and do. Furthermore, the Bible claims to be our only true source of religious authority. Peter writes, "His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Pet. 1:3). The inspired Word of God can make us "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). We must do all things by Christ's authority (Col. 3:17), and we know what Christ has authorized because He has revealed it to us in the Bible exclusively. We often refer to this idea as the "sufficiency of the Scriptures." We must not look to any man-made creeds or conventions to tell us what to believe and do.

When some sincere, well-meaning Christians talk about the sufficiency of the Scriptures, they add that we should not be doing philosophy. I have even heard some preachers say that we need to concentrate on God's Word **instead** of philosophy. But we cannot avoid using philosophical techniques as we build our faith by studying His Word—we use the techniques whether we know it or not. Philosophy is essentially the activity of developing good reasons for beliefs and actions. Peter commands us to be ready to give a reason for our hope in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). Peter is telling us to be philosophers—not to adopt the views of any particular philosopher but to develop the ability to justify our beliefs to ourselves and to others. Once we as young people have discovered that our Christianity is reasonable and defensible, we will be less likely to fall away from it and more likely to confidently share it with others.

Philosophy is just critical thinking with the purpose to attain wisdom about whatever topic. So it is no surprise that God actually demands that we use philosophical techniques to understand His Will. Paul writes that we must "test all things" and choose that which is good (1 The. 5:21). The process of testing all things is the process of analyzing ideas to see whether they are true. To test all things

requires more than simply comparing one Bible verse to another; it also involves using logic to understand what God has to say, and to figure out how God's message applies to our own situations. This is the essence of good philosophy, and while God certainly does not require that we study philosophy in school, He does require that we "put our thinking caps on" and do some reason-giving work. Isaiah prescribes as much, when he gives the Lord's invitation for us to "reason together" (Isa. 1:18). I am thankful that my parents helped me prepare for this.

3. If my parents had not insisted upon our family being more important in my life than our congregation's youth group and had not protected me from some influences in the group, and I had left the Lord, my parents' priorities would help explain why I left.

I had good experiences with youth groups in several congregations as I grew up. In these groups, my Christian friends and I had devotionals, worked in service projects, studied in Bible classes together, and did a lot of fun, wholesome, silly things. One of my favorite "youth group" memories is a trip we made to Atlanta to watch the Braves play and to visit Six Flags. The youth leaders who worked with me over the years were kind and encouraging. Why should I think youth groups posed any threat to my soul?

I am not sure what we usually mean by "youth ministry." I know that there are a lot of good men serving as youth ministers in our brotherhood, and that there is great variety in what they do from place to place. So it is difficult to make generalized statements about "what youth ministers do." The history of the exercise of youth ministry has been varied, as experienced youth worker Mark Cannister observes: "Gather a stack of theological dictionaries and books on the history and theology of Christian education. Now try to find 'Youth Ministry' in these books. It will not be a major heading. Rather, youth ministry organizations, events, and leaders will be located under other major headings." Also, the age-range of people involved in youth groups

has fluctuated widely (Cannister). Furthermore, my conversations with older Christians suggest that youth groups and youth ministers, as such, were virtually non-existent 50 years ago. Christianity has lived, and in many cases thrived, without formalized youth programs. Clearly, somebody was working with the youth all along.

As many of our congregations spend a lot of money and effort on youth ministries, I suggest we ask what youth ministry is and to what expediency we are using it. I have not undertaken any surveys to find out what youth groups are doing nowadays or what kind of impact they are having on the church's retention rate, so anything I offer (beyond what the Bible says) is anecdotal. However, my anecdotal evidence might be just suggestive enough to be constructive. I grew up in youth groups and have done a little work as a youth leader each year for the past nine years.

Consider the following ideas in succession:

A. Let us say that the typical goal of a youth group is to bring young people closer to the Lord, and that this is typically accomplished through the general avenues of (1) Bible study, (2) service, and (3) Christian fellowship. This description could be more precise, but probably few readers will disagree with it. After all, the Bible teaches that we should study it (King James Version, 2 Tim. 2:15), that we should serve (Mat. 25:31-45), and that we should fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7). It seems that youth groups may be uniquely positioned to facilitate these goals among the youth.

B. Scripture assigns goals 1-3 (in A above), among other goals, to the church as a whole and not particularly to youth groups. The Bible does not mention youth groups as such, but young people were being converted in Bible times, so it is safe to assume that a formalized youth group is not required in order to develop Christianity among our youth. The expediency of a youth group is therefore not on the same level as the expediency of a baptistry, for example. We cannot baptize people without a large container of water, but we can have faithful young people without a formalized youth program.

C. The accomplishment of goals 1-3 in the lives of young people is assigned primarily to their own, Christian parents (Eph. 6:1-4;

Tit. 2:1-5; see Colley and Colley). Christian parents must take primary responsibility for their children's spiritual development.

D. At most, a youth program should be the parents' tool to accomplish their goal. If any youth program weakens or pressurizes the relationship between young people and their parents, the youth program should at least be suspect.

If proposals A-D are right, then I think our present circumstance dictates that we make the proposal I suggested above:

E. We should re-examine youth ministry as it is currently practiced, in order to make it more conducive to helping parents accomplish their God-given objective of rearing faithful Christian children.

We can rightly ask two questions at this point: (1) What is it about our present circumstance that makes E true? And, (2) if we find that we need to change our approach to youth ministry, how should we change it? Again, my answers to these questions will rely on anecdotal evidence, but perhaps hopefully my experience with youth groups has been wide enough to facilitate helpful discussion.

Our Present Circumstances

What are the things about our present circumstances that suggest E is correct? I think there are three answers.

First, we are losing a lot of children to the world, and surely all of us recognize the tragedy of even one prodigal soul (Mat. 16:26). In light of this condition, even a person who thinks that we are getting youth ministry essentially right should still be happy for us to ask whether we could improve.

Second, there is often a disjunct between the training a prospective youth minister receives and the job he is assigned. When I was working on my undergraduate degree, I had a course in youth ministry. After reading the textbook for the course, I remember having two feelings: (1) I was overwhelmed by the vast amount of work a "good" youth minister might be expected to do. (2) I felt that I was nowhere near qualified to be a youth minister, and that I would not receive the training I needed from the Bible program in which I was enrolled. The job my textbook described was more like a child

psychologist or a family therapist than a Bible teacher. Fair enough, we have children who need such services. But our youth ministry training programs probably do not focus much on child psychology. Do we have children who need the services our prospective youth ministers are actually being trained to provide? As a brotherhood, I think we are not sure about what we want our youth ministers to be. Event coordinators? Counselors? Teachers? Preachers? Of course, each individual congregation is entitled to set up a youth program however its elders wish, but it is relevant to ask if we are doing as well as we could in training the youth ministers and placing them in jobs for which we have prepared them.

Third, the structure of some youth ministry programs themselves seems to pressurize or de-emphasize parent-child relationships. This is the problem to which Mark DeVries points: “During the last century ... youth ministries ... have increasingly (and often unwittingly) held to a single strategy that has become the defining characteristic of [the traditional—CC] model: the isolation of teenagers from the adult world and particularly from their own parents” (21, parenthetical item in orig.). I am confident that elders do not design youth programs to make children want to escape from home life and to crave a high degree of independence from parental authority. Teenagers crave independence enough on their own without having their cravings enhanced by the church. Yet, some of our youth programs inadvertently facilitate these kinds of thoughts in the minds of their members. Here’s how I imagine some young people think, approximately:

We’re mostly stuck here at home or at school where we have to do chores and homework and be constantly nice and respectful to people older than us. Then, every week or so, we get to hang out with our youth minister and the youth group and be who we really are. We have more fun with them. The youth minister is closer to our own age and he really understands us. He

doesn't tell us what to do very much. He gives us our freedom and doesn't make us work like Mom and Dad do. When we're with the youth group, we watch movies or hang out at the mall, and we also talk about spiritual stuff on our own terms. When we're with the youth minister, we can ask questions about things that really matter. At home, we're not so comfortable talking about those things.

I believe that this kind of situation can arise naturally in the typical youth group even if all the adolescents and the youth minister are dedicated Christians.

Then, there are the patently impure influences that may exist in the youth groups. I suppose every youth group of any size has some members that try to glamorize sin. While no Christian can totally escape worldly influences (John 17:15), we can try to avoid putting our children in pre-arranged social systems (like some youth groups) that place very little restriction upon the expression of rebellious tendencies. If parents are around, it may be much less "cool" to discuss sinful activities in a positive light.

I remember thinking that my youth minister was cool, and I did really enjoy being with my youth group. As I already indicated, there were times when I preferred to go on a youth trip than to stay home. But by spending countless hours with me in study, play, and prayer, my parents had already ensured that our family unit was more important to me than the youth group. I also knew that my family's rules applied no matter where I went with the other kids. My parents had spent enough time enforcing these rules strictly so that I could understand them and that they existed for my own good. I heard "Remember who you are" before going on many excursions. This meant that I was representing Christ, but also that I was representing a family name. My parents made sure they were informed about what was going on at the youth events even if they did not attend (they often did). Because I was convinced that my

family commitments were right and took priority, there was very little risk that any influence from outside the home could cause me to leave the Lord. The trips with the youth groups were learning experiences in a Christian context.

I never once thought of asking my youth minister an important spiritual question before I thought of asking my father or mother. I knew that they understood me better than the youth minister did and could better apply the Bible to my particular circumstance. But the reason I would always talk to my parents before the youth minister is true for the very same reason that I never chose to miss a family holiday celebration in order to go on a youth trip: I was simply closer to my family than I was to the youth group. If my parents had failed to develop this closeness through time and discipline, and I had left the Lord, their failure would have helped to illuminate why I left.

An Alternative

If we think that the typical youth ministry model is not accomplishing goals 1-3 as well as it should, then how should we revise the typical model? I appreciate Mark DeVries' general idea that parents and families should be central to youth ministry. However, once we appreciate the singular influence parents have over their children (as DeVries emphasizes in chapter four of his book), then any approach that says "We really should get parents involved in youth ministry" seems a bit like some lower-level workers saying "We really should let the CEO come to work." **The parents should be the starting point in child rearing at every age**, and whoever ministers to the whole congregation's young population should merely serve the parents as they perform their leading role in the spiritual development of the children. Put simply and Biblically, the parents **are** our youth ministers. Any others—elders, deacons, preachers, Bible class teachers, youth workers—who want to contribute to the spiritual growth of the children are welcome.

What should be the role of the official youth minister in the congregation? In the average congregation, there might no longer be a role for him, beyond the work that every Christian has to do. But since we are accustomed to having youth ministers, I do think there

is an extremely valuable service they could render, if they are willing to dedicate themselves to it. I propose that youth ministers receive rigorous training in two areas: Bible and family therapy/counseling. Bible, because anyone who is going to make himself available to discuss spiritual matters with adolescents and their parents needs to be acquainted with what the Bible says. Family therapy, because many parents and children need the services of professional counselors, and if our own youth ministers were prepared to provide these services, then all the better. The Christian counselors I know have more opportunities for work than they can accommodate.

So, while I think we should adjust our methodology to stop hurting ourselves, I also see an opportunity to fill a pressing need. A brief consideration of the problems that plague many teenagers suggests that counseling could serve as the basis for a congregation's youth ministry, especially in the cases of larger churches. We know that adolescents suffer from at least the following problems: anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, depression, thoughts of suicide, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, violence, adolescent pregnancy, academic failure, and substance abuse (Gullotta and Adams xix-xxi). Pornography abuse and sexual abuse also pose severe threats to teenagers today ("Pornography Harms"; Flinn). I hope these problems are less frequent in the church and that there is not a youth group where all of these problems are present. Even so, it probably would be hard to find a youth group of any size where at least one or two of these problems has not occurred recently. Furthermore, parents and church leaders often have questions about prevention and feel ill-equipped to handle such problems when they do occur.

As rampant as these problems are in contemporary society, congregations may not have enough of them to justify hiring a full-time youth minister who primarily counsels instead of doing what youth ministers typically do. This prospect may raise a concern about my approach: "What will aspiring youth ministers do if there is no place for the traditional youth minister?" We are a long way

from this becoming a reality, but I suppose these men could train to preach or counsel as I have suggested. This is certainly not a terrible prospect, and their qualifications may actually serve them better in terms of long-term job prospects than qualifications in the field of traditional youth ministry, even if ideas like mine are never adopted. After all, some have worried that traditional youth workers have too few opportunities for fulfilling work when they get a bit older, are less “cool” in the eyes of adolescents, and perhaps have a harder time identifying personally with the problems young people face. If the youth workers were trained counselors or preachers, there might be less chance of crisis “down the road.”

Another concern about my view immediately comes to mind: “Will the kids fellowship with one another if we de-emphasize the role of the youth minister? After all, we do not want to abandon fellowship between Christian young people.” I have three responses. First, I think Christian young people naturally get together in informal settings. I do not remember a time in my life when I did not seek the company of friends at church (probably no one had to tell me to play with the other children). And “instinctive” recreation continued into my teenage years. At one congregation where my father preached, we had no youth minister and few organized youth events, but we teens still found a way to get together, even before we could drive.

Second, parents are fully capable of contacting other parents and making sure the young peoputh activities. At one congregation I know, there is no full-time youth minister, but a good deal of structure to youth events as planned cooperatively by the elders, deacons, and various parents. I think this circumstance is close to the ideal situation, although this congregation might yet have an appropriate role for a part-time youth minister along the lines I have outlined.

Conclusion

By God’s grace, I have not become a prodigal. Anyone who has remained faithful has done so not only because of his own

determination, but because of many natural agencies God uses to help him along in spiritual security. For me, these agencies have been my parents and sister primarily but also teachers, elders, youth ministers, friends, and entire universities. For others, the combination of such agencies could be very different. But for all of us, our success will depend on the degree to which we follow the Word of God. Let us give our full attention to its study and application.

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CHAPTER 3

How To Raise A Prodigal

Eddy Gilpin

“**A**nd not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living” (King James Version, Luke 15:13). Thus began the perilous, life-altering event that forever changed this young man. Unlike many others who share the same story, this young man learned from his mistakes and made his way back to center. It was all about choices for him, as it is for each of us. However, parents play a tremendous role (especially in the formative years) regarding the choices that are made. Although each of us is, of course, an individual with the ability and free will to make choices all our own, parental influence concerning those choices can render either a huge advantage, a negligible effect, or a negative outcome. Parents bear a tremendous responsibility in seeing to it that their children are guided properly. Sadly, parental roles are being abandoned by a huge section of our society today, leading to stories with less happier endings than this parable from the Lord. The methods (or lack thereof) being used by many parents today provide a virtual how-to guide on rearing misguided, irresponsible, angry, uncooperative, and disruptive children and adolescents. The cycle continues as these children grow to be adults and rear their children using the same “model.” So, if one were to set down guidelines to rearing a wayward child, just what might they be?

Pamper Him All His Life

Coddling children and hampering their development is nothing new. The practice goes back to Biblical days. Samson, who would

become the thirteenth judge of Israel, was born to parents who had no other children (Jud. 13). Later in his life, Samson was determined to have a wife from among the Philistines. Even though such was a violation of the Mosaic Law (Deu. 7:3-4), and even though his father pleaded with him not to take a wife from among that heathen nation, Samson demanded that his father obtain the Philistine woman for him anyway, stating, “Get her for me; for she pleaseth me well” (Jud. 14:3). We are not told how old Samson was at this time, but this decision led to much grief for him and his family. And, while this is not necessarily an indication that Samson was always afforded his way in matters, it does demonstrate what can happen if parents give in to the desires of children when it goes against their better judgment. As for Samson, he continued his flirtation with forbidden women and the dangers such entailed (Jud. 16). His determination led to the loss of his strength, sight, dignity, and eventually his life (Jud. 16:21-30).

Children need the nurturing of their parents. Older women are instructed to teach the younger women to love their children (Tit. 2:4). Such love is necessary to their growth and development. However, when children are given no boundaries and afforded everything their hearts desire, trouble is in the making. As Dr. James Dobson stated, “If you can’t make a five-year old pick up his toys, it is unlikely that you will exercise any impressive degree of control during his adolescence, the most defiant time of life” (*Dare* 33).

Prohibit Him From Nothing

The never-say-never mentality has come to influence child-rearing in a terrible fashion. Many parents say “no” to nothing, allowing their children to engage in acts that endanger them physically, socially and, more importantly, spiritually. This kind of action again goes back to Biblical times. Regarding Hophni and Phinehas, the sons of Eli, the Scriptures state:

Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the LORD. And the priests’ custom

with the people was, that, when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a fleshhook of three teeth in his hand; And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fleshhook brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shiloh unto all the Israelites that came thither. Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. And if any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and then take as much as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, Nay; but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force. Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD. (1 Sam. 2:12-17)

The Word further reveals that Eli knew of his sons' wickedness and speaks of his permissive nature towards his boys. The Record states:

Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the LORD'S people to transgress. (1 Sam. 2:22-24)

Later, when God spoke to Samuel regarding this matter about Eli He stated, "For I have told him that I will judge his house for ever

for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not” (1 Sam. 3:13).

One can only wonder about the number of men who sit incarcerated in the prisons of our land or whose bodies lie far too early beneath the sod simply because they were not restrained by caring parents. There must be boundaries placed on children; and those boundaries must be upheld and maintained. Children quickly learn what they can get away with and will manipulate their parents in ways that are beneficial to themselves. Parents that exercise little to no restraint with their children are asking for trouble.

Prevent Him From Being Disciplined

Discipline has become a dirty word in our society. While there are many instances of child abuse in our world, the fact that some have gone overboard with disciplinary measures is not righted by those who seek to refuse discipline altogether. Both extremes are dangerous and lead to greater problems for the children of such down the line.

Many factors have influenced our society regarding this subject, but allow me to mention three (and the men who are most closely associated with them) which have helped to mold our current societal view of discipline: first, Charles Darwin and the “theory” of evolution; second, Sigmund Freud and his philosophy that man should act like what he naturally is; and, third, Benjamin Spock, who basically taught a generation that “love is enough” in rearing children. If children are constantly bombarded with the idea that they evolved from animals, and that they should act naturally because they cannot help being what they are, and that they should not be punished for acting like brute beasts because that is ultimately what they are, is it any wonder that our culture has reared the likes of Dylan Klebold, Eric Harris (Columbine High School murderers) and Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech mass murderer)?

The Bible is clear regarding the use of corporal punishment. Many passages speak not only to its use, but also to the consequences in failing to practice it. “The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child

left to himself bringeth his mother to shame” (Pro. 29:15). Indeed, how many mothers hang their heads in shame because of their wayward children, knowing that they failed in disciplining them in their formative years? “Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell” (Pro. 23:13-14). What a sad day the Judgment will be for parents who will learn that if they had only disciplined their children properly their lives (and perhaps their eternal destinies) would have turned out far differently. “Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying” (Pro. 19:18). This passage reveals that some tears should be shed at times. The implication is that pain is certainly a purifier in the disciplinary process. Too, parents are warned not to let a few tears get in the way of accomplishing the task of discipline. “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” (Pro. 13:24). As the saying goes, “sometimes love has to be tough.” As Dobson has truthfully stated, “The parent must convince himself that punishment is not something he does *to* the child; it is something he does *for* the child” (*Dare* 29). “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Pro. 22:15). How tragic it is to know that lives have been altered for the worse because such Biblical measures were not taken with them when they were young and impressionable. “Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul” (Pro. 29:17). No one wants to be around uncontrolled and uncontrollable children. How many are the harassed mothers and frazzled fathers who have simply failed to take charge of their offspring and lovingly but firmly discipline them? The same process that could have trained their children to be obedient, cooperative and respectful citizens could also have alleviated much of the stress in their own lives.

James Dobson relates some of these same principles regarding the dire need for firm, fair, and Biblical discipline. He stated:

...we must not depend on hope and luck to fashion the critical attitudes we value in our

children. That unstructured technique was applied during the childhood of the generation which is now in college, and the outcome has been quite discouraging. Permissiveness has not just been a failure; it's been a disaster! (*Dare* 14)

Corporal punishment is reserved specifically for moments of willful, deliberate, on-purpose defiance by a child who is old enough to understand what he is doing. These challenges to authority will begin at approximately fifteen months of age and should be met with loving firmness. (*Parenting* 87)

There is a critical period during the first four or five years of a child's life when he can be taught proper attitudes. These early concepts become rather permanent. When the opportunity of those years is missed, however, the prime receptivity usually vanishes, never to return. If it is desirable that children be kind, appreciative, and pleasant, those qualities should be taught—not hoped for. (*Dare* 20)

In my opinion, spankings should be reserved for the moment a child (age ten or less) expresses a defiant 'I will not!' or 'You shut up?' When a youngster tries this kind of stiff-necked rebellion, you had better take it out of him, and pain is a marvelous purifier. When nose-to-nose confrontation occurs between you and your child, it is not the time to have a discussion about the virtues of obedience. (*Dare* 27)

When a parent loses the early confrontations with the child, the later conflicts become harder to win. The parent who never wins, who is too weak or too tired or too busy to win, is making a costly mistake that will come back to haunt him during the child's adolescence.... The proper time to begin disarming the teen-age time bomb is twelve years before it arrives. (*Dare* 33)

The youth of our day would do well to heed the advice of Solomon—advice which not only applies to children but also instructs parents in the virtues of proper training, both taught and lived, before their children. He stated, “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, And forsake not the law of thy mother: For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck” (Pro. 1:8-9). “I am recommending a simple principle: when you are defiantly challenged, win decisively. When the child asks, ‘Who’s in charge?’ tell him” (Dobson, *Dare* 50). “The tougher the temperatment (sic) of the child, the more critical it is to ‘shape his will’ early in life” (Dobson, *Parenting* 86).

Protect Him From Any Consequences of Wrongdoing

One of the great tragedies of our day is children being allowed the freedom of adults by adults who are no more responsible than children! Political correctness has had a heyday in the family circle. Talk to any public school administrator or instructor and you will soon understand how times have changed. As others have said, it used to be that if a child got in trouble in school, he would be in just as much if not more trouble at home. However, in our day it is not the child who is to be blamed; it is the teacher or administrator. Children are simply not being made to understand that there are consequences to their actions. Parents are protecting their offspring from the consequences of wrong actions by placing the blame on those who call attention to the offensive acts rather than on their children, the perpetrators of the offensive acts. They make

demands of public school officials and then make threats if those demands are not met. And, sadly, many governmental officials and regulations support such behavior and demand more and more from those administrators and teachers and less and less from those children.

The Bible reveals that there are consequences to our actions. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him” (Eze. 18:20). “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). “Good understanding giveth favour: but the way of transgressors is hard” (Pro. 13:15). Children must be taught that misconduct on their part can and will bring repercussions to them and might well affect others also.

Provide No Spiritual Training

With each passing year our nation is becoming a more Godless society. In generations past moral qualities were almost a given within the home. Even if the Bible itself was not taught, at least the moral values contained in it were upheld by the vast majority. With lives of luxury and the advent of the television and computer ages came the loss of the innocence of a nation. Following on the heels of the “free love” society of the 1960’s came the infamous Roe v. Wade decision of the early 1970’s, the progressive advancement of the National Organization for Women (and other rabid organizations that sought to destroy the home), the open acceptance of evolutionary teachings, and the homosexual agenda. The public arena was quickly filled with the ideas that there is little sanctity in human life, man is free to do as he pleases without moral restraint, and “God is dead.” Religious principles were soon replaced with secularism, humanism, and atheism. Public schools can teach children about “safe sex” and how properly to use a condom but are restrained in using the Bible in any fashion. On the other hand, and quite ironically, prisoners are allowed ready access to the Bible. Sadly, though both public schools

and prisons are operated by the state, only one will allow true moral principles to be taught unimpeded.

The Bible says, “Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Pro. 22:6). To be certain, this is a general principle and not a concrete rule. Each person is different and has his own freedom of will. However, one is much more likely to walk the moral high road if he is taught those principles throughout his youth. Paul stated, “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Children that are taught Biblical standards early and often and who have those standards lived before them are much less likely to veer from them and lead immoral and ungodly lives. Mosaic standards taught, “And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deu. 6:6-7). Parents would be wise to instill in their youngsters Biblical values during their early years. The failure to do so might well find them in a setting where they are encouraged to seek such values on their own—not the public school, but the public penal system.

An interesting and alarming account is given of Ahaziah, the sixth king of Judah. After the ignominious death of his father, Jehoram (2 Chr. 21:12-20), Ahaziah was made king at the age of forty-two (2 Chr. 22:1-2). Although not a child by any stretch of the imagination, he was still influenced tremendously by his mother, Athaliah (and likely had been all of his life). Of this relationship the Bible states, “He also walked in the ways of the house of Ahab: for his mother was his counsellor to do wickedly. Wherefore he did evil in the sight of the LORD like the house of Ahab: for they were his counsellors after the death of his father to his destruction” (2 Chr. 22:3-4). The writer of First Kings stated it this way:

And he did evil in the sight of the LORD, and walked in the way of his father, and in the way of

his mother, and in the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin: For he served Baal, and worshipped him, and provoked to anger the LORD God of Israel, according to all that his father had done. (1 Kin. 22:52-53)

His was a classic case of parents who failed miserably in training their child in a proper fashion. Such a failure will not produce children who are acceptable to a law-abiding society and will, almost certainly, lead them to eternal condemnation.

Pardon His Actions Before Others

The Lord made mention of those who “began to make excuse” (Luke 14:18). Not only can one make excuses for his own actions, he can also make excuses for the actions or inaction of others. Many parents are guilty of this very thing. In their eyes their child can do no wrong. So, whatever others perceive to be wrong with their child must be attributed to some other source. Their actions must be pardoned in some fashion so as not to reflect upon their children in any negative light. There has never been a more potent weapon in the devil’s arsenal of lies than the statement “Well, that’s just the way he is.” It may well be that he is that way, but it is certainly not the way he should be.

A high school principal friend related the story of discovering that three of his female students were not in class on a particular day. Having an idea of their whereabouts, he left school and drove by the local pool hall in town. Sure enough, there were the three girls. He entered the back door of the establishment and caught them red-handed, smoking cigarettes and playing pool. After taking them back to his office, he called each parent. One of the parents insisted that her child would never do such a thing and that the principal must be mistaken. Even after he explained that he had personally escorted her daughter from the pool hall to his office (where she currently stood before him), the mother continued to excuse the actions of her daughter and attempt to indict the character of the school official.

Many children grow up with such excuses being made for them and never having to “face the music” of their own actions. Such is a surefire method for raising a prodigal.

Permit Him To Choose His Own Companions

Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the great apostle stated, “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33). The same Holy Spirit inspired Solomon to pen, “He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed” (Pro. 13:20), as well as “Whoso keepeth the law is a wise son: but he that is a companion of riotous men shameth his father” (Pro. 28:7); and also, “Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away” (Pro. 4:14-15). Other passages parallel the thoughts of these that the companions one chooses so often affect the outcome of his life.

In a chapter entitled, “Successfully Raising Teenagers...It Can Be Done,” the author noted the following:

There is an important principle in 1 Corinthians 13:11. Paul is talking about the role of spiritual gifts and how they were temporary. But he makes a great statement that we need to consider. ‘When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things’ (1 Cor. 13:11). Here is the point—children think differently than adults do. (Isn’t that deep?) They don’t have the experience or the knowledge to make good decisions in some areas. That is when parents need to be parents. (Gillaspie 382)

This could certainly be no truer than in their selection of friends. Children need their parents to be parents and assist them in these choices, particularly in their earlier years. They will have friends. Those friends will either have a good influence on your child or they

will have a bad influence on your child. Parents who “respect the privacy” of their children far too much to interfere in such things as their friendships may find the teenage years and beyond filled with grief. Children need to be told that Little Johnny is not the kind of young man with whom we need to be associated. They need the guidance of parents who can readily see Little Suzy’s inclinations and tell their children that she is not the kind of friend we need to have. It may well be that such advice and directives should extend even into the adolescent years, since those associations are so strong in the formation of children’s character. Better to put down one’s parental foot now on such issues than to bemoan the lack of doing so in the wake of a prodigal’s departure from the way that is right.

Prepare Yourself For A Life Of Grief

In a post that was originally taken from a pamphlet entitled *Twelve Rules for Raising Delinquent Children* (distributed by the Houston Police Department), the last entry stated the very thought listed in this heading (12 Steps). After all, if one is going to go about the process of raising a prodigal, he might as well be prepared for the aftershock. Consequences follow actions (Gal. 6:7). If we, as parents, fail to bring our children up “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4) and choose rather to leave them to themselves (Pro. 29:15) or, worse still, to contribute to their downfall, we had better be prepared for certain heartache and grief. “A wise son maketh a glad father: but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother” (Pro. 10:1). “A foolish son is the calamity of his father” (Pro. 19:13). “He that begetteth a fool doeth it to his sorrow: and the father of a fool hath no joy” (Pro. 17:21).

Perhaps no better example of this kind of grief can be found than that of David at the loss of his son Absalom. Of David’s sons, the most prominent in Scripture would have to be Amnon, Absalom, Adonijah, and Solomon. One writer noted of them:

The time from their births until they were grown was a period not discussed in Scripture. Since

the early years of a child's life are basic to the formation of their character we must conclude David's life and behavior during that time at least partially contributed to their later troubles. (Curd 291)

David's own conduct in his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba and subsequent murder of her husband, Uriah, contributed greatly to his troubles (2 Sam. 12:7-14). The rebellion and death of his son Absalom was one of the most troubling consequences to him. Upon finding out about the death of his son, David lamented "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33). His grief almost brought him to ruin, as indicated by the words of Joab:

And Joab came into the house to the king, and said, Thou hast shamed this day the faces of all thy servants, which this day have saved thy life, and the lives of thy sons and of thy daughters, and the lives of thy wives, and the lives of thy concubines; In that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well. Now therefore arise, go forth, and speak comfortably unto thy servants: for I swear by the LORD, if thou go not forth, there will not tarry one with thee this night: and that will be worse unto thee than all the evil that befell thee from thy youth until now. (2 Sam. 19:5-7)

Perhaps David felt the sting and heartache of guilt for not rearing his son as he should have. His emotions and conduct at the

death of Absalom were in complete contrast to those at the loss of the first child born to Bathsheba and him (cf. 2 Sam.12:19-23). May we learn from the experiences of men like David and avoid a lifetime of sorrow because of our failure to rear our children properly and to guide them as best we can to the soul's bright home.

Conclusion

The story we label as the Parable of the Prodigal Son has a happy ending (at least for the prodigal himself). However, as stated earlier, for far too many the story does not end happily. And for the wayward, drug-addicted, alcoholic, hopeless lives of the countless prodigals of the world, there are even more sorrowful, grieving, heart-broken parents who sit and wonder "Why?" and "What if?" In order to insure such an ending for yourself and for your children, simply Pamper Them All Their Lives, Prohibit Them from Nothing, Prevent Them from Being Disciplined, Protect Them from Any Consequences of Wrongdoing, Provide for Them No Spiritual Training, Pardon Their Actions Before Others, Permit Them to Choose Their Own Companions, and Prepare Yourself for an Inevitable Life of Sorrow.

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CHAPTER 4

There Arose A Famine In The Land: The Pleasures Of Sin Are Short-Lived

Robert Jeffries

Introduction

Our Lord has been given the title “The Master Teacher” by many. He always knew what to say and exactly how to say it. Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus would use a number of ways to teach a lesson and drive home a particular point. He would approach situations in a variety of ways to convey His saving message. Whether He was teaching in a straightforward way as He did in the beatitudes (King James Version, Mat. 5:3-11) or simply turning a question upon the questioner to expose their error (John 8:1-11), He knew how to teach effectively. Probably the most often and maybe the most effective method that was used and recorded throughout the Gospel accounts is the use of a parable. Using such an approach, the Lord was able to draw honest hearts unto Heavenly truths. The word *parable* is described as “an earthly story with a Heavenly meaning.” For many, the most well-known out of all the parables that our Lord taught was “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” Some have described it as a classic. From a Hollywood perspective, it has all the components of an award winning, best-selling drama. Charles Dickens said: “It is the finest short story ever written” (P. Butler 329). Even though these words were spoken two thousand years ago, they are still just as relevant today as they were then.

This lesson is not designed to cover the entire parable; however, we do want to center our minds around the first few verses in order to set our minds in the proper context. “Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them. And he spake this parable unto them, saying” (Luke 15:1-3).

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. (Luke 15:11-16)

The Condition Of The Country

The young man wanted his inheritance, and he wanted it now. He did not want it just to keep it or to put it into savings and live off the interest. He wanted to go out and live it up, but he could not hit the road until he received his inheritance. To do so, he would have to go to the far country. This far country was a long way from his father. He knew that he would never be able to live the way he wanted at home. He could not wait to get away. For many young people, they cannot wait to go and sow their wild oats. The perception of the far country was one full of fun, where one could live without a care in the world. Many have heard the expression “the grass is greener on the

other side.” This was the mentality that the prodigal had concerning the far country.

For us today, the perception of sin is all of the things listed above. For example, consider the beer commercials that air on our television sets today. The promise is “the good life.” The young, good looking people are living “the life.” However, what they do not show is someone sick to their stomach the next day, the liver problems that can develop, the car accidents, etc. They only show the here and the now. What so many people do not realize is that alcohol affects everything from the top of our heads to our little toes. No wonder there are so many passages that are written to keep us from partaking of alcohol.

Think about the perception some have in regards to drugs. They partake in them to take the edge off. Some desire them to “get high” without thinking of the terrible crash that comes later. Others never think about the possibility of addiction (not only for themselves, but even passed on from a mother to a child) or even death.

Another area to consider is the housing market. Even though the housing market analogy does not necessarily fall into the category of sin, think about the housing market “bubble” burst. The market was not as good as it seemed, and many were not as careful with the “fine print” as they should have been. Therefore, because they only thought about the “here and now,” many lost their homes. You see, we must understand the nature of the far county; it is temporary.

When considering the temporary nature of sin, one of the most familiar Bible accounts centers around the life of Samson. Samson saw beautiful women and had to have them. He took no thought for the true nature of the women and what their true motives were. Samson was a man that was set apart by God, but his weakness for women eventually cost him his life. Someone once said, “He who fails to learn from the mistakes of the past is doomed to repeat them.”

The prodigal son never thought about the true nature of the far country. He never thought that these pleasures would only last for a season, and that eventually all of the fun, pleasure, and care-free living would come to an end. “And not many days after the younger

son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15:13). The words that are used in this verse are very interesting. The text says he “wasted,” which means “to squander away.” He wasted away his “substance,” which means his “goods or possessions.” He wasted away his substance on “riotous” which means “wasteful.” In other words, he squandered away his possessions on wasteful living. Albert Barnes described it as “living without saving anything.” Everything the prodigal son spent his money on was a waste. The elder brother mentions that he wasted his money on harlots (Luke 15:30). In like manner, whenever money is spent on sin it is always a waste. People buy alcohol, drugs, prostitution, lottery tickets, and tobacco just to name a few, and countless millions are wasted. They do nothing but destroy.

Whenever considering the far country, we always need to ask ourselves the question have we counted the cost?

The condition of the country was probably nothing like he ever imagined. It taught him more than he wanted to know, it took him further than he wanted to go, kept him longer than he wanted to stay, and was more than he wanted to pay when it was all said and done.

The Consequences Of His Conduct

First, **he found himself empty**. The prodigal now found himself in this particular class, and he had no money to help him survive during the famine. “And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want” (Luke 15:14). The prodigal had emptied his wallet. Not only was his wallet empty, but the prodigal was also empty in his heart and character.

Second, **something terrible happened in the far country**. “And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine” (Luke 15:14-15). There arose a famine in the land. Famines were

generally caused by local irregularities of the rainfall, by destructive hail storms, “And Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven: and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran along upon the ground; and the LORD rained hail upon the land of Egypt” (Exo. 9:23), by ravages of insects, “For they covered the face of the whole earth, so that the land was darkened; and they did eat every herb of the land, and all the fruit of the trees which the hail had left: and there remained not any green thing in the trees, or in the herbs of the field, through all the land of Egypt” (Exo. 10:15) and by enemies, “And he shall eat the fruit of thy cattle, and the fruit of thy land, until thou be destroyed: which *also* shall not leave thee *either* corn, wine, or oil, *or* the increase of thy kine, or flocks of thy sheep, until he have destroyed thee” (Deu. 28:51). In a city, a famine might be caused by a siege, “And there was a great famine in Samaria: and, behold, they besieged it, until an ass’s head was sold for fourscore pieces of silver, and the fourth part of a cab of dove’s dung for five pieces of silver” (2 Kin. 6:25); pestilence often followed in its wake, and the suffering was great. (“Famine”)

Famines were extremely dangerous to the well-being to any people, but especially to the poor (the class in which the prodigal now finds himself). Oftentimes, it would even lead to eliminating a lot of the population. The land that he imagined just a short time before, now had nothing. He thought the grass was green on the other side, but it turned out to be nothing but a mirage.

Third, **after spending all of his money on meaningless things, the prodigal now finds himself at one of the lowest points in his life.** The only employment during the famine that he could find was

taking care of pigs. “And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine” (Luke 15:15). Most believe that this parable is about two boys who were Jews. To understand how awful this was, one must consider the background concerning the regulations that Jews had regarding pigs. In our country, a hog farmer is not looked upon as the refuse. However, during the first century, hog business to a Jew was the depth of depravity. The Mosaic Law forbid the Jews from eating any type of meat that came from a hog, nor were they able to raise hogs. “And the swine, because it divideth the hoof, yet cheweth not the cud, it *is* unclean unto you: ye shall not eat of their flesh, nor touch their dead carcase” (Deu. 14:8). How despicable, degrading, and humiliating this employment must have been in the eyes of the Jews to whom Jesus was speaking (Trench 399). This part of the parable may further indicate the downward slide the prodigal was on at this time.

Fourth, **if taking care of pigs were not bad enough, he was not eating the same food as they did.** “And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!” (Luke 15:16-17). Here is the fourth consequence of his wasteful lifestyle. He was starving to death. The hungrier an individual gets, the less choosy he becomes about food. This young man fained (longed) to be fed with what the pigs ate, the husks. In our vocabulary today, husks are generally referred to as the dry leaves around the ear of corn. However, the husks in our text refers to the “pod of the carob tree, the food of beasts” (Gill). “A husk was bean-shaped and were commonly used for fattening swine. They contain a proportion of sugar. The very poorest of the population occasionally used them as food.” (J. Butler 528). Furthermore, this is the only time that this word is mentioned in the entire Bible. Desiring this type of food indicated he was starving and would eat just about anything. When one compares it to the fine dining he was experiencing during his riotous living, he had hit rock bottom.

His craving emphasized his terrible condition as a result of his wasteful living.

The Considerations For A Christian

First, **sin is a harsh taskmaster because it has terrible consequences.** The prodigal never imagined when he got his inheritance that just a short time later he would be taking care of pigs and desiring to eat the food they ate. But it lets us know that sin has consequences. Let it be known that there is a difference between forgiveness and consequences. One who is forgiven still has to face the consequences of his/her actions. Earlier this year, Brigham Young University was one of the top basketball teams in the entire country. In fact, they were ranked as high as number three in the nation. At nearly the pinnacle of their season, one of their best players was dismissed from the team because he broke the honor code. He was having premarital sexual relations. Some have criticized by saying that it is unforgiving. This player can receive forgiveness, but he still has to live with the consequences of his actions. One of the hardest teachings today for people to understand and live by seems to be our Lord's teaching on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. His teaching really is crystal clear. "And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except *it be* for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Mat. 19:9). Yes, forgiveness can be obtained, but there are still consequences to one's actions. If an individual is unfaithful to his spouse, the consequence of his decision making means that he can only be married to that one person or remain single for the rest of his life. The Apostle Paul reminds us just how harsh sin can be, and the terrible consequences that go with it.

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed

from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 6:16-18, 23)

Second, **a mighty famine is sure to overtake our soul when we wander away from God.** The prodigal found exactly what the Psalmist wrote, “God setteth the solitary in families: he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land” (Psa. 68:6). When sin is reigning, it is choking out the bread of life. “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Mat. 5:6).

Third, **oftentimes afflictions are used for our benefit.** In fact, the Psalmist valued his affliction because he knew the benefit of them. “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word. . . . It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Psa. 119:67; Psa. 119:71). Sometimes individuals have to hit rock bottom before they make their journey in the right direction. This writer knows of a man that was living it up with riotous living. He said that one of his marriages could be described as being all about the drugs, the alcohol, and the sexual relationship. He was busted by the FBI and had a twelve gauge shotgun plastered to his cheek, with an FBI agent telling him “one move and you will meet your Maker.” After he was placed in prison, sobered up, detoxed, and divorced, he became a brand new man. He described those five years in prison as the best and worst years of his life. His afflictions were used to his benefit, and he is now a faithful Christian.

Fourth, **sin can cause our lives to spiral out of control.** The prodigal’s life went on a complete downward spiral once he left his father. Sin became a snowball in his life. Consider one area of King David’s life. It started small; just one look, and then a look became a stare, and then a stare become a thought, and then within hours he committed adultery, and within days he committed murder. All

because he did not stop it when it started. “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jam. 1:14-15).

Fifth, **sin is addictive**. He wanted more and more until the money ran out. Sin is habit-forming; it keeps one wanting more and more. And it is not just the obvious ones—drugs, alcohol, smoking, gambling; all sin is habit-forming. The following is an excerpt from Allen Webster’s book, “Why Not Be A Prodigal?”

Lying is addictive. Once a person becomes a liar, a lie will come easier to his lips than the truth. He will tell a lie when the truth would have served him better (Proverbs 8:7; John 8:44; Acts 5:3-4; Ephesians 4:25; Colossians 3:9; 1 Timothy 1:10; 4:2; Titus 1:2, 12; Revelation 21:8; 22:15)

Cursing is addictive. There are men, and some women, who curse without even thinking about it. They can hardly open their mouths without using God’s name in vain. Even when they try to stop, they can hardly keep the words from slipping out (Psalm 10:7; 59:12; 109:17-18; James 3:10).

Sex sin is addictive. Because there is pleasure in sex sin (Hebrews 11:25), once one starts, it is very hard to stop (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:15-20; Matthew 5:27-28; Galatians 5:19-21). Don’t think marriage will remove the temptation, either. One who sleeps around before marriage will find it hard not to run around on his wife (her husband) after marriage (Proverbs 5:20-23).

Cheating is addictive (cf. Romans 12:17). Some students work harder trying to cheat than they would have had to work to read the material and answer the questions. Once one

starts cheating, it is hard to go back to studying for honest grades. (29)

Sixth, **the far country was deceptive**. He had the idea that the grass was going to be greener on the other side. Finally, he could live it up, and no one would be around to tell him what to do. Sin is also deceptive. Sin promises liberty and brings about bondage (Rom. 6:23). Sin appears to be beautiful, but it's actually very ugly (Psa. 51:1-2; Isa. 1:18-20; Isa. 59:1-2; Jam. 1:27).

Finally, **the pleasures of sin are short lived**. Being able to leave home could not come soon enough. However, once he got what he wanted, it did not last as long as he thought it would. The buzz from alcohol only lasts for a brief moment in time but could have lasting consequences. The high from drugs lasts for a short while, then eventually wears off with a hard crash later. The pleasure from a sexual experience in the moment may be brief but brings about lasting consequences. When the prodigal son left his father's house, never did he imagine that his life of pleasure would come to some horrifying end. In the book of Hebrews, we see the example of Moses as the pleasures of Egypt are placed before him. Moses makes a courageous decision to serve God faithfully than to enjoy the pleasures from Egypt that would only last for a season. "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:24-25).

Conclusion

Lou Gehrig, the famous baseball player with the New York Yankees, once found himself in a pressure-filled moment during a game. Unwittingly, a New York sportswriter gave a lesson more about life than baseball when he wrote what happened. Gehrig came to bat in the ninth inning with the winning runs on second and third. He ran the count full to three balls and two strikes. All that he needed to do was get a base hit, and the game would be won. The fans were beside themselves with excitement. The opposing team was watching

this last pitch anxiously in the dugout. They were very aware of the skill of Lou Gehrig, and more times than they cared to remember, he had won the game for the Yankees in situations just like this one. The pitcher wound up and hurled a heater of a strike across the plate. Lou Gehrig did not even take a swing at the pitch. The ump yelled, "Strike three!" Very slowly, Lou turned to the umpire and said something to him. At this the home crowd of Yankee fans went wild because Lou never argued with the umpire. The sportswriters all piled over their seats and went straight to the field to find out what Lou had said. They asked the ump what had been said because whatever it was would certainly make the headlines the next morning. The umpire smiled and turned to Lou and told him to tell them what he had said. He looked a little startled as he answered, "I said, 'Mr. Ump, I would give ten dollars to have that one back.'" The New York sportswriter was so impressed with this that he added it to his column that day. There are people all over the world who would give ten dollars or ten thousand dollars to get just one minute back and for the privilege of changing something they said or did in that minute.

May we always remember, just because the grass may look greener on the other side, looks can be very deceiving. Whenever it comes to sin, this is always the case, and it never lasts as long as we wanted, and the consequences are deadly spiritually.

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CHAPTER 5

The Far Country Of Atheism

Kyle Butt

On February 12, 1998, William Provine, a professor in the Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology at the distinguished Cornell University, took to the podium on the campus of the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He was invited to deliver the keynote address at the second annual Darwin Day, a day dedicated to commemorating the life and teachings of Charles Darwin. In an abstract of that speech, on the Darwin Day Web site, Dr. Provine's introductory comments are recorded in the following words: "Naturalistic evolution has clear consequences that Charles Darwin understood perfectly. 1) No gods worth having exist; 2) no life after death exists; 3) no ultimate foundation for ethics exists; 4) no ultimate meaning in life exists; and 5) human free will is nonexistent" (Provine, 1998). Provine's ensuing message centered on his fifth statement regarding human free will. Prior to delving into the "meat" of his message, however, he noted: "The first 4 implications are so obvious to modern naturalistic evolutionists that I will spend little time defending them" (1998).

It is clear then, from Provine's comments, that he believes naturalistic evolution has no way to produce an "ultimate foundation for ethics." And it is equally clear that this sentiment was so apparent to "modern naturalistic evolutionists" that Dr. Provine did not feel it even needed to be defended. Oxford professor Richard Dawkins concurred with Provine by saying: "Absolutist moral discrimination is devastatingly undermined by the fact of evolution" (2006, p. 301).

Comments from such high-profile evolutionists provide an excellent springboard from which to examine the logical

consequences of belief in naturalistic evolution. If it is true that humans evolved from non-living, primordial slime, then any sense of moral obligation must simply be a subjective outworking of the physical neurons firing in the brain. Theoretically, atheistic scientists and philosophers admit this truth. Charles Darwin understood it perfectly. He wrote: “A man who has no assured and ever present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, **only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones**” (1958, p. 94, emp. added). On a pragmatic level, however, when a person or group of people actually allow the theoretical idea to influence their actions, the brutality of evolution’s immorality is brought to light, and its absurdity is manifested.

Devaluing Human Life

It is an easily ascertainable fact that belief in atheistic evolution devalues human life, demoting it to the base level of animal status. Such thinking logically leads to the adoption of measures that destroy innocent human life, but are still viewed by atheistic thinkers as “moral.” For instance, in 1983, Peter Singer published an article in the prestigious magazine *Pediatrics* titled “Sanctity of Life or Quality of Life?” In the article, he contended that there is no moral burden to keep alive human infants who are born with mental retardation or other developmental problems such as Down’s syndrome. The entire article presents a case against the sanctity of human life, and suggests that the lives of some animals would be much more valuable than the lives of mentally retarded children. In fact, he alluded to the fact that modern, evolutionary teaching has destroyed the idea of the sanctity of human life:

We can no longer base our ethics on the idea that human beings are a special form of creation... Our better understanding of our own nature has bridged the gulf that was once thought to

lie between ourselves and other species, so why should we believe that the mere fact that a being is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* endows its life with some unique, almost infinite, value?... If we compare a severely defective human infant with a nonhuman animal, **a dog or a pig**, for example, **we will often find the nonhuman to have superior capacities, both actual and potential, for rationality, self-consciousness, communication, and anything else that can plausibly be considered morally significant.** Only the fact that the defective infant is a member of the species *Homo sapiens* leads it to be treated differently from the dog or pig. **Species membership alone, however, is not morally relevant....** If we can put aside the obsolete and erroneous notion of **the sanctity of all human life**, we may start to look at human life as it really is: at the quality of life that each human being has or can achieve” (Singer, 72[1]:128-129 emp. added).

In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins expressed the same idea when he wrote: “Notice now that ‘pro-life’ doesn’t exactly mean pro-*life* at all. It means pro-*human-life*. The granting of uniquely special rights to cells of the species *Homo sapiens* is hard to reconcile **with the fact of evolution....** The *humanness* of an embryo’s cells **cannot confer upon it any absolutely discontinuous moral status”** (2006, p. 300, italics in orig., emp. added).

In his book *Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism*, self-proclaimed Darwinian James Rachels stated that when the true moral implications of evolution are understood,

human life will no longer be regarded with the kind of superstitious awe which it is accorded in

traditional thought, and the lives of non-humans will no longer be a matter of indifference. This means that **human life will, in a sense, be devalued**, while the value granted to non-human life will be increased. A revised view of such matters as suicide and euthanasia, as well as a revised view of how we should treat animals, will result (1990, p. 5, emp. added).

He further noted: “The big issue in all this is the value of human life.... The difficulty is that **Darwinism** leaves us with fewer resources from which to construct an account of the value of life” (p. 197, emp. added).

According to atheistic evolution, whether a human child lives or dies should depend on the level of potential suffering, intelligence or lack thereof, mental retardation, or physical handicap. If resources are so limited that an intelligent chimpanzee and a human child cannot both be kept alive, then the child’s intelligence or threshold of suffering should be compared to the chimpanzee’s. If the chimp happens to be more “intelligent” or more capable of suffering, then the “simple” fact that the child is a human should not confer any special moral status. Thus, according to this line of thinking, it would be morally right to eliminate the human child in favor of the chimpanzee. Rachels presented this idea quite clearly:

An infant with severe brain damage, even if it survives for many years, may never learn to speak, and its mental powers may never rise above a primitive level. In fact, its psychological capacities may be markedly inferior to those of a typical rhesus monkey. In that case, moral individualism [of which Rachels is a proponent—KB] would see no reason to prefer its life over the monkey’s (1990, pp. 189-190).

The absurdity of such thinking flies in the face of everything that humans have understood to be moral. The framers of the *Declaration of Independence* understood the special place that humans hold. They penned the famous words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (1776). Notice that the *Declaration* framers believed that **humans** had certain rights that were “self-evident.” In fact, the framers simply recorded this idea that had been understood by humanity for millennia.

What happens when individuals, who believe that humans should not be given any special moral status, put their belief into action? James Rachels shed a sickening light on that question when he concluded:

Some unfortunate humans—perhaps because they have suffered brain damage—are not rational agents. What are we to say about them? The natural conclusion, according to the doctrine we are considering, would be that their status is that of mere animals. And perhaps we should go on to conclude that they may be used as non-human animals are used—perhaps as laboratory subjects, **or as food** (1990, p. 186).

Population Elimination

Forrest Mims III is the Chairman of the Environmental Science Section of the Texas Academy of Science. He edits a publication titled *The Citizen Scientists*. On March 3-5, 2006, Mims attended the 109th meeting of the Texas Academy of Science, which was held at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Mims related the events that occurred during that meeting in an article titled *Meeting Doctor Doom* (2006). [Unless otherwise noted, the following quotes and facts are derived from that article.]

At the meeting, Dr. Eric R. Pianka, “the University of Texas evolutionary ecologist and lizard expert who the Academy named the 2006 Distinguished Texas Scientist,” delivered a speech to about 400 attendees. Just before Pianka spoke, Mims noted that an official of the Academy was involved in a conversation with the cameraman who was recording the meeting. The conversation resulted in the cameraman pointing “the lens of his big camera to the ceiling and slowly walking away.” Mims started taking notes on the speech when Pianka began by warning the audience that most people are not ready to hear what he had to say to the assembly.

Mims noted that one of Pianka’s main points was that humans should not be given special status among other animals. “Pianka hammered his point home by exclaiming, ‘We’re no better than bacteria!’” In his speech, Pianka suggested that the Earth cannot survive the current human population increase, and that something needs to be done “to reduce the population to 10 percent of the present number.” Pianka then mentioned several ways this might occur. “His favorite candidate for eliminating 90 percent of the world’s population is airborne Ebola (Ebola Reston), because it is both highly lethal and it kills in days instead of years.” The speech ended with a question-and-answer period. Mims noted: “Immediately almost every scientist, professor and college student present stood to their feet and vigorously applauded the man who had enthusiastically endorsed the elimination of 90 percent of the human population. Some even cheered.”

Of course, many within the evolutionary community did not want to connect themselves closely with the idea that an evolutionary ecologist seems to think that his evolutionary ideas need to lead to the mass destruction of five billion humans. They quickly accused Mims of misrepresentation. On April 6, 2006, Nick Matzke wrote:

The wingnut echo chamber has recently gone insane over the idea that Eric Pianka, a distinguished and much-loved ecologist at UT,

advocates mass genocide by ebola in order to bring down world population. The allegation was leveled by disgruntled creationist Forrest Mims, and rapidly spread to the blogosphere [via places like Dembski's blog (three posts!) and Telic Thoughts, and then went to the Drudge Report and caused a national media firestorm appearing in my local paper by Monday morning. I smelled a rat from the beginning, and now I have been proved right. KXAN News36 in Austin, TX, has just debunked the whole thing (2006, emp. added).

Matzke's statement that the information from News36 debunked "the whole thing" was far from the truth. In fact, in a letter dated April 10, 2006, Assistant Professor Dr. Kenneth R. Summy, the Vice-Chairman of the Environmental Science Section of the Texas Academy of Science, wrote:

My overall impression of Dr. Pianka's presentation was a 'doomsday' message that life on earth is about to end, and the sooner the human population crashes the better. I hope he was joking or being sarcastic when he stated that a pandemic of ebola virus would be great for the earth? [sic] no sane person would really believe that (2006).

Dr. Summy further noted:

Forrest Mims did not misrepresent anything regarding the presentation. I heard these statements myself, and would be willing to bet that most of the audience attending the presentation got the same impression that I

did. In my opinion, the message contained in the keynote address detracted from what was otherwise an excellent meeting (2006).

The following statements by a student “defending” Dr. Pianka add further credence to Mims’ record: “Dr. Pianka’s talk at the TAS meeting was mostly of the problems humans are causing as we rapidly proliferate around the globe.... He’s a radical thinker, that one! I mean, he’s basically advocating for the death of all but 10% of the current population! And at the risk of sounding just as radical, I think he’s right” (“Dr. Eric R. Pianka...,” 2006; see also “Revisiting...,” 2006).

Additionally, Dr. Pianka personally posted several student evaluations of his teaching. One student commented: “I don’t root for ebola [sic], but maybe a ban on having more than one child. I agree...too many people [are] ruining this planet” (“Excerpts from Student Evaluations,” 1999). Another wrote: “Though I agree that conervation [sic] biology is of utmost importance to the world, I do not think that preaching that 90% of the human population should die of ebola [sic] is the most effective means of encouraging conservation awareness” (“Excerpts from Student Evaluations”).

The fact is, Dr. Pianka’s evolutionary concepts of ecology push him to conclude that humans are no better than bacteria and that the human population needs to be dramatically reduced. As much as many of his fellow evolutionists would like to distance themselves from such radical thinking, they cannot logically do so. Atheistic evolution implies that humans are no better than bacteria. They may have more capacity to suffer, they may have more complex brains and body structures, but in the end, one living organism is only as valuable as another. If you have the moral right to destroy millions of bacteria because they are hindering the “progress” of humanity, you have the same moral right to destroy billions of humans because they are causing ecological problems for other, equally valuable, organisms on the planet.

Abortion

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines abortion as: “the termination of a pregnancy after, accompanied by, resulting in, or closely followed by the **death** of the **embryo or fetus**” (“Abortion,” n.d., emp. added). In the United States, this murderous practice has been legal since January 22, 1973, and has resulted in the deaths of more than 48 million innocent human lives in this country alone. If the abortions performed in Europe and Asia during the same time period were added to this figure, the death toll would easily reach into the hundreds of millions. Is it immoral to terminate the lives of unborn human children?

According to the atheistic evolutionary community, abortion is not an immoral practice. In fact, it is often viewed as something moral and right. One line of reasoning used to justify the practice is the idea that humans should not be treated differently than animals, since humans are nothing more than animals themselves. The fact that an embryo is “human” is no reason to give it special status. Dawkins wrote: “An early embryo has the sentience, as well as the semblance, of a tadpole.... One school of thought cares about whether embryos can suffer. The other cares about whether they are human.... Secular moralists are more likely to ask, ‘Never mind whether it is *human* (what does that even *mean* for a little cluster of cells?); at what ages does a developing embryo, of any specie become capable of *suffering*?’” (2006, pp. 297-298, italics and parenthetical items in orig.). Dawkins identifies himself as a “secular moralist” who would not factor into the moral equation the idea of “humanness.” How would he and other “secular moralists” decide if a human embryo should live? He noted:

A consequentialist or utilitarian is likely to approach the abortion question in a very different way, by trying to **weigh up suffering**. **Does the embryo suffer?** (Presumably not if it is aborted before it has a nervous system; and even if it is old enough to have a nervous system it surely suffers

less than, say, an adult cow in a slaughterhouse.) (2006, p. 293, parenthetical item in orig., emp. added).

The modern atheistic moralist simply “weighs up suffering.” If the human embryo has not yet reached the stage at which a nervous system develops, then it is less valuable than an animal that does have a nervous system. And even if it does have a nervous system, it probably does not suffer as much as a cow in a slaughterhouse. Thus, it would be more moral to stop killing cows in a slaughterhouse than to stop allowing humans to abort their children. As atheistic writer Sam Harris noted: “If you are concerned about suffering in this universe, killing a fly should present you with greater moral difficulties than killing a human blastocyst [three-day-old human embryo—KB]” (2006, p. 30). He further stated: “If you are worried about human suffering, abortion should rank very low on your list of concerns” (p. 37).

The moral bankruptcy of such thinking is brutally obvious. Since when is the amount of suffering the criterion by which moral decisions of human life and death are made? Yet that is exactly what Dawkins and his fellow atheistic moralists contend. He wrote: “Of course, it could be argued that humans are more capable of, for example, suffering than other species. This could well be true, and we might legitimately give humans special status by virtue of it” (2006, p. 301). According to Dawkins, it would be logically permissible to kill any person as long as they do not suffer, or others (like parents or siblings) do not suffer because of their deaths. Suppose, then, a society decides that five-year-old orphans with no siblings are less than ideal and need to be eliminated. In keeping with Dawkins’ morality, if policemen sneak up behind the children and deliver an immediately lethal bullet to their brains so that they never feel any pain, then such actions could be as morally viable as killing adult cows in a slaughterhouse. Dawkins and his fellow atheistic thinkers have absolutely no grounds on which to assert that killing five-year-olds in this fashion is “wrong.”

Peter Singer admits the reality of this logical implication of atheistic evolution. In his chapter titled: “Justifying Infanticide,” Singer concluded that human infants are “replaceable.” What does Singer mean by “replaceable”? He points out that if a mother has decided that she will have two children, and the second child is born with hemophilia, then that infant can be disposed of and replaced by another child without violating any moral code of ethics. He explained: “Therefore, if killing the hemophiliac infant has no adverse effect on others, it would, according to the total view, be right to kill him. The total view treats infants as replaceable” (2000, p. 190).

He went on to argue that many in society would be aghast at killing an infant with a disability like hemophilia, but without good reason. He argued that such is done regularly before birth, when a mother aborts a child in utero after prenatal diagnosis reveals a disorder. He stated:

When death occurs before birth, replaceability does not conflict with generally accepted moral convictions. That a fetus is known to be disabled is widely accepted as a ground for abortion. Yet in discussing abortion, we say that birth does not mark a morally significant dividing line. I cannot see how one could defend the view that fetuses may be “replaced” before birth, but newborn infants may not (2000, p. 191).

Singer further proposed that parents should be given a certain amount of time after a child is born to decide whether or not they would like to kill the child. He wrote: “If disabled newborn infants were not regarded as having a right to life until, say, a week or a month after birth it would allow parents, in consultation with their doctors, to choose on the basis of far greater knowledge of the infant’s condition than is possible before birth” (2000, p. 193). One has to wonder why Singer would stop at one week or one month. Why not simply say that it is morally right for parents to kill their infants at

one year or five years? Singer concluded his chapter on infanticide with these words: “Nevertheless the main point is clear: **killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person**. Very often it is **not wrong at all**” (p. 193, emp. added). When the logical consequences of atheistic evolution are so clearly spelled out by its adherents, the prospects are grisly indeed.

Animals Kill Their Offspring

Another line of reasoning used to justify abortion (and various other immoral practices) is the idea that since humans are animals, it is right for them to behave like animals. Charles Darwin himself proposed in a chapter of *The Descent of Man*: “My object in this chapter is to shew that there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties” (1871, p. 446). Thus, it is suggested that if we can find an example of animals engaging in an activity, that would provide enough moral justification needed for humans to practice the same. Applying this idea to abortion, Barbara Burke wrote: “Among some animal species, infant killing appears to be a natural practice. Could it be natural for humans too, a trait inherited from our primate ancestors? Charles Darwin noted in *The Descent of Man* that infanticide has been ‘probably the most important of all checks on population growth throughout most of human history’” (1974, 185:653).

Notice that Burke recognizes the fact that humans kill their offspring, and justifies the practice by referring to “analogous” activities in the animal kingdom. Maybe, she reasons, humans kill their infants or unborn children because they inherited the murderous practice from their animal ancestors. By reasoning in this fashion, she attempts, not only to suggest that killing human infants is not morally neutral, but that it could be morally right if the practice is used to check population growth. In this regard, James Rachels wrote:

Finally, if one is nevertheless tempted to believe that humans are psychologically unique, it is useful to remember that the whole enterprise

of experimental psychology, as it is practiced today, assumes otherwise. **Animal behaviour is routinely studied with an eye to acquiring information that can then be applied to humans.** Psychologists who want to investigate maternal behaviour, for example...might study the behaviour of rhesus monkey mothers and infants, assuming that whatever is true of them will be true of humans—because, after all, **they are so much like us** (1990, p. 166, emp. added).

In response to such thinking, several points need to be considered. Humans are not animals. There is no documented evidence verifying the false idea that humans evolved from lower organisms (see Harrub and Thompson, 2002). In fact, all observable evidence verifies that humans maintain a completely unique status in regard to their mental, emotional, and cognitive components (see “In the Image...,” 2001; Lyons and Thompson, 2002). To justify human behavior based on behavior observed in the animal world exhibits a grotesque ignorance of everything humans understand about morality. Ten percent of the diet of an adult Komodo dragon often consists of its cannibalizing young Komodo dragons. Would anyone be so irrationally disturbed as to suggest that, because we see infant cannibalism in Komodo dragons, it would be natural for humans to eat their young as well? Apparently so. James Rachels wrote: “The whole idea of using animals as psychological models for humans is a **consequence of Darwinism. Before Darwin, no one could have taken seriously the thought** that we might learn something about the human mind by studying mere animals” (1990, p. 221, emp. added).

If all conceivable human behavior can be justified based on the idea that it mimics animal behavior, then why not abolish all laws, allow stronger humans to kill the weaker ones, allow mothers to eat their babies, allow men to murder sexual rivals, allow women to murder and cannibalize their lovers after intercourse, and

simply chalk up such a deplorable situation to “nature”? The logical consequences of such philosophical justification are as obvious as they are ridiculous. The ploy to justify abortion (and other equally reprehensible immoralities) by suggesting that it is “natural” is little more than an attempt to cast aside all moral constraints and debase society to the point of mindless bestiality. Yet such is the logical result of atheism.

Death In The Name Of Atheism

Not all atheists are grotesquely immoral people. In fact, many of them would be viewed as moral individuals who do not steal, murder, abuse their children, or violate laws. The point to be made is not that all atheistic thinkers are living out the logical implications of their beliefs. The point is that the philosophy of atheism logically implies that immorality is acceptable or non-existent. It is true that most atheists do not put the implications of their belief into practice, but it is also true that some do, and that their actions cannot be construed to be anything other than what they are—the logical consequences of atheistic, evolutionary thinking.

Of course, “respectable” atheists deny that people commit heinously immoral crimes at the instigation of atheism. As Dawkins has stated: “Individual atheists may do evil things but they don’t do evil things **in the name of atheism**” (Dawkins, 2006, p. 278, emp. added). His assertion is patently false. People often do evil things in the name of atheism. These people understand their evolutionary atheism to be a primary contributing factor to their evil actions, and the full weight of atheism’s logical conclusions justifies their behavior.

Columbine

April 20, 1999 will go down in U.S. history as the date of one of the most nefarious, murderous criminal acts in modern times. Two teenage boys, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, after months of elaborate planning, opened fire on their schoolmates, killing 12 of their peers and one teacher, injuring 23 others, and then committing suicide. Evidence posted on the Web and in written documents

showed that the two teens had concocted detailed plans to kill hundreds of students with homemade explosives, but most of their macabre plans went awry.

Hundreds of police investigators, educators, political leaders, and other professionals delved into the reasons why Harris and Klebold snapped as they did. One eye-opening aspect of the research has been the very clear connection between the evolutionary idea of natural selection and Harris' desire to kill his fellow humans. On the day of the shooting, Harris wore a white T-shirt with the words "Natural Selection" emblazoned on it ("Columbine," 2008). This was not coincidental, but was designed to make a statement. According to the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Report, in a document found in his room, Harris wrote: "I would love to see all you f-----s die. NBK. I love it! sometime [sic] in April me and V will get revenge and will **kick natural selection up a few notches**" (as quoted in "Columbine," 2008, emp. added). His diary also stated: "I will sooner die than betray my own thoughts. but [sic] before I leave this worthless place, I will kill whoever I deem **unfit** for, anything at all, especially life" (as quoted in "Columbine," 2008, emp. added).

In his article titled "Kill Mankind. No One Should Survive," Dave Cullen reported extensively on the investigation surrounding the Columbine massacre. He wrote:

They do consider the human race beneath them," one investigator said. Harris "talks a lot about **natural selection** and that kind of leads into his admiration of Hitler and Nazism and their 'final solution'—that we, the human race have interrupted or disrupted **natural selection** by inventing vaccines and stuff like that. In one of his writings, he talks about that: 'It would be great if there were no vaccines, because people who should have died would have died, and we wouldn't be perpetuating this kind of stuff' (1999, emp. added).

The Columbine killers' evolutionary beliefs cannot be disconnected from their brutal slayings.

Finland Massacre

Another example of this type of relationship between atheism and immoral behavior comes from Finland. An 18-year-old man named Pekka Eric Auvinen marched into his school and shot and killed seven of his schoolmates as well as the headmistress. He then turned the gun on himself and committed suicide. When such gruesome carnage occurs, we naturally ask, "Why?" What would drive a young man like Auvinen to commit such horrific atrocities? In Auvinen's case, the answer is clear.

Auvinen explained the philosophy that led him to commit this dastardly mass murder. On a Web site message board post from before the slaying, he explained that he was a self-avowed "cynical existentialist, anti-human humanist, anti-social social-Darwinist, realistic idealist and god-like **atheist**" ("Teen Dead...", 2007, emp. added). He went on to state: "I, as a **natural selector**, will eliminate all who I see **unfit**, disgraces of human race and failures of **natural selection**" (2007, emp. added). There you have it. The reason he murdered eight innocent people is because he was an atheistic evolutionist who devalued human life and believed that he had the right to destroy any living being who he considered to be less fit than himself.

As much as evolutionists insist on separating themselves from such disgusting displays of immorality, the logical implications of their godlessness tie them indubitably to Auvinen's actions. The only thing that separates Auvinen from other atheists is that he acted out the logical implications of his atheistic belief. It is high time atheism's immorality is recognized, repudiated, and exposed for the reprehensible fruit it bears.

Jeffrey Dahmer

Jeffrey Dahmer was one of the most notorious serial killers in modern history. He murdered 17 men and boys, dismembered them, stored human body parts in his apartment, practiced homosexual necrophilia and cannibalized his victims (Dahmer, 1994, p. 10). He

was convicted of 15 counts of murder and sentenced to serve over 900 years in prison. During his incarceration, he was murdered by another inmate.

When a person perpetrates such brutal and deranged crimes against his fellow man, natural questions that arise in the minds of those who hear the details include: Why would a person commit such heinous crimes? What would cause a person to become such a murderer? In Jeffrey Dahmer's case, he supplied the world with the answer.

In 1994, Stone Phillips interviewed Jeffrey Dahmer and his father Lionel Dahmer for NBC's *Dateline*. In that interview, Stone Phillips asked Jeffrey Dahmer several questions regarding the possible causes of Dahmer's behavior. In one portion of the interview, Jeffrey explained that he took complete and personal responsibility for his actions, and his crimes could not be blamed on his parents, school, or other external circumstances. Following those remarks, Jeffrey said: "There comes a point where a person has to be accountable for what he's done." His father, Lionel, then asked him: "Let me ask. When did you first feel that everyone is accountable for their actions?" Jeffrey responded:

Well, thanks to you for sending that creation science material. Because **I always believed the lie that evolution is truth**, the theory of evolution is truth. That we all just came from the slime, and when we died, you know, that was it. There was nothing. **So the whole theory cheapens life....** And I've since come to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the true Creator of the Earth. It didn't just happen (Phillips, 1994, emp. added).

Lionel Dahmer then began to discuss the period of time during Jeffrey's upbringing that he thought most influenced Jeffrey's murderous behavior. Lionel said: "At that period of time I had drifted

away from a belief in a Supreme Being. And I never, as a result, passed along the feeling that we are all accountable. In the end, He owns us. And that basic concept is very fundamental to all of us.”

Stone Phillips then asked Lionel: “You feel that the absence, at least for a while, of a strong religious faith and belief may have prevented you from instilling some of that in Jeff?” Lionel responded: “That’s right.” Phillips then turned to Jeffrey and asked: “Is that how you feel?” Jeffrey responded to Phillips’ question: “Yes, I think that had a big part to do with it. If a person doesn’t think that there is a God to be accountable to, then what’s the point of trying to modify your behavior to keep it within acceptable ranges? That’s how I thought, anyway” (Phillips, 1994).

To what, then, did Dahmer attribute his gruesome, horrifying crimes? He simply said he believed that evolution is true, that humans arose from primordial slime, and that there is no personal accountability inherent in the theory. Dahmer understood the logical implications of atheistic evolution perfectly. Dahmer’s behavior appalls society because he had the brains and drive to put the theoretical implications into practice in real life. When he did, society was justifiably outraged at his behavior. But such outrage is justifiable only in the context of a God to Whom all people are accountable. Without such accountability, Dahmer was right to conclude: “What’s the point of trying to modify your behavior to keep it within acceptable ranges?” Dahmer is yet another example of a person who committed heinously evil crimes in the name of atheism.

Conclusion

The psalmist wrote: “The fool has said in his heart “There is no God”” (Psalm 14:1). The inspired writer then explained what happens to a person or society that comes to such an atheistic conclusion: “They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none who does good” (Psalm 14:1). The lesson and manuscript presented here has for its purpose to document the grotesque ways that the philosophy of atheism condones and encourages immorality. Having done that, it is our responsibility as Christians to make known the

logical, immoral implications of atheism to those in our society, and to encourage those with whom we come in contact to avoid this far country of sin and immorality.

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CHAPTER 6

The Far Country Of Denominationalism

B. J. Clarke

Introduction

You will not find it on a map, but it is one of the most populated countries on earth. You cannot book a flight to this place, nor can you drive to its location, but people travel there all the time. In fact, multiplied millions of people have not only visited this place—they have taken up residency there, and have lived in this country for years. What is this place? It is the “far country of Denominationalism.”

Because such a country is never mentioned in geography courses, a number of questions are in order. When did this “far country of Denominationalism” come into existence? Who are its residents, and how did they become such? Just how far is the far country of denominationalism? Can you get there from here? Is it safe there? Can you get to heaven from there? If not, how does one leave the far country of denominationalism?

When Was The “Far Country Of Denominationalism” Established?

The church of our Lord—the very one eternally purposed by God (King James Version, Eph. 3:9-11), prophesied of by the prophets (2 Sam. 7:12ff; Isa. 2:1-3; et. al), and prepared for by John (Mat. 3:1ff), Jesus (Mat. 4:17; Mat. 16:18-19), the apostles and other disciples (Luke 10:1-17)—was finally presented on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). About 3000 of those who heard the Word, gladly welcomed it and were baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38-41). These 3000 were simultaneously added to the Lord’s church (Acts 2:41;

Acts 2:47). It is absolutely vital to observe that, in their act of obedience, not one of them became a resident of the “far country of Denominationalism.” Instead, they simply became members of the Lord’s church.

This crucial distinction must be recognized in order to identify properly the “far country of Denominationalism.” Even members of the church all too often underappreciate the fundamental distinction between the Lord’s church and manmade denominationalism. We cannot assume that people know what we mean by the use of the term *denominationalism*. We must take the time to explain the meaning of the term. Brother N. B. Hardeman did just that in one of his famed Tabernacle sermons, preached at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1922. He asked:

What is a denomination? It is a religious organization larger than a local church, smaller than the redeemed in the aggregate. Therefore it comes in between, separate and distinct from, the church of the Bible at both ends of the line. How is the church used? It is either a local congregation or it embraces all Christians. Now, a denomination stands between these, and therefore, it is a thing unheard of and unknown in the Bible; and I say that cautiously, respectfully, and yet firmly. (226-27)

Thus, denominationalism developed **after** the establishment of the Lord’s church on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). How long, after the establishment of the church, did it take until the “far country of Denominationalism” came into being? Tragically, this “far country” was not very far away, time wise. The Lord’s church did not exist for long before men started adding to, and subtracting from, the Word of God. By so doing, they created a religion that was different from the one the Lord established. In fact, the doctrines and commandments of men (Mat. 15:8-14) created a multiplicity

of religious organizations, all of which were/are different than the church of Christ, the church that was/is governed by the apostles' doctrine (Acts 2:42).

Who Are The Residents Of This Far Country?

1. Judaizers. Some of the very first residents of the “far country of Denominationalism” were the Judaizers. The books of Romans, Galatians, and Hebrews all deal with the problems and apostasy caused by the Judaizers. The Judaizers consisted of a group of teachers who influenced Jewish Christians to depart from the gospel of Christ to return to the practice of Judaism. In so doing, they created a religious group that separated itself from the church the Lord established on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. To separate oneself from the Lord's church, and yet claim still to be in religious fellowship with God, is the very essence of denominationalism.

2. Gnostics. The apostasy of the first century was not limited to those who forsook Christianity to go back to the Law of Moses. The book of Colossians reveals that some of the members of the Lord's church were being duped by “philosophy and vain deceit,” by a heresy that was “after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ” (Col. 2:8). This philosophy was likely one of the first manifestations of a heretical movement, eventually known as Gnosticism. The Gnostic view was that all matter is evil; therefore, the body is truly evil, and thus, it is alleged, God could not have become human flesh without contaminating Himself. The apostle John met the apostasy of Gnosticism head-on (1 John 4:1-3) because it constituted a group who separated themselves from the church to form their own religious group (1 John 2:19).

3. Catholics. In spite of the clear pattern for church organization outlined in the New Testament (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17-28; Phi. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), church history reveals that gradual changes in the form of church government paved the way to apostasy and ultimately to the development of the Roman Catholic Church.

With these developments, certain elders began to call themselves Bishops in an attempt to exalt and distinguish themselves in rank and authority from the other elders with whom they served. The preeminence of men began replacing the preeminence of Christ (Col. 1:18; 3 John 9). It was not long before primacy became the obsessive, all-consuming quest of the metropolitan bishops. Predictably, the “chief elders” of the local congregations began to squabble as to who among them would be the Chief of the chiefs. The erroneous doctrine that Peter was the Chief of all the apostles lay the foundation for the subsequent doctrine that Peter was, in fact, the universal bishop of the entire church. Hence, it was not long until certain men began to proclaim themselves to be successors of Peter, the Universal Bishop of all bishops, an office which eventually became known as the “papa” i.e., “pope.”

Often times at the behest of the pope, pretentious councils of men convened to discuss the policies of the Roman Catholic Church. The men who comprised these councils had the propensity to follow their own wills rather than the will of God. Therefore, it is not surprising that the decrees of these men precipitated even more departures from the Word of God.

4. Protestants. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was raised as a Catholic, educated as a Catholic, and eventually entered a monastery. Nevertheless, the more he studied the Bible the more disenchanted he became with Roman Catholic doctrine. He was especially incensed when he saw the great poverty of the people, which had been caused by the sale of indulgences. This led him to write down his **protest** against the abuses of indulgences (and other Catholic doctrines) and on October 31, 1517, he nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the church building at Wittenburg.

Word of his protest traveled swiftly, even reaching the papal court. The Roman Catholic Church tried to find some way to thwart his influence and halt his teaching. In 1518, Pope Leo X summoned him to appear in Rome. In 1520, he burned the papal bull (a document sent directly from the pope) that demanded that he recant his position. Another bull was prepared in January of 1521 for the

purpose of excommunicating Luther. When called upon to recant at the Diet of Worms, he firmly refused. He said:

Unless I shall be convinced by the testimonies of the Scriptures or by evident reason (for I believe neither Pope nor councils alone, since it is manifest they have often erred and contradicted themselves) I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted, and my conscience is held captive by the Word of God; and as it is neither safe nor right to act against conscience, I can not and will not retract anything. (Rowe 36)

Regrettably, for all of his spoken allegiance to the Word of God, Luther, like many others, was more interested in **reforming** the Catholic Church than he was in **restoring** the one church about which we read in the New Testament. Thus, instead of moving out of the far country of Denominationalism, Luther and his followers merely multiplied its population. Luther overreacted to the Catholic emphasis upon human works and swung to the other end of the pendulum, teaching that salvation is by faith only. Unable to refute the force of James 2:24, which clearly teaches that justification is not by faith only, Luther simply discounted the book of James, calling it a “right strawy epistle.”

Tragically, although Luther did some good in seeking to turn men away from the errors of Catholicism, he did eternal damage in developing and promoting the false doctrine of salvation by faith only. How many multiplied thousands of people have died lost, erroneously thinking that they had been saved by faith only?

John Calvin (1509-1564) was another prominent protestant against Roman Catholic teachings. This is remarkable, considering that Calvin was born to Roman Catholic parents. Moreover, his father was determined that John would become a Catholic priest. At the tender age of fourteen, John began his studies at the University of Paris. He attended the University of Orleans in 1528 to study law.

While there, Calvin became captivated with classical literature. In fact, when his father died in 1531, John Calvin returned to Paris to study the literary classics.

In 1533, John Calvin claimed that he experienced a sudden and emotional conversion, a conversion that would change his entire course in life. It was during this year that Calvin abandoned the Roman Catholic religion and began promoting “reformation ideas” in opposition to the Catholic Church. After his “conversion” from Roman Catholicism, he spent three years in seclusion. During this time, he authored the “Institutes of Christian Religion,” and in 1536, (at age 26) he published his first edition.

As Calvin’s theology began to take on more shape, it eventually took on a name of its own: Calvinism. While we freely appreciate every effort that John Calvin exerted to oppose the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, we must also point out that there is hardly a denomination on the face of the earth that has not been tainted by the false doctrine of Calvinism. Gospel preachers have spent as much time trying to undo the damning effects of Calvinism as John Calvin spent trying to undo the damnable effects of Catholicism. Both Catholicism and Calvinism fall short, far short, of measuring up to the standard of truth revealed in the New Testament.

In truth, the work of men like Luther and Calvin led people away from one region of the “far country of Denominationalism” right into another. They led multitudes from the state of Catholicism right into the state of Protestant denominationalism. As one Protestant group splintered off from another, new denominations were born. These denominational churches have continued to proliferate and subdivide until the present moment, and the ugly picture of a fragmented and sorely confused religious world is the consequence.

5. Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and such like. In short, the “far country of Denominationalism” is populated by any and all religions that do not match up with the church our Lord established on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). It is truly sad that this denominational country is populated with so many different groups that it is impossible to discuss them in all in a single volume, much

less a single chapter. This division, obviously, is contrary to the desire of God (1 Cor. 1:10ff).

You Can't Get There From Here!

Sometimes, when you ask someone for directions to a particular place, they will respond with a wry smile, "You can't get there from here!" Although this statement is spoken usually in jest, if someone were to ask how to get to the "far country of Denominationalism," it would be perfectly appropriate to say, "You can't get there from here." How is this so? Look at the parentheses in following statement and you will see this to be true: "You can't get there (to the far country of Denominationalism) from here (the Bible). In other words, if you insist on getting your doctrine only from the Bible, you will never end up in the far country of Denominationalism! Consider this truth from two vantage points:

1. If you follow the Bible only, you will never end up in a church other than the church that was established on the Day of Pentecost. We know that a church was established on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41; Acts 2:47), but what church was it? Perhaps the better way to ask the question is "Whose church was it?" Would anyone dare to affirm that the church established in Acts 2 belonged to the Pope of Rome? Was it the church belonging to Martin Luther? John Calvin? Was it the church of John Wesley? Whose church was it, anyway? Obviously, the church we read about in Acts 2 was the church belonging to Christ. After all, He is the builder of the church (Mat. 16:18), the purchaser of the church (Acts 20:28) and the head of the church (Col. 1:18).

If you had been present on Pentecost and you had asked those who were baptized to tell you what church they were members of, how would they have replied? Would they have identified themselves as members of some well-known modern-day denomination? If someone had asked those who were baptized on Pentecost, "what denomination are you a member of," the multitudes saved on that day would have been bewildered and confused by the question; there were no modern-day denominations in existence at that time. There

were sectarian religious groups in existence (such as the Pharisees and the Sadducees), but there were no modern day denominational churches in existence at that time. Indeed, there was a church in existence at that time, but it was not a manmade denominational organization. Those who were baptized on Pentecost were added to the church of Christ, i.e., the church that belonged to Christ.

Consequently, when Paul wrote the Romans he said, “The churches of Christ salute you” (Rom. 16:16). When Paul referred to “the churches of Christ” he was referring to that group of individuals who had been called out of the world to become members of the church built and bought by Christ, the church of Christ!

One thing is absolutely certain—there is not a word said in Acts 2 about the 3000, which were baptized, subsequently joining a denomination. On the contrary, the moment that the Pentecostians received the remission of sins, they were simultaneously added by the Lord to His church (Acts 2:41; Acts 2:47). No one voted them into a denomination, for there were no denominations in existence and since God had already added them to the church of His Son Jesus Christ, they did not need to join another one.

Regrettably, many see no difference between a denomination and the church you read about in the Bible. Brother Hardeman asked his Ryman auditorium audience, in 1922, to consider the differences:

Is the church of the Bible a denomination? I would have you think candidly, unprejudiced and unbiased in mind, as you thus contemplate. I repeat it: Is the church about which you read in the Bible, the church for which Christ gave his blood, the church of which Christ said, “Upon this rock I will build my church”—is that a denomination? If so, which one? Out of the one hundred and sixty-four, which one is Christ talking about? Why, as a matter of facts, my friends, for fifteen hundred years after the Son of God died a felon’s death on the cross there was

not a denomination known in all the annals of history. Our denominationalism is of modern origin. It does not so much as belong to the study of ancient history, but to medieval and modern; and, as a matter of fact, I believe, in common with you, that when we read the Bible in the privacy of our homes and in the anxiety of our souls to learn God's will—when we read about the church there, I doubt if any of us then have in mind that we are reading about some denomination. The fact is that out of the one hundred and sixty-four that are mentioned in our government records, there is not a shadow of a record of any of them in the word of God. (225-26)

Brother Hardeman went on to make the outstanding observation that when you want to find out about the many denominations, which are on the earth, you do not need the Bible “for you can take the Bible and memorize it from lid to lid, and you would be no wiser about denominations than at the beginning. Why? Because the Bible says not a word about them” (Hardeman 226). In other words, if you want to read and learn about denominationalism, you cannot get there from here (the Bible)!

2. If you follow the Bible only, you will never teach a doctrine other than the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9) and the apostles' doctrine (Mat. 16:18-19; Acts 2:42). Tragically, in the years after the Lord's church was established, men were not willing to adhere to the Bible only. Instead, they added their own doctrines to the Word of God and subtracted from their practice things that were plainly required in the Word of God. The list of false doctrines below represents but a sampling of these departures. When it comes to finding Divine approval for these doctrines, “you can't get there from here (the Bible)!”

1) The introduction of “Holy Water” was introduced about 120 A. D. Alexander, a bishop of the church taught that water

for baptism must first be blessed and consecrated for religious purposes (Brumback 19). However, there is not a single Scripture that supports such a notion. Consequently, you cannot get to the denominational doctrine of “Holy Water” from here (the Bible)!

2) The observance of Lent can be traced back to Telsephorus, a bishop at Rome, who, about 140 A. D. set aside 40 days as a period of fasting on the basis of an alleged apostolic tradition (Rowe 262). Yet, this doctrine did not come from the Word of God. You cannot get there (Lent) from here (the Bible)!

3) The origin of priestly robes was borrowed from Judaism and included in the Church in 257 A. D. by Stephen, bishop of Rome (Rowe 265). It is not in the New Testament. You cannot get there (priestly robes) from here (the Bible)!

4) Around 305 A. D. compulsory celibacy began to take root despite the clear Bible teaching of 2 Timothy 4:1-4, 1 Corinthians. 9:5-6, and Matthew 8:14. The doctrine was enforced with more vigor beginning in 1074 A. D., (Rowe 272) but the aforementioned passages prove that you cannot get there (compulsory celibacy) from here (the Bible)!

5) The first record of the practice of sprinkling came in 250 A.D. when Novation, who was sick, had water sprinkled upon him as a substitute for baptism. It did not come into general use until after the eight century when Pope Stephen III legalized it. Even then, it was not until the Council of Ravenna (1311) that sprinkling was declared to be as authoritative as immersion (Brumback 34). However, the Bible clearly teaches that baptism is a burial (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12; Acts 8:38) in much water (John 3:23). You can get there (sprinkling) from the doctrines and commandments of men, but you cannot get there (sprinkling) from here (the Bible)!

6) Origen is credited with advancing the doctrine of Purgatory as early as 220 A.D. The doctrine suggests that certain souls (who have not committed mortal sins) will be punished only temporarily in hell until the penalty for their sins has been

satisfied (Brumback 32). Such a doctrine is completely absent from the Scriptures, thus proving that you cannot get there (Purgatory) from here (the Bible)!

7) The practice of praying for the dead came into practice about 380 A.D. (Rowe 278). Praying to the dead began about a century later. But where do we read of such a practice in the Bible? We do not read of such and thus you cannot get there (praying for and to the dead) from here (the Bible)!

8) The practice of private confession to a priest, also known as auricular confession began in 390 A.D. However, it did not become a universal practice of the Catholic Church until 1215 when Pope Innocent III made it a fixed part of the doctrine of the church (Brumback 57). This practice began much too late to be a part of the apostles' doctrine, not to mention that there is one mediator between God and man, the Man, Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5). Therefore, you cannot get there (confessing to a priest) from here (the Bible)!

9) The worship and veneration of images began at the beginning of the 6th century (Rowe 299). Yet, Jesus said we should worship only God (Mat. 4:10). Consequently, you cannot get there (to worship and venerate images) from here (the Bible).

10) In the year 666 A.D., Pope Vitalian approved the use of an organ in the worship of the Roman church. Despite his decision, it would be many years before the practice of instrumental music would be well received by the Catholic Church in general. Brumback observes:

There is just as much authority for the mass, the worship of images, for purgatory, and for the adoration of Mary as there is for instrumental music in church worship. Not until the apostasy developed and the papacy was formed did mechanical music find its way into the church worship. There is no mention of its use in the

New Testament church nor any mention of it by the apostles. For hundreds of years after the death of the apostles there is no mention of its use. Ambrose, Chrysostum, Eusebius and Basil wrote much about the worship of the church but they do not make mention of mechanical aids to the worship....No one who is guided by the scriptures can be led to believe that instrumental music was connected with the worship of the early church. (75-6)

Rowe adds, “The general introduction of instrumental music can certainly not be assigned to a date earlier than the fifth or sixth centuries” (319). Thus, when it comes to using instrumental music with God’s authority, “you can’t get there from here (the Bible)!”

11) The Second Council of Nice (787 A.D.) upheld the idea that the literal body and blood of Jesus were present in the elements of the Lord’s Supper (Rowe 329). In spite of these Catholic claims, “you can’t get there from here (the Bible).”

12) Pope Pascal I promised that the torments of purgatory could be shortened by the payment of certain sums of money. The doctrine was expanded to teach that one could purchase indulgences, i.e., forgiveness for sins not yet committed. By the year 1190, this doctrine was a major part of the doctrine of the Catholic Church (Brumback 82). There is not a scintilla of Scripture to support this heresy. You cannot get there (purgatory) from here (the Bible)!

13) The Fourth Council of Constantinople (A.D. 869) passed a decree recognizing tradition as equal in authority to Holy Scripture (Rowe 338). In spite of these Catholic claims, passages like 2 Timothy 3:16-17, 2 Peter 1:3, and Jude 3 show that the Bible is sufficient. You cannot get there (the view that tradition has as much authority as Scripture) from here (the Word of God)!

14) In A.D. 1229 the Council of Toulouse wrote: “We forbid also the permitting of the laity to have the books of the Old and New Testament.” Later, Pope Gregory IX would argue that the “Holy Mother Church” alone had the right to interpret the Scriptures (Rowe 425). Yet, the Bible encourages individuals to read and study the Scriptures (1 Tim. 4:13) in order to understand the Scriptures (Eph. 3:3-5; Eph. 5:17). You cannot get there (the sovereign right of the Church to interpret Scriptures) from here (the Bible).

15) In 1870 A.D. the Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church declared that the pope was infallible in matters of doctrine and morals. The Bible does not authorize the existence of the pope, much less affirm his infallibility! Only Christ is the perfect Head of the church (Col. 1:18). So, you cannot get there (infallibility of the pope) from here (the Bible).

On and on we could go listing the bizarre and unbiblical doctrines advanced by the Catholic Church. However, you cannot get to any of these doctrines from here (the Bible)!

With reference to Protestant theology, Calvinism has by far been the most influential. It contains five basic planks: (1) Men are totally depraved by virtue of inheriting such a sinful nature from their parents and ancestors. (2) God has chosen a definite number from all eternity to be recipients of eternal life, without faith or works or any other thing on the part of man as a condition. (3) Jesus died only for those whom God elected to be saved. His atonement was limited. The benefits of His death were not for all men. (4) Only those who were elected, and for whom Christ died, would receive the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. This miraculous power, exerted upon their hearts by the Holy Spirit, would be irresistible. (5) The elect saints will always persevere in their relationship with God. Such persons cannot fall away and be lost. These five planks of Calvinism can be summarized and easily recalled by means of a well-known acrostic.

- Total Hereditary Depravity
- Unconditional Election
- Limited Atonement
- Irresistible Grace
- Perseverance of the Saints

As you can see, combining the first letter of each of the five major premises of Calvinism gives us the word *TULIP*. Hence, some have said that the flower that changed the religious world is the “TULIP” of Calvinism. However, when you look at this “flower” under the microscope of Scripture, you quickly see that “you can’t get there (Calvinism) from here (the Bible)!”

You Can’t Get There From There!

What? The above statement actually makes sense if you read it as follows: “You can’t get there (to heaven) from there (the far country of denominationalism).” Interestingly, even the leaders and members of denominational churches admit, “You can get there (to heaven) without coming from here/there (the far country of denominationalism).” In other words, Denominationalists do not believe that it is necessary to hold membership in a particular denomination in order to be saved. Brother Hardeman addresses this very matter:

Well, then, does a man have to become a member of a denomination in order to be saved? Why, there is not a man on earth that would tell you he does. Get it! If I can, therefore, be saved from sin and be saved in heaven without becoming a member of a denomination, then what reason is there upon the earth for the existence of a thing that is admittedly nonessential to the salvation of the souls of men? (227)

While we agree that one can go to heaven without being a member of a denomination, this statement does not take us far

enough. It is not just a question of whether you can get to heaven without going through the far country of denominationalism. It is a question of whether you can get there (to heaven) without being a member of the church that belongs to Christ. What if someone is a member of a denomination but not a member of the church of Jesus Christ? Can they get there (to heaven) from there (the far country of denominationalism)?

This is tantamount to asking, “Must one be a member of the church of Christ in order to be saved?” Brother Hardeman was not intimidated to answer this question, nor should we be frightened by the query. In providing the answer, he gave an excellent and simple illustration:

I said that God located the life of a fish and put that location in water; and if a fish ever enjoys that kind of life, it must get into that realm where God saw fit to designate and locate it. Just so has God Almighty located the life of a Christian. Where has he located salvation? Mark the idea. Just two places, just two kingdoms—the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil. Where are God’s children? They are inside of God’s family. It is not complimentary for you to suggest that God has children outside of the family. That is not even complimentary to say regarding men. God’s children—Christians, the saved, the redeemed—are in the family of God, which is the church of God, “the pillar and ground of the truth.” (227)

In answering the question of whether men must be members of the church of Christ in order to be saved, we must clarify what we mean when we speak of the “church of Christ.” Men have become so used to denominationalism that it is hard for them to think undenominationally. However, once they see the distinction

between the church we read about in the Bible, and modern-day denominations, it is revolutionary in its effect. Some years ago, after a series of studies with a Methodist couple, the light went on in the mind of the wife, who said to me excitedly, “Wait a minute—you’re not asking us to leave our denomination for the Church of Christ denomination. You’re asking us to leave denominationalism altogether and just be members of the church of Christ we read about in the New Testament.” When I assured her she was exactly right, she said, “Shall we go to the pond?” She and her husband were baptized at the church building, the same hour of the night, to be added to Christ’s church, the church belonging to Christ, the undenominational, pre-denominational church of Christ (Acts 2:41; Acts 2:47; Rom. 16:16).

The Book of Ephesians also proves decisively that you cannot get there (heaven) from there (the far country of denominationalism). According to the inspired apostle Paul, (1) There is one body (Eph. 4:4); (2) The body is the same thing as the church (Eph. 1:22-23); (3) Jesus will save only those who are in His one body, the church (Eph. 5:23). Therefore, there is only one church and only those who are in that one church will be saved. This may sound narrow-minded in our broad-minded age, but it is what the Bible teaches and we must not shy away from this Biblical fact. Just as the saved had to be in Noah’s ark (1 Pet. 3:20-21), and just as the saved had to be in Rahab’s house (Jos. 2:18-21; Jos. 6:22-25), so today the saved must be in the house of God, which is the church of the living God (1 Tim. 3:15).

You Can Get Back From There!

What if someone is already in the far country of denominationalism? It is obvious from the preceding section that it is not safe to remain there! But is there any way to get back to safe ground? The good news is that, if you are in the far country of denominationalism, **you can get back from there!** How so? The way back is to reverse the steps that led one into the far country of denominationalism. This far country became populated when men added to the Word of God and subtracted from the Word of God. As

noted earlier, some sought to correct these errors by reforming the Catholic Church. Rowe offers the following excellent comments:

We accept the good that preceding reformers have accomplished, and honor those who have rescued the Bible from the grasp of a despotic hierarchy, but whatever they taught contrary to God's Word, we reject. What the early reformers left undone, we propose to complete; by which we mean an entire restoration of the ancient order of things, in faith and practice, in doctrine and discipline. (37)

In the above quotation, we find the prescription that would drive millions and millions out of the far country of Denominationalism, and into the blood-bought church of Christ. It is the same prescription given by Peter: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (1 Pet. 4:11). Speaking where the Bible speaks involves two primary things: (1) speaking *only* that which is in accordance with the truth of the Bible (not adding to the Word of God), and (2) speaking *all* that the Bible says (not subtracting from the Word of God).

This restoration mentality is displayed for us in several passages. Space limitations allow us to examine briefly only three.

1. When God struck Uzza dead for touching the ark of the covenant, King David was displeased, and asked, "How shall I bring the ark of God home to me?" (1 Chr. 13:12). The answer to David's question was as close as the nearest copy of the Law of Moses. God's original instructions charged the Levites, particularly the sons of Kohath, to carry the ark of the covenant, using the staves that were in the rings by the sides of the ark (Num. 4:4-15; Exod. 25:12-15). In fact, God prohibited the sons of Kohath from using any oxen or oxen carts "because the service of the sanctuary belonging unto them was that they should bear upon their shoulders" (Num. 7:9).

Yet, in direct opposition to God's original instructions, the people of God "carried the ark of God in a new cart . . . and Uzza and

Ahio drave the cart” (1 Chr. 13:7). Thus, the stage was set for disaster. The oxen stumbled, Uzza reached, and God administered the death penalty (1 Chr. 13:9-10). Although David was initially displeased that God struck Uzza dead, by the time we get to 1 Chronicles 15, we find David setting in motion a restoration of God’s original blueprint for transporting the ark. He said, “None ought to carry the ark of God but the Levites: for them hath the Lord chosen to carry the ark of God, and to minister unto him for ever” (1 Chr. 15:2, emp. mine, BJC). He frankly admitted that they had failed to follow “after the due order” (1 Chr. 15:13). The children of the Levites accomplished the restoration of the original plan when they “bare the ark of God upon their shoulders with the staves thereon, as Moses commanded according to the word of the Lord” (1 Chr. 15:15). This introductory example demonstrates that there is often a need for restoration because man so often abandons God’s original pattern.

2. As a young king, Josiah set in motion a restoration movement. When he was twenty years old, he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places where idol gods were worshipped. Jehovah’s commandment to worship Him and Him alone (Exo. 20:3-5) had been ignored and abandoned by God’s people. Josiah sought to restore the practice of monotheistic worship and removed the altars, images, and groves. He even went so far as to burn the bones of the priests upon their altars (2 Chr. 34:3-7). After accomplishing this task, he immediately sought to restore the house of God to its rightful state.

In the midst of these repairs a book of the law of the Lord, given by Moses, was found (2 Chr. 34:14). Shaphan the scribe took the book and read it before the king. Upon hearing it, the king rent his clothes and said, “Great is the wrath of the Lord that is poured out upon us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the Lord, to do after all that is written in this book” (2 Chr. 34:19-21). So determined was Josiah to restore the practice of God’s laws, he called all the people together and read in their ears all the words of the book of the covenant that was found in the house of the Lord. Immediately following this reading he publicly pledged to perform all the words

of the covenant that were written in the book. Josiah asked all who were present to take the same stand.

This commitment to restoration was not just a passing fancy. Josiah was not only interested in eliminating evil practices from among God's people, but he was also concerned with restoring practices that God had required which had long been forgotten. Thus, when Josiah learned from reading the book of the law of the Lord that a passover was to be kept on the fourteenth day of the first month, he immediately restored that practice. Scripture tells us that this particular passover had not been kept, at this time, since the days of Samuel the prophet. None of the kings preceding Josiah had ever kept it on the fourteenth day of the first month, as God's Word required. But in the eighteenth year of the reign of Josiah, this passover was kept (2 Chr. 35:1; 2 Chr. 35:17-19).

3. A final example of this restoration principle is recorded in Nehemiah 8:1-18. Upon hearing the words of the law read and explained, the people discovered that God expected them to dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month. This commandment had not been observed since the days of Joshua! Yet, the people immediately restored this practice.

These examples demonstrate not only the validity of restoration, but also its necessity. When God's way has been abandoned, it is our duty to return to it. Please observe the reverence of these people for God's Word. They had more respect for God's Word than they did for their family members who had neglected it in the years before them. Also note that Josiah was not an originator of the command to keep the passover. The command had long been in existence before Josiah was ever born. Thus, he was not an originator, but a restorer.

Similarly, when men like Alexander Campbell, Barton W. Stone, and countless others in the early 1800's, began to go to the book of the law of Christ and discover practices that they should eliminate, and others that they should begin keeping, they were not originators, but restorers. The people in Josiah's day did not keep the passover merely because Josiah told them to do so. They realized that Josiah was pointing them back to the authority of Scripture to keep such a

passover. Likewise, there is not one doctrine that we believe merely because of Alexander Campbell, or any other restoration pioneer. I lovingly challenge anyone to point to even one doctrine taught by faithful churches of Christ that has as its sole authority, the man Alexander Campbell. Campbell sought to point men back to the book of the law of the Lord as the authority for all matters of faith and practice.

The examples cited above show that the desire to return to the book of inspiration for guidance in restoring the practice of God's law is both valid and necessary. Those in the time of David, and in the days of Josiah and Ezra, were concerned about following the divine pattern as revealed in God's Word. We must seek to create within the hearts of modern man today the burning desire to go back to the book of the perfect law of liberty, and to use it, and it alone, as the standard for all that we do religiously.

If all would determine to go back to the Bible and the Bible alone for our rule of faith and practice, then the far country of denominationalism would quickly go the way of ancient Babylon, Tyre, Assyria, etc. The residents of this country would abandon it and return to the heavenly country of which we read in the Bible. All creeds, dogmas, disciplines, manuals, catechisms, and policies of men would be cast aside and replaced with the legislation from the sole head and chief monarch of the church, Jesus Christ (Col. 1:18; Eph. 5:23).

Our task is to motivate men to hearken unto Jesus and the apostles through whom He spoke (Mat. 17:5; Acts 3:22; John 16:12-15; 1 Cor. 2:9-16). If we could accomplish such a task, religious division (as it exists today) would vanish away and the restoration of primitive Christianity would be realized. Therefore, let us lovingly, clearly, and urgently call this world back to the Bible, and as we do so, let us make sure that we speak where the Bible speaks, and that we are silent where it is silent!

Conclusion

A little girl was walking to church services with her father. Missing her mother, who attended another church, she said, “Daddy, does God do all things for the best?” Daddy replied, “Well sure, honey. God does all things for the best.” Tearfully, the girl responded, “Daddy, if God does all things for the best, why didn’t He make just one church so you, me, and Momma, could all go together?” God did make just one church, but, sadly, man polluted it with the doctrines and commandments of men (Mat. 15:8-9; 1 Tim. 4:1ff). To get back to the undenominational church of Christ, we must go back beyond the pollutions of men to the pure seed of the kingdom, the Word of God (Luke 8:11).

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CHAPTER 7

The Far Country of Liberalism

Gary Colley

It is always a pleasure to be associated with the good brethren of the Southaven church of Christ. We commend the director, Wade Webster, the elders, and every member of the congregation for the extensive preparation for this work. No doubt many will be blessed because of these studies, both in hearing the lectures and also in reading the book.

Introduction

The church of Christ is the most important institution ever established in the world. It was planned, prophesied, and promised by the eternal God of Heaven (King James Version, Eph. 2:19-22; Eph. 3:20-21). There is a golden thread of promises beginning in Genesis 3:15 and continuing to the birth of Christ, His death, His burial, and His resurrection, pointing to the redemption offered in the church of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-3). The church of Christ is made up of those who obey Jesus' commands, who are called out of the world by the Gospel (Acts 2:41; Acts 2:47; Acts 4:12; 2 The. 2:14). All nations were brought into one body, with the promise of salvation in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son (John 3:16; Eph. 4:4-6). Jesus' words in Matthew 16:16-19 present an interesting and timely picture to which we can relate. He speaks of:

1. A foundation
2. The building on that foundation
3. The Architect
4. The One Who holds the keys
5. Hades trying to prevent building of the church

There are also five promises contained in these few verses of Scripture that have great magnitude:

1. I will build.
2. Gates of Hades shall not prevent its building.
3. I will give thee the keys of the kingdom.
4. Whatsoever thou shalt bind (forbid) is bound.
5. Whatsoever thou shalt loose (permit) is loosed.

The church was brought forth, built, established, and begun in harmony with the promises and fulfilled prophecies on the notable day of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit's power was given to the chosen apostles (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16-21; Acts 2:4). The coming of Jesus Christ and the Gospel which He brought is the only hope of the lost world (Mark 16:15-16). The Word of God is not only a love letter to the lost, but also the pattern for those called out of the world to follow, copy, imitate, and live by in the world (Rom. 10:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). To add to His Word, to take from it, or to change it in any way will be rewarded with eternal punishment (Rev. 22:18-19).

Some Have Departed

There are two extremes that are troubling the church of Christ today, Anti-ism and Liberalism. Though all in the churches of Christ have been blessed with all spiritual blessings "in Christ" (Eph.1:3), still some have departed from God's plan of salvation either by adding to or subtracting from God's Word. Webster's New World Dictionary defines *liberalism* as: "1. the quality or state of being liberal, especially in politics or religion. 2. liberal principles or ideals" ("Liberalism").

This defines the departure and digression from the Truth called liberalism, which is never right nor is it pleasing to our Heavenly Father (Gal. 1:6-9). Our nation's departure from the Constitution and the intentions of our founding fathers into liberalism has left us in a state of chaos and with a shaken foundation. Going beyond or

leaving the proper standard of God's Word will also bring the church to desolation (Heb. 5:12; 2 John 9-11). In this state of confusion, the churches of Christ lose their reason for existing! If we change every glorious distinctive quality that makes us the New Testament church of Christ, we lose our identity and become just another denomination! When one binds where the Lord has loosed, or looses where the Lord has bound, it constitutes departure and digression (Mat. 16:18-19).

Our Enemy Is Satan

There are those who are now following Satan in his desire to change God's Word, and thereby have gone into the far country of liberalism! (Gen. 3:4; 1 Pet. 5:8). That is, they have left the pattern., safety, comfort, and saving state of the Father's house, just as did the prodigal son when he "took his journey into a far country" (Luke 15:11-24). We need to go back to teaching the fundamentals of the faith. If men are not grounded in the fundamentals, they are more readily open and ready to accept the approaches of liberalism. The great gulf between the righteous and the wicked, both here and eternally, is not measured in inches, yards, or miles, but in character (Luke 16:26). Character is what we really are in life, unlike reputation or what others say about us. Just as there was great rejoicing when the Father received his sinful son home, so the angels also rejoice when one who has gone into the far country of liberalism returns home in repentance (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10). God does not change (Jam. 1:17), Christ does not change (Heb.13:8-9), the Holy Spirit does not change (John 16:13), the seed of the Gospel does not change, and neither should Christians change (Luke 8:11-15). Therefore we would be foolish to think that we can be "Change Agents" as some today claim for themselves and still please the God of our creation. We exhort men who have gone in this direction to come to themselves as the prodigal did (Luke 15:17) and come back to the old paths of Truth (Jer. 6:16; John 14:6). God spoke unto Israel words of exhortation to cause them to return to His way when they had sinned. Listen to this great exhortation. He said, "I will make darkness light before them,

and crooked things straight. These things will I do unto them, and not forsake them” (Isa. 42:16).

Satan Is Always A Threat

To be forewarned should make us forearmed. Anything that is a threat to individual Christians is a danger to the Lord’s church collectively, whether it be moral degeneracy or doctrinal degeneracy. Knowing that the Lord’s church is made up of souls that are obedient to the Gospel of Christ, we must be strong, faithful, evangelistic, and morally upright in order to please Him (1 Cor. 16:13-14; Heb. 11:6). We must keep in mind that Satan is always a threat and that his helpers do teach false doctrines (2 Cor. 11:13-15), Consequently there are cases where some brethren have followed Satan and have fallen into apostasy (1 Pet. 5:8; Heb. 2:1-4; Heb. 4:1; Heb. 6:4-6; 1 John 4:1; 2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Our young people need to be cautioned at a very early age about the danger of marrying a non-Christian who can lead them into the far country of liberalism! Other causes for these departures may be preachers, some of whom are now destroying the faith which they once preached (Gal. 1:6-9). It may be elders who should be “watchmen on the wall” but are now ignoring the departures and leaving the “sheep” without protection (Acts 20:28-30; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). Or it may be seeing the wicked prosper (Psa. 73) or just outside influences of the world which distract us from faithfulness (Rom. 12:1-2; Luke 8:14; Col. 3:16-17). For our safety and help to others, we are always to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3). This means we must be willing to wrestle the Truth from the hands of the Devil (1 Tim. 6:12; 1 Tim. 4:16).

Some Unexpected Causes

Some move into a new community where liberalism exists, but they do not realize the dangers and departures of the congregation until they have already placed membership. We recommend that these seek to change the situation where possible, or else remove themselves and their families from the danger of losing their

souls. Some are looking for the wrong things when they choose a congregation. They look for social “programs” for the young people. Or they choose a congregation because it is close to their residence. Or they are attracted to the location because “they have a nice building.” Although these congregations may seem attractive, a price must be paid in the weakening of their spiritual strength and faith and that of their families (1 Cor. 15:58)! It may call on us to suffer for standing up for the Truth (1 Pet. 4:16). It will call on us to have conviction, determination, and a strong faith (1 Pet. 3:15). But when we consider the results of not standing up for “the faith” that brings “the shipwreck of faith” (1 Tim. 1:19), we had better understand the importance. Sadly, some who in the past were staunch and loyal defenders of the faith have now gone into apostasy because the “ravaging wolves” appeared in sheep’s clothing (Mat. 7:15-20; 1 Cor. 10:12-13).

Some Real Causes Of Departure

The major departure comes when there is a lessening of appreciation for the completeness, authority, and power of God’s Word; we have located one of the known causes of departure (Mat. 28:18-20; Heb. 4:12; Rom. 1:16-17). The “New Translations” containing, among other errors, all five points of Calvinism may be in evidence among the members or with the preacher and elders. Just as those grow weak who do not eat the proper physical food for strength and growth, so the spiritual weakness comes to those who do not study and imbibe God’s inspired Word (2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). To identify some of these, we may note that they are those who object to offering the Lord’s invitation at the close of their sermons, or who think it is “old-hat” to quote the Bible to affirm what we preach. Every completed sermon in the New Testament offered the plan of salvation at the close. Those who claim “new revelations,” or that the Holy Spirit is guiding them personally and directly, or who turn away from the Bible to a man-made creed are certainly large clues that is a departure from the Truth or liberal trend and mind-set. When there are those who are more interested in his or her “experiences”

than the Truth of the New Testament, these are known steps toward, and causes of, apostasy! The exchange of New Testament acts of conversion and worship for emotional “experiences” and claims of “direct leadings of the Holy Spirit” are out of line with the Truth. “Testimonial services” where the lights are out, all are holding hands and being directed by leaders who are void of the Truth, present departure in action! Departure probably will come gradually to those who have been faithfully taught the Gospel in time past, but now that they are not hearing it taught in the classes or preached from the pulpit. And the Truth is not being upheld in purity by the departures rapidly coming. Where there is a de-emphasis from the pulpit or in classes of the importance of the teaching and preaching concerning Bible authority for all we do in worship and life, many grow weak and depart. Neither are these reading and studying the Text in their homes to gain strength; therefore they grow sickly and die spiritually (2 Tim. 2:15; John 6:44-45). Social subjects, fables, and “profane and vain babblings” constitute the fodder that many are being fed from the pulpit today. Paul says it “will increase unto more ungodliness” (2 Tim. 2:16). These are going into “The Far Country of Liberalism!”

Some other causes for departure from the Truth come in the smokescreen of an appeal for “relevance.” These claim the Gospel is “out of date.” They think our main work in the church is to feed the ghettos, to follow the dictates of the local “culture,” to have women lead in prayer and make the announcements, lead the song service, and to wait on the Lord’s Table. This, of course, flies in the face of such passages as 1 Corinthians 14:34, 1 Timothy 2:8 and 1 Tim. 2:12-15 and lands one in “The Far Country of Liberalism!”

Although we are not against higher education, we recommend that one keep his feet firmly set in the Gospel while sitting at the feet of modernist and atheist! Intellectualism and degrees have caused many to put their trust in men instead of God. Religiously, these teachers demand that they be called “Doctor,” in which many students are impressed beyond measure, but which the Lord condemned in Matthew 23:1-12. We never note Paul, Peter, or Matthew being

called “Father” or “Doctor.” They refused to depart into “The Far Country of Liberalism!”

Then there are those who are advocating a “broader fellowship” with the denominations of the world. It is noted in some bulletins, classes, and lectureships that denominational baptism is being accepted in some congregations. Open membership is being practiced even with those who have not obeyed the Gospel as prescribed in the New Testament (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21). Some are being accepted on their saying of the “sinner’s prayer” for their salvation! This prayer is not found in the Scriptures nor was any person told to do this in the New Testament. It is man-made and will not save. It tells the Lord to “come into my heart” instead of letting the Lord tell us to come into Him (Rev. 3:20). We need to read again very closely Ephesians 5:11! How sad is the “Far Country of Liberalism!”

When the suggestion is made that we “only have the truth in part, and have not restored the church,” our spiritual antenna’s need to go up! We have restored the church of the New Testament in worship, organization, obedience, and Godly living. When one makes the claim that we have not restored the New Testament church, ask him or her in what way have we missed in these areas? These may respond, “Well, it is just your thoughts versus mine, because we cannot know the truth anyway.” Is it not strange that these claim to know that we cannot know! Their language betrays them! The Lord said that we can know the truth and commanded that we do so (John 8:31-32).

Some are reported now to believe that they have some if not all of the spiritual gifts given only by the laying on of the apostles hands (Acts 8:18-21; 1 Cor. 12). Some claim they are witnesses, ambassadors, and even apostles and prophets! However, the apostles had to be those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ baptism and ascension (Acts 1:21-22). Paul said the apostles were the ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20). We need to be humble enough today to speak what the witnesses and ambassadors have given us in the Word, and not to depart into the “Far Country of Liberalism.”

There is an increasing acceptance of atheistic theories such as evolution. Humanism in our day is taking its toll! A few years ago, a book which taught “Genesis is just a myth” came out of one of “our” universities! Parents need to stay close to their young people, and to know what they are being taught in school, what they are seeing in the media, and what their friends may have them listening to in “rap music” or they may depart into “The Far Country of Liberalism!”

The “wolves” are denying that we have a New Testament pattern in the time and purpose of taking the Lord’s Supper. It may be taken, according to them, on Thursday night “preceding a school test,” or in a wedding ceremony to “help solemnize the vows.” They have developed what they call the “New Hermeneutics” or science of interpretation, which is not “new,” nor true “hermeneutics.” Jesus gave the correct thought in John 17:17, Acts 2:42, Acts 20:7, and 1 Corinthians 16:1-2. While these are minimizing Bible authority, even to the use of instrumental music accompanying their singing, they leave the Lord for their own desires, and go into “The Far Country of Liberalism” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16).

Some are now advocating House Churches, Children’s Churches, Cell Churches, Underground Churches, Restructured Churches, or Community Churches, all of which have not one whisper of Divine Authority. These have gone into the “Far Country of Liberalism.” These desire to identify with and please the world! They reduce sacred terminology to the ridiculous by calling themselves “Jesus Freaks,” speaking of God as “the Old Man Upstairs, and “Jesus Christ, Superstar.” We need to return to the Father’s house from The Far Country of Liberalism, by applying such Scriptures as Hebrews 12:28 and 1 Peter 4:11!

Intimidation Tactics

When one stands against and speaks up about going into “The Far Country of Liberalism,” he needs to be warned that he can expect to meet strong opposition. Some have been heard to ask in liberal churches and schools, “Do you dare question me?” Or “We do not believe in ‘labels’ such as liberals!” Yet, do not be surprised if they

label you as “a knuckle-head,” “keeper of the orthodoxy,” “legalist,” “witch-hunter,” or “trouble-maker,” etc. They want you to exercise “tolerance” with them, but they do not practice the same toward their opponents.

If we turn from the Truth to false doctrines and practices, we will allow them to condemn our souls and the souls of our children (2 John 9-11). They will remove the reliable translations of the Bible (such as the King James and American Standard versions), change the church of Christ into a denomination, and cause the ears of those whom we may influence for Truth to be closed in hearing and obeying the Gospel of Christ (Rom. 1:16-17). This is a price we are unwilling to pay!!

Conclusion

Have we been asleep while the “weeds” of error have been sown in our souls and the souls of our families? It is time for us to awaken out of sleep, to close our ranks, and in many places to build again the walls of Zion! We have the perfect law of liberty (Jam. 1:25). We are commanded to be of the same mind by studying the same Bible (1 Cor. 1:10-15). Early New Testament Christians stood together in teaching and living in harmony with God’s Word (Acts 17:6; Acts 17:11). Oh, that we would do the same! Hopefully our study will bring home to the Father’s house those who have gone into “The Far Country of Liberalism!”

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CHAPTER 8

Riotous Living: Mixed Swimming

Derrick Coble

Introduction

“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things” (King James Version, Phi. 4:8). Paul penned these words by inspiration specifically to the Lord’s church at Philippi. He needed to stress to them the importance of keeping their minds focused upon Christ at all costs because they had evil outside influences all around them. There were Judaizing “dogs” (Phi. 3:2) who were shameless and ready to attack them at any moment. Furthermore, there were “enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things” (Phi. 3:18-19). Please note that these individuals focused upon “earthly things” rather than the higher “spiritual things” which Paul challenged his readers to attain (Phi. 4:8). If the Philippians would follow the example of Paul, they could be assured they were also imitating Christ (Phi. 3:17; 1 Cor. 11:1) whose mind, mouth, and manners were always perfect (1 Pet. 2:21-22; Heb. 4:15).

With this in view, the same thoughts and mindset should permeate the lives of all Christians even today. God has commanded, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phi. 2:5). Therefore, when people see a child of God, they should see that his mind (heart) is no different than Jesus’ own heart. Paul wrote, “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children; And walk in love, as

Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour. But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints” (Eph. 5:1-3). The heart that is filled with sin and uncleanness is a heart that is defiled (Mat. 15:18). Thus, it is of utmost importance that the people of God heed the words of wisdom penned of old: “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life. Put away from thee a froward mouth, and perverse lips put far from thee. Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established. Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil” (Pro. 4:23-27). Unfortunately, the eyes of frail humanity often wander from godly paths to fleshly lusts (1 John 2:16). Christian thoughts are not always centered upon “things above” (Col. 3:2) and even some lives are becoming of Satan more than saints (John 8:44). Examples of this include: Eve, who saw that the tree of knowledge was desired to make one wise and partook of the fruit (Gen. 3:6); Achan, who saw the spoils of Jericho and coveted after them (Jos. 7:21); and Simon, who saw that through the laying on of hands the Holy Ghost was given and wanted to buy that power from the apostles (Acts 8:18). Fleshly lusts were also a problem for the prodigal son, who “wasted his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15:13). These fleshly lusts constantly “war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11) and can wage battle against the Christian through various means, including mixed swimming.

Riotous Living Is Reckless Living

The word *riotous* is used only three times within the King James Version and each time it is used in a negative way. It is found twice in the book of Proverbs where the Hebrew word *zalal* is translated as “riotous.” Note the following: (1) “Be not among winebibbers; among **riotous** eaters of flesh” (Pro. 23:20; emph. DC). (2) “Whoso keepeth the law is a wise son: but he that is a companion of **riotous** men shameth his father” (Pro. 28:7; emphasis DC). In other verses, *zalal* is translated as “glutton” (Pro. 23:20-21) and “vile” (Jer. 15:19) (King

James Concordance). According to Strong, *zalal* literally means “to shake or quake.” Yet, in a figurative sense it means “to be loose morally, worthless, or prodigal.” Fittingly, it is in reference to the prodigal son that Jesus uses the term riotous (*asotos*) one final time to describe the way the boy lived after demanding his inheritance and leaving his father (Luke 15:13). Of this unfortunate lifestyle, H. Leo Boles observed:

He “wasted.” That is, dissipated, squandered; this was the very opposite of “gathered together.” It means more exactly that he scattered his property like winnowing grain (Mat. 25:24). We know how he “wasted his substance”; it was done “with riotous living.” This means that he lived dissolutely or profligately; he was a spendthrift, a profligate, a prodigal. He plunged recklessly into extravagance, dissipation, and dissolute living. (299)

Boles’ comments are in harmony with the definition of the Greek term *asotos* as given by Strong and Thayer. Both scholars agree that the riotous living of the prodigal son was done “dissolutely” and “profligately.” In other words, the prodigal son used his portion of the inheritance for shameless and wicked behavior. He was loose in morals having lost all regard to good principles, virtue, and decency (“Profligate”). In essence, his life was reckless in every sense of the word. Fortunately, even though he failed, he saw the error of his ways and returned unto his loving father with a penitent heart (Luke 15:18).

Much like the prodigal son, Christians can become involved in reckless living, too. This happens when the child of God casts aside godliness for worldliness in spite of the many warnings against such. Paul warned, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (Heb. 3:12). Peter wrote to stir up the pure minds by way of remembrance (2 Pet. 3:1)

saying, “Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness” (2 Pet. 3:17). Peter also likened Christians who turn back to the pollutions of the world to a dog returned to his own vomit and a clean sow who has returned to the filthiness of the mud (2 Pet. 2:20-22). For these prodigal children of God, “the latter end is worse with them than the beginning” because they have turned from God’s holy commandments (2 Pet. 2:20-21).

God is not pleased when His children are reckless in behavior. In fact, He is angry with the wicked every day (Psa. 7:11). He wants the body to be used for His glory since it is the temple of His Holy Spirit and bought with the blood of His Son (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The child of God is a new creature (2 Cor. 5:17). He is commanded to “touch not the unclean thing” (2 Cor. 6:17), “keep himself unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27), “live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Tit. 2:12), “love not the world” (1 John 2:15), and “abhor that which is evil” (Rom. 12:9). Even so, sometimes lust conceives and brings forth sin in the heart of a saint (Jam. 1:15). Reckless living in the far country of sin then becomes a daily practice. It is astounding to hear of the number of Christians who participate in the reckless drinking of alcohol and smoking (which destroy the body), using profanity, gambling or playing the lottery, dancing, viewing pornography, fornication, and mixed swimming – all of which violate plain Scripture (cf. Eph. 5:18; 1 Cor. 6:12; Eph. 4:29-31; Rom. 12:17; Gal. 5:19-21; Col. 3:5). The prayer of the righteous should be that these Christians repent and “come to themselves” after the manner of the prodigal son (Luke 15:17).

Mixed Swimming Is Reckless

When the world hears of reckless behavior, mixed swimming does not even cross the mind. Most likely, thoughts are conjured of drunk drivers in oncoming traffic, someone who fires a weapon from a moving vehicle, or drag racers who accidentally swipe a pedestrian off the road. These are definitely forms of reckless behavior (all of which are punishable by law). In fact, according to Tennessee

Criminal Law on reckless endangerment, “recklessly” is defined as follows:

“Recklessly” means that a person acts recklessly with respect to circumstances surrounding the conduct or the result of the conduct when the person is aware of but consciously disregards a substantial and unjustifiable risk that the circumstances exist or the result will occur. The risk must be of such a nature and degree that its disregard constitutes a gross deviation from the standard of care that an ordinary person would exercise under all the circumstances as viewed from the accused person’s standpoint. The requirement of “recklessly” is also established if it is shown that the defendant acted intentionally or knowingly. (“Reckless Endangerment”)

Transfer this description from man’s law over to God’s law which is infinitely higher (Isa. 55:8-9). Does not this description fit all acts of willful sin, including mixed swimming? Those who participate in mixed swimming do so intentionally or knowingly, choosing to disregard the effect which it can have upon their own soul and the souls of others. They are guilty of spiritual reckless endangerment of which David wrote, “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression” (Psa. 19:13).

Yet, it has been estimated that over 1 billion people visit the beaches of the United States each year where men and women of all ages are present. Undoubtedly, many of these are Christians. Of course, swimming (in and of itself) is not the real issue. There is nothing wrong with swimming for fun or exercise. Just like the prodigal, his inheritance was not the real issue. Nonetheless, his lack of restraint and virtue in his reckless living was a problem. That same lack of self-discipline and loss of decency is a reckless problem

among the mixed company of swimmers today. How is this the case? Please observe the following:

Immodesty

One of the biggest problems is swimming attire among mixed (male/female) crowds. The latest fashions for women barely clothe the body (much like undergarments) while men are encouraged to bare their chests and adorn brief swimwear. Interestingly, those who are prepared to swim among mixed company see the necessity of wearing clothing over their swimwear to “cover up” and also take a towel for drying and “covering up” after swimming. There are even items that ladies can purchase called “cover-ups” to be used for this very purpose. The name of this garment alone insinuates that there are certain body parts **uncovered** during swimming that normally remain **covered** so as not to embarrass or cause shame upon the person in public. So, the question is this: If one can see the need to cover up before and after swimming, why is it acceptable to uncover one’s nakedness during mixed swimming?

This principle of “covering up” really goes back to the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:7-10). Of course, the first sin committed by Adam and Eve was the sin of disobedience in eating of the fruit which God had commanded not to eat (Gen. 2:17). Afterward, they realized they were naked and made themselves aprons or loincloths (Gen. 3:7). Thus, immodesty entered into the world. Beforehand, they were both uncovered and unashamed (Gen. 2:25), but now they felt the shame of open nakedness. So, God fully clothed them (covered them up) with coats of skin (Gen. 3:21).

Today, there seems to be no shame for those who participate in mixed swimming. However, God still demands “modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety” (1 Tim. 2:9). It should be noted that Paul’s statement was in immediate reference to women in the worship assembly; though, in keeping with godly living, it most assuredly applies to every man and woman in every place and time. So, what is modest apparel? The word *modest* is derived from *kosmios* signifying neat or well-arranged. It “consists in purity of sentiment and manners, inclining us to abhor the least appearance of vice and

indecent, and to fear doing anything which will justly incur censure” (McClintock). The word *apparel* is derived from *katastole* signifying “down” (*kata*) and “garment” (*stole*). Hence, it is a “garment let down.” “Some scholars associate the word with the ideas of ‘keeping something in check’ in the sense of ‘reserve, restraint,’ with the added thought that one’s ‘outward attire’ is an expression of a person’s true ‘character’” (qtd. in Jackson 65). Does the swimwear of today stay in keeping with God’s command here? Can one really say that it is pure, decent, and reserved?

The next two descriptions of proper attire are those articles of clothing which promote “shamefacedness and sobriety” (1 Tim. 2:9). These words denote a feeling of “respectful timidity in the presence of superiors” (Vincent). They indicate a definite sense of “shame” or “reverence” (Robertson) “with a constant rein on passions and desires” (qtd. in Jackson 65). Again, what shame is there in ladies wearing a “two-piece” or even a “one-piece” swimsuit in front of gazing men? What shame is there in a man uncovering his chest in front of gazing women? Neither group can possibly maintain a constant restraint on passions and desires dressed in such ways. That is why a Christian must consider who he is influencing and causing to stumble into sin by his own actions. Jesus said, “It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones” (Luke 17:1-2). The point is abundantly clear! A person would be better off to die a violent death than to cause just one of God’s children to stumble and fall. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31). Thus, one can only conclude that mixed swimming violates the basic principles of modesty and godliness.

Immorality

Some Christians will definitely agree that wearing immodest swimsuits is not in harmony with the will of God, but they do not want to give up their public swimming pleasure. The argument is then made that as long as they cover themselves modestly on the beach or at the pool, then mixed swimming is acceptable. What these

Christians fail to understand is this: Even if it is the case that one is modestly dressed in a public swimming area, he is still willfully exposing himself to others who are not. Thus, the danger lies in the harmful effects of what is seen. Paul said, “Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof” (Rom. 13:13-14). The world is all about fulfilling the lusts of the flesh (1 John 2:16), but Christians must deny this desire. The mind must be blocked from all forms of impurity because immoral thoughts are stimulated by what a person sees, reads, and hears (Winkler 99). Note the words of Jesus: “But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell” (Mat. 5:28, 29).

It is very easy for anyone to behold the general nakedness amidst mixed swimming and have immoral thoughts. A man may pride himself in the fact that he has not committed physical adultery, but one sin that is a universal problem is the “lust of the eye” (mental adultery) created by looking on a woman or man. The immoral lust of this passage is a strong desire that is strictly forbidden. David was a man who knew about the consequences of this immoral behavior. When he left his bed, to walk on his roof, “he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon” (2 Sam. 11:2). Looking upon the nakedness of Bathsheba caused his heart to lust after her (mental adultery) and then it culminated in sexual intercourse (physical adultery) (2 Sam. 11:4). Perhaps this is why he wrote, “I will set no wicked thing before mine eyes: I hate the work of them that turn aside; it shall not cleave to me” (Psa. 101:3). Job even knew the danger saying, “I made a covenant with mine eyes; why then should I think upon a maid?” (Job 31:1). Concerning this dangerous sin, Andrew Connally wrote the following:

It is adultery in the heart, an adultery which requires no physical contact or expression. It transpires in the heart, the mind. This is one reason why this sin is so dangerous. Like all sins committed in the heart, hatred, jealousy, envy, anger, etc., it can satisfy baser emotions and never be acted out in life. The satisfaction takes place in the heart and mind of man and no one knows or sees but God. (117)

It must also be remembered that the only exception Jesus gave for divorce and remarriage was fornication (Mat. 5:32; Mat. 19:9). Therefore, mental adultery is not a Scriptural ground for divorce; yet, it is a sin which must be acknowledged and cleansed by the blood of Christ (Rev. 1:5). Could the same lust be present during mixed swimming? Yes! Could it lead to further sin? Yes!

Having said this, a Christian must block anything that would cause him to stumble—doing whatever it takes to eliminate the temptation of sin, even if it means staying away from the public beach or pool. The goal of each Christian should be to “abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 The. 5:22). The American Standard Version puts it like this: “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 The. 5:22). That is, when something is known to be evil (or questionable as such) the child of God will carefully withdraw himself from the activity. Will people think it strange when a Christian refuses to go to the pool or beach for mixed swimming opportunities? Yes! Peter taught this principle well:

Forasmuch then as Christ hath suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves likewise with the same mind: for he that hath suffered in the flesh hath ceased from sin; That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God. For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of

the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: Wherein **they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you.** (1 Pet. 4:1-4; emphasis DC)

It does not matter what society says is normal. It does not matter if ungodly individuals speak evil of the godly. What is most important is that every saint is diligent in “denying ungodliness and worldly lusts” living “soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Tit. 2:12).

Immaturity

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb. 5:12-14)

Much of this issue is summed up in the words of Paul above. Too many Christians are immature in the faith and want to be like the world. Perhaps, they would have been found among the elders and people of Israel who gathered themselves together and went to Samuel saying, “Give us a king . . . that we also may be like all the nations” (1 Sam. 8:5, 20). But the people of God are a part of a “chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9).

The Hebrews writer was pushing for spiritual growth so that everyone could understand why a practice was right or wrong. Many of the Hebrews only saw what they wanted to see because of stubbornness, bias, or prejudice (McDaniel 246). Is it any different today? It seems that Christians (babes or full grown—old or young) across the nation want to get as close to sin as they possibly can and turn a blind eye. They say, “A little bit won’t hurt” or “I can control my thoughts.” Some even aver, “The Bible doesn’t say not to” or “God knows my heart.” It is sad to see full grown adults still drinking from a bottle. God will judge and punish them for their error (Rom. 2:6-9; 2 Pet. 2:17). The fact is God wants all men to see things as He sees them. God wants His children to exercise themselves unto godliness (1 Tim. 4:7), grow in knowledge (2 Pet. 3:18), and choose good over evil (1 Pet. 3:11).

Conclusion

It cannot be overemphasized that sin is present at the beach or pool. It can overtake anyone quickly and unexpectedly, ultimately causing spiritual death (Rom. 6:23). Thus, everyone has a need to cling to the only life preserver available—Jesus the Savior. The apostle Paul stated, “And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (2 Tim. 4:18). Loosing all ties with the world and practicing self-denial is the only way that one will ever be fit for the kingdom (Mat. 16:24; 1 Cor. 9:24-27). That is why Jesus said, “Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33).

The Prodigal Swimmer

Here I am at the beach, you see-
A little scantily clad, you see-
I’m wasting my life recklessly
And no one knows how bad.

My friends are all at work, you know-
My family's miles away at home-
God's church would look at me with woe,
It really is quite sad.

I haven't worshipped in a while,
My lusts consume my whole lifestyle,
If to God I would but reconcile,
I know the life I once had.

I will return to him again,
How could I have thought this wasn't a sin?
Indecently swimming with women and men,
Blinded by Satan with some fad.

God, please show me Your mercy and Your grace,
Forgive my sins and my disgrace,
Let me look upon your face,
Please, do not be mad.

I sinned against Heaven and in Your sight,
I was dead, I was lost—as dark as night,
But you loved me and received me with all Your might,
I was still Your cherished lad.

My child, you know I love you so,
The angels in Heaven rejoice you know,
When one who is erring returns to the throne,
You have made me exceedingly glad!

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CHAPTER 9

Riotous Living: Drunkenness

Patrick Morrison

I am once again humbled and thankful to our heavenly Father for the opportunity to be a part of the Power Lectures. The Southaven Church of Christ and her godly elders are to be commended for providing this annual opportunity that we might grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Brother Wade Webster does a tremendous job each year in selecting the theme and the lessons, and the lectureship volume is always a welcomed and valued addition to my library. May God continue to richly bless the Southaven congregation for her continued labors of love in the service of our Lord.

This year's study on the parable of the prodigal son (King James Version, Luke 15:11-32) is a most worthwhile study. Of all the parables given by the Master, the prodigal is perhaps the most memorable of them all. All of us can identify with this wayward young man, for we have all at one point or another willfully wandered away from the protection and provisions in the Father's house. We can sympathize with his plight, having made the same journey into the far country of sin. How many of us can say that we have not wasted our substance on riotous living at some time in our lives? For those who have not walked the road of waywardness, perhaps we can see our reflection in the life and attitude of the elder brother. To be quite honest, we have probably been represented by both of these boys at one point or another in our spiritual journey. No matter how often we read and study this portion of Scripture, we are moved by it. However, this parable is far more than just a moving story; it is a reflection of the great love of our Father for all who have become estranged

from Him whether by willful rebellion, self-righteousness, neglect, or careless wandering.

The focus of our study is the riotous living of the prodigal while in the far country. After being granted his portion of the inheritance from his father, the younger son took his journey into a land far removed from the watchful eye of the father. While there, the prodigal wantonly spends through his inheritance in short order: “And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15:13). The word translated *wasted* (*diaskorpizo*) means “to dissipate” or “to winnow.” In other words, the prodigal was throwing his money to the wind. The phrase *riotous living* (*asotos zao*) means “living unsavingly.” As might be expected, a young man coming into a great sum of money with no restraints on its use quickly throws his money away while saving nothing.

The term *riotous living* does not exactly spell out for us on what this young man wasted his newly-procured inheritance. We might assume that he spent his living on wine, women, gambling, and perhaps other vices. It is not far-fetched to think that his wanton spending spree included partaking of intoxicating beverage. Though the word translated *riotous* is found only one time in that exact form in the New Testament, the noun form is found three times (Eph. 5:18; Tit. 1:6; 1 Pet. 4:4). The word is translated as *excess* once and *riot* twice in the King James Version (the ESV translates the word *asotia* as *debauchery* each time, and the ASV translates it as *riot* in each occurrence). In the instruction given to the Ephesians, Paul states, “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). Here we find a link between wine and riotous living. When we consider riot and debauchery, we typically consider alcoholic beverages to play some part in them. Intoxicants such as alcohol have plagued man from the very beginning of time and will continue to do so until time is no more. The prodigal likely had his fair share of the devil’s brew as he threw his money around. While the money flowed, so, too, did the alcohol. Regretfully, this young

man in all probability drank up much of his inheritance. Thanks to the effects of beverage alcohol, the days and nights became a blur, the money dried up, the fair-weather friends that he had made while footing the bill soon vanished, and the prodigal soon found himself in the depths of despair and hopelessness. This is the end result of riotous living. This is the reality of the pursuit of happiness and contentment at the bottom of the bottle. Drunkenness is an ancient evil that continues to worsen, for we have failed to learn the lessons that have been so often lived out before us. What can the prodigal teach us about the evils of alcohol?

Biblical Warnings Against Alcohol

Numerous are the warnings in Scripture by way of injunction as well as example concerning the dangers of intoxicating beverage. The wise man Solomon sought to warn his son about the evils of alcohol in the Proverbs. He had sought out merriment and happiness through wine and found it to be an exercise in vanity and futility (Ecc. 2:3). By experience Solomon knew that alcohol could not bring true and lasting joy to one's life, but instead brought with it misery and pain. Through the pen of inspiration, Solomon sounds out this warning to his son: "Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise" (Pro. 20:1). Wine not only makes man a mocker in that he ridicules and scoffs at things that do not deserve such ill treatment, but it also makes a mockery of man, holding him under its sway. Solomon would sound out a far more detailed warning just a few chapters later in the book of Proverbs. Perhaps again drawing upon his own experiences, the wise ruler puts these words before his son: "Who hath woe? Who hath sorrow? Who hath contentions? Who hath babbling? Who hath wounds without cause? Who hath redness of eyes? They that tarry long at the wine; they that go to seek mixed wine" (Pro. 23:29-30). Oh, how many of those who have tasted of the devil's brew could echo these sentiments? By his own experiences Solomon had learned some of these painful lessons about alcohol. He is hoping through these words of wisdom to keep his own son from learning these same lessons firsthand.

Alcohol brings with it troubles, sorrows, conflict, incessant prattle, unexplained wounds, and so much more. What would Solomon advise his son to do concerning the usage of intoxicating beverage? “Look not thou upon the wine when it is red, when it giveth his color in the cup, when it moveth itself aright” (Pro. 23:31). Do not even look at it! Do not be tempted to imbibe alcohol in the first place! If only intoxicating beverage could be seen for what it really is—a drug that impairs the abilities to reason and judge properly, affects the depth perception, slurs speech, severely decreases reaction times for even basic motor skills, and adversely affects vital organs (especially the liver). No wonder that Solomon would characterize alcohol in the following fashion: “At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder” (Pro. 23:32). How many would be tempted to partake of intoxicants if they saw it as a poisonous serpent waiting to strike? Sadly, many look only to the temporal pleasures that alcohol can bring without looking to the end of it. The commercials and advertisements used to peddle strong drink never portray the drunkard lying face down in the street in a pool of his own vomit, or his family left at home to scrape together what little money they can find because he has wasted his substance on riotous living! What are the real effects of imbibing inebriates? “Thine eyes shall behold strange women, and thine heart shall utter perverse things. Yea, thou shalt be as he that lieth down in the midst of the sea, or as he that lieth upon the top of a mast. They have stricken me, shalt thou say, and I was not sick; they have beaten me, and I felt it not” (Pro. 23:33-35a). Alcohol promises to make suave Don Juans and invincible Supermen out of those who partake, while in reality it only delivers blithering idiots whose mouths overrun their brains to the detriment of their physical well-being. That alcohol is a powerful drug which often comes to control the life of the user cannot be denied, either by science or by Scripture: “When shall I awake? I will seek it yet again” (Pro. 23:35b). We would do well to avoid the evils of alcohol lest some or all of these evils befall us.

Recalling words that his mother had spoken to him, and which God allowed him to write with the pen of inspiration, Solomon

states, “It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine; nor for princes strong drink” (Pro. 31:4). Why would Solomon’s mother (Bathsheba, wife of King David) teach her son, whom she knew would ascend to his father’s throne, that alcohol should have no place in the life of such a ruler? Kings were expected to render wise and equitable judgments and to lead their people righteously, neither of which could be accomplished by the aid of intoxicating beverage. Quite to the contrary, alcohol would only serve to make more difficult the task of leading God’s people in the way He would have them to go. His mother wisely instructed her son that the use of wine and other strong drink was unbecoming of a good and prudent leader. If only more world leaders would learn this valuable truth! The alcohol industry in the United States is a \$20 billion per year enterprise! Even with the recent economic downturn, the sale of alcohol did not suffer in most places (As a matter of fact, a simple internet search will reveal that alcohol sales were up in most places even with the economy suffering!). Yet, consider some astounding statistics regarding alcohol (Again, these can be found on any internet search engine): It is estimated that some 100,000 deaths per year can be attributed to the usage of alcohol. Some 30% of burn accidents are blamed on alcohol and alcohol related-impairment. Approximately 30% of drowning deaths involve intoxicants. Above 30% of suicides are linked with beverage alcohol. Deaths from accidental falls are tied to alcohol usage nearly 40% of the time. Somewhere in the proximity of 40,000-45,000 deaths result from automobile accidents each year, and some 45% of these are directly linked to drinking of alcohol. Intoxicating beverages play a part in almost 60% of homicides in the U. S. Add to these startling figures the heartache of families torn asunder, the economic impact of lost wages, costs incurred by insurance agencies and such like, the increase of crime, and a plethora of additional troubles associated with the usage of alcohol and you can understand why Solomon’s mother would advise him as she did!

Other passages would highlight the dangers of imbibing intoxicating drink. God warned through the prophet Habakkuk,

“Woe unto him that giveth his neighbor drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and maketh him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness” (Hab. 2:15). We are commanded, “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). The kingdom of heaven must not be characterized by drunkards (1 Cor. 6:10), nor are Christians to keep company with such (1 Cor. 5:11). Those who would serve the Lord’s church in the most grave capacity as bishops/elders/pastors are not to be given to wine (1 Tim. 3:3; Tit. 1:7). As men who must carefully tend the flock of God (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-5) and who must give account for the souls of the congregation entrusted to their care (Heb. 13:17), it is understandable why Scripture would prohibit them from imbibing alcohol. These passages suffice to warn us against the evils of beverage alcohol.

Consider also some very powerful examples in Scripture of the dangers of intoxicating beverage. The earliest record of the effects of alcohol is found in Genesis 9. Shortly after departing the ark, Noah began to cultivate the soil and planted a vineyard (Gen. 9:20). He soon enjoyed the fruit of his labor and drank of the wine produced from the vines. In his drunken state, he lost his ability to feel shame and was lying uncovered in his tent, only to be discovered by his son Ham. Because his son broadcast what he had seen rather than cover his father’s nakedness, Noah pronounced a curse upon Ham’s son (Gen. 9:24-25). Not long after this incident, we find yet another shameful incident involving the effects of alcohol on a family. After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the other cities of the plain and the loss of his wife, Lot and his two daughters fled to the mountain of Zoar (Gen.19:30). His daughters surmised that there were no men left by whom they might bear children, and so they schemed together to get their father drunk and commit incest with him (Gen.19:31-36). The nations of Moab and Ammon, continual thorns in the side of the nation of Israel, resulted from this illicit relationship (Gen. 19:37-38). It would seem that there is also a connection between the sin of Nadab and Abihu and intoxicating drink. As you are aware, the sons of Aaron were consumed with fire from God for offering incense by means of unauthorized fire

(Lev. 10:1-2). Immediately after the death of these two sons, God addresses Aaron and the rest of his sons: “Do not drink wine nor strong drink, thou, nor thy sons with thee, when ye go into the tabernacle of the congregation, lest ye die: it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations” (Lev. 10:9). It may merely be conjecture to assume that alcohol played some role in the poor decision of Nadab and Abihu, but the prohibition given to Aaron immediately following these events would seem to indicate that their judgment had been clouded by means of wine and/or strong drink. Knowing the reverence and respect God demands of those who approach Him in worship and also knowing the severity with which Jehovah would treat those who disregard His laws for worship, would Nadab and Abihu have acted out of apathy or willful rebellion? It is possible that they acted in such fashion. However, it seems far more likely that their reasoning was impaired when they approached God in an unauthorized manner. Some may point to this passage and try to minimize the unauthorized fire, saying that Nadab and Abihu were punished for drunkenness, but the fact remains that whether sober or intoxicated, their sin was in violating the Almighty’s commands concerning worship. Drunkenness would simply contribute to their poor decision, which ultimately cost them their lives. King Ahasuerus called for his queen Vashti to parade indecently before him and his guests after his heart had been made merry with wine (Est. 1:10). Thankfully Vashti refused his ungodly demand. A worldly ruler like Ahasuerus might have had no qualms about exposing his wife to other men even without the aid of intoxicating drink, but there can be no doubt that imbibing intoxicating drink contributed to such a foolish and sinful request!

Attempts To Justify Moderate Drinking of Intoxicating Beverages

With all of the warnings given regarding the dangerous effects alcohol has upon the mind and body, it would seem that those seeking to please God should desire to avoid any substance that would cause one to reason improperly or that could cause one to lose influence with his/her associates. However, there are many

who wish to justify the drinking of alcoholic beverages based upon the principle of moderation. Those who advocate moderate consumption of intoxicating drink argue that the Word of God only condemns drunkenness, leaving us to imbibe so long as we do not cross over the threshold into being a drunkard. The problem with this reasoning is that there is no definitive line whereby we may declare someone drunk. Blood-alcohol levels have been put in place by state governments in order to make driving under the influence of alcohol past the set limit a crime. Yet, in recent years many states are rethinking this “hard-cap” on blood-alcohol levels. Now we are starting to hear things such as “Buzz driving is drunk driving.” More and more, the realization is that even slight amounts of intoxicating drink can impair judgment and reaction times, which dangers are only magnified when one is the least bit intoxicated behind the wheel of an automobile! Christians are instructed to live soberly (Tit. 2:12; 1 Pet. 5:8), an impossible task when mind-altering substances impair reason and discernment.

Many seek to justify moderate drinking of alcohol based upon the prevalence of such in Bible times. It is true that wine was part of everyday life in both Old and New Testaments. Wine is mentioned over 210 times in the Scriptures and strong drink is found 20 times. There are several words in the Hebrew language from which the word wine is translated in the Old Testament. The overwhelming majority of the time the word *yayin* is used. The word is defined by Strong’s as “to effervesce; wine (as fermented); by implication intoxication.” Many would point to this as proof that the wine mentioned in the Old Testament was intoxicating drink. However, the same Hebrew word was also used of a grape vine (Num. 6:4) and the liquid that comes from the winepress (Jer. 48:33). These usages of the very same word indicate that wine can carry with it the meaning of unfermented juice of the grape. Note also that new wine is pictured as still being in the cluster (Isa. 65:8), clearly showing that wine as we find it in the Old Testament can mean either fermented or unfermented grape juice. Context will determine its meaning! In the New Testament two words are translated as wine, *oinos* (some 36 times in this form

or a derivative) and *gleukos* (one occurrence). *Oinos* can certainly mean intoxicating drink (Eph. 5:18), but it can also mean the juice of the grape prior to the fermentation process (Isa. 16:10, as translated in the LXX). Again, context will determine its usage. It must also be remembered that the wine which we know today bears little to no resemblance to the wine of Bible times. Intoxicating beverages in our society have a much, much greater alcohol content than did the wine mentioned in Scripture. The preponderance of evidence shows that the wine of Bible times was generally mixed with water to dilute it, varying in ratios from three parts water to one part wine to twenty parts water to one part wine. Generally anything with a greater concentration of alcohol was considered “strong drink” and was consumed only by those who were considered barbaric. We give no thought to the fact that we enjoy clean drinking water, but such was not a privilege afforded to those in Bible times. Purification of drinking water involved boiling it, straining it, or mixing it with small amount of alcohol to kill any harmful bacteria. This is not to say that wine was strictly used for the purpose of providing something safe to drink, but it does stand to show why it was so prevalent among the peoples of Bible times.

Some would point out that since alcohol is a product of nature and, therefore, created by God, it should be received and used with thanksgiving (1 Tim. 4:4). However, the reasoning that we should be allowed to imbibe intoxicating beverages based upon this argumentation is extremely flawed. Alcohol used for its proper purposes is good and should be received with thanksgiving. It has medicinal and antiseptic qualities (see Luke 10:34; 1 Tim. 5:23). Would anyone reason that since heroin or cocaine are derived from natural products that these should be received and used with thanksgiving? The poppy plant and the cacao tree have their proper usages, but to think that God intended these to be used as mind-altering substances solely for recreational enjoyment is absurd.

Still others find similarities with drunkenness and gluttony (one being the partaking of too much drink, the other of partaking of too much food). The argument is usually advanced in this fashion: If one

can eat without being gluttonous, then one can drink intoxicating beverages without becoming drunk. The premise is that the Bible only condemns drunkenness; therefore, anything short of a drunken state would be permissible. In an effort to give answer to this quibble, I have heard some say that if, for example, it takes six beers for a person to be considered drunk, then to drink one beer would make an individual one-sixth drunk. The same line of reasoning could be applied to the eating of food (If I must eat three hamburgers to be considered a glutton, then to eat one hamburger would make me one-third gluttonous). The argument of degrees of drunkenness or gluttony does not hold much water or carry much weight (forgive the puns) when viewed in this light. However, there is one fundamental principle that must be taken into account before we concede victory to the proponents of “it’s ok to drink so long as you don’t get drunk.” One must eat in order to live, but the drinking of intoxicating beverage is not necessary to survive!

The social drinker likes to invoke the miracle of Jesus in Cana of Galilee (John 2:1-11) as proof that moderate alcohol consumption is not only permitted by Jehovah but sanctioned by the sinless Son of God. On the third day of a wedding feast in Cana (which feasts, incidentally, could last seven days) the hosts had run short of wine for their guests (John 2:3). When this problem is brought to the attention of Jesus by his mother, he commands six water-pots to be filled to the brim (John 2:6-7). Jesus gave instruction to draw out some of the liquid and take it to the governor of the feast (John 2:8). Immediately the ruler recognized the quality of the wine and voiced his amazement to the bridegroom (John 2:9-10). Most assume that Jesus miraculously produced intoxicating drink, since that is what we typically think of when we hear the word *wine*. However, there are a number of problems with this assumption. For one, for social drinking to have Divine endorsement, it must be proven that the wine made through the miraculous power of the Christ actually contained alcohol. We have already noted that the word translated *wine* in the New Testament can mean either fermented or unfermented juice of the grape. What does the context bear out in this case? Note the words

of the ruler of the feast in regard to the general practice at these social gatherings: “Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now” (John 2:10). Now, if the general practice for social gatherings like this wedding was to put forth the highest quality intoxicating wine first, and then after the guests had imbibed enough, to set before them an intoxicant of inferior quality, how is it that this governor was able to distinguish this latter wine as being of higher quality than the former if his senses were dulled by previous consumption? If indeed the wine spoken of here was merely an unfermented juice of the grape, then it is easy to see how the ruler of the feast was able to discern the higher quality wine produced by Jesus from that which he had indulged in prior to the miracle. A second, and far more troubling, problem with the assumption that Jesus turned water into intoxicating wine is that this would have our Lord acting out of harmony with what the Scriptures teach regarding the dangers of beverage alcohol! The Bible clearly affirms that Jesus did no sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15); yet, if we hold to the assumption that he produced alcoholic wine for the wedding guests, then the Christ violated the law of God (Hab.2:15)! If Jesus made intoxicating wine, the amount he created would have been more befitting of a drunken orgy than a social sip (each water pot held 20 to 30 gallons, English Standard Version)! How shameful that so many would cast aspersions upon the sinless Son of God out of a desire to fulfill selfish and ungodly lusts!

The Christian’s View Of Drinking Alcoholic Beverages

What, then, should the faithful Christian’s attitude be toward intoxicating drink? The Scriptures teach that the body of the Christian is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.6:19). As such, we should desire to keep our earthly tabernacle free from defilement, whether it be from drug usage (including alcohol), eating an improper diet, lack of exercise and proper rest, intentionally harming the body, or any number of other things. We are also instructed to maintain constant watchfulness, for our adversary is seeking to devour us (1 Pet. 5:8).

Continual vigilance demands a sober mind, an impossibility when we allow ourselves to be controlled by mind-altering substances like alcohol and other drugs. Still further, Christians are described as a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). Every Christian is a priest in the New Covenant, and our service to God is carried out on a daily basis (Rom. 12:1-2). If the priests under the Law of Moses were instructed to abstain from wine and strong drink when they came to do service in the tabernacle/temple (Lev. 10:9), should not the priests of God today be expected to act similarly when rendering service to the Lord? The faithful Christian realizes that the most prudent course is to abstain from drinking alcoholic beverages. The thrill of a momentary “buzz” is not worth all of the pain and heartache that alcohol will inflict upon its victims. No one has ever been sorry for avoiding intoxicating beverages!

Conclusion

The prodigal had to face the harsh reality that what he had sown he was now being made to reap (Gal.6:7-8). His desire for the greener pastures of freedom and unrestrained passions led the prodigal far away from his father’s house. The journey into the far country may appear at the outset to lead to happiness, but in reality it is a hard road to walk (Pro.13:15). This young man could not find lasting peace and joy at the bottom of the bottle, in the embrace of strange women, or in the company of evil companions. Instead he found only a depleted inheritance, an empty stomach, and a dead-end to the road that had once seemed so full of promise. He had to sober up and come to his senses so that he could go home again. How many prodigals have made their way into the far country today, having been enticed to leave the Father’s house for the promise of a good time as they drink their cares and worries away? Sadly, at the end of this road lie broken bodies, broken homes, and shattered lives. It is time that we sober up to the reality of intoxicating drink. It promises great things but brings only heartache and misery. Let us take a lesson from the prodigal and leave the wine and strong drink in the pigpen of the far country, where it rightfully belongs!

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CHAPTER 10

Riotous Living: Evil Companions

Rob Whiteacre

How do brethren who once heard about the resurrection from an inspired apostle, who stood in it, and who were saved by it come to reject this pillar of Christianity (1 Cor. 15:1, 2)? Paul’s answer, “Be not deceived: evil companionships corrupt good morals” (American Standard Version, 1 Cor. 15:33). Moreover, how do our children, who have attended worship and Bible study since the cradle, have parents who are devout in their faith, and were baptized into Christ, leave the Lord’s church? There should be no controversy about the cause of our children’s corruption. An average school age child spends at least one hour going to and coming from school, eight hours in a school, and one hour in some kind of recreation. Most of this companionship is far from good and is, in some cases, immoral. Now how does four hours of congregational consecration each **week** combat ten hours of carnal companionship each **weekday**? In short, we need to do a better job analyzing and applying, “Be not deceived: evil companionships corrupt good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33). This inspired inscription will be the center of our consideration.

The Context: 1 Corinthians 15:33

A study of the context means to examine how the word is weaved through the text. It means to look around and take note of the setting. The more we learn about the setting, the more strength it gives our understanding of the Sacred Scripture. The verse is set in one of Paul’s most critical books. It was written to correct their many doctrinal and moral problems. Some commentators believe the verse

is a repetition on an old proverb or a reference to the poet Meander (Clark 286). This is a testimony to the obvious nature of its teaching, and regardless of how others have adopted its principles, its origin is with the Living God (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Let us consider the city, creeds, and church at Corinth as it relates to 1 Corinthians 15:33.

The City

The Greek name for Corinth means “ornament” (Jensen 265). In 146 B.C., Corinth had been devastated by the Romans. It was not until the reign of Julius Caesar that the city was rebuilt to become the political capital of Achaia (Tenney 289). Being located on an isthmus (a narrow strip of land) connecting the eastern and western Roman Empire, it also became a major trade center (Tenney 289). Corinth was a “boom town” which offered great wealth and luxury (Tenney 290). Estimates of its population vary during the days of Paul from 100,000 to 700,000 (Jensen 266).

The Creeds

The creeds at Corinth were countless. It did have a synagogue and it was Paul’s first place to visit when he arrived (Acts 18:1-4). However, its affluence and influence were ungodly. Corinth was the home of the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty and love (Jensen 266). At one time, it lodged more than 1,000 priestesses who were professional prostitutes. Morally, the city was loose even according to the inferior standards of the pagans (Tenney 290). The Greek word *korinthiazomai* (“to act the Corinthians”) came to mean “to commit fornication” (Jensen 266). Jensen wrote, “One writer has described Corinth as ‘a seaman’s paradise, a drunkard’s heaven, and a virtuous woman’s hell’” (266).

The Church

The church was in danger of losing her identity. “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you, that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Cor. 15:12). It seems extreme to find a Christian moving so far from her foundations. Yet, this is the condition of church of Christ at Corinth. Paul’s first contact with Corinth is recorded in Acts 18. This was his second missionary and it occurred about A.D. 50. He spent 18 months in his

pioneer preaching there (Acts 18:11). Corinth was the home of some notable Christians among whom were Justus, Crispus, Aquila and Priscilla, and Apollos, but not even these giants in the faith could overcome the corruption of bad companionship. Brethren, there is a mighty message for any congregation who ignores God's commands on companionship. No matter how strong you think you might be, any congregation or Christian who dances with the devil can and will eventually be devoured by His deceptions!

The Command: "Be Not"

The Bible authorizes in only three ways: direct statements, implications, and examples. The clearest of all direct statements are commands. These are "spelled-out" propositions stated in an emphatic and explicit way. This command is straightforward, strong, and steadfast. Let us consider each of these aspects.

It Is Straightforward

It is straightforward without the ambiguity of secular humanism. In no uncertain terms, Paul says, "Be not." No one wants to say what they mean, and very few seem to mean what they say. Sometimes our words are so cloaked in tact that they have lost their power to prick. We need elders, preachers, and Bible school teachers to be straightforward with the Scriptures and not apologetic. We need preaching that cuts to the heart of the problem and causes men to repent of their sins and be baptized into Christ (Acts 2:37-38).

It is Strong

I realize that authoritative commands are not popular, but nonetheless, they are powerful. Consider the following potent passages from the Proverbial pages on companionship.

Proverbs 1:10: "My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not."

Proverbs 5:8: "Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house."

Proverbs 4:14, 15: “Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil *men*. Avoid it, pass not by it, turn from it, and pass away.”

Proverbs 9:6: “Forsake the foolish, and live; and go in the way of understanding.”

Proverbs 12:26: “The righteous *is* more excellent than his neighbour: but the way of the wicked seduceth them.”

Proverbs 13:20: “He that walketh with wise *men* shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed.”

Proverbs 14:7: “Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not *in him* the lips of knowledge.”

Proverbs 22:24: “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go.”

Proverbs 23:6: “Eat thou not the bread of *him that hath* an evil eye, neither desire thou his dainty meats.”

Proverbs 28:7: “Whoso keepeth the law *is* a wise son: but he that is a companion of riotous *men* shameth his father.”

Proverbs 29:24: “Whoso is partner with a thief hateth his own soul: he heareth cursing, and bewrayeth *it* not.

Proverbs 23:20: “Be not among winebibbers;
among riotous eaters of flesh.”

Brethren, these are inspired instructions for raising faithful children! There is no better book than the Bible for molding our sons and daughters into the image of Christ. Parenting from Proverbs should be the preferred pattern for all counselors. Yes, man has his masterpieces for parenting (“*Bringing Up Boys*” and “*Bringing Up Girls*” by James Dobson), but none have done better than the Holy handbook. Over forty times, the wise preacher directly uses the phrase “My son.” Is it not fascinating to learn how many of these parenting precepts deal with companionship? Parents, are you listening?

It Is Steadfast

Commands are not here today and gone tomorrow. Being almost 2,000 years removed from the apostles admonition does not weaken it. Time does not change God’s commandment on companionship. Congregations of our Lord have rationalized away God’s commands for cultural considerations. No matter how far we think man has “evolved,” we can never outgrow our need for His inspired Word. Paul’s pattern for companionships is steadfast!

The Captivation: “Deceived”

The word *deception* means “to make to wander, cause to err lead astray” (Bullinger 209). Deception is the single greatest strength of the subtle Serpent. He seeks to deceive Christians, churches, and entire countries into sin. He deceived Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1; 1 Tim. 2:14). He sought to deceive the churches of Corinth that there was no resurrection of the dead. John warns that he will go out to deceive all nations in the four quarters of the earth (Rev. 20:8). Satan will forever “lie in wait to deceive” (Eph. 4:14). Jesus said, “Take heed that no man deceive you” (Mat. 24:4).

I must admit, he has done a very good job deceiving man about companionships. Perhaps no greater deception has fallen upon our youth than the deceptive and dangerous modern date. It is both

captivating and cursing our children with sin. It is time we ask what does the Bible say about the modern date? If we are honest, we must reply, “Absolutely nothing.” Parents, I plead with you to consider the following questions. How can I spend long periods of time with a girl without making a commitment? Where can I be alone with a girl, unsupervised, and even with the permission from her parents? How can I kiss, make-out, and explore my sexuality without the fear of a father’s wrath? Where can I have my way with a girl without consequences, cost, or concern? Why dating, of course! Is there a more deceitful companionship than the *simple* and *innocent* date? I am convinced the modern date is the Devil’s deceptive way to seduce teenagers into having sex before marriage. One study I read a few years ago indicated that, by the age of sixteen, one out of every three girls is having sex. The modern dating model is about 75 years old. For the past 60 years, our teen birth rate has been rising. We have the highest unwed birth rate of any industrialized nation on earth. When are we going to learn that dating DOES NOT work! We need to do something different if we are going to break the cycle. Several years ago, I was given a book titled *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* by Joshua Harris. After reading it, I was convinced the American dating model must be abandoned by Christians if we are going to save our children. Since there is no example of the modern “date” in the Bible, we must dig deeper to search for a better way of finding a lifelong companion. I would like to introduce a different, but by no means new concept to replace the dating model. This type of companionship is called *courtship*. Since we have not courted for so long, perhaps a short course (courting 101) will help.

The companionship of courting is Biblical. Solomon courted his bride (S. of Sol. 1-3). They did not hook-up, create a casual relationship, search the wanted ads (now internet dating sites), or try cohabitating first. Solomon told his son to find a wife, not a girlfriend (Pro. 18:22). The word *find* meaning to attain, acquire, and to reach out, is a striking contrast to chance meetings, blind dates, and worldly acquaintances. Courting is a method where two people carefully seek companionship without compromising their Christian character.

The companionship of courting allows for parental judgment to guide their children, while dating leaves it to mere chance. I am not advocating a pre-arranged marriage, but I am advocating parental involvement in this monumental moment of life. “Neither shalt thou make marriages with them; thy daughter thou shalt not give unto his son, nor his daughter shalt thou take unto thy son” (Deu. 7:3). Talk to your children early and often about the eternal import of this decision. As with Abraham and Isaac, my wife and I are going to send our children into our own country to find our own kindred (Gen. 24:2-4; Gen. 28:1-2). I am talking about the church of Christ and the network of friends we should be creating for our children. From Bible camp to Gospel meetings, lectureships, church seminars, youth gatherings, and sister congregations, we can surround our children with Christians. We can even make a mental list of families who share our devotion to God and thirst for Heaven. Our children will marry one of their peers. We may not be able to control who they wed, but we can control where they find their companions! Dating is too much like playing Russian Roulette with the souls of our children.

The companionship of courting encourages children to be children while dating pushes children into adult activities before they are ready. Children are not designed to be husbands, fathers, wives, or mothers. They are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually immature. Remember, God said it is a MAN who leaves his father and mother and not a boy (Gen. 2:24). Children in America grow up too fast. There is no valid reason to allow pre-teens and young teens to date. Studies have repeatedly shown that the younger our children date, the higher the risk for sexual activity. Courting is for adults, the young and aged, and not for children.

The companionship of courting confines the couple with time limits; whereas, many who date spend more time together than those of us who are married. The more time you spend with someone who is not rightfully yours, the more opportunity you have for temptation to turn into sin. During courtship, agreements are made as to when and how long you spend together.

The companionship of courting helps to safeguard both the man and woman's purity, while dating is the primary way young people lose it. "It is good for a man not to touch a woman. Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:1-2). If you want to touch, get married! The companionship of dating usually leads to prolonged kissing, making out, inappropriate touching, and physical exposure. In contrast, the companionship of courting has no such expectations. Both parties enter into courtship agreeing that sex and those things that lead to sex are OFF LIMITS! Notice what Shulamith said during her courtship with Solomon, "I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake my love, till he please" (S. of Sol. 2:7; S. of Sol. 3:5). It was not until her wedding night that she finally allowed her sleeping sexuality to "awake" (S. of Sol. 4:16).

The way our children are meeting their lifelong companion falls right into Satan's lure and the Devil's deceptions. I am resolved to raise my children in a different way because I want different results. I know this may sound peculiar and perhaps will be unpopular, but I refuse to let my children be "deceived" by the dangerous date!

The Crookedness: "Evil"

It is hardly heard, rarely recited, and almost immoral to use. I am speaking about *Evil*. According to Thayer, *evil* is, "universally of a bad nature . . . base, wrong, wicked . . . what is contrary to the law" ("Evil"). If something is evil, then something must be good. If something is good or evil, there must be a standard for it. The standard is the law, not of men, but of God. Those who seek to use human law as their standard for evil come into great peril. Moral evil and good cannot be of human origin, for nothing in humanity can explain it. This difficulty was recognized and realized by those who tried the Nazis for their war crimes against the Jewish people. The Nazis thought they had the moral right to exterminate the Jews. Nazi Heinrich Himmler said, "We had the moral duty to our people to destroy this people which wanted to destroy us"

(Warren 38). Have you ever considered what law the Nazi's violated in seeking to exterminate the Jews? It was not German law, and there was no international law. In fact, no human law was cited in their conviction. R.H. Jackson in his closing statement at the Nuremberg trial appealed to a higher law which, "rises above the provincial and transient" (Warren 16). For centuries, atheists have tried to use the origin of evil as a way to silence God's people, but when pressed to explain by what standard they know evil, they are left speechless. Any system that cannot clearly explain why the murderous events of the holocaust were evil, must be rejected and repudiated by all rational people. We have no problem preaching on evil. Drinking, dancing, and immodest dress are evil. Cursing, carousing, and cheating are evil. Denominationalism, Humanism, and Hedonism are evil. Evolution, Theistic-evolution, and Atheism are evil. I am sad by the effects of evil, but I am glad for the standard that identifies it. Brethren, evil is always identifiable and should always be identified!

The Companionship: "Companionships"

Good companionship is good, but evil companionship is equally bad. What are the limitations on our companionship? May I have companionship with non-Christians? These, among other questions, are frequently asked by sincere saints. First, the Bible mentions the word *friend* 53 times, *friends* 49 times, and *friendship* two times. The Bible word *friend* appears to have two distinct meanings. It was used as a term of endearment and as a form of kind address to another. It is the term of endearment that Paul prescribes in his second epistle to Corinth:

Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for

ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. (2 Cor. 6:14-18)

This sacred scripture has been misused by friends and foes alike. This verse neither prohibits marriages between non-Christians and Christians nor prohibits friendships between non-Christians and Christians. Moreover, neither is this verse a blank check on companionship, but it is a balanced approach. The key to unlocking the meaning is with the word *unequally*. Let us note what Paul did **NOT** say, “Be ye not (omission) yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14). The warning words focus on **UNEQUAL YOKING**. Imagine a balance scale for a moment. On one side you have a heavy weight and the other side a hollow weight. The scale is tilted dramatically down on the side of the heavy weight. If a carnal companion has the greater influence, you must cease their influence by ceasing the relationship. This is what Paul is prohibiting. He is reminding all Christians of the responsibility that comes with choosing friends. We cannot place ourselves into a relationship (marriages included) that allows unbelievers, unrighteousness, and idolaters to have the greater influence. This would include those who could deceive us through the drink, dance, date, and dress. We (Christians) must be the stronger in the relationship. The scale must always tip on the side of godliness. Therefore, if you have a friend who has been deceived and his influence on you is greater than your influence on him, you must do one of two things. You must grow to a point where the scale tips back in your favor, or you must sever the relationship. It is obvious from these verses that the solution for them was separation. As Paul said,

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord” (2 Cor. 7:17).

The Corruption: “Corrupt”

Evil companionship can corrupt the weak and weaken the strong. The word *corrupt* means “to spoil, corrupt, destroy, to bring into a worse case” (Bullinger 188). Thayer adds,

to corrupt, to destroy . . . (in the opinion of the Jews the temple was corrupted, or ‘destroyed’, when anyone defiled or in the slightest degree damaged anything in it . . .) . . . dropping the figure, to lead away a Christian church from that state of knowledge and holiness in which it ought to abide . . . (“Corrupt”)

Earlier Paul described this corrupting influence with the figure of leaven. “Your glorying is not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?” (1 Cor. 5:6). The corrupting nature of evil is powerful. Good flesh can be corrupted quickly with dead flesh. An excellent illustration of corruption comes from ancient Roman justice. When a man committed murder, one method of punishment was to strap the dead body of the victim to the murderer. The victim would be tied to the murderer at the wrists, chest, legs, and ankles to give maximum skin contact. The murderer would have to carry his victim everywhere he went; there was no escape. As the body of the victim began to decompose, flies would gather, and maggots would soon cover the body. Acid from the decomposition would begin to eat into the skin of the murderer opening him up to infection from the flies and other means. The stench from the rotting flesh would nauseate the host, and he would beg for release from this torture. He would want more than anything to be able to throw off this rotting, stinking corpse and get away. Eventually the murderer would die of septic shock, blood poisoning, or another infection. The illustration points us to the fact that the flesh of the host grew more and more

corrupt as it stayed in contact with the rotting flesh of the dead man. How sad when those who are risen in the waters of baptism so connect themselves to the corrupting nature of sin in riotous companionship. In time, they, too, will only be fit for the grave.

The Christianity: “Good”

Jesus declared, “And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? *there is* none good but one, *that is*, God” (Mat. 19:17). Thayer defines *good* as “for use, useful; virtuous” (“Good”). We have already seen its counterpart, “evil,” and therefore should have a solid understanding about its import. All goodness comes from God, and nothing good can come without Him. Who are the virtuous? Those who mold themselves into the image of God. Our companions should be Christians, but not just any Christian. Befriending or even marrying a Christian can be more damaging than a non-Christian. Remember Solomon said, “Favour *is* deceitful, and beauty *is* vain: *but* a woman *that* feareth the LORD, she shall be praised” (Pro. 31:30). Who is worse, the man who makes it clear in the beginning of their courtship he has no interest in the Lord’s church or the man who deceives the woman by acting as though he does? How many wives have awakened after a few years of marriage to learn their husband was a pretender during their “dating” days and really has no love for the church? Now she has small children and will be forced to raise them in the faith without the leadership of her husband. It is important that we look beyond the surface and measure the heart of our companions by their fruits (Mat. 7:20). Brethren, we do not just need Christians as our companions, we need faithful Christians.

The Character: “Morals”

The King James Version uses the word *manners* while the American Standard Version more accurately renders it *morals*. According to Bullinger, the Greek word means “the manners and habits of man, his disposition, character” (479). Thayer says it is a “dwelling-place” (“Morals”). An examination of the transliteration of the Greek word “ethos” into English gives us an insight into its

meaning. Do you see the word ethics? In this form, it is found only once. Its sister form is found 13 times and is normally rendered *custom* (Brown 437-438). Interestingly, it is found in Hebrews 10:25 and is rendered *manner*. It begs the question, is it immoral to forsake the assembly of the Saints?

“Two things awe me most, the starry dky above me and the moral law within me”(Kant). Morality is the inward application of God’s law. It is the house of God’s holiness that dwells within only one of God’s created—man. Brethren, if we are not careful, our holy house, our inward tabernacle, can be corrupted by evil men. Morality is the separator of man and beast, and I am not talking about animals. The Bible provides a code of ethics which brings man to the highest character in the world. Christians should search for companions with these characteristics, ethics, and morals. Do not ever be so desperate for companionship that you would forsake the guide of your youth (Pro. 2:17). How many young people, so lonely for a friend, or pressure for a mate, compromise their Christian character and settle for a corrupting companion? At first, they seek to save, later they seek to survive, and at last they squander their soul.

The Conclusion

The Prodigal son went into a far country and wasted his substance (and almost his soul) with riotous living. We cannot know exactly the kind of riotous living in which he engaged, but we can know that evil rarely travels alone. I have no doubt he surrounded himself by evil companions who deceived him into partaking of their evil deeds. Let us never underestimate the control of companionship. Matthew Henry surmised, “Note, bad company and conversation are likely to make bad men” (477). Furthermore, Adam Clark wrote,

There is no difficulty in this saying; he who frequents the company of bad or corrupt men will soon be as they are. He may be sound in the faith, and have the life and power of godliness,

and at first frequent their company only for the sake of their pleasing conversation, or their literary accomplishments: and he may think his faith proof against their infidelity; but he will soon find, by means of their glowing speeches, his faith weakened; and when once he gets under the empire of doubt, unbelief will soon prevail; his bad company will corrupt his morals. (286)

At Corinth, evil companions crippled their faith, and today, evil companions are corrupting our consecration. In many cases, children are the victims as we continue to ignore God's law on companionship. It has always been true, it is still true, and it will always be true, "Be not deceived: evil companionships corrupt good morals" (ASV, 1 Cor. 15:33).

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CHAPTER 11

Riotous Living: Fornication

Cliff Goodwin

“**Y**ou only go around once—you need to grab all the gusto you can!” How many times has this statement, or a similar one, been made? Its origin is utter spiritual ignorance, and its destiny is sure spiritual destruction. Far too many people are living for the “here and now.” They never seem to pause with even a contemplation of what could be termed the “there and then.” The worldly, carnal mindset sits at the pinnacle of shortsightedness. All enamored with present delights and gratification, it never realizes or cares that there is a ceaseless eternity looming on the horizon. To borrow from the inspired language of Peter, the carnal-minded person “is blind, and cannot see afar off” (King James Version, 2 Pet. 1:9).

Bible students recognize this shortsightedness in “the prodigal son” (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus described this young man’s conduct as “riotous living” and identified it as the means of squandering his possessions (Luke 15:13). What exactly is *riotous* living? Jesus used an interesting word whose forms are found only four times in the entire New Testament. The other three occurrences are emboldened in the following passages.

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is **excess**;
but be filled with the Spirit. (Eph. 5:18)

If any be blameless, the husband of one wife,
having faithful children not accused of **riot** or
unruly. (Tit. 1:6)

Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with *them* to the same excess of **riot**, speaking evil of *you*. (1 Pet. 4:4)

In its noun form, the word means “an abandoned, dissolute life” (Thayer). At the heart of its meaning lies the idea of *no restraint*. It indicates an indulgent lifestyle, one perhaps following the motto, “If it feels good—do it; if you want it—have it!” Obviously this attitude is contrary to the Christian principles of “righteousness, and self-control, and the judgment to come” (cf. Acts 24:25, ASV). It is **not** that God seeks to deprive man of pleasure or enjoyment in this life. After all, it is He that “giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). He simply commands man to govern and restrain himself in keeping with Divine law. *Riotous* living is polar opposite of this concept.

There is something else very interesting about the Greek word translated *riot* or *riotous* in the King James Version. It is derived from the combination of the negative particle and the word meaning *to save*; hence, it literally denotes *unsavedness* (Strong). A riotous person is not usually known for saving much of anything—his money, his health, or even his self-respect. He throws it all away in pursuit of worldly pleasures and carnal gratification. This is the very portrait painted of the prodigal son. He was uninhibited, indulgent and reckless, and he paid the price for such behavior.

Fornication: The Definition

Many sins could be included under the heading “riotous living.” Drunkenness and fornication would probably top the list. Upon the prodigal’s return, it was the disgruntled elder brother who accused him of devouring the father’s resources with harlots (Luke 15:30)—a charge not likely far from the truth. The Greek word translated *harlots* (*porne*) is from the same root from which the word *fornication* (*porneia*) is also rendered. A word needs to be said at this point regarding *porneia*.

Thayer defines *porneia* as simply “illicit sexual intercourse,” but then goes on to elaborate with “adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, intercourse with animals, etc.” Obviously, fornication is used to translate a very broad word which denotes all sexual intercourse outside of scriptural marriage. The Hebrews author penned by inspiration, “*Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled: for fornicators and adulterers God will judge*” (Heb. 13:4, ASV). From this verse alone one can see the sinfulness of both *pre-marital* and *extra-marital* sex. Further, both homosexuality and lesbianism are sinful, for it is impossible for those acts to occur within God-ordained marriage (i.e. a man and a woman scripturally joined by God, Mat. 19:3-9).

By definition, fornication stands in complete contrast to God’s plan for human sexuality (cf. 1 Cor. 7:2). God has placed this wonderful blessing firmly within the realm of matrimony; it has even been appropriately termed “God’s wedding gift.” The world, on the other hand, seeks to fling such a gift across a wide spectrum of human relationships and liaisons, besmirching what God intended to be a beautiful expression of marital love. Fornication is always selfish. Though the world may advance this sin under the guise of love, it is really no more than unrestrained lust. It relegates sexual expression to essentially the level of beasts, and it reverses the intended purpose of the human body from that of glorifying God to that of rebelling against Him (cf. 1 Cor. 6:18).

Fornication: The Determinations

In spiritual matters, ignorance is certainly not bliss. Man must learn and know the truth of God’s Word if he is to be saved (John 8:31-32; 1 Tim. 2:4). Sadly, however, there are many who are not learned in the spiritual verities. They have not been taught by others, neither have they taught themselves by reading and studying the Bible. Such ignorance is not a new problem. The ancient Gentile world had chosen not to retain God in their knowledge (Rom. 1:21-28). Thus, they were mired in the darkness of spiritual ignorance until the Christian dispensation. The spread of the Gospel of Jesus

Christ began to change this fact in the first century. The apostle Paul told the Athenians, “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30).

As then, even so today, ignorance of God’s Will does not excuse sin. There are many who commit fornication because spiritual principles have not been taught or stressed in their lives. In other words, they may not “know better.” They understand neither God’s plan for human sexuality, nor the seriousness of man’s going counter to that plan. Such ignorance is proof-positive that the church’s work is never done. The preaching of the Gospel and the teaching of Biblical principles must be carried out across this globe—in every generation (cf. Mat. 28:18-20).

Others, however, become guilty of fornication even though they know and understand that is it wrong. These cases of disobedience tend to fall into one of two categories. First, there are those who succumb to fornication in weakness. Two people find themselves alone when the passions are too high and the circumstances too inviting. The sin had not been planned, or premeditated, but it occurs nonetheless. Such a spiritual tragedy is always lamentable. Second, there are those who commit fornication in rebellion. They know truth concerning the matter, but they have determined that carnal desires are more pressing. Christian principles and holy living are knowingly laid aside; a worldly course is pursued. Perhaps they have decided to “sow their wild oats” now, with a vague and distant intention to reform their lives one day. The immoral results of both cases are sinful, but the heart condition of those involved in the latter is especially scary.

There is one fundamental answer for both cases of weakness and cases of rebellion. The means of getting individuals *to that answer* will differ between the two groups. Obviously the rebellious category will be more difficult to bring to repentance, but both groups need essentially the same thing. They fundamentally need to make some strong spiritual determinations. These determinations would be akin to what was said of Daniel, “But Daniel **purposed in his heart** that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s meat,

nor with the wine which he drank” (Dan. 1:8; emp. mine, CG). A person must arm himself with strong determination *before* the temptation to commit fornication presents itself. Once the “time and opportunity” meet with a willing partner, it is often too late—if not nigh impossible—for one to muster the strong determination in his heart to resist. On the other hand, if the strong determination is present beforehand, it will most often prevent one from even allowing himself to get into a tempting, or compromising, situation.

Probably the greatest treatise on fornication in all the New Testament is found in First Corinthians 6:9-20. From this text one can glean a number of spiritual determinations that, if made, will aid one greatly in avoiding and overcoming the sin of fornication. *First, one must determine that he will not defend or justify the sin of fornication.* This is a determination with which the rebellious offender will have to grapple from the outset. As long as one seeks to justify or rationalize his own sinful behavior, there is no hope for reformation (or salvation!). There seem to have been some of this ilk in the church at ancient Corinth. Paul anticipates one or two of their flimsy arguments and answers them in verses twelve and thirteen.

Verse twelve is one of the more difficult verses in the overall passage. “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). The basic meaning of this verse can be understood at face value: one cannot give himself over to anything—even lawful things—so that they control him. Everything in life must be kept in proper perspective and priority; lawful things must be used lawfully. This truth is easily enough discerned from the text. But what is this truth doing in the present *context*? What does this truth have to do with fornication?

Here is a proposed solution. Paul was obviously not saying that fornication is lawful behavior, as this would contradict what he had just written in verses nine through eleven. But were some of the rebellious Corinthians trying to say that it was? According to the record in Acts, Paul had stayed in Corinth some eighteen months, teaching the Word of God among them (Acts 18:11). It is

more than plausible to assume that Paul had taught the Corinthians during that time concerning meats offered unto idols. In fact, First Corinthians 8:4 suggests this, “As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, **we know that an idol is nothing in the world**, and that *there is* none other God but one,” (emp. mine, CG). Hence, it seems that in First Corinthians chapters eight and ten Paul was trying to “dial back” the Corinthians regarding their insistence on such liberty. Knowing that an idol is nothing and that meats offered unto idols are not inherently tainted, a willful Corinthian might have insisted that neither is fornication sinful (acts of fornication were closely linked with idolatry, especially in Corinth). Perhaps Paul was anticipating such an argument in 1 Corinthians 6:12 and would thoroughly refute the same by the end of the chapter.

Then in verse thirteen Paul anticipates an age-old argument that some still proffer today. “Meats for the belly, and the belly for meats; but God shall destroy both it and them. Now the body *is* not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor. 6:13). This could be summarized as “the nature argument.” Some would say that sex between a man and a woman is as natural as a person’s putting food into his stomach. Stomachs and food go together just like men and women go together, they reason. But Paul “shoots down” this argument very quickly. While it is true that stomachs are designed by God for the digestion of food, it is **not** true that men’s and women’s bodies are designed for fornication! The human body is designed and intended for God’s service and glorification. Any provision God has made for sexual activity between men and women has been subordinated to that overall purpose. In other words, sex is only pure and right when it occurs within the confines of God’s Law (i.e., marriage). All other sexual relations are illicit and rightfully termed *fornication*.

Second, one must determine that he will not dishonor his union with Christ. When a child of God unlawfully joins his body to another in the act of fornication, he is disgracing and, in effect, renouncing his union with Christ. The apostle Paul provides this weighty, inspired logic.

Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make *them* the members of a harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to a harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. (1 Cor. 6:15-17)

Paul's use of the word *members* in this context is interesting. He uses the same term again, later in the epistle, when he writes, "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular," (1 Cor. 12:27). One need not miss Paul's point. The church, the spiritual body of Christ, is made up of *people*—not just *souls*—but *people*. People have physical bodies, and their identity in this world cannot be separated from their respective physical bodies. When Christ redeems a person, He redeems **all** of the person—both body and spirit. "For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Cor. 6:20). True enough, the union between Christ and a Christian is a spiritual union (1 Cor. 6:17), but that spiritual union has ramifications involving the Christian's body. He **totally** belongs to Christ. To illicitly join his body with another in the act of fornication is to denigrate his relationship with Christ and the importance thereof.

Third, one must determine that he will use his body as an instrument for God's glory. "Pro-choice" supporters of abortion miss a key consideration that comes into play here. The slogan "*My body. My choice!*" is baseless. In the truest sense, a person's body never really *belongs* to that person. The body came from God (cf. Gen. 2:7; 1:28); it is sustained by God (cf. Mat. 5:45; James 1:17); it will one day be resurrected by God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:22); and its eternal destiny rests in the hands of God (cf. Mat. 10:28; John 5:28-29). And one is so brazen as to exclaim, "*My body. My choice!*" Really?! The psalmist declared, "Know ye that the LORD he is God: *it is he that* hath made us, and not we ourselves; *we are* his people, and the sheep of his pasture" (Psa. 100:3). God is man's Sovereign Creator, and He created

man for His pleasure and glory (cf. Isa. 43:7; Rev. 4:11). Therefore all with which man is endowed—including His physical body—is to be used and employed in a way that brings glory to God. Elsewhere Paul penned, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is your reasonable service*” (Rom. 12:1).

Understanding the purpose for which man’s body was intended helps shed some light on another statement Paul makes in First Corinthians 6. “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body” (1 Cor. 6:18). What is so exceptional about fornication, that it merits the foregoing description of its disastrous effects? Could the answer somehow lie in God’s Divine intention for man and for the body in which he lives upon this earth? When a person commits the sin of fornication, he employs the body given him by God in a work that is a polar opposite to its intended use. That body intended to glorify God is directly, overtly, and actively engrossed in *sinning against God!* Every would-be fornicator needs to rehearse the words of Joseph, “[H]ow then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9b).

Fourth, one must determine that he will use his body to go to heaven—not misuse it and go to hell. This point comes out quite early in the context presently studied.

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither **fornicators**, nor idolaters, nor **adulterers**, nor **effeminate**, nor **abusers of themselves with mankind**, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor. 6:9-11; emp. mine, CG)

All of the sins emboldened above directly involve fornication in one form or another. These, along with all the others, fall under the same Divine sentence—namely, the denial of entrance into heaven, the eternal kingdom of God. One must ever be impressed with the immortal nature of *his own* existence! Such is surely entailed in one's being made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Even the body with which man is endowed will last forever and ever, though not in its fleshly form. Each person's body will be resurrected at the last day (1 Cor. 6:14) in a spiritual, incorruptible form (1 Cor. 15:42-50). Then man in his resurrected body will stand before God in judgment, receiving the sentence of death or the reward of life (cf. Mat. 10:28).

One cannot contemplate these facts without coming to a sobering realization: man can commit acts in his temporal, physical body, the consequences of which he will suffer eternally. Peter strikes at this very concept in writing, "Dearly beloved, I beseech *you* as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul" (1 Pet. 2:11). How sad and foolish for one to misuse the temporal so as to jeopardize the eternal (2 Cor. 4:18)!

Fornication: The Deterrents

With something so strong as the sex drive in human beings, and with immoral opportunities so prevalent as they are in this modern time, what is there to deter fornication among God's people? Apparently inquiry needs to be made into such deterrents, for in some places fornication almost appears to be as prevalent inside the church as it is without. The Bible reveals a number of things that should motivate the sensible heart to faithfulness and deter the God-fearing soul from fornication.

First and foremost, one's love for God should trump any momentary lust. The Bible teaches man to "love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind" (Mat. 22:37). But even better, the Bible reveals more than ample grounds *why* man should love God to this degree. Every good and every perfect gift comes from God's bountiful hand (Jam. 1:17). He did not

withhold from man that which man needed the most, but deserved the least (Rom. 8:32). This unspeakable gift, in fact, cost God the most (John 3:16; 2 Cor. 9:15). In short, man ought to love God supremely because He first loved us (1 John 4:19)!

Second, and closely connected with love, there is the deterrent of gratitude. A grateful heart is one that considers all the blessings God has bestowed and where one would be without them. He rejoices in the goodness of God and naturally wants to reciprocate to the best of his limited ability. It is interesting to observe the transition Paul makes from sinful behaviors to gratitude, setting them in contrast one to the other. “But **fornication**, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather **giving of thanks**” (Eph. 5:3-4; emp. mine, CG). It is the height of ingratitude to take the very blessings given by God and then misuse them in sinning against God. Fornication disgustingly fits that description.

Third, love for one’s neighbor can serve as a deterrent to fornication. *Lust* has the opposite effect. Jesus clearly set forth in the story of the Good Samaritan that one’s neighbor is his fellow-man, **period** (Luke 10:25-37)! Yet every time fornication is committed, the participants sin against their fellow human beings. Obviously, they sin against each other as stumbling blocks (Rom. 14:13). However, one should consider even further the following words of the inspired Paul.

For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter: because that the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. (1 The. 4:3-6)

Why is it, in condemning fornication, that Paul mentions defrauding, or wronging, another? Obviously, he could have had a specific form of fornication in mind—namely adultery. Adultery is fornication in which marital vows are infringed (that is, one or both participants are married, only to someone else). But there is something else to consider. Even when unmarried couples commit fornication, are they not wronging their respective future spouses? When all things are considered, fornication is one of the most unloving things a person can do. It may be committed in the name of “love,” but such is no more than selfish lust. One neither loves himself nor his neighbor(s).

Finally, contemplation of eternity can be a deterrent to the sin of fornication. Is a moment of pleasure really worth eternity in a devil’s hell? Are repeated trysts worth the forfeited salvation of one’s immortal soul? Again, Paul’s words should be soberly considered, “Put to death therefore your members which are upon the earth: **fornication**, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry; for which things’ sake cometh **the wrath of God** upon the sons of disobedience” (Col. 3:5-6, ASV; emp. mine, CG). There will come a time when the sinner will no longer lust for fornication. In fact, there will come a time when he will wish that he had never committed it in the first place (cf. 1 John 2:17).

Conclusion

The prodigal son of Luke 15:11-32 was, in all likelihood, a fornicator. If so, he learned the hard way the truthfulness of the proverb as it appears in the King James Version, “For by means of a whorish woman *a man is brought* to a piece of bread” (Pro. 6:26). Tragically, the number of his kind throughout history has been legion. May God’s people ever beware of and avoid this perilous sin.

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CHAPTER 12

Riotous Living: Gambling

Mark Lindley

“**A**nd not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living” (King James Version, Luke 15:13). With these few short strokes of his pen, Luke described the prodigal son’s tragic plunge into the depths of sin. Having received his portion of the inheritance, the wayward son squandered his father’s fortune on “riotous living.”

The term *riotous* means “dissolutely” (Thayer, “Riotous”). According to Webster’s dictionary, *dissolute* means “lacking restraint; marked by indulgence in things (as drink or promiscuous sex) deemed vices” (“Dissolute”). These definitions indicate that the prodigal son’s lifestyle was without restraint and marked by indulgence in sinful activities. Did he get drunk? Did he give himself to fornication and sensual pleasure (cf. Luke 15:30)? Did he waste some of his money on gambling? Scripture does not reveal all the specific sins the young man engaged in, but gambling could certainly be classified as “riotous living.” Without question, gamblers often lack restraint and indulge in various activities which are condemned in God’s Word as sin.

Of course there are many, in and out of the church, who attempt to defend gambling. They affirm that it is harmless fun. However, if gambling is viewed in light of what the Bible teaches, it becomes evident that gambling truly is a “riotous” activity in which no child of God should participate. Since the problem of gambling is not going to go away, God’s people need to be informed on this subject. This lecture will set forth a definition of gambling, arguments

against gambling, arguments made in support of gambling, and a Scriptural conclusion.

Gambling Defined

Webster's dictionary gives a basic definition of the term *gamble*: "the playing of a game of chance for stakes" ("Gamble"). In a tract entitled "What about Gambling?" Jackie Stearsman cites a definition of gambling given by Stafford North: "Gambling is the act of risking what is yours in order to get what belongs to another with nothing given in return" (Elkins and Taylor 3). Based on these definitions, there are three key elements involved in gambling: (1) an uncertain, arbitrary event; (2) the wager (something of value) that is deliberately chanced on a particular outcome; (3) a winner and a loser—the winner wins at the direct loss of the other gambler(s) (Blackwell). Those who gamble gamble for basically one reason—to win. However, by winning, the gambler takes from the loser. In other words, gamblers operate by the desire to take something from someone else, and this unlawful desire is best described as greed. Surely, a practice that is set up on the foundation of greed cannot be God-approved.

Biblical Arguments Against Gambling

For the one who has a sincere desire to please God, the Bible will be consulted as the final standard of authority regarding all beliefs and practices (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Although there is no specific verse of the Bible that states "Thou shalt not gamble," the gambler violates many Biblical principles.

Gambling Violates The Principle Of Stewardship

A steward is one who is entrusted with the goods or possessions of another. God has entrusted us with many blessings such as money and material possessions, and we are to be good stewards of all God has given us. Paul wrote, "Moreover, it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful" (1 Cor. 4:2). In the context of this statement, Paul is writing about being a good steward of the Gospel. However, the general principle also is set forth that in all stewardship we are to be "found faithful." All that we have has been given by God. "Every

good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning” (Jam. 1:17). God says, “If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fullness thereof” (Psa. 50:12). These verses establish that we own nothing. Rather, God allows us to use His money and material possessions while we live upon earth. This world and all that is in it belongs to God, and therefore our money and possessions are not ours to waste. The Lord taught this principle in the “Parable of the Talents” (Mat. 25:14-30). A “talent” in this parable represents money. Jesus said that the one-talent man “dugged in the earth, and hid his lord’s money” (Mat. 25:18). The “money” that he hid was the “talent” with which he had been entrusted. The reason the one-talent man was condemned is that he failed to be a good steward. Jesus said that the lord of the one-talent man said, “Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury” (Mat. 25:27). Poor stewardship caused the one-talent man to be cast into “outer darkness,” a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mat. 25:30).

It cannot be successfully denied that gambling is poor stewardship. Common sense should enable the casino gambler to see that the odds are clearly stacked against him. The house must win in order to stay in business, and therefore the gambler must be the loser. However, the money lost is not the gambler’s to lose—it is God’s—and one day we will all give an account of how well we have managed the blessings with which we have been entrusted.

Consider the odds of winning the lottery. Depending on where one lives, the odds vary to some degree. Yet, even with the best odds of winning the lottery, the chances are rather slim. The odds of winning some state lotteries are 18 million to 1, while other states offer odds as high as 120 million to 1. To better understand just how bad those odds are consider that the chance of being killed by lightning in the United States is 2,650,000 to 1. Therefore, if we take the odds offered by some states of winning the lottery (120 million to 1), and compare those odds with the chance of being killed by

lightning (2,650,000 to 1), we can conclude that one is 45 times more likely to be struck and killed by lightning than to win the lottery. All of these facts mean that one's chances of winning the lottery are essentially zero (Blackwell).

Imagine a financial advisor telling a potential client, "I would advise you to invest your money in funds that have essentially no chance or one chance in 120 million of being successful." No sober-thinking person would accept such irrational advice. Yet, many will rush to purchase their "chance" to strike it rich. Poor stewardship!

Gambling Is A Form Of Covetousness

Covetousness means "greedy desire to have more" (Thayer, "Covetousness"). One of the Ten Commandments is "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's" (Exo. 20:17). A greedy desire for what belongs to another was wrong under the Old Testament and it is wrong today. Jesus warned, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15). It would not be possible to desire to win money that belongs to someone else without violating passages which condemn covetousness.

Gambling Is Addictive And Enslaving

Those who become addicted to gambling typically go through four phases: the winning phase, the losing phase, the desperation phase, and the hopeless phase. During the winning phase, the gambler may win big. This generates excitement and a feeling that one is "good" at gambling. This leads to more time and money spent at the casino. During the losing phase, the gambler begins to "chase" his losses and gambles in order to win back money that was lost. During this time one may become preoccupied with gambling, begin lying to friends and family, borrow money, and default on debts. Then, during the desperation phase gambling becomes a compulsion. The gambler may feel guilty and ashamed but cannot muster the strength to quit. Now addicted, the gambler may steal or cheat to support the addiction. Then, the hopeless phase comes and the gambler may

turn to alcohol or drugs to numb the pain of the addiction. Many problem gamblers also attempt suicide because they feel they have hit “rock bottom.”

Just how bad is the problem in America? one might ask. According to Dr. Howard J. Shaffer, of the Harvard Medical School Division on Addictions:

Gambling is an addictive behavior, make no mistake about it. It has all the properties of a psychoactive substance. It changes the neurochemistry of the brain. In other words, the excitement of the possibility of winning a large sum of money, with minimal investment, has a narcotic-like effect on the brain—that calls for greater and greater risks, in the hope of that ‘big’ win. (Jackson, “Is Gambling a Moral Issue?”)

The truthfulness of that statement is seen in the following confession made by a recovering gambling addict: “I was hooked. I adored the casinos. The glitz of the lights, the sound of the slots, the hope in the air. It all made me feel so alive” (Dirr).

According to studies, 15 million display some sign of gambling addiction. Three million are problem gamblers. The suicide rate for pathological gamblers is 20 times higher than for non-gamblers (one in five attempts suicide). Two-thirds of the adult population placed some kind of bet last year. Sixty-five percent of pathological gamblers commit crimes to support their habit. The average debt incurred by a male pathological gambler in the United States is between \$55,000 and \$90,000 (\$15,000 for female gamblers) (“Gambling Facts and Statistics”).

This writer heard about a young businessman who was observed in Tunica, dressed in a suit, sitting on a curb, with his faced cupped in his hands, crying. A gentleman passing by noticed that the young man appeared to be very upset, so he asked if he could help. The young professional told the older gentleman that he was in

Tunica on business. The night before, he had decided to unwind at the casino where he won \$500. He was so excited about winning that the next day he withdrew \$15,000 he and his wife had saved for a down-payment on a house. He went back to the casino and lost it all—every dime. As he sat on the curb crying, he said, “I can’t go home and face my wife.” Such stories could be multiplied many times over.

Scripture warns about allowing ourselves to become enslaved to things of this world: “All things are lawful unto me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12). Paul is simply stating that he would not allow anything to control him. Yet, millions are such slaves to gambling that we have an organization in this country called Gamblers Anonymous that is designed to help gamblers regain control of their lives.

The Known Gambler Will Lose His Ability To Influence People For Christ

Christians need to realize that many people of the world view gambling as a vice. This writer well remembers going to pick up a van that would be used as a “church” van. However, the van had once been used as a shuttle van to take gamblers to a casino. When the man at the car lot heard that the van would be used by a church, he said to me, “Boy, you sure are making a big change in the way this van will be used!” His statement revealed that he believed the church and the casino were worlds apart. How could we reach that man or others like him with the Gospel, if we were known gamblers?

Christians must be concerned about our ability to influence others for Christ. Paul wrote, “If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless, we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:12). Paul would not engage in those things that would hinder the spread of the Gospel, and neither should we. James affirms that in order to practice pure religion one must keep himself “unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27), and even according to many non-Christians, gambling is a mark of worldliness.

Gambling Violates The Golden Rule

The Lord said, “Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets” (Mat. 7:12). How can one be a successful gambler and practice the Golden Rule? It simply is not possible. The gambler must desire the misfortune of his opponent. However, if the gambler desires the misfortune of his opponent, then he is not practicing the Golden Rule.

Gambling Encourages Profit At The Pain And Loss Of Other People

It is an established fact that those who gamble the most are the ones who can least afford it. Money that needs to be spent on bills, groceries, or clothing for children is thrown away at the gambling table. Innocent children may be deprived of bare necessities because their parents are addicted to gambling.

The Scriptures teach, however, that Christians are to care for the poor and those in need. Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia, “As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10). Doing good to all would include giving to those in need. Gambling, however, “takes” from the poor and those in need.

In fact, the busiest day in Atlantic City casinos is the day after welfare checks are sent out (Blackwell). This indicates that those who have no money to lose are some of the very ones who frequent Atlantic City casinos. Studies show that poorer people buy the most lottery tickets and spend a larger portion of their income on gambling than those of the middle class (Calonius 109-114). It is certain that the needs of some children are neglected because of gambling. Surely, an activity that profits at the pain and loss of others is not in keeping with the teachings of God’s Word.

Gambling Puts One In Bad Company

Although Christians cannot avoid coming in contact with the immoral who have no interest in spiritual things, one should not intentionally place himself in an environment where there is so much evil and temptation. The psalmist wrote, “Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of

sinner, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful” (Psa.1:1). Those who gamble in the casinos must keep company with drunkards, addicts, thieves, and prostitutes. The New Testament warns about keeping such company: “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33). Such evil association may corrupt even the strongest Christians.

Gambling Violates The Second Greatest Commandment

Jesus said that the second greatest commandment is to “love thy neighbor as thyself” (Mat. 22:39). The love of which Jesus spoke is agape love. It is this type of love that will inspire one to seek the highest good of others. But how can the gambler obey the teaching of this passage? How can the gambler truly seek the highest good of his fellowman while trying to gain possession of his money, car, or house? The answer is that he cannot.

Gambling Is Not An Honorable Or Scriptural Way To Obtain Money

Gambling is essentially trying to obtain something (money) for nothing. It is a way of taking what belongs to another person without giving anything in return. Such greedy desire is not an honorable or Scriptural way to obtain money.

The Scriptures teach that one honorable way to obtain money is by receiving it as a gift. Paul encourages Christians to work with their hands that they “may have to give to him that needeth” (Eph. 4:28). Paul would not encourage Christians to give to those in need, if receiving a gift from others were wrong. There is therefore nothing wrong with receiving money as a gift. The Bible also teaches that money can be earned through working. Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, “And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing” (1 The. 4:11-12). It is clear from this statement that Christians are to “work” that they may have the money they need. God has always required man to work. In the Garden of Eden Adam was to “dress” and “keep” the garden (Gen. 2:15).

Paul stated that if a man will not work, “neither should he eat” (2 The. 3:10). These verses prove that working is the primary, honorable, and God-ordained way of acquiring money.

However, some would rather steal from others in order to get money. This is obviously not an honorable way to obtain money. Paul warned the Corinthians that “thieves” will not “inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Cor. 6:10). Also, he wrote to the church at Ephesus: “Let him that stole steal no more” (Eph. 4:28). Stealing is sinful. Webster’s dictionary defines the term *steal* as follows: “To take the property of another wrongfully and especially as a habitual or regular practice” (“Steal”).

If we were going to place gambling in one of the following categories—receiving a gift, working, stealing—into which category would gambling best fit? No one could make the case that gambling is the same as receiving a gift. The casinos are not known for giving monetary gifts to customers. Gambling certainly could not be classified as working. The gambler is not giving an honest day’s labor for an honest day’s pay. No, gambling is not receiving a gift, and it is not the same as working. Rather, gambling would have much more in common with stealing. In view of all the Biblical principles violated by gambling, one could scripturally state that gambling is indeed taking the property of another wrongfully, which, by definition, is stealing.

Arguments Made In Support Of Gambling

There are many who disregard Biblical principles and attempt to justify gambling. Here are some of the main arguments advanced in support of gambling.

“It Is A Harmless Recreational Activity Like Fishing Or Golfing”

Some say that they gamble “just for fun,” and that they do not lose any more money than one might spend on other forms of recreation. However, if gambling is condemned in Scripture—and it most certainly is—simply saying that it is “just for fun” does not justify the practice. Suppose one said that he enjoyed getting drunk or committing adultery “just for fun.” Would such practices thereby be justified? Of course not. The same holds true for gambling.

Further, the argument that one blows only small amounts of money while gambling does not make it right. Whether one wagers \$5 or \$5,000, the principle is the same. Gambling is not defined by the amount of money gambled.

Also, gambling is not merely a harmless form of recreation. There is a reason there is an organization set up to help problem gamblers—Gamblers Anonymous—but there is no “Fishing Anonymous” or “Golfing Anonymous.” Gambling is an addictive, ruinous, and unscriptural practice. Fishing and golfing are not. *“The Bible Does Not Mention The Word ‘Gamble’ And Therefore It Is Not Wrong”*

There is an old adage that “what proves too much proves nothing.” Such is the case here. If it be true that gambling is justified simply because the word *gamble* is not mentioned in Scripture, then the flood-gates are open for many other practices to be justified. For example, meth is not mentioned in Scripture, and neither is bootlegging. However, no person who has even a casual understanding of the Bible would attempt to justify these practices on the grounds that they are not explicitly condemned in Scripture. The fact is that there are many Biblical principles which gambling violates.

“Gambling Will Boost The Economy And Benefit Our Area”

This may be the most popular argument among gambling supporters. However, many studies indicate that the argument has no basis in reality. Michael Fitzgerald, an award-winning newspaper (“The Record”) columnist in Stockton, California cites a 1994 study out of the University of Illinois that indicates the social problems created by gambling such as gambling addiction, domestic abuse, suicide, crime, and indebtedness far outweigh any benefits to the community. Fitzgerald affirmed that the gambling enterprise costs taxpayers \$3 for every \$1 of state revenue collected. In addition, the journalist notes that “a Creighton University study found that counties with casinos soon have doubled the bankruptcy rates of counties without casinos” (Jackson, “Is Gambling a Moral Issue?”).

But assume for a moment that gambling boosts the economy. Would that make it sanctioned and Scriptural? No, it would not.

The Bible does not teach that the end justifies the means. In other words, the Bible does not teach that Christians may engage in that which is sinful in order to bring about good. Suppose a woman becomes a prostitute but gives part of the money she earns to charity. Would giving the money to charity make prostitution “good” for the community? No, it would not; and using poker money to pay medical bills does not justify gambling.

Further, it would be difficult to convince millions of pathological gamblers and their families that the suffering they experience because of gambling is not as significant or important as boosting the economy. How do we quantify the pain and suffering brought about by gambling? How do we quantify the tragedy that occurred in Atlantic City when a 16-year old boy slit his wrists after he lost \$6,000 on lottery tickets? How can we calculate the loss suffered when a middle-aged couple from Joliet, Illinois committed suicide after the wife accumulated \$200,000 in casino debt? How can we calculate the “costs” of two children that died while locked in cars as their parents or caregivers gambled in nearby casinos (Natl. Gambling Impact Study Commission)? Should we just ignore the pain and misery of others and continue to affirm that gambling is good because it will boost the economy? No, gambling would still be morally objectionable even if it did boost the economy. Incidentally, who said that right and wrong are determined by the litmus test of whether a thing is good for the economy? God did not.

“All Of Life Is A Gamble”

It is true that there are many “risks” taken in life. There is an element of risk involved when we drive along the highway, board a plane, invest money, etcetera. However, all of life is not gambling. Remember the definition of gambling: “The playing of a game of chance for stakes.” The normal risks we take in life do not constitute gambling, and furthermore, gambling is not wrong merely because of the risk involved. Gambling is wrong because it is a form of covetousness; it is motivated by greed, and the winner wins at the direct loss of the other gambler(s).

Investing money in the stock market is not parallel to gambling. One who invests does so with the full authority of Jesus. The Lord said concerning the one-talent man, “Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury” (Mat. 25:27). To receive “mine own with usury” means to get one’s money back with interest. Consequently, this text authorizes investing money. Investing in the stock market does involve a risk, but the investor is putting his money in legitimate businesses and companies in hope of gaining a profit. However, the investor is not hoping to profit at the direct loss of others.

Purchasing insurance is not gambling. The insured pays premium payments that he might be protected from the inevitable reverses of life: illness, injury, accidents, and death. Purchasing legitimate protection is not the same as playing a game of chance for stakes.

When all the arguments have been analyzed in light of the Scriptures, one can see that gambling may have many defenders, but no defense. It is a practice that cannot be harmonized with the teachings of God’s Word.

Conclusion

Did the prodigal son gamble in the far country of sin? Whether he did or not, one thing is certain: gambling would have been a perfect fit for his riotous lifestyle. It is a practice that is antagonistic to the spirit of Christianity. Christians should oppose it and encourage others to do the same. Simply put: gambling is a “bad bet.”

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CHAPTER 13

Riotous Living: Dancing

Scott Cain

I am grateful to the elders, deacons, preachers, and members of the Southaven Church of Christ for the opportunity to be a part of this great lectureship. The *Power* lectures were a highlight of the summer during my time at Memphis School of Preaching, and the lectureship books throughout the years are valuable assets in the library of any Gospel preacher. I use them often. I commend the church here for its rich history, and I pray for its bright future laboring in the Lord's fields.

“And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living” (King James Version, Luke 15:13). A.T. Robertson described the prodigal's departure: “He burned all his bridges behind him, gathering together all that he had.” He was selfish. In prioritizing his fortunes over his father, he demanded his inheritance. In placing his freedom above his family, he bade them good riddance. In preferring fun to frugality, he wasted his substance. Just as this ingrate had burned his bridges with his family, his inheritance burned holes in his pockets: he was wasteful. According to Vincent the word translated *wasted* (*dieskorpisen*) described the winnowing of grain. Thus in his selfishness the prodigal scattered his inheritance to the wind.

The prodigal learned that he who goes hog wild will find himself with the hogs (Luke 15:15), but what were the specifics of this “riotous living”? Jesus chose not to divulge the dirty details of the young man's deeds. The older brother accused him of harlotry (Luke 15:30), but Scripture is mum as to the particulars of the prodigal's

profligacy. Literally translated, the phrase *riotous living* describes “one who does not save, a spendthrift” (Robertson) or “living unsavingly” (Vincent). Rather than speculate over the prodigal’s deeds, each soul should be asking, “Does Jesus view my life as riotous living?” This study will begin by asking the question, “Is dancing riotous living?”

Webster’s Dictionary defines *dancing* as a “series of rhythmical motions and steps, usually to music” (292). The *Encyclopedia Britannica* notes, “One of the oldest art forms, dance is found in every culture and is performed for purposes ranging from the ceremonial, liturgical, and magical to the theatrical, social, and simply aesthetic” (“Dance”). This definition is broad. As the late Charles Chumley observed, “It ranges from such simple activity as that of a person who expresses with certain bodily movements his feelings of joy and enthusiasm to that of one who is skilled in interpreting and arousing powerful human emotions” (2). The broad nature of the term *dancing* requires Christians to investigate the subject more fully so as to understand what dancing, if any, is acceptable for God’s people.

The ramifications of this study go far beyond the annual adolescent query, “Should I go to the prom?” Christians of all ages face questions pertaining to the subject of dancing. Should Christians dance at weddings? Should Christians watch television programs promoting certain kinds of dancing? Should Christian children perform motions that correspond with VBS and Bible class songs; is this dancing?

Examining the world, none can deny dancing’s popularity. From current television shows to “classic” movies to cherished tunes, dancing is an ever-present part of American society. This is no new craze; generations have been characterized and polarized by their dances. Nor is dancing unique to American interests; every culture has some form of dance, some dating back centuries or even millennia. Along with its popularity and universality, dance is also revered as a discipline. Poise, elegance, and grace are common compliments society dons upon skillful dancers for their

precision and control. However, society's praise does not equate to God's approval, and that which society calls poised, elegant, and graceful could often be more precisely pegged as poisonous, evil, and gratuitous (Luke 16:15). For the child of God, the world's opinion holds no clout over God's instruction (Isa. 55:8-9; Mat. 7:13-14).

Examining the Word, none can deny that dancing was a major part of the ancient cultures. Some would attempt to use Scripture as justification for any and all dancing (Psa. 149:3; Psa. 150:4). While there is indeed a time for dancing (Ecc. 3:4), a survey of the twenty-seven occurrences of *dance*, *danced*, *dancing*, or *dances* in the King James Version yields two categories of dancing: condoned and condemned. Each Biblical mention of dance derives from one of six Hebrew words or two Greek words, but Scripture's condoning or condemning of a dance depends more upon the setting than upon the original word used. For example, there was no hint of transgression when Moses' sister Miriam used timbrels and dances (Heb. *m^ehola*) to praise God for His triumph over Pharaoh at the Red Sea (Exo. 15:20-21); yet this same word (*m^ehola*) denoted the idolatrous and immodest dancing that ignited the anger of both God and Moses when Israel worshipped the golden calf with their grotesque carousing (Exo. 32:7-10; Exo. 32:19-25). The words translated *dances* and *dancing* are the same; the difference was in the setting.

Without a doubt the Israelites' dancing at the foot of Sinai was as wasteful as the "riotous living" of the prodigal son. They were casting their innocence to the wind by having "corrupted themselves" (Exo. 32:7). They were casting their inheritance to the wind by having angered God (Exo. 32:10-13). They were casting their influence to the wind by setting an example that would cause the rest of the world to question God rather than revere Him (Exo. 32:12). Because dancing can become "riotous living," Christians must learn from the trials and mistakes of this generation of Israel (1 Cor. 10:11). The question is no longer, "Is dancing riotous living?" but instead, "When does dancing become riotous living?"

Dancing Becomes “Riotous Living” When The Christian Throws Innocence To The Wind

The Israelites had cast their innocence to the wind by having “corrupted themselves” (Exo. 32:7). This they did by practicing the idolatry that God had prohibited and by perverting the dancing that God had permitted. When it comes to dancing today, Christians can forsake their innocence by condoning what God condemns or by corrupting what God condones. God expects holy living (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

Dancing is not an inherent evil; both Miriam and David danced in ways that appear to have been acceptable to God (Exo. 15:20; 2 Sam. 6:14). Nor is all dancing evil wherein one gender dances in view of the other; both Miriam and David danced publicly. However, the genders’ ability to view each other did not mean that they danced in contact with each other: “the sexes never intermingled in it, except where pagan influences had crept in” (Freeman 196). The dances that were condoned in Scripture were generally either celebratory or ceremonial: “the dance of public rejoicing, and the dance which was more or less an act of worship” (Smith 1169). David’s celebratory dance was an enthusiastic leaping and whirling (2 Sam. 6:14-16; 1 Chr. 15:29); picture the excitement and joy when the dugout clears after a game-winning homerun. The ceremonial dances of the women seem to have been more contrived and choreographed. Ultimately, the condoned dances of Scripture were performed in innocence.

In contrast, the condemned dances of Scripture were iniquitous. Dances involving idolatry, immodesty, and immorality only accomplished the will of Satan (Exo. 32:19-25; Mat. 14:6). The dances that drew the ire of Scripture were ultimately connected to carnality. They were anything but innocent.

Innocence Is Thrown to the Wind When Christians Pursue the Works of the Flesh.

In the model prayer, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Mat. 6:13). It is the height of hypocrisy to utter these words in prayer to the Father and then rush headlong into temptation. God provides a way to escape

in the face of trial, but each individual must choose to escape the temptation rather than embrace it (1 Cor. 10:13). God cannot deliver from evil those who dive into it. “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (Jam. 1:14-15). If a dance leads to temptation or lust, it wastes a Christian’s innocence.

In detailing the works of the flesh, Paul mentioned lasciviousness (Gal. 5:19). This word, translated from the Greek word *aselgeia*, Thayer describes as “filthy words, indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females” (79-80). The English word *lasciviousness* refers to that which excites sexual desires (Webster’s 636). Consider what takes place in a typical dance setting: a couple’s bodies draw close to each other, their hands embrace various positions from the neck to the waist, their bodies move in unison with each other with his legs going between hers and hers between his, until the music stops. In other instances, women dance by themselves with seductive motions exhibiting the contours of the very features that modest women seek to conceal. With its indecent bodily movements, unchaste handling of males and females, and actions that excite lust, such dancing is obviously lascivious; therefore it is an action that Christians must avoid.

Carnal dancing creates lust for both genders. Men are generally stimulated by sight, whereas women are stimulated by touch, communication, and relationship. Carnal dancing provides the stimuli for both: the man sees the movement of the woman’s body, and the woman feels the strength of the man’s hands along with the sensation of sharing an effort as their bodies move together.

Not only must Christians avoid doing such actions, they must also avoid viewing such actions. Jesus warned, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Mat. 5:27-28). The faithful child of God is fighting to keep the evil out of his heart: “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of

life” (Pro. 4:23). There are enough lascivious images bombarding the innocent eyes and threatening to infect the hearts of Christians on a daily basis, so why would a Christian choose deliberately to behold scenes that are guaranteed to beget lust? Whether the lasciviousness is taking place on MTV, CMT, DWTS, or down at the VFW, God’s people should be too mindful of their innocence than to want any part of the iniquity.

The realization that carnal dancing appeals to the human sex drive is not reserved to Christians. Consider some observations from secular society. According to Mick Jagger, “All dancing is a replacement for sex.” George Bernard Shaw called dancing “the vertical expression of a horizontal desire legalized by music.” J. Louis Guyon was the owner of the Chicago’s Paradise ballroom, the largest and the most conservative dance hall in Chicago (Kenney 71). Concerning the new dances emerging in his day, Guyon declared that “many of the couples performing these dances should have a marriage license before stepping on the ballroom floor, and—if they had a marriage license there would be no excuse for committing such acts in public” (McMahon 163). If this type of dancing had nothing to do with sexuality, then boys would not be embarrassed to dance with boys.

Let none be deceived; carnal dancing is lascivious. Whether it occurs in a ballroom, a barroom, a barn, or a basketball gymnasium, and whether it is samba, swing, square dance, or “stand-and-sway,” carnal dancing appeals to lust. This is especially true of graphic simulations of sex acts in what is known as “grinding,” a form of dancing that has shocked high school chaperones for over a decade. Christians are to flee from fornication, not flirt with it (1 Cor. 6:18).

God expects His people to be pure. He wants their hearts to be pure (Mat. 5:8). He wants their minds to be pure (Phi. 4:8). He wants their consciences to be pure (Tit. 1:15). He wants their souls to be pure (1 Pet. 1:22). He wants their religion to be pure (Jam. 1:27). In order to maintain purity, Christians must keep themselves “unspotted from the world” (Jam. 1:27). Christians cannot maintain purity and embrace the lasciviousness of carnal dancing. Embracing

lasciviousness requires casting away innocence. As Paul said of the Exodus generation of Israel, “Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted” (1 Cor. 10:6).

Innocence Is Thrown To The Wind When Christians Prevent The Fruit of the Spirit.

Not only does carnal dancing pursue the works of the flesh, it also battles the fruit of the Spirit. Peter besought saints to “abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). Paul reminded Christians of the conflicting nature of fleshly lusts as compared to the Spirit’s fruit (Gal. 5:17). In detailing the Spirit’s fruit, Paul wrote, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law” (Gal. 5:22-23). Paul did not list the Spirit’s “fruits” (plural), but rather the Spirit’s “fruit” (singular). Each of these nine traits is a part of the whole. The absence of any one of these traits means that the Spirit’s fruit is absent. While lascivious dancing strikes at the foundations of each of these traits, it wars against three in particular.

Carnal dancing wars against love. This is the *agape* that Paul said “doth not behave itself unseemly” and “Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in truth” (1 Cor. 13:5-7). Carnal dancing does both: it behaves itself unseemly and it rejoices in iniquity. Despite the chorus of countless secular songs that declare love at first dance, Scripture shows that lascivious dancing prevents Biblical love in the heart.

Carnal dancing wars against faith. Thayer calls this “the character of one who can be relied on” (514). The indication is faithfulness. A faithful husband does not flirt with other women, nor does a faithful wife flirt with other men. In like manner, a faithful Christian does not flirt with lust and sin.

Carnal dancing wars against temperance. Temperance is literally *inner strength*. This is a person with self-control. Vincent described it as “holding the passions in hand.” Lascivious dancing motivates both participants and spectators to wear their passions on their sleeves rather than bare them in their hands, and as a consequence self-control is abandoned. A prime example is Herod Antipas.

Herod Antipas was the son of Herod the Great. He had entered into an adulterous marriage with Herodias, the wife of his brother Philip (Mark 6:17). John the baptizer's declaration of the unlawful nature of their union made him the target of Herodias' hatred, but Herod's fear and respect for John motivated him to spare John's life and keep him imprisoned (Mark 6:18-20). As intemperate as Herod was, he exhibited a rarely seen level of self-control when it came to John. Then came the day of Herod's birthday feast and the dance of Herodias' daughter, whom history remembers as Salome. "And when the daughter of the said Herodias came in, and danced, and pleased Herod and them that sat with him, the king said unto the damsel, Ask of me whatsoever thou wilt, and I will give it unto thee" (Mark 6:22). Her dance was not one of virtue, but of vice. It was sensual in nature (Mounce 518). This dance was "probably of a pantomimic character affected by Roman influence" (Smith 1169). "The dancing of the East was then, as now, voluptuous and indecent, and nothing but utter shamelessness or inveterate malice could have induced a princess to thus make a public show of herself at such a carousal" (McGarvey). Herod was so enthralled by his niece's licentious display that he uttered a rash vow that he would soon regret. Upon consulting with her mother, Salome requested John's head be brought on a charger (Mark 6:24-25). Driven by his lust, Herod bound himself to a transgression that he had previously chosen to avoid.

Masses of people with far better intentions than Herod Antipas have allowed the intrigue of a dance to lead them into sins that they never would have committed otherwise. A representative of the New York Police Department once stated, "It is estimated that in New York City, 4000 women are living the life of infamy, and that three-fourths of these are started on their life of infamy through the dance" (Harrell 2). A study conducted in Chicago asked 300 prostitutes where they thought they went wrong: "85% of them said, 'My first step wrong was caused by the modern dance'" (2). Both of these studies were reported five decades ago, yet they reflect an irrefutable Biblical fact: lust begets sin. Those who decide to get their feet wet with lust will soon find themselves in over their heads in the sins

they once avoided. Lust battles against temperance, and lascivious dancing is no exception.

God's people are to be holy, innocent, and pure. This is impossible for those who engage in lasciviousness. By pursuing the works of the flesh and preventing the fruit of the Spirit, innocence is cast to the wind and life becomes a riotous mess.

Dancing Becomes “Riotous Living” When The Christian Throws His Inheritance To The Wind

In addition to corrupting themselves, the Israelites' idolatrous and immodest dance enflamed God's wrath (Exo. 32:10). Had Moses not interceded God would have destroyed the nation of Israel and conferred the Abrahamic promise to Moses (Exo. 32:10-13). Like the prodigal, their riotous living resulted in the squandering of more than just innocence: they were squandering their inheritance.

An inheritance awaits the faithful child of God. Peter called it “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4). Jesus described this inheritance as “the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Mat. 25:34). Ultimately, receiving this inheritance requires faithfulness on the part of God's children: “He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be My son” (Rev. 21:7).

The Inheritance Is Thrown To The Wind When Christians Commit The Works Of The Flesh.

Having enumerated the lusts of the flesh, Paul declared that “they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal. 5:21). In short, a person cannot go to heaven and continue in these sins. Transgressions such as adultery, fornication, hatred, murder, and drunkenness are no more and no less damning than the sins of lasciviousness and reveling (Gal. 5:19-21); all prevent admission into heaven.

The lascivious nature of many dances has already been shown. Paul said that the lascivious “shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” Lascivious dancing can keep a person out of heaven.

Dancing can keep souls from heaven if it fits the description of “revellings” (Gal. 5:21). Reveling referred to “*a festive procession, a merry-making; in NT a revel, lewd immoral feasting*” (Mounce 1198). Originally descriptive of “a merry-making,” the word became indicative of “carouses, in which the party of revelers paraded the streets with torches, singing, dancing, and all kinds of frolics” (Vincent). Often these were drinking parties (Robertson). When dancing is an unrighteous revelry, heaven is forsaken.

Can participating in dancing keep a person out of heaven? Some would respond by saying, “I just don’t see God sending people to hell over a harmless little dance.” These people are right: God will not punish people for harmless dances. However, God’s Word clearly indicates that any action (including dancing) that is lasciviousness or reveling is far from harmless. In fact, it is lethal.

The Inheritance Is Thrown To The Wind When Christians Conform to The World Around Them.

God’s heavenly inheritance is for those who are sanctified (Acts 20:32). To be sanctified is to be cleansed from sins and set apart for God’s usage. As such, God’s people are to be different from the world around them. This emphasis appears repeatedly throughout the New Testament. “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom. 12:2). “But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:15-16). “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:15-16).

Having seen that inappropriate dancing fits the criteria of multiple works of the flesh, and noting that John identifies worldliness as the origin of fleshly lusts, it should come as no surprise that the world is enamored with the carnal choreography of lewd dancing. Society works hard to reach young people at an early age to convince

them of the virtues of dancing. Cartoons for toddlers depict animated characters dancing. Elementary school girls are taught to flaunt themselves in unison while holding a pair of pompoms. Middle school students on the threshold of adolescence and its accompanying hormones experience their first taste of “romance” while sharing an embrace on a dimly lit dance floor during a school-sponsored function. High school students become convinced that life’s most important events happen on the nights of dances and proms. By the time they reach college, young adults are convinced that the only way to enjoy the collegiate years is to become permanent fixtures at the local dance clubs. Twenty-two years of incessant and increasing exposure to lewdness result in a generation whose tolerance for debauchery is appalling to older generations, yet this is how these young people have been trained to think. They marry, bear children, turn on the latest cartoons for their toddlers, and the cycle begins again.

God’s people are to be different. The prince of this world has gone beyond convincing the world that indecency is the norm; he has convinced society that indecency is only a matter of perspective, and thus there is no real indecency. Christians know better. Christians know that there is an absolute standard of truth and morality (John 8:32). Christians know that this truth sets them apart from the world (John 17:17). Christians know that to forsake sanctification is to forsake salvation (Heb. 10:29). Christians know that receiving the inheritance of heaven above means releasing the iniquities of earth below.

There will be ridicule. The world will scoff at the Christian’s convictions. God’s people expect this: “Wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Pet. 4:4). It is worth noting that the word translated riot is derived from the same word that described the prodigals “riotous living” (Luke 15:13). When Christians choose to avoid wasting their lives and souls on the world’s lusts, the world may call it being strange, but Paul called it being strong: “Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13).

As a teenager, Sherry Burgess faced the question of whether she should attend the prom. She knew her friends would be there and that photos and memories would be made that would be kept for a lifetime. The decision was not easy, but she made her choice and held to it. Recounting her decision, Sherry wrote the following words:

One night was hard
God held my hand,
He gave me courage
To take a stand.
It doesn't hurt me anymore
I'm stronger than I was before.
One night was hard
I made a stand,
And now there's left
The Promised Land.

Sherry made a choice between going to the prom or staying on the road to the Promised Land. She chose the Promised Land. She remained sanctified. She held fast to her inheritance.

Dancing Becomes “Riotous Living” When The Christian Throws Influence To The Wind

Mark Twain once said, “Dance like no one is watching.” This could describe the mentality of Israel at the foot of Sinai. Unable to set their eyes upon their enemies, their leader, or their God, the Israelites convinced themselves that they were all alone (Exo. 32:1). Once people are convinced that no one is watching, it is only a matter of time before they begin to live that way. They danced as though the nations behind them and before them would be oblivious to the fact that they had abandoned God. They danced as though the leader that led them from bondage would never return to behold their rapid plummet into idolatry. They danced as though the Almighty God Who delivered them from the Egyptians’ whips was too nearsighted to see their revelry at the foot of Sinai.

They danced like no one was watching, but their sins were open for all to see. The Lord was watching. God's omniscient eye could see their dancing even as it occurred (Exo. 32:7; Pro. 15:3). Their leader was watching. Moses learned of their iniquity from the mouth of God, and he would later behold it for himself (Exo. 32:19). Saddest of all, though, was the fact that the heathen nations were watching. They were not beholding the events as they happened, but consider the negative impact upon the world if they were to learn that God had delivered Israel from Egypt only to obliterate them at Sinai (Exo. 32:12). Their selfish actions jeopardized the influence of God's chosen people upon the world of the lost.

Today, Christians are the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16), and as such they should live as though they are always being watched. "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Mat. 5:16). God's people must be wary of their reputations (Pro. 22:1). Engaging in inappropriate dancing can cause a Christian's influence to keep others from following Christ, push the erring further away from Christ, or lead the faithful from Christ. It is hard to lead others to heaven while traveling down the road to hell.

Inappropriate dancing can hurt the Christian's influence on the lost.

Christians cannot claim to walk in the Spirit and then follow after the flesh (Gal. 5:16). The world knows the difference. Unsaved souls are watching God's people, and they are quick to notice inconsistencies. Even as the world's mouth opposes Christ's people, its eyes behold each Christian's every move (1 Pet. 2:12). Rather than living inconsistent lives and giving the world ammunition against God's people, Christians must capitalize upon these opportunities to teach by example.

An individual Christian's influence is not the only example that gets viewed with skepticism when a Christian engages in immoral activity. The church's influence is hurt; inappropriate dancing by members of the body of Christ cause the Lord's church to appear inconsistent or conflicting. The Bible's influence is hurt; those who profess to be Christians yet espouse the right to dance inappropriately

declare to the world that they are either ignorant or indifferent to the teaching of God's Word on the matter.

Christians have the obligation to share the Gospel with every soul (Mark 16:15). Souls will not listen to people whom they deem untrustworthy or inconsistent.

Inappropriate dancing can hurt the Christian's influence on the family.

Addressing wives with unbelieving husbands, Peter gave the following counsel: "Likewise ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives: While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear" (1 Pet. 3:1-2). These wives were to live the Gospel example before the eyes of those whose ears refuse to hear the Gospel message. This is good advice for dealing with any family member who is hostile to hearing the Gospel. The converse of this statement is also informative. How likely is it that a non-Christian spouse, parent, child, or sibling will agree to worship Sunday morning with a family member who spent Saturday night getting jiggy with it?

A Christian can cause others to stumble over dancing without ever setting foot on the dance floor. Those whose entertainment choices include television programs and movies that glorify immoral dancing are setting an inconsistent and hypocritical example for their family members. Whether the dancing is viewed in a ballroom or a living room, the act is still lustful and therefore sinful.

Inappropriate dancing can hurt the Christian's influence on the erring.

"Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal. 6:1). Paul instructed the "spiritual" brethren to endeavor to restore the erring. Who are the spiritual? Remembering that Galatians 6:1 comes immediately after Paul's discussion of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-26), it becomes evident that they which are spiritual are they whose lives demonstrate these essential Christian traits. On the other hand, those whose lives display

the works of the flesh would be the ones overtaken in a fault; they are the ones that need to be reached and restored. Keeping in mind the relationship between dancing and lasciviousness, those who participate in inappropriate dances are not those who are spiritual, but those who need to be restored!!!!

Imagine a member of the body of Christ pursuing the works of the flesh and then claiming to be “spiritual” and trying to restore another brother whom he sees as “overtaken in a fault.” Jesus’ words come to mind: “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Mat. 7:5).

Inappropriate dancing can hurt the Christian’s influence on the saved.

The saved need examples. “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). “Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample” (Phi. 3:17). A Christian cannot claim to follow Christ while engaging in the sort of lustful activities that Jesus condemned (Mat. 5:27-28). Those who engage in indecent dancing choose to embark upon the path to perdition. They waltz their way to hell, and in so doing likely lead others with them.

Sherry Burgess’ decision to miss her prom did not happen overnight. She deliberated for weeks, weighing the pros and cons, and at one point had chosen to go. Then she realized what was at stake.

With a week and one-half to go, everyone at school was buzzing with excitement. Then, one night, I suddenly thought of an argument that I just could not rationalize away—my sister! You see, I have a little sister who is twelve years old Although the whole school might not mind if I went to the prom, and although no one else might find out, there would be one special person who would know for sure that I went—

my younger sister. I imagined Melissa thinking as she entered high school, “If Sherry went to the prom, then why can’t I go to this dance too?” Suddenly, it wasn’t concern only about my own soul, but was also the possibility of causing my little sister to stumble by my actions and being finally lost.

Consider the frequent settings of dances today. Usually there is alcohol involved (yes, even when it breaks the school’s rules), people are dressed immodestly, and the lyrics of the music are suggestive, crude, or even sinfully instructive. Does this environment improve or impede a Christian’s influence?

Conclusion

Selfishness drove the prodigal to waste his inheritance. A self-centered attitude spurred the Israelites’ dance of iniquity at Sinai. Is it possible that inappropriate dancing is an act of selfishness?

Consider the context of Galatians 5.

For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. But if ye bite and devour one another, take heed that ye be not consumed of one another. This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. (Gal. 5:13-16)

Paul’s contrasting of the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit was given in the midst of a discussion exhorting Christians to be selfless rather than selfish. “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit. Let us not be desirous of vain glory, provoking one another, envying one another” (Gal. 5:25-26). A life filled with the

fruit of the Spirit is a selfless life, but one filled with the works of the flesh is selfish. If inappropriate dancing is lasciviousness (and it is), if lasciviousness is a work of the flesh (and it is), and if works of the flesh are selfish, then inappropriate dancing is an act of selfishness (and it is!).

Realizing the selfish nature of lewd and licentious dancing, the true motivation of those who seek to justify such behavior becomes transparent. “I don’t see anything wrong with it . . . I don’t believe that I will go to hell for dancing . . . I don’t want to miss *my* prom with *my* friends; this is *my* night . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . Me . . . Me . . . Me . . .” Such statements are foreign to the lips of those who put God first. Dancing done outside of God’s acceptable parameters is a selfish squandering of innocence, inheritance, and influence.

What about the hokey pokey? What about a husband and wife in the privacy of their own home? For these and any other questions pertaining to dancing, consider the following thoughts: 1) Spousal activities in the privacy of marriage are honorable in all (Heb. 13:4); 2) Men and women (regardless of their relationship) dancing in contact with each other publicly was not condoned in scripture; 3) **All** dances involving suggestive or sensual bodily movements within view of anyone other than one’s spouse are the lascivious work of the flesh; 4) Use common sense.

Scripture is silent as to whether the prodigal’s riotous living included immoral dancing. What can be known, however, is that there was a dance of celebration upon his return (Luke 15:25). Knowing that the Heavenly Father longs to celebrate the return of all prodigals, why would a soul waste time on earth dancing in carnality? Instead, look ahead to an eternal spiritual celebration with the Father.

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CHAPTER 14

Wasting One's Substance: Irresponsible Stewardship

Mark Teske

When the prodigal son went into the faraway land, he “wasted his possessions with prodigal living” (New King James Version, Luke 15:13). To say that this young man was a poor money manager would be an understatement. Yet there are more similarities between this young man’s lifestyle and the common lifestyle in our society than we would like to admit.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mat. 6:21). Jesus’ words as recorded by inspiration through the pen of Matthew can give us great insight into the underlying problem of the prodigal son. This young man had a heart problem. He treasured material possessions more than his home and his family and his actions merely followed what his heart had already decided.

As we begin our journey seeking for insight into lessons that we can learn from the young prodigal, let us turn our attention for a moment to a young man described as the rich, young ruler in Mark 10:17-21. In this setting, we read of the young man running to Jesus and kneeling before Him to ask a question. As we can tell by his actions, this young man was indeed very interested in what Jesus had to say in response to his question which was, “What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life” (Mark 10:17)? Jesus then asked the young man to confirm openly that he had kept many of the commandments of the old law. We can see from his answers that he was a religious man and a conscientious keeper of the laws since his very youth. Yet there was something that was lacking in this man’s spirituality—there was something that was stopping him from obtaining eternal life.

Mark 10:21 contains great insight into what happened next. In that verse, we are told, “Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him.” Thus, we have inspired revelation as to Jesus’ motive in continuing the conversation. Jesus loved the young man. Because Jesus loved the young man, He told him to “sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven” (Mark 10:21). This young man needed to get his priorities straight and stop treasuring his money and begin treasuring what was truly important. It took true love for Jesus to tell this young man what he needed to hear even though the young man “went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions” (Mark 10:22).

Can the way we handle our finances be a “salvation issue”? According to Jesus’ words to the rich, young ruler, they can be! We can deny that the command given to this rich, young ruler applies to us—however, we live in the most prosperous society up to this point in history. Our wealth is so commonplace that we hardly even recognize how materially blessed we really are. We must therefore be extra diligent to make sure that we study this topic carefully. With this important thought in mind, let us study what the Scriptures teach about money management so that we do not fall into the same traps that caught not only the prodigal son and rich, young ruler but have also caused many to lose their souls (1 Tim. 6:10).

A Proper Attitude Toward Money

When faced with terrible adversity, Job declared, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, And naked shall I return there” (Job 1:21). Job had accumulated much wealth (Job 1:3), a large family, and a level of stature among the people. However, even when all that he had accumulated was taken away suddenly, he kept a proper sense of perspective. He realized that everything that he had ever owned was merely a temporary loan from God. We cannot take anything out of the world (1 Timothy 6:7). Truly the only thing that is ever in doubt is the exact timing of when God will take it back or allow it to go to someone else.

When we have a proper attitude toward wealth, sudden changes in our wealth will not cause great distress in our lives. People are often amazed to learn that those who suddenly gain great wealth through winning the lottery are often forced into bankruptcy just a few short years later. Those who engage in such activities (i.e., the sin of gambling) do not have a proper, godly attitude toward money to begin with and the sudden increase in wealth deprives them of what little sense they may have had.

Some of the greatest wisdom regarding proper money management comes from within the pages of Scripture itself. In Proverbs 30:8b-9, we read:

Give me neither poverty nor riches— Feed
me with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full
and deny You, And say, “Who is the Lord?” Or
lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of
my God.

There are potential pitfalls on either extreme of wealth. Too much wealth can cause us to replace the role of God in our lives with overconfidence in our riches. Poverty can lead us into temptation to break other of God’s laws in our quest for our needs. The truly wise man will pray for neither poverty nor riches!

The Preacher of Ecclesiastes also warned about seeking after wealth. In Ecclesiastes 5:10, he declares, “He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; Nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity.”

There are two rules that we can note about wealth. First, you can always have more so there is no upper limit to how much wealth you can obtain. Second, out of the billions of people in the world, there is only one richest person in the world and it is probably never going to be you. Many who are reaching after this goal are willing to stop at absolutely nothing to be that one person—no matter who or what they destroy in the process. So why are so many people doing everything in their power to gain more? This is vanity!

Let us just assume for a short moment that you actually did succeed in becoming the richest person in the whole world. Jesus addressed that possibility when He asked, “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul” (Mat. 16:26)? The point is, no matter how much material wealth we gain during our life here on earth, your money will not benefit you a single bit in eternity (1 Tim. 6:7). The desire for money will probably destroy more souls than the benefits of wealth can ever help.

Paul was inspired to warn Timothy and the other brethren at Ephesus about the love of money in 1 Timothy 6:10: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.” The specific warning here is about our attitude toward money. We must guard ourselves from loving money. Money is a “necessary evil” in order to live in a society, but that does not mean that we should allow ourselves to have an inordinate desire for it. When we consider the prodigal son, we see a young man whose love for money exceeded his love for his father, his love for his family, and his love for righteousness.

I am continually amazed by the number of people who fall victim to financial scams. The scam artists usually use the promise of an inordinate return on your money to appeal to greed in order to steal money. The tricksters know this and they rely upon their ability to paint a “picture of great wealth” to their victims in order to conceal their thievery. There is no such thing as a low-risk, guaranteed, high-yield investment. Why should someone spend an inordinate amount of their own money just to make you rich? It does not make sense. If it looks too good to be true, it probably is! If you maintain a proper attitude toward money, you will not get caught up in such schemes.

A rather recent phenomenon from a historical perspective is the idea that everyone can and should amass a certain degree of wealth during our lifetimes, so that we can retire and no longer have to work to provide for ourselves. There is nothing inherently wrong with setting some funds aside to provide for your personal needs

during your later years when you are unable to work. However, this sometimes becomes a trap for greed and laziness, as it did to the rich man in Luke 12:16-21. Some have retired from their professions and at the same time have also “retired” from working in the Lord’s church. Rather than becoming selfish in our older years, it would be much better for us to save up and plan for what we can do for the Lord in the advanced years of life. There is much work to be done for the Lord, and retirees can often use their skills and do much good for the sake of the kingdom.

Some have tried to rationalize their love for money by imagining that if they made just a little more money, all of their financial problems would go away. Though it sounds good in theory, it is often not the case. Someone who manages their money poorly when they have a lower income will manage their money poorly when their income rises. A higher income does not make a person a better money manager. In fact, the opposite could be effectively argued. It is more difficult to properly manage a higher income.

To maintain a proper attitude toward money, I strongly suggest that you start with a proper financial goal. Rather than setting a dollar amount that we wish to accumulate toward a college fund or a retirement fund, we should **first focus on being a good steward of what God has given you**. Once we have mastered the role of being a good steward, then we can live a happy, godly life no matter what our income or amount of wealth. Godliness with contentment is great gain (1 Tim. 6:6) indeed!

Proper Acquirers Of Your Money

As Christians, we need to make sure that we spend our money wisely. Not only do we need to have a proper attitude toward our money, we also need to make sure that those acquiring our dollars are proper.

I do not believe that I am taking Colossians 3:17 out of context when I say that it applies to where we spend our money. “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” This passage requires us to have authority from God for all that we

do in our deeds, and one of our deeds is spending our money. So the question then becomes, for what does Scripture authorize us to use our money?

We are authorized to provide for our families. 1 Timothy 5:8 teaches “if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.” Thus, we have full Scriptural authority to provide for our own household and for our extended family. Although caring for your family seems obvious, it is not without Biblical authority.

We are authorized to provide for others. Ephesians 4:28 states, “Let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.” Thus, we have not only full authority to help others in need, but the encouragement to do so, as well. In teaching about doing our charitable deeds in Matthew 6, our Lord presupposed that His followers would be doing charitable deeds. In verse 2, He states, “When you do a charitable deed.” Not if, not maybe, but when. Thus, charitable deeds are expected of those who would follow Jesus. We have many other passages dealing with helping others in need including from the Hebrews writer who was inspired to urge Christians to share (Heb. 13:16). And the early Christians indeed shared with each other (Acts 2:44-45).

Sadly, many have passed off their obligation to share with those in need to the government. Since our government no longer appeals to the Scriptures for guidance, they fail to heed passages such as 2 Thessalonians 3:10 which states, “If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.” While we would never consider assigning our responsibility for evangelism or edification to the government, we sit silent when the government has taken over this role that the Lord has assigned to His church. Instead of our Lord and His church receiving the glory for benevolence, the glory goes to our government and elected officials.

We are also authorized to provide for those who preach the Gospel. In 1 Corinthians 9:1-18, the apostle is inspired to explain that it is acceptable for those who preach to be supported by those who hear the Gospel. Even though Paul did not assert that right while

he was with the Christians in Corinth, he establishes that it was his right to be paid for his labors. While he labored among them, he purposely refrained from receiving money so that those looking to accuse him of preaching for profit would have nothing with which to accuse him. In verse 14 he states, “Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”

In 1 Timothy 5:17 we likewise see authorization to support an elder in his labors, especially when he labors in the Word and doctrine. Although I know of very few elders who exercise this right, the right is theirs nonetheless. The same chapter also teaches that we should care for our own (1 Tim. 5:8, 16) as well as for those widows who meet the qualifications given (1 Tim. 5:3-16).

From a practical perspective, we must exercise judgment when determining what constitutes providing for our families and what is merely selfishness. Some things that we may claim are necessities are really luxuries. While kids may selfishly complain, designer clothes and the latest fashions are not a necessity. God’s definition of our necessities (food and clothing) does not include these things (1 Tim. 6:8). Rather than expect children to strive for “godliness with contentment,” some acquiesce to their selfish desires repeatedly and put their young souls in jeopardy.

In many cases, if we would only reevaluate our spending habits, we would find that we could actually live our lives in a better manner by spending less dollars. If we spend less, we can remove the stress of wondering if we can meet our bills for the month or hear the constant harassment of bill collectors. By spending less, we can focus our attention on the better things in life and not be “forced” to make decisions mainly for financial reasons. Overall, our quality of life can improve significantly when we live within our means. It then becomes easier to focus on spiritual things and not be tempted by the monetary challenges of our lives.

When you consider spending your money on something, first ask yourself some questions. Will this purchase bring me closer to or further from God? Will these things increase my chances of getting to heaven or decrease them? Will this purchase edify others

or will it possibly tear them down? While these questions should be asked constantly about every decision that we make in life, they are very important when we spend our money. I have heard many families complain that they do not spend enough time together as a family, yet they pay each month for hundreds of television channels that actually keep them from spending time together. Others have felt the need to strap themselves down with a large house payment and multiple car payments that require both parents to be gone for long hours every day. Are these things really more important than spending time training the souls of their children (Eph. 6:4)?

Proper Apportionment Of Your Money

Once we have a proper attitude about our money and identify the proper acquirers of our money, we can look at properly apportioning our money. How much money can and should we be spending on the different items in our budget? Let us work from the theoretical to the practical aspects of this matter.

How we apportion our money reflects our values. Things that are important to us will be higher on the list, while things that are less important to us will be further down on the list. I realize that some may question that thinking, but it is totally rational and reasonable. We have become so accustomed to what those in the world around us have done that we can sometimes convince ourselves that we have no choice in the matter. This is not the case—you can choose where to spend your money! We are accountable for all of our choices including how or where we spend our money.

The first place that we should spend our money is in returning to the Lord. The Lord has always demanded His portion first—and we are no exception to that rule. After defeating the kings, Abraham gave to Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, a tenth of everything that he had recovered (Gen. 14:18-20). The Israelites were later required to give a tithe (10%) which was the Lord's (Lev. 27:30), which He subsequently gave to the Levites for their support (Num. 18:21-24). This tithe was in addition to the other sacrifices

and offerings that the people were required to give; thus the total amount was above 10%.

The prophet Malachi was inspired to prophesy about the lack of a “full tithe” from the people. Malachi commanded, “Bring the full tithes into the storehouse” (Malachi 3:10 ESV), which the people had not done, and as a result, the Lord was withholding His blessing from the people. This passage does not support the false teaching that anything that we give to the Lord will be returned to us with multiple increase. Rather, it teaches that Lord will withhold His blessings from us when we fail to remember Him.

The idea of giving in proportion to our income did not stop with the Old Testament. The principle is stated in Luke 12:48 which reads, “For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required.” The Lord gave instruction to the rich through Paul’s pen when He wrote, “Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (1 Tim. 6:18). Thus, the rich have a specific requirement to give and share as well as numerous warnings about trusting in their material wealth (Mat. 19:23-24; Luke 12:16-21; Luke 16:19-31; Luke 18:18-24; 1 Tim. 6:9; Jam. 5:1; Rev. 3:17-18).

A fact that many Christians are quick to state is that nowhere in the New Testament does God give a specific percentage that we are to give Him. While this is a true statement, it does not necessarily follow that God will be fully pleased with us no matter what we give. The poor widow was praised for giving two mites even though she was in great poverty (Luke 21:2). We see the very early Christians sharing with each other in a very liberal manner (Acts 2:44-45; 2 Cor. 8:1-5). I believe that the most telling part of the example of the Macedonians comes in 2 Corinthians 8:5 where we learn that “they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.” It is when we give ourselves first to the Lord that our wallet will follow.

I have found that a very practical way of looking at personal finances is to realize fully that everything I have is the Lord’s and He is just giving me temporary custody of it. When considering an expense, I try to ask whether it is a good way to spend His

money. It also helps me to live by something that my mother told me many times while I was growing up: “Never confuse problems with expenses.” Many things that would otherwise cause worry and concern are merely expenses and therefore places to use the money that the Lord has provided.

Proper Actions With Your Money

Proper money management is an issue that most families face at some time. Avon Malone used to warn his preaching students about having “too much month at the end of the money.” Patrick Dorinson warns, “Never let your yearnings get ahead of your earnings.” Many people have a hard time making and keeping track of a family budget. The process need not be difficult; rather it just takes some consistent record-keeping and a desire to actually do it. Here are a few suggestions from one who made his living for several years by showing businesses how to live within a budget.

First, take a month and keep track of absolutely everything that you spend. My wife likes to do this by using a debit card to pay for everything, while I prefer to pay cash and write down every expense. The first time that I did this, I was amazed at how much money I spent on “little things,” such as drinks and snacks (Starbucks gets their \$10.7 billion in annual revenue from someone—the little things really do add up). By tracking expenses to this detail, you may notice the many small money drains that destroy the family finances of many. Once you have tracked everything for a month, you can then multiply it by 12 and get a feel for your annual expenses.

Now compare your list of actual expenses to your priorities. Oftentimes, you find that you spend an inordinate amount of money on certain things that surprise you. The last time I did this, I realized that the cost of our cable TV had “crept up” to over \$900 per year! It surely was not worth that to us, so we canceled the service. Consider adjusting your spending in different categories. For instance, a family could forgo eating out one night a week and invite another family over to eat with the money that they saved by preparing their own food. That not only feeds the physical appetite but also allows for the

pleasure of sharing time with others. We have found that we can eat an excellent, special meal at home for less money than we can eat many fast-food burgers bought at restaurants.

As you evaluate your priorities versus your spending, a budget will be the end result of your efforts. Write down your budget and keep it handy where you can refer to it. Realize that the budget is merely a document that helps you to plan your spending. If something needs to be changed to better reflect your priorities, then change it. Compare your budget to what you actually have spent and that will give you the items that need adjusting in order to meet your new budget. If you do not change your spending behavior, then you will just keep doing what you have always done.

Remember that expense management is an ongoing process. In the business world, I would often warn that “a strong cash flow covers a multitude of sins.” Periodic belt-tightening can be a positive thing for businesses and families alike. It is during these times that we, through necessity, challenge expenses and get rid of things that we really do not need. Also, do not think that you can look at your expenses only once in your lifetime and you will never have a problem again. Expenses and priorities change. In our family, diapers and babysitters have given way to car insurance and college tuition.

Money management is one area where members of the church can be of great help to each other. I know of several women who have “contests” to see who can find the best sales. I have heard of others who gather to clip and share coupons with each other. Take shopping trips as groups to secondhand clothing stores. While each of these specific ideas may not appeal to you, consider other ways to help and encourage your brethren.

Proper Instruction On The Management Of Money

It is a difficult and challenging task to teach proper money management skills to our children. However, to ensure their faithfulness to the whole counsel of God, we cannot neglect teaching in this area. Here are a few suggestions with regards to helping to train your children as they grow into adulthood.

First, consider having them buy some things for themselves. Many of our youth have part-time jobs, but the income that they receive is often spent only in frivolities and fancies and they never gain an understanding of what it takes to manage money properly. It is not unreasonable for kids to buy their own clothing, gasoline, car insurance, and other items for themselves. Their attitude toward the \$150 pair of sneakers might change when they have to walk everywhere because they cannot afford any transportation. The thrift stores that they “never would be seen dead” in suddenly become great places to pick up a new wardrobe. Even if you have to give your children an allowance, it would help them to understand more about what it takes to balance a budget.

Second, talk to them early about the possible jobs and professions that they can enter. Help them to see how jobs that pay more often require much more of those involved, which may be detrimental to their long-term goals regarding spirituality and marriage. For instance, nursing is an honorable profession, but anyone entering the profession needs to realize that most nurses work evenings, nights, or weekends. Some professions may require extensive travel, while others require schooling that can last through most of the child-bearing years. While some shift workers will have to miss the assembly from time-to-time, how much better the decision to find employment in areas where missing an assembly of the saints is the exception rather than the rule.

Third, consider taking your kids to a place where they can see what real poverty looks like. Many a young person has come home from a mission trip with a totally new perspective on the material blessings they have received. Spending time and sharing the Gospel with people who have less material blessings burns an impression deep into their psyche and it will be difficult to ever remove. If an overseas trip is not viable, there are many places in our country, including Indian reservations, where similar levels of poverty can be experienced and appreciated while sharing the Gospel message with souls in need of the Savior.

Conclusion

Maintaining a proper perspective on money and wealth can be extremely difficult while living in a society that glorifies an improper perspective. If we pay careful attention to our attitudes about our money, the acquirers of our money, the apportionment of our money, our actions with our money, and passing on proper money management principles to our children, we can follow God's principles in this area of our lives.

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The Repentance Of The Prodigal Son

CHAPTER 15

When He Came To Himself: Waking Up From The Madness Of Sin

James Rogers

Introduction

The topic for Luke 15 across the top of my Bible reads: “God’s Interest in Sinners:—The Lost Sheep; the Lost Piece of Silver; The Prodigal Son.” God is vitally interested in sinners. Jesus came “to seek and to save that which was lost” (American Standard Version, Luke 19:10). Luke 15:1-2 serves as the introduction to the parable Jesus told and to this topic specifically. In these verses, one sees: The Audience (“the publicans and the sinners”); The Approach (“drawing near”); The Anticipation (“to hear him”); The Adversaries (“The Pharisees and the scribes”); and The Aspersion (“This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them”). Notice the emphasis upon sinners!

It is to “the Pharisees and the scribes” that this parable is addressed. It is so easy to get caught up in the powerful lessons of the parable and lose sight of the aim of the parable. Jesus is trying to restore National Israel, represented by the Pharisees and the scribes, to fellowship with God. As we study this subject, please keep that aim in mind.

As one reads Luke 15:11-13, he is stunned with the journey this boy took into sin. When he reads Luke 15:17, he is struck with the journey this boy took into self. When he reads Luke 15:20, he is thrilled with the journey this boy took home. Others will discuss in detail the journey into sin and the journey home, but we want to take

a close look at the journey into self. Lenski asserted, “The heart of the parable is stated in this sentence: ‘He came to himself’” (812).

Perhaps it is the journey into self that gives people the most trouble. It is sometimes fun to journey into sin. After having been decimated with sin, it is pleasant to journey home. However, when the bad consequences hit us, it is difficult to take that journey into self. National Israel needed to take the journey into self and come back to God. There are many today who need to take that same journey. I trust this study will help all of us in this matter.

When He Came To Himself

“But when he came to himself” (Luke 15:17). These six words are powerful individually and, when put together, show just how important they are in this parable. Were it not for these six words, the story would have ended with Luke 15:16. What a tragedy that would have been and what a fix the boy would have been in! They remind us of the importance of every word chosen by the Holy Spirit in the writing of the Bible (1 Cor. 2:6-16; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:19-21). Were it not for the twenty-eight words of Genesis 3:15, the Bible would have ended at Genesis 3:14 and man would have been in an unfixable fix.

We need to remember he was given time to come to himself. He could have died while wasting “his substance with riotous living” (Luke 15:13). When one undertakes sin, he does not know he will have the time to come to himself. This underscores the longsuffering of God toward sinners. When dealing with sinners in Noah’s day, Jehovah gave them “a hundred and twenty years” (Gen. 6:3) to repent. It is certainly true that “the Lord . . . is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

Jesus was using this parable as one of many attempts in His personal ministry to restore National Israel to fellowship with God. God’s longsuffering was still bearing with them. However, the time was drawing near when God would have had enough. Within approximately 40 years of the telling of this parable, National

Israel would be destroyed. A failure to come to themselves led to the tragedy.

The Contrast

But (de) contrasts this part of the story from the first. This shows the beginning of the journey into self. Apparently time with the pigs had given him time to study himself. It is said that a man is known by the company he keeps. This boy had gone so far that the only company he could keep was swine and this was because they had no choice. The story is told of a drunk who wandered into a pig pen and lay down by the pigs to sleep off his stupor. The pigs got up and left!

Coming To Himself

When he came is from *elthon* which means “to come or go” (Strong, “Erchomai”). The application of this term in this parable is seen as it is explained by various writers. Evans commented that “the expression is found in Greek and Latin authors, generally with the meaning of coming to one’s senses as the result of reflection” (593). Another wrote that this is “an idiom in Semitic languages as well as in Greek and Latin. In this instance it could be paraphrased: ‘When he realized how foolish he had been’” (Buttrick 8:273). This word is also “a medical term, and means ‘came to his senses after fainting’” (Eiselen, Lewis and Downey 1048). As one considers the situation with this boy, it was “as if he had been far from himself as he was from home . . . he had been away, out of his head” (Robertson 2:209).

To is from *eis* which means “to or into (indicating the point reached or entered), of place, time, or (figuratively) purpose (result, etc.)” (Strong, “Eis”). “He had been living to a self which was not his true self” (Ellicott 1:316). Here we see this boy “either, realising the situation; or, coming to his true self, his sane mind” (Nicoll 1:581).

Himself here references his coming to his right way of thinking. This may give some insight into the man before he left home. Perhaps, before getting all wrapped up in himself (“give me,” Luke 15:12), he thought sensibly. Now, he has come back to that kind of thinking.

Coming to himself shows he had to make a journey to get to himself. It was a hard journey to make. DeHoff observed, “This is the

longest trip many people could take” (5:243)! It is not easy to look at ourselves as we really are when we are sin. He had to engage in a deep, inner struggle with himself. While it was a hard journey, it was a helpful journey. He came to what he should have been all along. “He lives, so to say, on the ground-floor of his soul-house” (Taylor 347). This journey to himself proved to be a healing journey. It put him on the right path again. It eventually led him home. Making this journey would result in a change of his lifestyle which would bring about a change in his fortune.

Three statements show he had arrived at his right state of mind: “I perish” (Luke 15:17); “I have sinned” (Luke 15:18) and “I am no more worthy” (Luke 15:19). These statements show that he no longer had the “give me” attitude. He no longer felt he deserved anything. He saw his poverty and his need for grace and mercy. This is what Jesus wants men to see today. This is the attitude of “the poor in spirit” which will lead to “the kingdom of heaven” (Mat. 5:3). This will lead him to say, “Make me” (Luke 15:19). Similar statements to these are made by others in the Bible when they come to themselves. As we look at ourselves in the mirror of God’s Word (Jam. 1:23-25), do we need to make similar statements and then follow through with lifestyle changes?

This man could not see clearly. “The god of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them” (2 Cor. 4:3-4). The Son “had been morally and spiritually blind; he had not been able to see things as they were; his sense of values had been out of balance” (Childers 6:559). “Sin is an infatuation, a craze. When the blinded eyes of the soul are opened no man is content to abide in sin; that is, in destruction” (Johnson 1:285). In helping people see sin in their lives, Jesus made it clear that it is important that one “cast out first the beam out of thine own eye; and then thou shalt see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (Mat. 7:5). Seeing clearly means to have full vision so that nothing is overlooked. When the younger son arrived at the place where he could see clearly, he began the road to recovery.

The boy could now see that he had been insistent (Luke 15:12). The attitude, “Give me,” caused him to go away from himself. He had been impatient (Luke 15:13). The statement, “Not many days after” show he could wait no longer to leave home. He had been irrepressible (Luke 15:13). The activities of wasting “his substance” and “riotous living” (Luke 15:13) kept him away from himself. He could also now see that he had become impoverished (Luke 15:14-17). He “spent all” (Luke 15:14). Spending could not bring him to himself. He was now “in want” (Luke 15:14) and “no man gave unto him” (Luke 15:16). A job and a lack of hospitality could not bring him to himself. He described himself as perishing (Luke 15:17). He was certainly not at himself (Luke 15:17). It is when he comes to this state of things that he comes to himself and begins to see that he needed to become immaculate (Luke 15:17-19).

All of the things experienced by the younger son in going away from home and himself had been experienced by National Israel. They had once thought clearly and enjoyed abundant fellowship with Jehovah. They “served Jehovah all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of Jehovah that he had wrought for Israel” (Jud. 2:7). When that generation died, “there arose another generation after them, that knew not Jehovah, nor yet the work which he had wrought for Israel” (Jud. 2:10). From that time, Jehovah worked through judges, priests, kings, and prophets to restore National Israel to Himself. When Jesus told the parable of the younger son, He was still working to do that. National Israel desperately needed to “come to himself!”

Waking Up From The Madness of Sin

Sin Is Madness

Our world does not view sin as madness. Sin is increasingly becoming the norm and those who oppose it are considered mad. However, those who know Bible teaching know differently. Wiersbe observed that “there is an ‘insanity’ in sin that seems to paralyze the image of God within us and liberate the ‘animal’ inside” (1:235). Vincent observes that “came to himself” is “a striking expression,

putting the state of rebellion against God as a kind of *madness*. It is a wonderful stroke of art, to represent the beginning of repentance as the return of a sound consciousness” (1:387). Barnes observed,

It is commonly applied to one who has been ‘deranged,’ and when he recovers we say he has ‘come to himself.’ In this place it denotes that the folly of the young man was a kind of derangement—that he was insane. So it is of every sinner. Madness is in their hearts . . . they are estranged from God, and led, by the influence of evil passions, contrary to their better judgment and the decisions of a sound mind. (229)

The younger son

regains his wisdom as he gains a sense of his folly. He returns to his right mind . . . he perceives how great is his foolishness . . . reason returns . . . He is restored to sanity of mind as he obtains a sense of his sinfulness. To be able to say . . . ‘I have sinned,’ is to come back into a right and sound spiritual condition. We are in an wholly unsound mental state when we can regard our disloyalty and disobedience to God with complacency and even with satisfaction. (Spence and Exell, “Luke 2:54”)

Solomon observed that “madness is in” the heart “of the sons of men” (Ecc. 9:3). “Madness” is from “*howlelah* . . . *folly*” (Strong, “Howlelah”). Shemaiah the Nehelamite called the true prophets of Jehovah, mad (“*shaga* . . . to rave through insanity”) (Strong, “Shaga”) (Jer. 29:26). His statement would be true as applied to real false prophets. The Babylonians were mad (“*halal* (*hawlal*) . . . to be (clamorously) foolish; to rave”) (Strong, “Halal”) over idols (Jer.

50:38). Saul was mad (“emmainomai . . . to rave on, i.e. rage at”) (Strong, “Emmainomai”) like a maniac when he was persecuting Christians (Acts 26:11).

Boles observed that the younger son

had been deaf to all reason; his state was a form of reckless living, devoid of all good reason; he had lost sight of all that was good, reasonable and just; he had lost sight of his better nature and the virtues of righteous living. His eyes were blind to all that was good, his ears were deaf to wise counsel, and his appreciation of the better things of life was lost. Some describe his state as being a state of insanity. The time came when he ‘came to himself’; he comes back to his better self; he regains his good judgment and opens his eyes and unstops his ears and heightens his appreciation of the better things of life . . . he begins to take a sensible view of his own situation. (301)

Lenski wrote:

It was an insane thing for the prodigal thus to leave his father, thus to plunge into riotous living, to go on till he ended amid the swine and envied them their food. Conversion means to become rational, right-minded, properly balanced again. It is a sound, rational act to turn from sin, its curse and doom, to God, pardon, and salvation. The real turn occurs in the depth of the soul. (812)

Ironside noted that “this young man had been suffering from a mental abberation (sic). Now, the younger son regained his right

mind . . . This young man came to himself; he began to think. If you can get people to think then something will happen. The devil is doing his best to keep people from thinking” (494).

National Israel was insane and needed badly to get out of the madness of sin. The Pharisees and the scribes needed to see themselves in the activity of this younger son while he was out of his mind.

Sin Is Sleep

The sluggard is a sleeping sinner and needs to awaken (Pro. 6:9-10; Pro. 19:15). The Romans were encouraged to “awake out of sleep: for now is salvation nearer to us than when we first believed” (Rom. 13:11). This sleep was “spiritual torpor” (Strong, “Hupnos”). Because of their division, many of the Corinthians were spiritually dead (1 Cor. 11:30). This condition is described as sleep. In the discussion of the resurrection, Paul admonished the Corinthians to “awake” (“rouse (oneself) out of stupor”) (Strong, “Eknepho”) “to soberness righteously, and sin not” (1 Cor. 15:34). The Ephesians are to be motivated to “awake” and “arise from the dead” (Eph. 5:14). One observed that “the religious realm of today is overflowing with self-satisfied, sleep-walking individuals who consider church-going and money-giving a comfortable substitute for repentance” (“God Demands Repentance,” 1).

National Israel was spiritually asleep. They needed to awaken and serve God faithfully. Jesus is attempting with this parable to awaken them to soberness in their relationship with God.

Repentance

Waking up from the madness of sin is repentance of sin. The younger son changed his mind about living in the far country. “There was a change in his attitude; his *will* has undergone a change respecting his course of conduct. There is a new determination within him” (Nichol and Whiteside 2:148). His thinking had brought him to the far country. When he changed his thinking, it would bring him home. “One of the names of Christian repentance . . . is *resipiscentia*, or a becoming wise again” (Trench 402 Footnote 2). One of the words translated *repentance* in the New Testament is *metanoeo*. Wuest wrote:

A change of moral thought and reflection which follows moral delinquency. This includes not only the act of changing one's attitude towards and opinion of sin but also that of forsaking it . . . The act of repentance is based first of all and primarily upon an intellectual apprehension of the character of sin, man's guilt with respect to it, and man's duty to turn away from it. The emotional and volitional aspects of the act of repentance follow, and are the result of this intellectual process of a change of mind with respect to it. This means that the correct approach of the Christian worker to a sinner whom he wishes to lead to the Lord is that of clearly explaining the issues involved. When the unsaved person is made to clearly understand the significance of sin, the intellectual process of changing his mind with respect to it can follow, with the result that sorrow, contrition, and turning away from it will also follow. A mere emotional appeal to the sinner is not the correct one. The Greek word *metanoeo* tells us that the intellectual appeal must come first, since the act of repenting is basically a mental one at the start. (28)

Commenting on *metanoeo* in Matthew 3:2, Clarke observed:

The verb . . . is either compounded of *meta*, *after*, and *noein*, *to understand*, which signifies that, *after hearing* such preaching, the sinner is led to *understand*, that the way he has walked in was the way of misery, death, and hell. Or the word may be derived from *meta* *after*, and *anoia*, *madness*, which intimates that the whole life of a sinner

is no other than a continued course of *madness* and *folly*: and if to live in a constant opposition to all the dictates of *true wisdom*; to wage war with his own best interests in time and eternity; to provoke and insult the living God; and, by habitual sin, to prepare himself only for a state of misery, be evidences of *insanity*, every sinner exhibits them plentifully. It was from this notion of the word, that the Latins termed repentance *resipiscentia*, a growing wise again, from *re* and *sapere*; or, according to Tertullian, *Resipiscentia*, *quasi receptio mentis ad se*, restoring the mind to itself: *Contra Marcion*, lib. ii. (3:50)

Certainly, the younger son had engaged in this type behavior. Now, with his repentance, he was getting back on the right path. This is the emphasis of the parable. When the lost sheep had been found and brought home, Jesus said, “I say unto you, that even so there shall be joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine righteous persons, who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). When the lost coin had been found, Jesus said, “Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:10). Though the word *repentance* is not found in the illustration of the younger son, the principle is there.

National Israel needed to get the lesson. They thought they needed no repentance. They looked at the publicans and sinners as the ones who needed to repent and bragged on themselves for their righteousness (Luke 18:9-14). In times past, Jehovah had told National Israel He was tired of their playing at repenting (Jer. 15:6). They had become so bad that Jehovah told Jeremiah, “pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me; for I will not hear thee” (Jer. 7:16). The Babylonian captivity had stopped the idolatry and refusing to allow the land to lie idle, but it had not fully cured Israel. The problems

faced by Jesus from National Israel (John 1:11) and addressed in part in Luke 15, were still going on. They would finally result in the crucifixion of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21-23). They so desperately needed to follow the course of return that the younger son followed.

Conclusion

When he came to himself, he illustrated the publicans and the sinners who were drawing near to hear Jesus (Luke 15:1). These were the ones who were coming to themselves and returning to God. The statements, “I perish” (Luke 15:17), “I have sinned” (Luke 15:18) and “I am no more worthy” (Luke 15:19) stand in contrast to the self-righteousness of the Pharisees and the scribes (Mat. 5:20). While learning the beautiful lessons of the illustration, please do not miss the lesson of the parable. Jesus is trying once again to bring National Israel back to God. National Israel needed to see it was perishing in sin. National Israel needed to say and really mean, “I have sinned.” National Israel needed to understand that being a blood descendent of Abraham did not make them worthy before God (Mat. 3:7-9). There was “joy in heaven” and “in the presence of the angels of God” (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10) over the publicans and sinners. There was grief in the heart of the Godhead over National Israel (Mark 3:5).

The beauty of the illustration used by Jesus is seen in the consequences of the younger son’s coming to himself. While others will develop it further, let me observe: **When he came to himself**, his remembrance of home was inviting (Luke 15:17). Seeing clearly, he could see home in all its inviting beauty and pleasantness. **When he came to himself**, his resolution to return was intense (Luke 15:18-19). There was not anything in the far country to sidetrack his thinking. He was seeing it clearly now. **When he came to himself**, his return was immediate (Luke 15:20). He did not linger in returning. The pig pen had no hold on him. He gave the pigs a permanent wave and was off. Perhaps he could sing on his way home, “I Can See Clearly Now!”

What about us? Do we find ourselves in the far country in want? Are we in the pig pen starving? Can we make the journey to ourselves and come home? It is the knowledge of the Word of God that can bring us home (2 The. 2:14). Study of that Word will bring faith in Jesus as the Christ (Rom. 10:1-21). Repentance of sin will follow a conviction that on purpose living in sin will bring death (John 8:24). Confession of faith in Jesus as God's Son (Acts 8:37) will be followed by baptism unto the remission of sins (Acts 2:38). Should we, as National Israel, have already come into covenant relationship with God but have fallen away from grace (Gal. 5:4), may we come to ourselves and return through repentance, prayer, and confession of sins to those involved (Acts 8:22-24). We will then have awakened from the madness of sin!

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CHAPTER 16

Bread And To Spare: The Abundance Of The Father's House

David Sproule

Parents and educators know all too well that different people learn in different ways. Some are visual learners—they have to see it to “get it.” Some are auditory learners—they have to hear it to “get it.” Some are sensory learners—they have to touch it, do it, or experience it to “get it.” Some may be a combination of these three types. Parents and educators also know that it takes some people longer to learn certain lessons than it does others. Unfortunately, even in the process of learning some of the most fundamental and essential lessons of life, many individuals have enrolled in and graduated from “The School of Hard Knocks.” In other words, they may have learned the lesson, but they learned it the hard way. This type of learning could accurately be described as painful—i.e., painful for the one going through the “learning process,” and painful for loved ones watching it all happen.

Regrettably, the younger son in Luke 15 appeared to be a sensory learner, who had applied to and been accepted to “The School of Hard Knocks” campus in the far country. Even if he had **seen** other “graduates” returning from the far country (as a visual learner) or had **heard** about their perilous experience through their words or even lessons from his father (as an auditory learner), the younger son was determined to learn some of the fundamental and essential lessons of life the hard way. It turned out to be a painful experience

for him, a painful experience for his father and a painful experience for Bible readers over the next two thousand years.

His courses during his time in the far country started easy but grew more and more intense. “He had spent all” his portion of his father’s livelihood (New King James Version, Luke 15:14). “There arose a severe famine in that land.” He had nothing, and now the land was producing nothing. Now, probably for the first time in his life, “he began to be in want.” What do you suppose were his emotions? What must have been going through his mind? What options might he have considered? Desperate to find a new direction for his life, he took a course in Livestock Management, where he gained much-needed field experience, as he was sent “into the fields to feed swine” (Luke 15:15). At this point, he was perishing “with hunger” (Luke 15:17), and “he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate” (Luke 15:16). This poor lad had reached rock bottom, and “no one gave him anything” (Luke 15:16). The young man had plummeted himself into a sad and pitiful state! Yet, it was on this occasion that he finally started learning.

Most parents and teachers have witnessed that moment when “the light bulb goes on” in a child’s head and it is apparent that the child is beginning to “get it.” Luke 15:17 must have been one of those light-bulb moments. Jesus said that the younger brother “came to himself.” Not only was he far away from home, he had also been far away from himself. But, in the midst of the darkness of sin and despair, a glimmer of hope began to emerge—he was learning! The first decisive step he made to rectify his miserable situation was coming to this key realization—**“How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!”** (Luke 15:17). The son thought about what he had left behind. He remembered all the tremendous blessings that were his back at home. He recognized that even the least in his father’s house had abundantly more than he did. They had “bread” and he had none. They had “bread enough” and he had none. They had “bread enough and to spare” and he had none. Away from his father’s house, he possessed and enjoyed **none** of his father’s blessings. In more ways

than just physically, this young man was “in want” and “perishing”! He realized that he needed to go home! He realized he desperately needed his father! He realized that the basic necessities (represented by “bread”) were provided in abundance in his father’s house, and they were *only* provided to those who were in his father’s house!

Meditate momentarily on the multitude of blessings that this younger son had not only squandered in his riotous living but had also completely renounced when he left home. Why would he give all of that up? Why would he desert such a loving father? How long do you suppose it took him to waste “his possessions with prodigal living” (Luke 15:13)? How long do you suppose it was from the time he hit rock bottom to the time “he came to himself”? What would you have done if you were in the same situation—with the same kind of father, same abundance of blessings, same consequences for turning away? Let us consider how we can apply this to our lives today.

The Bread Is In The Father’s House

The house of the prodigal’s father is an integral part of the narrative in Luke 15. The son dwelt within his father’s house for years and was the beneficiary of its bountiful blessings. Then, the son abandoned his father and the house and consequently suffered immensely as he was separated from those bountiful blessings. It was when he came to himself that he realized the blessings (“bread” is used as a synecdoche for all the blessings, especially physical nourishment, in Luke 15:17) were only his when he was in his father’s house!

The application for us today from this parable parallels the abundant blessings that our heavenly Father has for us. Only those who are in our Father’s house are beneficiaries of His bountiful blessings. Before looking at some of these blessings, how are we to understand “the Father’s house” today and can we be certain that the blessings of God are exclusively found therein?

Keys To Understanding The Father’s House

Paul’s epistle to the church in Ephesus has as its greatest emphasis the Father’s house. If we want to know the spiritual meaning to us

today of the “father’s house” in Luke 15, the book of Ephesians is God’s commentary to explain it to us, for it was written to those who were dwelling in the Father’s house. Paul wrote, particularly to the Gentile Christians, “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners” (Eph. 2:19). In other words, “You are no longer living outside the Father’s house!” Paul continues, “But [you are] fellow citizens with the saints and members of **the household of God**” (Eph. 2:19). He was writing to the citizens, saints, and members of the Father’s house! To understand that in light of what the rest of the epistle teaches and to understand who is in the household of God, take time to connect the following passages:

- The letter was addressed to the saints in the Father’s house, who were “the faithful in Christ” (Eph. 1:1).
- Those who are “in Christ” are all part “of the same body” (Eph. 3:6).
- Those who are in the body of Christ are in the church of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23).
- Those who are in the church are those who are “a holy temple in the Lord,” who are built together “for a dwelling place of God” (Eph. 3:19-22).
- Those in whom the Lord “may dwell” are those who are in “the whole family” of the Father (Eph. 3:14-17).

To summarize the book of Ephesians on this point: Christians are in the household of God, are in Christ, are in the body, are in the church, are the dwelling place of God, are in the family of the Father (the last of these, “the family,” bringing us full-circle with the first, “the household”).

The prodigal in Luke 15 learned that in his father’s house there was bread enough and to spare. Is that true for the Christian, as well? In our Father’s house (i.e., in Christ, in the body, in the church, in the

presence of God, in the family of God), are there blessings enough and to spare? If so, does the book of Ephesians provide commentary on that point? It most certainly does, and the careful reader will find this to be true from the very beginning of the letter.

Keys To Understanding God's Blessings

Consider carefully and enjoy immensely the third verse of the book of Ephesians: **“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ”** (Eph. 1:3). The passage provides four keys regarding the blessings of God that are essential to grasp at this point in the study (start at the end of the verse and work backwards):

1) The **Location** of God's Blessings: **In Christ!** Based on the study above, this means that, in order to receive blessings from God, one must be in Christ, the body, the church, the temple and the family!

2) The **Origin** of God's Blessings: **The heavenly places** (lit., “the heavenlies”)! The blessings of God do not originate from man, nor can they be disseminated at man's discretion. They are God's blessings to give as God sees fit!

3) The **Nature** of God's Blessings: **Spiritual!** While there are definitely physical blessings promised by God (cf. Mat. 6:25-34), the bread that truly matters is that which feeds and nourishes the soul, preparing it for eternity! The greatest blessings of God are those which are spiritual in nature!

4) The **Distribution** of God's Blessings: **Every!** If the word *every* was not in this passage, it could be argued (however, unsuccessfully) that there are “some” spiritual blessings from the heavenlies that can be enjoyed outside of Christ. The rest of the New Testament would not permit such a conclusion, but God makes it abundantly clear in this verse that every single spiritual blessing from Him is found exclusively in Christ! If one is not in Christ, there are absolutely zero spiritual blessings promised to him.

Are you in Christ? Are you in the Father's house? Are you in the body, church, temple, family of God? If so, what kind of learner are you? God tells us that every spiritual blessing at His disposal is given

only to those in Christ. Have you learned that? Do you know that to be true by hearing about it? By seeing it? By experiencing it yourself? How mindful are you of all of the blessings that your heavenly Father is showering down upon you in His house?

Have you left your Father's house (cf. Luke 15:13)? Have you packed your spiritual bags and exited to a far country (cf. Luke 15:13)? How are things going? Is your material substance sustaining you (cf. Luke 15:13)? Do you ever sense that you are living in the midst of a famine, perishing and hungering for God and His blessings (cf. Luke 15:14, 17; Mat. 5:6)? Would you gladly fill the emptiness in your life, left vacant by abandoning the Father's house, with the vile, swine-like sustenance of this world (cf. Luke 15:16)? Is there anyone who is giving you anything worthwhile for this life or the next life (cf. Luke 15:16)? Brother in Christ, sister in Christ, will you please come home? If the study above, concluding that no spiritual blessings are yours outside of the Father's house, has started to pull you back (or even if it has not), reflect upon all of the blessings that you are missing! Brother, sister, there is bread enough in the house of our Father and to spare!

Bread Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

It has been said that "familiarity breeds contempt," meaning that the more you know someone or some situation, the more likely you are to lose respect or find some fault. It has also been said that "familiarity breeds apathy," meaning the more you are around a person or situation, the more habitual, expected, and uninteresting things tend to become. It is easy to take something for granted!

Do you suppose the prodigal took his father's house for granted? Do you suppose he took all of the blessings associated with his father's house for granted? Perhaps, while surrounded by the wonders of home, he pondered, "Bread? Really? Having bread is not such a big deal! It's rather common! It doesn't deserve a second thought!" Until that day when he eyed the swine's husks, he may have never realized how good he had it at home! He was perishing in hunger in

the far country, when he could have been at home with bread (and all the physical blessings) enough and to spare. The prodigal did not appreciate what he had when he had it; it was not until he did not have it and then came to himself that he appreciated the true value of living in his father's house!

Is it possible that Christians in the Father's house today can fail to appreciate what they have and allow familiarity to breed apathy? Is it possible that a child of God in His Father's house could ponder his surroundings and say, "Blessings? Really? Are there really that many blessings? These things are not such a big deal! They're rather common, from what I can see!" May we not wait until we are perishing in spiritual hunger in the far country to recognize the bountiful blessings that are ours in the house of God! (The spiritual blessings to follow in this study will be limited to some of those mentioned in the book of Ephesians.)

Grace Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

Grace may be one of those blessings (like bread) that we forget about and take for granted. Grace has commonly been defined as "unmerited favor" or simply "getting what you do not deserve." From the Greek word *charis*, Mounce provides this insight—"the acceptance of and goodness toward those who cannot earn or do not deserve such gain" ("Favor"). This description comes right from Ephesians 1:6, "The glory of His grace, by which He has made us **accepted** in the Beloved." Without the grace of "the God of all grace" (1 Pet. 5:10), we could never be accepted or "serve God acceptably" (Heb. 12:28)! If it were not for God's grace, we would be forever condemned! Yet, we read this most beautiful thought—"by **grace you have been saved**" from sins (Eph. 2:5; Eph. 2:8).

Is there enough grace? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? As Paul discussed "the glory of His grace," he emphasized "the **riches** of His grace" (Eph. 1:7), "the **exceeding riches** of His grace" (Eph. 2:7), the "**abundance** of grace" (Rom. 5:17) and that "grace **abounded much more**" (Rom. 5:20). As he contemplated the power of grace in his own life, the apostle

declared, “The grace of our Lord was **exceedingly abundant**, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:14).

In my Father's house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father's house, there is grace enough for me, grace enough for all, and to spare!

Mercy Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

Grace and mercy are sometimes hard to differentiate. While grace entails specific favors and manifestations of God, mercy has sometimes been defined simply as “not getting what you do deserve.” Grace can entail the movement of God *on your behalf*; mercy can sometimes entail the restraint of the movement of God *on your behalf...for your own good*. Mounce speaks of mercy as an “emotional response and resulting action after encountering the suffering or affliction of another” (“Pity”). The mercy of God (who is “the Father of mercies,” 2 Cor. 1:3) involves the **compassion and pity** of God toward those who are in need. “When the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared . . . according to His mercy He saved us” (Tit. 3:4-5).

Is there enough mercy? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? In Ephesians 2:4, Paul proclaims that God “is **rich** in mercy.” The lesson we learn from the perseverance of Job is “that the Lord is **very** compassionate and merciful” (Jam. 5:11). Our Father “according to His **abundant** mercy has begotten us again to a living hope” (1 Pet. 1:3).

In my Father's house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father's house, there is mercy enough for me, mercy enough for all, and to spare!

Forgiveness Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

Some of the most wonderful and vivid prophecies of all the Old Testament concern the promise of forgiveness. “Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow” (Isa. 1:18). “For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:34). Yet, these promises of God are not fully appreciated until one comes to terms with the devastating consequences of one's sins—“Your iniquities have separated you from your God; And your sins

have hidden His face from you, So that He will not hear” (Isa. 59:2). Apart from God, there is absolutely nothing that anyone can do to rectify this most egregious condition. Yet, due to the saving power of the blood of Jesus, those in the Father’s house have “the **forgiveness** of sins” (Eph. 1:7), have been “**washed**...from our sins in His own blood” (Rev. 1:5; Acts 22:16), have “been **justified** by His blood” (Rom. 5:9), and “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son **cleanses** (present tense, continually) us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

Is there enough forgiveness? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? Those in the Father’s house are assured that He has “forgiven you **all** trespasses” (Col. 2:13) and that He will **continue** “to cleanse us from **all** unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). And the heart of God “desires **all** men to be saved” from their sins (1 Tim. 2:4).

In my Father’s house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father’s house, there is forgiveness enough for me, forgiveness enough for all, and to spare!

Redemption Enough And To Spare In The Father’s House

While in its New Testament usage the doctrine of redemption often parallels the doctrine of forgiveness, it does stand out with a beauty of its own. In the New Testament, a variety of Greek words are used for which we typically have only the one English word. The greatest emphasis on redemption in the New Testament is to convey **deliverance** through Christ. “In Him we have **redemption** (*apolutrosis*) through His blood” (Eph. 1:7), “being justified freely by His grace through the **redemption** (*apolutrosis*) that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). “You were not **redeemed** (*lutroo*) with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). “Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might **redeem** (*lutroo*) us from every lawless deed” (Tit. 2:13-14). Through the sacrifice of Christ, we have been **delivered!** The New Testament not only emphasizes the deliverance part of redemption but also the **purchase** part of redemption. Our Savior, now exalted in heaven, is being praised,

“For You were slain, and have **redeemed** (*agorazo*) to God by Your blood” (Rev. 5:9). The American Standard Version probably more accurately represents the weight of this word—“and didst **purchase** unto God with thy blood men.” The very same word is found in 1 Corinthians 6:20, where the word **redeemed** is not found, but its meaning is—“For you were **bought** (*agorazo*) at a price.” *Delivered! Bought! Redeemed! Beautiful!*

Is there enough redemption? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? The assurance we have is that Christ “gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from **every** lawless deed” (Tit. 2:14). By the shedding of His blood, He “didst purchase unto God . . . **(men) of every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation**” (Rev. 5:9, ASV).

In my Father's house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father's house, there is redemption enough for me, redemption enough for all, and to spare!

Love Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

Is there any greater, any more-loved topic to meditate upon than the love of God? It is beyond our comprehension that “He loved us, **even when** we were dead in trespasses” (Eph. 2:4-5)! *Oh, what love!* Paul declares that “the love of Christ . . . passes (present tense, continuous) knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). Its wonder, its beauty, its fullness are beyond any human mind to hold any more than a small trifle.

Is there enough love? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? Paul spoke of God's “**great** love with which He loved us” (Eph. 2:4). Jesus Himself said, “**Greater** love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus said it does not and cannot get any greater than this. *It is immeasurable!* You cannot find any device or combination of devices by which you “may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is **the width and length and depth and height**” of the love of Christ (Eph. 3:17-19)! *Oh, what love!*

In my Father's house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father's house, there is love enough for me, love enough for all, and to spare!

Reconciliation Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

The worst condition in which one can live (not merely “one of the worst,” but the very worst) is to live “far off” from God, “alienated and enemies in your mind” (Col. 1:21; Eph. 2:13). When one is not *in* the Father’s house, he is “afar off,” “alienated” and separated from God because of his sins, no matter how far or how close he might think he is. How soothing, then, the thought that “in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross” (Eph. 2:13-16). Through Christ’s death on the cross, all of mankind (no matter how hostile or divided) can be reconciled to each other; but, even more importantly, all of mankind (no matter how far or alienated from God) can be brought near and reconciled to the Father. “For if when 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” (Rom. 5:10). The work of reconciliation was done by God through Christ, that our sins may not be imputed to us (2 Cor. 5:18-20). *What a glorious thought!*

Is there enough reconciliation? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? The magnitude of God’s reconciliation is so great that it took a people (the Gentiles) who “were without Christ...having no hope and without God” (Eph. 2:12) and opened the way that the **whole world** (2 Cor. 5:19) and “**all things**” (Col. 1:20) might be reconciled unto Him, if they would turn from their wicked works.

In my Father’s house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father’s house, there is reconciliation enough for me, reconciliation enough for all, and to spare!

Fellowship Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

Fellowship in the Father’s house has two dimensions—there is the fellowship with fellow brethren, and there is the fellowship with our Father and our Savior (both of these are emphasized in the book of Ephesians). Reconciliation naturally leads to fellowship on the human level. In Christ, we were made “one” when He

created “in Himself one new man . . . in one body,” that we might be “fellow citizens with the saints” (Eph. 2:14-19). We have fellowship with each other for “we are members of one another” (Eph. 4:25). Even greater, “truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). In the book of Ephesians, Paul depicts this blessing with these words—“For through him we both have **our access** in one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:18, ASV). “What a fellowship! What a joy divine! Leaning on the everlasting arms!” We not only have access to the Father, we have **our** access to the Father—a special blessing just for His children! “He has made [us] alive together with Him” (Col. 2:13)!

Is there enough fellowship? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? In the Parable of the Great Supper in Luke 14, the Master (representing God, the Father) invited guests to a great feast He had prepared—a feast prepared not only for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. The message of the servants to the Master still rings true today—“**still there is room**” (Luke 14:22). “**Whoever** fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him” (Acts 10:35).

In my Father's house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father's house, there is fellowship enough for me, fellowship enough for all, and to spare!

Peace Enough And To Spare In The Father's House

There is a peace “which surpasses all understanding” (Phi. 4:7), and this peace is found and enjoyed only in the Father's house! It is “**the peace of God**” (Phil. 4:7), which is extended by “**the God of peace**” (Phil. 4:9). In the book of Ephesians, Paul proclaims that Christ “Himself is our peace,” having come “and preached peace” (“the gospel of peace,” Eph. 6:15), that He might “[make] peace through the blood of His cross” (Eph. 2:15; Col. 1:20). How sweet the thought that, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation filled with hostilities and anxieties, “we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1)!

Is there enough peace? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? This peace which surpasses all

understanding is nothing like the peace which the world seeks and offers (cf. John 14:27). It is a peace that can rule in **every** heart (Col. 3:15), for “the Lord of peace himself” is able to “give you peace **at all times in all ways**” (2 The. 3:16, ASV)!

In my Father’s house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father’s house, there is peace enough for me, peace enough for all, and to spare!

Inheritance Enough And To Spare In The Father’s House

“Inheritance” is a word that often brings to mind receiving great wealth and property, but it entails so much more than that! To appreciate more fully our Father’s inheritance, consider the “according to” statements in the first three chapters of Ephesians, which explain the basis and authority upon which this inheritance is made available—“according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:5); “according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself” (Eph. 1:9); “according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11); “according to the working of His mighty power” (Eph. 1:19); “according to the riches of His glory” (Eph. 3:16); “according to the power that works in us” (Eph. 3:20). This is not something administered or executed by man; it is extended as God’s good pleasure purposes. We have the wonderful privilege of having been adopted “as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself” (Eph. 1:5) and based on that exceptionally unique relationship, “In Him also we have obtained an inheritance” (Eph. 1:11). *A thought too magnificent to fully comprehend!* May we give “thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance” (Col. 1:12)!

Is there enough inheritance? Is there enough for me? Is there enough for everyone else who needs it? The invitation and promise is made to “whosoever will” (Rev. 22:17, KJV), for in the Father’s house, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female” (Gal. 3:28). We are all equally “**fellow**-heirs, and **fellow**-members of the body, and **fellow**-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 3:6, ASV).

In my Father's house (i.e., in Christ, in His church), and *only* in my Father's house, there is inheritance enough for me, inheritance enough for all, and to spare!

Conclusion

Those who are “in Christ” are those who are in “His body” (the church, the family, the house of God). Those who are “in Christ” experience “the fullness” of Christ “who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23). Every spiritual blessing that God has made available can only be possessed and enjoyed in His house! Only in the Father's house will one find the Father's grace, mercy, forgiveness, redemption, love, reconciliation, fellowship, peace, and inheritance! When one has never been “baptized into Christ” (Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27), then outside of the Father's house (i.e., outside of Christ) he will never experience the Father's grace, mercy, forgiveness, redemption, love, reconciliation, fellowship, peace and inheritance! The prodigal learned this lesson, although he learned it the hard way!

Away from his father's house, the prodigal sunk to the lowest depths of despair, having separated himself from all (not just some) of the blessings of home. “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). Humbled, the younger son returned home. When he arrived at home, notice what he experienced. “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...The father said to his servants, ‘Bring out the best...for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found...[the father] received him safe and sound” (Luke 15:20-27). When the wayward son returned home, his education came full-circle. He had learned some things in the far country (learned them by experience in “The School of Hard Knocks”) and then those lessons were verified when he returned to his father. Immediately upon his return, he experienced all of those things that he had abandoned and left behind—his father's grace, mercy, forgiveness, redemption, love, reconciliation, fellowship, peace, and inheritance!

All of the blessings were still there! And they were still there ...even for him!

Brother in Christ, sister in Christ, where are you today? Are you faithfully dwelling in the Father's house, partaking in and enjoying the bountiful blessings available only therein? Do you realize how wonderfully sweet and abundant they are? Or, have you permitted familiarity to breed apathy? Have you strayed away? Have you wandered from Christ? Have you wandered from His church, the Father's house, and from the abundance He so richly provides? Like the younger son in Luke 15, have you come to realize that there are zero blessings of the Father away from the Father? Please come home! Your family is waiting and watching! Even better, your Father is waiting and watching! He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Eph. 3:20)! Come, there's bread in the house of your Father, and to spare!

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CHAPTER 17

I Have Sinned: Taking Responsibility For One's Actions

Eric Owens

If the account in Luke 15 were described as a movie or play, it could fit into many categories. The early decisions and actions of the younger son would certainly be called a tragedy. His life in the far country would be categorized as an action movie. His low point in the pig's pen is full of drama. His return and acceptance by his father is truly a love story. The elder brother's refusal to enter and rejoice with his father is again a tragedy. No part of his life would be a comedy for there is nothing funny about sin.

We can all identify with this young man, because his story is our story. Not simply as individuals who have sinned, but his story is the story of humanity. Adam was the son of God (King James Version, Luke 3:38), and God gave his son everything. He placed him in a prepared place and gave him provisions, companionship, and freedom. Yet, Adam sinned and went to the far country. In the parable of Luke 15, the younger son did the same thing.

Allen Webster draws a striking parallel between us and the boy when he writes:

The prodigal son ran away from home. This young man is presented as a warning to us because each of us has run away from our Father (Romans 3:23; Ephesians 2:13-17). Let us try to picture him as he was. It is likely that he grew up in a wealthy, godly home. His father had been strict on him-as good parents are. He grew tired

of rules, restrictions, and regulations. He reached the legal age of adulthood and wanted to make his own decisions. (102)

Home is a great word to consider in the boy's life. He started at home, but he left his home. He went to the far country and for a time had another home. He got up out of the pit and returned home. The topic before us centers on a statement he made that led to his return home. When we meet him, his story is already in progress; he is pining away in a pen of pigs, considering sharing a meal with them. He is tired and weary. He has nowhere to go and no one to help him. H. Leo Boles gives the following description.

He moved now from his haunts of vice and dissipation and put himself in the service of some man of that country. He "joined himself" to "one of the citizens of that country." The verb here means to "glue or cement"; this implies that he forced himself upon the citizen, who was unwilling to engage him and who took him into service only upon persistent entreaty. This unhappy and miserable young man is now a useless appendage to a stranger who did not care for him. (300)

It is in this place and condition that the boy made one of the most remarkable statements any human can make. He came to himself and said I have sinned. In the pit, he made the statement to himself. His mind was made up, but his problem was not solved. For it was not until he got up out of the pit and went home that he was reunited with his father. Our focus is not on the boy leaving home. Neither is our focus on the boy returning home. Our focus is on the statement the boy made between those two places. The first is the statement "I have sinned."

If we desire to have a relationship with God, and if we desire to go to heaven, we must admit our sin. Those who fail to do so or refuse to do so will live miserable lives on earth and will one day live eternally in hell. There is no other way for humanity to live successful, happy, productive lives than to admit their sin and have them forgiven in the blood of Jesus.

The second part of our topic is taking responsibility for our actions. The first part, I have sinned, should lead naturally to the second, taking responsibility for our actions. I say should because not everyone who says I have sinned is willing to take responsibility for his actions. Pharaoh said he sinned, but he did not take responsibility for his actions (Exo. 9:27; Exo. 10:16). Balaam acknowledged that he had sinned but did not take responsibility for his actions (Num. 22:34). King Saul said he had sinned, but he never took responsibility for his actions (1 Sam. 15:24; 1 Sam. 15:30; 1 Sam. 26:21). Judas also professed his sin, but instead of taking responsibility, he hung himself (Mat. 27:4).

We know that none of these individuals took responsibility for his sin because none of them changed his life and attitude toward his sin. Taking responsibility involves making changes because of the sin, not simply acknowledging that one has sinned.

We all must take responsibility because God has made us free and with freedom comes obligation. We cannot enjoy the freedom to choose our actions and reject the consequences of those choices. Many men enjoy and even relish the freedom to choose their own way, but when the consequences of those choices come to bear upon them, some cry foul and lament that God is unfair. Israel tried to accuse God of being unfair, but Jehovah defended His way, declaring and demonstrating that the way of the LORD is equal. Railing or accusing God of being unfair does not change or remove our responsibility for our actions. The way of the Lord is equal (Eze. 18:25).

God created man in His image; therefore, we have the ability to choose our actions. We alone of all of God's creation can think, reason, reflect, ponder, consider, weigh matters, and then choose.

We can with this same ability reconsider our decisions and change our actions. The young man in Luke 15 did both. He made decisions, he suffered the consequences of those decisions, and then he reconsidered his position and made new decisions. His new decisions resulted in a new outcome in his life.

This is what makes the account in Luke 15 such a wonderful and encouraging example. The younger son in the parable did not simply say I have sinned. He took responsibility for his actions; he got up out of the pig's pen and went home to his father. Let us all learn from his example. Let us all acknowledge our sin, but let us also take responsibility for our actions. When we acknowledge our sin and take responsibility for our actions, it is the most powerful transforming statement any of us will ever make. Since the young man in our study took responsibility for his sin, for our purposes acknowledging sin will be synonymous with taking responsibility for our actions.

I Have Sinned

When He Said I Have Sinned, He Was Being Honest

In the parable, the younger son's actions are chronicled, and they are all attributable to him. Pay close attention to the personal pronouns. Notice Luke 15:12; the younger son said, "Give me the portion." Luke 15:13 records his actions; the younger son gathered all together and took his journey. He went to the far country where he wasted his substance with riotous living.

He joined himself to a citizen in the far country. He was sent to the fields and he fed swine. He desired to fill his belly with the husks the swine ate. He came to himself and he noted that he perished with hunger. In this state with all of his actions having led him to this place, he said, "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father **I have sinned** against heaven, and before thee" (Luke 15:18).

The statement is great because it is honest. There was no one else responsible for his actions. There was no one else who had made these choices and decisions. There was no one else who asked, left,

wasted, joined, desired, and hungered. It is the most honest statement anyone can ever make.

Every man who has sinned must be honest enough to admit it. Those who try to blame others for their decisions are nothing if they are not dishonest. Parents cannot be blamed for a child's actions, anymore than God could be blamed for Adam's. Teachers cannot be blamed for a student's failure to study, anymore than Jesus could be blamed for his failed disciples.

Elders and preachers cannot be blamed for a member's refusal to attend, to study, and to live the Christian life anymore than the apostles could for the church's departure. Doctors cannot be blamed for patients overeating and under-exercising. We cannot enjoy the freedom to choose while rejecting the responsibility of those choices. When we say I have sinned, it is as honest as any of us can ever be and the first step in changing our lives. This young man was honest with himself; he had sinned and he was honest enough to admit it. It is a great phrase but not everyone is willing to be honest and admit it; he did.

When He Said I Have Sinned, He Acknowledged God

The phrase *I have sinned* includes the word *sin*. Without God, there is no such thing. To be honest and admit that we have sinned is also to acknowledge the God we have sinned against. David spoke for himself but included humanity, when he said, "Against thee, thee only have I sinned" (Psa. 51:4). Joseph also recognized that if he had sinned, his sin would be against God (Gen. 39:9).

All sin is ultimately against God. The boy said, "I have sinned against heaven" (Luke 15:18). God's perfect character is the ultimate standard of good. Sin is not local, communal, or global; it is personal. All sin is against heaven! Paul spoke of the whole world—Jew and Gentile—when he wrote, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

If there is no God, there is no sin. If there is sin, then there is a God who has been sinned against. Those who admit their sin admit God; those who refuse to admit their sin also refuse to admit God. This young man recognized that his decisions were not simply

against his earthly father, but first and foremost, they were against his heavenly Father. Everyone should say what he said—"I have sinned against heaven"—because friend, if you have ever sinned, you did so against God. When we say I have sinned, we reject atheism and come home to the Father of our spirits (Heb. 12:9).

When He Said I Have Sinned, He Acknowledged His Created Nature

Human beings are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). When we admit our sin, we acknowledge that we are a unique creation, not animals. There is majesty to humanity. The record of Psalm 8 reveals that we are crowned with glory and honor. David's inspired account is that we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psa. 139:14).

Humans and angels are the only part of God's creation ever charged with sin (2 Pet. 2:4; Rom. 3:23). However, only human beings are ever recorded in Scripture as admitting it (Psa. 51:4). When we say I have sinned, we must appreciate the fact that we are the only ones on earth who can. No animal has ever said I have sinned! To admit sin is to admit that we are not animals.

The refusal of atheists and humanists to admit their sin is in part what makes them believe they are animals. This belief is no light matter. For if humans are animals, then humans are no different than any other animal. Animals cannot be charged with sin; therefore, killing a human would be equal to killing an ant, chicken, cow, or roach. No lion ever laments eating a gazelle. If humans are animals, then there would be nothing special or significant about us above any other animal. This is precisely what atheists and humanists believe.

Peter Singer argues that children are replaceable. He stated:

When death occurs before birth, replaceability does not conflict with generally accepted moral convictions. That a fetus is known to be disabled is widely accepted as ground for abortion. Yet in discussing abortion, we say that birth does not mark a morally significant dividing line. I cannot see how one could defend the view that fetuses

may be “replaced” before birth, but newborn infants may not. (qtd. in Butt 96)

Singer took his position further when he wrote:

If disabled newborn infants were not regarded as having a right to life until, say, a week or a month after birth it would allow parents, in consultation with their doctors, to choose on the basis of far greater knowledge of the infant’s condition than is possible before birth. (qtd. in Butt 97)

This is the only and natural conclusion of the position that humans are animals. And as such there is nothing sacred about human life. The conclusion also leads naturally to the questions Kyle Butt asked when he wrote, “One wonders why Singer would stop at one week or one month. Why not simply say that it is morally right for parents to kill their infants at one year or five years” (97)? Kyle is correct given Mr. Singers position that there is logically no cutoff for the notion of replaceability.

The young man of Luke 15 certainly did not believe such foolishness. In recognizing his own nature, he also validated the nature of other humans. The boy said he had sinned against his father. He recognized that his father was worthy of better treatment than he had given. He realized that his father was significant; he did not apologize to his fellow pen mates. He had not sinned against the pigs. He went home and apologized to his father. His actions teach forcefully that what we do to each other matters in heaven and on earth. “Children, obey your parents in the Lord; for this is right (Eph. 6:1). “Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Honor the king” (1 Pet. 2:17).

When the young man said I have sinned, he acknowledged his Divine creation. He acknowledged that he was made a little lower than angels. He acknowledged that he was crowned with glory and honor. Though he shared the pen with the pigs, he was the only one

in the pen who could own his sin, change his mind, acknowledge his God, get out, and go home. When we say I have sinned, we reject godless evolution and humanism; we esteem ourselves and others as being made a little lower than angels.

When He Said I Have Sinned, He Acknowledged God's Word

Sin is not simply against God's perfect character, it is also against God's revelation. John tells us that sin is the transgression of the law (1 John 3:4). Paul informs us that where there is no law, there is no transgression (Rom. 4:15). Therefore, when this young man acknowledged his sin, he also acknowledged God's revelation. God has not wounded the world up and left us to ourselves. God has communicated with man through His word (1 Cor. 2:8-13; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, no man is free to do that which is right in his own eyes, but every man must bring his life into harmony with God. Like the young man's father, our Heavenly Father has spoken to us.

Our lives boil down in large part to this single choice: will we listen to God or men? There is no comparison as to benefit and outcome for our lives and eternal souls. God has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). In contrast man cannot direct his own steps (Jer. 10:23). Our steps or lives will be ordered by someone. We will either listen to God or we will go our own way (Rom. 6:16). The young boy went his own way; read again the personal pronouns.

Some reject God suggesting that His rules are restrictive. They suggest they want to be liberated and free from God's tyranny. Maybe this is how the young man felt; maybe this prompted him to leave his father's house. But what young and old must realize is no man ever escapes rules, he simply replaces one set of rules for another.

The fundamental question of ethics is, who makes the rules? God or men? The theistic answer is that God makes them. The humanistic answer is that men make them. This distinction between theism and humanism is the fundamental division in moral theory. (qtd. in Noebel 193)

William Provine put it this way, “No inherent moral or ethical laws exist, nor are there absolute guiding principles for human society. The universe cares nothing for us and we have no ultimate meaning in life” (qtd. in Noebel 193). This is the sad and lamentable position one is forced to take who will not admit his sin. If there is no God, there is no standard by which one could call anything sin. Without God there is no universal moral or ethical law. Morality as such would simply be what one choses or refuses to do. Every man would be a law unto himself. As such, having no rules becomes the rule.

It would not matter how heinous or egregious the act; even rape would be explained as a naturalistic by-product of our evolutionary machinery. Joann Rodgers stated as much when she said, “Rape or at least rape-like acts clearly exist in many species, giving additional weight to both rape’s ‘natural’ roots and its ‘value’ in our biological and psychological legacy” (qtd. in Butt 106).

She further commented:

Even rape, fetishes, bondage and other so-called aberrant sexual behaviors are almost certainly biologically predisposed, if not adaptive, and may therefore be what biologists call ‘conserved’ traits, attributes or properties useful or essential to life across all cultures and genomes. (qtd. in Butt 106)

Evolutionists cannot stop at rape, adultery, or fornication; in evolution all sexual behavior must be explained as part of evolution. Listen to what Joann Rodgers had to say about pedophilia.

In addition, even the criminal justice system is coming to recognize that while pedophilia and other forms of exploitive sex must be punished in order to protect the victims, the perpetrators may also be victims-not necessarily of any abuse

but of their biological predispositions. (qtd. in Butt 111)

She then quoted psychiatrist Fred Berlin, who said: “Nothing in the research suggests that perversions are ‘volitional’ or that their expression is a failure of self-control” (qtd. in Butt 111). It is difficult to digest, but the position taken is that those who commit rape and pedophilia are not responsible for their actions because these actions are not volitional, they are simply the result of evolution. It is fitting that Charles Darwin stated the position best when he said,

A man who has no assured and ever present belief in the existence of a personal God or of a future existence with retribution and reward, can have for his rule of life, as far as I can see, only to follow those impulses and instincts which are the strongest or which seem to him the best ones. (106)

When God is rejected, the only conclusion can be that there is nothing absolutely right or wrong. Therefore, there can be no sin. Evolutionists may say that they do not like rape, but their position allows it and some of them even suggest that the one who does it is not even responsible for his actions.

The Nature Of Sin

Sin Brings Sadness

The sad, sordid, sorry state the young man was in was due to sin. The boy's greatest pain was spiritual pain. We must all come to realize the awful and destructive nature of sin. No good has ever come from sin. No one has ever improved his life by committing sin. Nothing has ever gotten better as the result of sin. No benefit to the world or any human being has come as the result of sin. Scripture says good things about ants and spiders, but nothing good is ever said about sin.

Sin is the fly in the soup of the soul. It is vile and repulsive. It is dark and destructive. It causes physical death and eternal death. Of all the words in the human language, *sin* is far and away the worst we have. For all the things that are awful in the world are probably sinful. Hatred, variance, strife, racism, rape, riot, lies, looting, larceny, murder, mayhem, and mistreating others are all sin.

The picture of sin could not be better than the one the Lord painted for us in this account. The boy is in a pig's pen. The pig is a greedy, unpleasant animal. He feeds and gorges until he can eat no more. The boy had lived his life this way. The pig and the pig's pen are dirty, this young man had become dirty. Try to imagine how clean this boy was when he left home. Now try to imagine how filthy and dirty he is in the pen. The dirt on his body is only surpassed by the condition of his soul. Let us all pray that we can appreciate how sin dirties our spiritual man. The pig's pen smelled. The stench of the pen had to be horrible. The odious condition of sin to our spiritual lives is graphically depicted by a pig's pen. In the pig's pen the boy was miserable; this well describes our lives when sin dominates them.

Sin Is Irrational

It was not until he came to himself that the young man admitted his sin. The implication is that in sin we are not thinking and acting as we ought. It is evident that the condition the boy was in was not in harmony with right thinking. His father had loved him, provided for him, housed him, and taught him his entire life. His father had blessed him, provided him an inheritance, and even consented to him when he asked to have his portion.

Having received such treatment care and love, it is reasonable to reciprocate the same, but he did not. He packed his things and walked out of his fathers' house to go and live among strangers. He took the goods saved by his father and graciously given to him and wasted them on harlots. He left his family and joined himself to fake friends who stayed with him as long as he had money. How often has this same sad scene been repeated by subsequent generations; those who do not learn from his story are destined to repeat it.

Sin Is Selfish

When we give ourselves to sin, we are acting selfishly. Every sin is a selfish act. Eve saw the tree and she desired it and what God said became secondary to her desire. Cain offered what he desired, not what God commanded. The world gave itself to sin, and every imagination of man's heart was evil continually.

James summed it up best when he said, "But every man . . . is drawn away of his own lust and enticed" (Jam. 1:14). This young man had acted selfishly, and this is what led him to the pig's pen. Another word closely associated with the selfish nature of sin is the word *pride*. The young man thought a lot about himself and not nearly enough about God, his father, and family. Pride goeth before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall (Pro.16:18).

Admitting Sin Demonstrates The Best Of Humanity

Admitting Sin Is Humble

While in the pig's pen, the young man said he had sinned. In the pen, he had an opportunity to reflect on his life and actions like he had never done before. Where once maybe pride ruled his life, now he could see clearly where his high-handed decisions had led him. He could reflect on his father's goodness. He could also reflect on his pseudo-friends who had flown away as quickly as the money he had. He had been humbled, and now he was humble. He was honest enough to admit it was his doing, and he was also humble enough to recognize the need for his father. It is humility which brings all men to Jesus, and humility is the beginning of every man's relationship with Jesus. "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mat. 5:3). Only those empty of self will come to Jesus to be filled.

Admitting Sin Is Hopeful

There is no hope for one who will not admit his sin. God cannot forgive those who will not repent, and one cannot repent until he admits his sin. The young man could not go home and be received by his father until he admitted his sin. If one has sin in his life, hope begins with admitting it and being willing to turn from it. The young

man is a great example for us all. Hope is also seen in realizing that it does not matter what sin one committed to enter the pigs pen. God will forgive all sin; therefore, there is no reason not to admit all sin. The saints at Corinth were forgiven of sin (1 Cor. 6:9-11); the Galatians were also forgiven of sins (Gal. 5:19-22). Since God forgives sin, it does not matter what the sin is. The hope of returning home rests in the willingness to admit sin.

Admitting Sin Is Helpful

Guilt and shame are often the by-products of sin. Adam and Eve covered themselves and hid after their sin (Gen. 3:6-9). The young man must have felt shame and guilt in his present condition. His journey from home was a lot further spiritually than his physical location. Considering his home life, to end up in a pen of pigs among strangers had to be shameful. Likely, he started feeling better the moment he admitted his sin and lifted his eyes toward returning home. His return home was spiritual as much as it was physical. Remember he had sinned against heaven and his father. The journey home started with the admittance of sin, but the guilt and shame had to start to slip away the moment he admitted his sin. The same is true for all of us. When we admit our sin we can start to feel better because we know God will have us back.

Application Admitting Our Sin

Saying I Have Sinned Identifies Us

We are not without significance in this world; there maybe six to eight billion people, but there is only one you. When we say I have sinned, we identify ourselves among the sea of humanity. Our identity demonstrates that we belong; we have a place in this world and we are important. This is certainly the case to God; He desires that we admit our sin so that He can save us from our sin. Admitting sin is identifying yourself with God. You are choosing the Lord's side, and it is the only way you can.

Saying I Have Sinned Connects Us To Others

No one is an island, none of us live to ourselves, and none of us will die to ourselves. If we live or die, we are the Lord's. This

young man sinned against heaven and his father. Our sins affect others; acknowledging them is among the greatest ways to restore relationships. Additionally, when we admit our sin, we are better equipped to be kind, patient, and longsuffering with others who sin. This is experienced only by those who admit their sin.

Saying I Have Sinned Connects Us To God

When we admit our sin, we admit that our relationship with God is in jeopardy. No other person can or will be held accountable for another person's sin. Adam and Eve teach us this in the third chapter of the Bible. This young man teaches us this when he acknowledged that he had sinned against heaven. Each one of us must admit our own sin because we desire our relationship with God to be restored. If I am lost, it will be because I have sinned; the same is true for you. If I am saved, it will be because I have admitted and taken responsibility for my own sin; this is also true for you (Eze. 18).

Let us never hide our sin, let us never blame others for our sin, let us all follow the young man's exemplary example and admit our sin and take responsibility for our actions. Only then can we hope to return home and be restored to our Father.

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CHAPTER 18

I Will Arise & Go: Resolving To Get Up And Go Home

James Watkins

The Prodigal Son (American Standard Version, Luke 15): An inexhaustible source of material for sermon building, teaching, and indispensable instructions. Luke Chapter fifteen is also concrete evidence of the absolute accuracy of Genesis 1:26-27. God created the earth, not a waste, but to be inhabited (Isa. 45:18). By whom?

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

When we hear Jesus say: “God is a Spirit” (John 4:24), and that a spirit does not have “flesh and bones” (Luke 24:39), we become aware that our physical appearance has nothing to do with our being made in His image. We are immortal spirits possessed of free moral agency. We are creatures of choice. Though we currently inhabit a decaying body of flesh, we shall live forever. We are to place the emphasis upon the inward, spiritual man (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Have you ever wondered about the two trees in the midst of the perfection of Eden? God warned Adam concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: “thou shalt not eat of it: For in the day that thou eatest

thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:17). Why would God put such a tree in Eden in the first place? You and I are creatures of choice. While we do not have two trees, we must make the same choice, life or death, that is. Heaven or Hell. God will not, cannot, make that choice for us. Let us look more carefully at the three parables in Luke fifteen. The shepherd is so concerned with each individual sheep that, when one goes astray and is lost, he leaves the ninety and nine and goes searching for the lost one til he finds it. When he finds it he places it on his shoulders, rejoicing. We, of course, understand that. The woman who possessed ten pieces of silver, when she loses one, lights a lamp, sweeps and searches diligently til she finds it. When she finds it, she calls her friends and they rejoice with her. In the parable under consideration, that boy is worth more than all the sheep in the world and not enough coinage has been minted to equal his value. Why did not that father go after that boy? That question takes us back to who we really are: immortal spirits possessed of the power of choice. God has done everything within His power to win your love. He allowed his precious, sinless Son to die the horrible, shameful death of crucifixion bearing my sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 2:9; 1 Pet. 2:24), to show His love for me (John 3:16), but He cannot come after you. You must make the decision to go to Him. You recall, of course, the Words of Christ recorded in Revelation 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.” Jesus has the power to open the door; why did He not just go in? Good friend, the latch string to your heart hangs on the inside. You and I must invite Him into our lives.

One of the more remarkable statements found in the Bible was made concerning this young prodigal: “When he came to himself.” A broad, meaningful statement indeed. Every responsible human being upon earth should slow his/her pace sufficiently to ask some very important questions: “Who am I?” “From whence came I?” “Where am I going?” When I consider the fact that I am superior to the lower forms of animal life, possessing the power of selfless love, the capability of forgiveness, compassion, understanding and

sacrifice; and when I see the beauty of God's handiwork, the changing of the seasons, the fertility of the soil, the consistent, mathematical movement of our planetary system, I should begin to realize that James 1:17 is true: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning."

Above all things God desires my salvation: "Who would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long suffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). When I consider that beautiful passage—which someone has described as the Golden text of the Bible—John 3:16, it should fill my heart to overflowing with love and gratitude. The depth of meaning is that little two letter word *so* has never been fathomed. How could God love a thoughtless, unworthy sinner such as I, sufficiently to allow his sinless, guiltless, innocent Son to die the horrible, shameful death of crucifixion bearing my sins? Such love is beyond the scope of my comprehension. When I read the simple statement in 1 John 4:19: "We love, because he first loved us," it should cause me to reflect, as did this young prodigal in our text, upon the bountiful goodness and mercy of our God: "How many hired servants (the least in the order of rank or authority) have bread enough and to spare (the true, abundant blessings of life are found only in Christ, Eph 1:3) and I perish here with hunger" (Luke 15:17). Good friends, this old world, with all of its sinful pleasures, provides no permanent happiness, fulfillment, or joy. We then, as did this young man, realizing that the hog pen of this old world has nothing of permanent value to offer, should come to ourselves, that is, come to grips with who we are, from whence we come and resolve to arise and go to our Father. God will receive us with open arms, heaven will rejoice, and our hearts and lives will be filled to overflowing. When we contemplate the promises and blessings of our Heavenly Father, we should be powerfully motivated to return to him. Our Lord said: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"

(Mat. 11:28). The Hebrew writer informs us of the love and concern of our Heavenly Father: “For himself hath said, I will in no wise fail thee, neither will I in anywise forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5).

David said, so very long ago: “I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread” (Psa. 37:25). Our Lord said in Matthew 6:33: “But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you.” Far beyond the physical care and blessings that our Heavenly Father supplies is the overflowing joy and security that comes through the knowledge of the fact that our souls are anchored in hope (Heb. 6:19).

Good people, today is the day for every responsible soul to come to himself and resolve to return to Him who is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

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CHAPTER 19

I Am No More Worthy To Be Called Thy Son: Humbling One's Heart For Repentance

Wayne Rodgers

Introduction

Only the brave and discerning ones dare to look at their lives from God's perspective. To even consider opening up oneself for examination is a brave situation at best. But to crawl back from the mire or the pit of despair or destitution says much of an individual's estimation of himself or herself. While the prodigal son's return was great cause for rejoicing, he sees himself lower than the lowest, enough to acknowledge he is not worthy to be called his father's son.

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. (King James Version, Luke 15:19-21)

The prodigal son after he "came to himself" (Luke 15:17) made a remarkable discovery that so many have made through the years: "I

do not have to live this way any longer. This is not who I am. This is not who I am supposed to be.” Charles Spurgeon is quoted as saying, “Humility is to make a right estimate of one’s self” (The Spurgeon Archive). Surely, he realized how much better it would be even to labor as a servant for his father, rather than the one he “joined himself to” (Luke 15:15) in the “far country” (Luke 15:13). He makes his plan to return to his father. His father sees him and runs to him and interrupts his plan to be made “as one of thy hired servants” (Luke 15:19).

While pride, arrogance, and fleshly desires led him away from home, **humility** is what brought him home.

I Am No More Worthy

Honor By Humility

We are taught to give **proper honor** to God and to our parents throughout Scripture:

Honour thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. (Deu. 5:16)

And to make thee high above all nations which he hath made, in praise, and in name, and in honour; and that thou mayest be an holy people unto the LORD thy God, as he hath spoken. (Deu. 26:19)

Wherefore the LORD God of Israel saith, I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the LORD saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. (1 Sam. 2:30)

Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, thou art very great; thou art clothed with honour and majesty. (Psa. 104:1)

Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim. 1:17)

Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen. (Rev. 7:12)

The wise man, Solomon, teaches us there is something that comes before honor. Notice the proverb: “Before destruction the heart of man is haughty, and before honour is humility” (Pro. 18:12). That which comes before honor is humility. Spurgeon spoke of a “prophetic prelude.”

Almost every event has its prophetic prelude. It is an old and common saying, that “coming events cast their shadows before them;” the wise man teaches us the same lesson in the verse before us. When destruction walks through the land, it casts its shadow; it is in the shape of pride. When honor visits a man’s house, it casts its shadow before it; it is in the fashion of humility. (The Spurgeon Archive)

The honor that had been taken from the father by the son at his words “give me” (Luke 15:12), now could be restored to its rightful place. The son because of his humility could now see the honor which must be granted to his father. In his estimation of himself, the prodigal son realizes that he has “sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:21).

To Be Called Thy Son

The Son's Perspective

The son's perspective of himself was that he had given up all rights and spent all the portion of possessions coming to him, therefore was now unworthy as a son. He had given up that life where he ran with his unholly friends. He had gone so far as to find himself in the muck and the mire.

Many feel that feeling of unworthiness. While its motivation is to make us see clearly the way that we should go, some get caught at the point of unworthiness and never move toward a road of reconciliation with the Father in Heaven. This feeling of unworthiness manifests itself in disgust for one's very own life.

Many statistics are found of those who think about or actually commit suicide as being linked to alcoholism, drug abuse, sexual abuse (self-imposed as per 1 Cor. 6:18), etc., and yet, all these stem from that which even the prodigal faced after going off into the "far country" (Luke 15:13). He was not himself. He had been beside himself. He had been morally insane (Lee 136). He had to come to the realization of his own condition.

While some choose to end their lives instead of taking the even more difficult road of swallowing pride, repenting of a sinful lifestyle, and following the road chosen by the Father, the prodigal son did not. He went to his father in humility, restoring the place of honor back with his father. To this father, the son was willing to serve. The son had in mind to say, "Make me as one of thy hired servants" (Luke 15:19) but was interrupted after his confession by the father.

The Father's Perspective

While the son felt unworthy to be called his son, the father, evidently ever looking forward to his son's return, saw him, had compassion upon him, ran to him, embraced him, and kissed him. From the father's perspective, his once dead son, was now before him, alive. He was lost, but now has been found! He had returned and now had confessed his sin against heaven and his father.

The father had a place for the son. It was in his heart. He longed for his return. He rejoiced greatly and said to his servants: "Bring

forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, 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 15:22-24). The father still saw his son! This story tells of reconciliation between the father and son, the son giving proper honor back to the father, and now restoration to the son.

In this is seen the proper perspective of the giving of honor. We are to give honor to the Father in Heaven. Notice the following verses which speak of the Father in Heaven glorifying His Only Begotten Son:

And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. (Heb. 5:4-6)

For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (2 Pet 1:17)

Jesus said, “How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only (John 5:44)? The only way this can work is for us as God’s children to learn and choose humility over pride. James taught us:

But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to

you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up. (Jam. 4:6-10)

Humbling One's Heart For Restoration

Examples of Great Men Who Sinned, But Humbled Themselves Before God

David, King of Israel, was a “man after God’s own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14); yet, from David we see an example of a man who was in the “far country of sin.” He lusts after Bathsheba, lies with her, sets up a conspiracy to cover up his sin, and has her husband Uriah killed when the cover up does not work. He carries on in “the far” country until Nathan, the prophet of God, enters in with a parable:

And the LORD sent Nathan unto David. And he came unto him, and said unto him, There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveller unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man’s lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. And David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the LORD liveth, the man

that hath done this thing shall surely die: And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, **Thou art the man**. Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I anointed thee king over Israel, and I delivered thee out of the hand of Saul. (2 Sam. 12:1-7)

David, of course, repented of his sin and we read of his humility that led to his confession of sin against God:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. **Against thee, thee only, have I sinned**, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest. (Psa. 51:1-4)

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God; and **renew a right spirit within me**. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me. Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit. Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall

sing aloud of thy righteousness. O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise. For thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: **a broken and a contrite heart**, O God, thou wilt not despise. (Psa. 51:7-17)

Peter is another example of a great man, an apostle of God, who sinned in denying that he knew the Christ and was one of His. This sin was urged on by Peter's pride.

Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, **thou shalt deny me thrice**. Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples. (Mat. 26:33-35)

And when they had kindled a fire in the midst of the hall, and were set down together, Peter sat down among them. But a certain maid beheld him as he sat by the fire, and earnestly looked upon him, and said, This man was also with him. And he denied him, saying, Woman, **I know him not**. And after a little while another saw him, and said, Thou art also of them. And Peter said, Man, **I am not**. And about the space of one hour after another confidently affirmed, saying, Of a truth this fellow also was with him: for he is a Galilaeen. And Peter said, Man, **I know not what thou sayest**. And immediately, while he yet spake, the cock crew. And the Lord turned,

and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. **And Peter went out, and wept bitterly.** (Luke 22:55-62)

As Jesus had said he would, Peter denied the Christ three times but gave him opportunity to honor Him once again. After our Lord's resurrection, He would appear to His apostles. Notice the opportunity given to Peter:

But go your way, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. (Mark 16:7)

So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; **thou knowest that I love thee.** He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; **thou knowest that I love thee.** He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; **thou knowest that I love thee.** Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. (John 21:15-17)

Peter goes on to teach us in his letter:

Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with **humility**: for God resisteth the

proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen. (1Pet. 5:5-11)

As David said he would teach (Psa. 51:13), Peter learned the lesson and teaches us the lesson of humility and of allowing God to exalt those whom He will. This humility and suffering will help make us complete, establish our faith, strengthen us, and settle us in our service to God. One writer has said, "What makes humility so desirable is the marvelous thing it does to us; it creates in us a capacity for the closest possible intimacy with God" (Baldwin).

Another example is **Paul**, first introduced as Saul of Tarsus, a young man full of responsibility in the Jews religion (Gal. 1:13-14). When Jews stoned Stephen to death, they "laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul" (Acts 7:58). Luke records:

And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and

made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, **he made havock of the church**, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. (Acts 8:1-3)

At the commission of the Sanhedrin, Saul would continue with unrelenting determination and persuasion to attempt to put an end to this Christianity. Saul was now leading the charge against Christians. He would go to Damascus as he hears of the scattering of Christians into other cities nearby.

And Saul, yet breathing out **threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord**, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem. (Acts 9:1-2)

For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure **I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it:** And profited in the Jews' religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers. (Gal. 1:13-14)

I verily thought with myself, **that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem:** and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to

blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests. (Acts 26:9-12)

Saul's conversion recorded in Acts 9, 22, and 26 reveals the heart of humility and submission in order to bring glory and honor to Christ and His church.

And it came to pass, that, as I made my journey, and was come nigh unto Damascus about noon, suddenly there shone from heaven a great light round about me. And I fell unto the ground, and heard a voice saying unto me, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And I answered, Who art thou, Lord? And he said unto me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom thou persecutest. And they that were with me saw indeed the light, and were afraid; but they heard not the voice of him that spake to me. And I said, What shall I do, Lord? And the Lord said unto me, Arise, and go into Damascus; and there it shall be told thee of all things which are appointed for thee to do. And when I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of them that were with me, I came into Damascus. And one Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there, came unto me, and stood, and said unto me, Brother Saul, receive thy sight. And the same hour I looked up upon him. And he said, The God of our fathers hath chosen thee, that thou shouldest know his will, and see that Just One, and shouldest hear the voice of his mouth. For thou shalt be his

witness unto all men of what thou hast seen and heard. And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord. (Acts 22:6-16)

Saul was there for three days without eating, praying, and waiting as told by Jesus. His humility is seen as he waits on Christ's instructions by the preacher, Ananias. This man was humble and ready to be in service to God.

Paul would say of his work and ministry:

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, To reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him among the heathen; immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood. (Gal. 1:15-16)

And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. And when they were come to him, he said unto them, Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, **Serving the Lord with all humility of mind**, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 20:17-21)

And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before

a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save **sinner; of whom I am chief**. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. **Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever.** Amen. (1Tim. 1:12-17)

Lesson Applications

The apostle Paul taught us to think like Christ. He spoke of humility: “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in **lowliness of mind** let each esteem other better than themselves” (Phi. 2:3). Christ gave us our perfect example of humility. Paul goes on to write:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess

that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. (Phi. 2:5-12)

Paul calls on the church's humility so that Philippi might learn from the great example of Christ to be obedient unto God. Once he has established the baseline or foundation for humility, he explains how they must move forward. So often, this is where people will hang up in their faith. But we should allow God to use us to accomplish great works in the Kingdom! When we learn to rely on God, we can move forward in our spiritual lives. According to Paul, we can no longer live on past accomplishment or even defeats. Then, Paul explains of his background and how he gave up those things and moved forward:

Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. (Phi. 3:12-16)

The apostle finally realizes this is not an easy task or one to be done on our own. He says we will need some help.

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. (Phi. 4:6-8)

I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me. (Phi. 4:13)

While we see the prodigal return to his father, realize that he would never have made the trip home had he not humbled himself. We must learn to humble ourselves and return to the Father in Heaven when sin has entered into our lives. There will be great rejoicing with each lost soul who returns to the Father (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10; Luke 15:32).

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CHAPTER 20

Practical Suggestions For A Parent Who Has A Prodigal

Robert R. Taylor, Jr.

Introduction

It has been an inestimable joy and high honor to appear on each Power Lectureship beginning with the initial one on The Providence of God in 1989 and to write a chapter for each published volume. We all owe a great debt to the elders, the Southaven congregation, the four directors—Thomas Warren, Garland Elkins, B. J. Clarke, and Wade Webster—the participating speakers, the wonderful audiences, Paul Sain for his expertise in printing the volumes, and heaven’s wonderful providence making it all possible. My personal gratitude is extended to Larry, Con, Vern, and Wade for the 2011 invitation to speak and pen a chapter for the printed volume. An entire lectureship on The Prodigal Son is an intriguing idea whose time is come. It will be unique among books published by us.

Some Beginning Observations

Families with a prodigal son or daughter surely elicit the sympathy and empathy of all of us. We all have listened in sadness as sorrow-filled parents and siblings have told their heartbreaking story of a beloved family member who has become a modern Demas and turned from truth to error, from faith to infidelity, from purity to impurity, and from family togetherness to family desertion.

Several years ago I was in a gospel meeting in a large Southern city. A fine Christian couple took me to a nice restaurant for the noon meal on Sunday. As the three of us ate our meal, I inquired of their family since I had not met them previously. As I now recall, they

had three children—all grown and away from home. Relative to two of them, they spoke with delight and understandable appreciation. They had turned out well and were a credit to the church and the two of them. Tears flooded their eyes and sorrow filled each spoken word relative to the third child—a daughter. Mournfully, they expressed, “We have no idea where she is or even if she is still alive. She left home and we never hear a word from her.” They had a prodigal and her absence grieved them greatly and rightly so. They had set a good example for her as well as the other two, had brought her up in the church, and taught her to remember God in the days of her youth (King James Version, Ecc. 12:1). She chose to walk a different path than her pious parents did or her two siblings. There was an empty chair at their dining table when the children and grandchildren came home. Happiness was greatly diluted in such family gatherings because one was absent with her whereabouts totally unknown. It has now been more than thirty years since that sad Sunday in April of 1980, yet I have never forgotten that Christian couple with their broken hearts. How can a child grieve the loving mother who brought her into the world and the devoted father who provided for her from infancy until she said a permanent good-bye to the two people who loved her better than life?

Avoiding Future Regrets

Back in the 1960s I conducted a number of gospel meetings for congregations in the Akron, Ohio area, one of which now comes to mind. The local preacher and his wife invited me to come for the evening meal. They also invited a lady in her 80s as guest. Just a short time before, she had obeyed the gospel and was zealous in her new role as a Christian. She and I were visiting in the living room while the local preacher and his wife were putting the finishing touches to the meal. They had young children who were playing on the floor before us. We watched their games with interest. After a little while, she made a comment to the effect, “I wish my children were this age again and I again their young mother.” I thought she was calling back pleasant memories of years long gone and now happily recalled. I was

wrong in my conclusion as she explained what she meant, “When my children were their age I was worldly, caring nothing for God, Christ, the gospel, the church, or being a Christian mother.” She had my interest promptly as she explained more,

Now they are grown and so are my grandchildren.
They are now what I was then. I cannot influence
a single one of them toward soul concern. They
pay no mind to my entreaties about their worldly
ways and how they need to change.

I was moved by what she said. I came home from that meeting and wrote a series of articles for one of our papers entitling it, “Avoiding Future Regrets.” I wanted my readers to realize how important parental example and teaching are to impressionable children. This lady waited too late to direct her children and grandchildren toward Christianity. This she regretted very much. She wanted desperately to go to heaven but could not interest a single member of her family to join her on her journey to that city that hath foundations whose Builder and Maker is God (Heb. 11:10). Members of her family were prodigals living in the far-off country, having no hope and minus God, the Christ, and the gospel in their worldly lives.

Prevention Is Wiser Than Reclamation

One of my all-time favorite preachers was the late and lamented Gus Nichols of Jasper, Alabama. In a lecture at Freed-Hardeman College (now University), he told us about the times he had had pneumonia and the scars he still had from these serious diseases. Then he said, “It would have been better if I could have prevented these than recovering from them with lasting consequences.”

This is surely true within the spiritual realm. It is far better to obey the gospel in youth, as inculcated in Ecclesiastes 12:1, than to delay it till one is at the threshold of demise. It is better to marry someone who will be a faithful Christian help meet than to marry someone who will be a millstone around the believer’s neck pulling him/her

down, Down, DOWN. It is far wiser for newly married couples to begin their marriage with God, Christ, the Spirit, the Bible and the church in the foreground of precious priority. Matthew 6:33 ought to be stamped indelibly on the hearts of both husband and wife. This should be fundamental and foundational. Spirituality should be at the helm with both marital parties. When children come along, they will see Dad and Mother practicing permanent piety and teaching truth and truth only. Doing on their part should precede teaching. Ezra comes to mind. He prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgment (Ezra 7:10). An even more powerful example comes promptly to mind. Luke began his second treatise of truth by noting so prudently and powerfully, “The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach” (Acts 1:1). God’s only begotten Son was a doer first and then a teacher. Nobility permeates this valiant verse of Sacred Scripture.

From infancy onward, pious parents should persist in teaching their offspring when they arise, before bedtime, at home, and away from home as per the wisdom inculcated into Deuteronomy 6:6-7. This is something we can learn from Old Testament Scripture as per Romans 15:4. Even prior to that intense form of spiritual education, a wise parent will “love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might” (Deu. 6:5). This was the Mosaic prescription to avoid rearing Jewish sons and daughters into future prodigals. Abrahamic children so were reared (Gen. 18:19). Samuel was reared in such manner by Elkanah and Hannah at first and later by Eli (1 Sam. 1-3). Eli had reared two prodigals in Hophni and Phinehas, but he succeeded marvelously well with the pliable Samuel—John was reared in this fine fashion by Zacharias and Elisabeth in Luke 1. Jesus was reared this way by Joseph and Mary in Luke 2. Timothy was reared this way by the lovely Lois and the earnest Eunice respectively in Acts 16:lff and 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:14-15. The children of that precious elect lady in 2 John were reared in this same marvelous manner (2 John 1, 4).

If at all possible, it is far better and wiser to rear God-fearing and God-honoring children than seeking later to reclaim prodigals who have forsaken home seeking sinful enjoyment in the far-off country filled with sinful pleasures. Yet, there will be cases where one child may desert family, friends, the Godhead, the Bible and the church for a fling of the lusts of eyes, the lusts of the flesh, and the pride or vainglory of life in spite of all pious parents have done by way of example and solid teaching. In Luke 15:11ff the Wonderful Father, the real hero of this precious parable, had a son who became sick of home and yearned for the far-off country where there were no restraints placed on his behaviour. Much to his surprise, he found there are no promotions in sin; they all are demotions. In such a climate of free living, it is never up but always down!

Persistent Prayers That Avail

Spiritually-minded parents will pray for their children in the womb, during infancy, during their formative years, and on into adulthood. Surely, prayers are an essential where there is a prodigal in the making or in actuality. Unfaithful children need to know of such prayers,

Son or daughter, never a day begins or ends but
what your father and I lift our earnest prayers for
your safety and for your return to that faith most
holy and to your family. We love you dearly and
miss you sorely.

In Psalm 55:18, David prayed at evening, in the morning, and at noon. Have you wondered why he did not say, "Morning, noon, and evening do I pray?" There is good reason why he did the former and not the latter. Hebrew days in the Old Testament and in the New Testament began at sundown or about 6:00 and ended at sundown or about 6:00 the next evening. We count from midnight to midnight in our reckoning of time. Evening would be the beginning of David's day. Morning would be when the

night ended and noon when half the working day was reached. Surely, we do not assume too much when we visualize David's prayers for his family—wives and children. Be it recalled he had prodigals among his children such as Amnon, Absalom, and later Adonijah.

Daniel prayed thrice daily as we learn in Daniel 6:10. Though unmarried and never a father, surely he prayed for Jewish parents and their children. He prayed to recall and interpret a king's forgotten dream in Daniel 2. Surely, some of his prayers must have been family oriented.

Jesus prayed for Jonas' son—Simon Peter—in these wonder-packed words, "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). Peter was a prodigal in the making as he soon would deny any affiliation with the condemned Christ. Who knows just how much this prayer meant in Peter's penitence plus the disappointed look Christ gave the denying disciple in Luke 22:61.

Jesus taught that we should pray and not faint (Luke 18:1). Paul taught the importance of "continuing instant, in prayer" in Romans 12:12. Other kindred passages come quickly to mind which read,

We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you. (Col. 1: 3)

Pray without ceasing. (1 The. 5:17)

Exhort therefore, that first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men. (1 Tim. 2:1)

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. (Phi. 4:6)

Continue in prayer. (Col. 4:2)

Availing prayer is a daily weapon prayerful parents possess in addressing the problem of a prodigal son or daughter. Never allow availing prayer to vacate your parental premises.

This happened back in the 1950s during the Korean conflict. A young man was in service. On a Wednesday some of his military associates approached him with this invitation. "We have obtained military leave to go into town tonight for a night of drinking and seeking out women for sexual activity. Why not go with us?" He was tempted to go with them and be a prodigal for the evening. Then it occurred to him that tonight is Wednesday Night Bible Study at the Charlotte Avenue congregation in Nashville, Tennessee. He knew his beloved mother would be present for that service and when they had prayer, she would breathe a word of prayer for her military son. A night of drinking and immoral activity and a prayerful mother had no affinity at all. He told the ones who invited him that he would not be going after all. This may well have been a case of 1 Corinthians 10:13 in successful operation. What if this mother had been the type who never attended Mid-Week Bible Study? This military lad would have had no memory apparatus to aid him in making a right decision for that Wednesday night.

I am writing this manuscript while in a gospel meeting with the Southside congregation in Lubbock, Texas. In the *Lubbock Avalanche Journal*, April 26, 2011, there was a letter addressed to Annie's Mailbox from a recovering cocaine addict who became a prodigal from the family who decided to practice tough love (Mitchell and Sugar). The former addict paid respect to the power of prayer by stating,

And do not ever stop praying for the addict. Prayers and good intentions by those who loved me helped me through the terrible prison I had placed myself in. I am still sober after 10 years and am back inside my family circle. (p. B-5)

Let prodigals know there is not a day goes by but what their names are taken before Heaven's prayerful altar.

Keeping Communicative Lines Open

Marriage counselors are pretty well united in saying a lack of communication is one of the most serious problems faced by fueding and fighting couples. Frequently, it becomes a serious obstacle in parent-child relationships as well. Healthy communication between parents and children still at home can be a powerful, preventive means of averting prodigals. When prodigals do develop, there ought to be an often expressed sentiment from grieving parents to wayward children that communicative lines always are open. Wayward children should never lose the feeling that Dad and Mother are ready to talk seriously and helpfully when they are willing to make that first step back home and toward right living again. Colossians 4:6 says, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man." Wise Solomon has some sage counsel that can help in matters of communication, "A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger" (Pro. 15:1). Somewhat later he wrote, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver. As an earring of gold, and an ornament of fine gold, so is a wise reprove upon an obedient ear" (Pro. 25:11-12).

Three questions that should challenge initial talks between parents and wayward children are: (1) Do we all know what is right? (2) Do we all want to do right? (3) Do we all want to do right now? The late and lamented Gus Nichols frequently used these beginning questions whether he was helping solve congregational disputes or domestic difficulties within family frameworks. He was a man of great and profound wisdom. He knew these were tried and tested questions possessing true, workable wisdom and merit.

Enlisting The Help Of Others

Surely, today's prodigal had wholesome friendships in times past. It may have been a peer who has remained within the ranks

of sobriety, righteousness, and godliness (Tit. 2:11-12). This former friend may be able to offer a helping hand in a prodigal's reclamation. It is surely worth a try. It may be an older brother or sister that may have a workable influence on the wayward one. It may be a young sibling who looked up with heroic status to the former family member before desertion occurred. It may be an elder, a deacon, a former Bible teacher, a gospel preacher, or a sweet Christian lady that may hold a possible answer for the prodigal's return. The late and lamented Guy N. Woods was called time and time again to help in situations like this. He once wrote a sweet, sincere letter filled with unanswerable Christian evidence arguments to a young person who had turned from faith to infidelity. Most veteran gospel preachers have been requested again and again to help in situations like this. Both my wife and I have helped in situations like this. Such letters may be a springboard toward restoration by the erring family member. Every possible avenue should be traveled by caring parents and concerned siblings to reclaim one nearer and dearer than even life is to them.

The Power Of Past Memories

In departing from the faith and from a loving, caring Christian family, the departing one cannot help but take memories with him/her. Jesus charged a departing congregation at Ephesus in Revelation 2 of the need to remember from whence the members had fallen. They were charged to do again the first works—not gospel obedience but those beginning works when they first became Christians.

The prodigal son in Luke 15:11ff had reviving memories of father, home, and servants that emerged in that hogpen of shame and degradation. The return of those memories triggered his will-power. Formerly, he had been sick of home; now he was homesick. Sin had failed miserably to give him satisfaction and meaning to life. Now he **longed** for what he once disdained even to the point of despising.

Each family has special days such as birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc. There may be a soft spot dormant in the prodigal's heart when those days roll around. Cards, e-mails, text messages, and phone calls may touch the chords of his/her heart and trigger some needed thinking toward a desperate change of lifestyle.

Sin Will Not Be Always An Attractive Magnet

Pleasure is connected with sin's magnetic pull upon the human heart. Were this not so, sin would not be such a slavish taskmaster upon accountable humanity. We are told in Hebrews 11: 25 about the pleasures of sin, but the Holy Spirit showed promptly that these sinful pleasures are seasonal—never permanent. Drugs become a drudgery. Liquor become loathsome and especially after it has contributed to the committing of crimes. Sexual conquests lose their appeal when participants contract sexually transmitted diseases. After a one night stand, the woman wrote a note for the man on the bathroom mirror, "Welcome To Aids!" Atheism, agnosticism, infidelity, and modernism are empty. It is the fool who says in his heart there is no God (Psa. 14:1; Psa. 53:1). Fool, here, derives from the Hebrew word *nabal* which means an "empty person." Spelled out this adds up to an empty hand, an empty heart, and an empty life. Why are young people, and sometimes older people as well, slavishly attracted to people who are empty-handed, empty-hearted, and empty-headed? Such is stranger than strange and amazingly amazing!

Sin soon runs its infamous course just as it did with the poor prodigal in Luke 15:11ff. The glamour faded for him when the money was gone and his fair-weather friends forsook him as quickly as the mist disappears before the rising monarch of the sky. Loyalty among prodigals is a mirage.

A carefree young man once boasted that he was getting a **kick** out of his sins. Later, he was quizzed, "Are you still getting a kick out of your sins?" He responded, "A kick indeed! I now am getting the kickback from my sins!" Sin kicks back. It has a sure payday. Ahab and Jezebel found this out in the crime they waged against the noble

Naboth in 1 and 2 Kings. Judas Iscariot found this out in Matthew 27:3ff. Osama bin Laden found this out in early May of 2011. There were no 72 virgins awaiting his coming subsequent to death. Tartarus in Hades is not filled with sexual pleasures.

Leave The Light On For Them

Tom Odett made this sentiment famous in a commercial for Motel Six—"We'll leave the light on for you." Prodigals should never forget that home lights will be burning brightly when they return penitently with a real resolve to change lifestyles. The prodigal in Luke 15:11ff found the welcome light burning for him by his Wonderful Father—the real hero of this precious parable—a parable Dickens called the most beautiful story in the English Bible.

Parents And Siblings Should Hold At All Times A Readiness To Receive

The Wonderful Father did in the longest portion of Luke 15. The self-righteous, unloving, selfish, ungrateful, and unforgiving elder brother was the proverbial "fly in the ointment" at the end of Luke 15. He is outside the circle of the celebration though besought tenderly by the Father to come inside where joy reigns.

Encouragement From God's Second Law Of Pardon

The first law of pardon, when obeyed, ushers us into the realm of the redeemed, the sphere of the saved as witnessed many times in Luke's second treatise of truth—the beautiful book of Acts.

The omniscient and omnibenevolent Godhead knew children of God would sin subsequent to conversion even as the Samaritan Simon did in Acts 8:18ff. Peter mapped out a way for his return (Acts 8:22). John, who had witnessed what happened to Simon in Acts 8, wrote 1 John 1:8-10 and 1 John 2:1-2. How marvelous are members of the Godhead Three as they provide a way for prodigals to return to the fold of the faithful. Grace and mercy are attractive in action here. Three conditions are obligatory:

repentance, confession of sin(s), and prayer (Acts 8:22; Jam. 5:16; 1 John 1:9).

Since God, Christ, and the Spirit of Holiness stand ready to receive back penitent prodigals, the family back home should be of like mind, inclusive of parents and siblings. There ought not be any reluctance when such thrillingly transpires. It is to be a time of happiness—not a time to be smug and sullen, not a time to be self-righteous and haughty.

Readiness To Rejoice When The Prodigal Returns

The Wonderful Father stood ready to rejoice when his long departed son came home. We read in Luke 15:20,

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.

Will God run? He will in receiving a son ready to return. The Wonderful Father did not allow him to make full confession but said to his happy household,

Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, 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 15:22-24)

The whole household felt joy of the deepest nature with one notable exception—the sullen, self-righteous, and selfish elder brother. Implied in the parable is the very definite sentiment that the elder brother would have been happier had his younger brother remained in the far-off country of sin. Had the younger son died and had been brought back dead, it is doubtful the elder brother would have shed

a single tear of sadness or felt any emptiness in his heart. The elder son represented the proud, self-righteous Pharisees who chided the Lord for receiving sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1-2). The contrast is marked indeed between the household in celebration and in a state of ecstasy and the sullen brother outside refusing any and all entreaties from his loving, caring father. When we face the same, we should choose the household of happiness as our norm and not the outside one filled with anger, resentment, and a refusal to forgive or be compassionate.

Conclusion

The Wonderful Father, representative of loving Jehovah, never gave up on his younger son. Let us be of like mind if we have a prodigal in the making or who is already in that far-off country of sin and shame.

May God bless every loving mother, caring father, and grieving sibling who have one or more family members away from home, without God, minus the Lord Jesus Christ, hopeless with no tie with God's family-the glorious church belonging to Jesus.

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CHAPTER 21

What The Local Church Can Do To Reclaim Prodigals

Melvin Sapp

Introduction

A lost person becomes a member of the local church when he is converted to Christ through his obedience to the Gospel. Every congregation has members who have become unfaithful for one reason or another. There is joy in heaven and in our hearts whenever one of these lost sheep returns to the fold. Yet, all lost sheep will not stagger back to the fold but need to be rescued by those who are faithful. As a church, we must try to reclaim those precious souls as the sheepfold is being depleted by the wolves.

Before Jesus started His personal ministry, John the Baptizer was sent to preach unto the “lost sheep” of the house of Israel (King James Version, Mark 1:1-8). These Jews were already in the family of God but had become unfaithful and needed restoring.

Before Jesus sent his apostles on the great commission, they were sent on a limited commission to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. They were instructed to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. “These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mat. 10:5-7). “Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Mat. 10:16).

Jesus gives an extended parable of the needed urgency in reaching out to those who have gone astray (Luke 15). There are

lost sheep in every congregation who need to be reclaimed. Every congregation need to have an intensive program designed at seeking to reclaim the unfaithful to the fold. What can the local church do to reclaim the prodigals?

Cultivate a Love For the Lost Prodigal

In the beginning of time God created man in his image.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Gen. 1:26-27)

Every person has an immortal soul that will exist throughout eternity.. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Gen. 2:7). “The burden of the word of the LORD for Israel, saith the LORD, which stretcheth forth the heavens, and layeth the foundation of the earth, and formeth the spirit of man within him” (Zec. 12:1). God has manifested His love for every person by giving His Son for the sins of the world. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). The magnitude of God’s love is so great that no greater love has ever been displayed. God loves us despite our being unworthy of His love because of our sins.

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die.

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6-8)

God has no delight in the death of the wicked but wants them to repent and turn from their evil deeds. “Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” (Eze. 33:11). God is a merciful and gracious God who wants every person to turn from his evil way. If we are to do God’s will and teach the lost, we must love every soul. “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Mat. 28:19-20). “And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned” (Mark 16:15-16).

We can love the souls of men and not love their sinful deeds.

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6-8)

Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and

the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. (1 John 2:15-17)

Love for our brethren reflects our love for God as we are commanded to love one another. “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34-35). Our love for God will inspire us to imitate His love for the lost.

God was willing to sacrifice for us, and we must sacrifice for one another.

In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. (1 John 4:9-11)

Love for our brethren will remove fear that often keeps us from acting. Those who are lost need Christians to love them enough to reach out to them. They are not concerned about their own souls and are misled concerning their ultimate outcome. They must be rescued by those who hate sin. “And others save with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh” (Jude 23). Those who are in sin are blind to their true spiritual condition (Naaman, David and Bathsheba, and the prodigal son). All who are in sin must come to the realization of their condition before real change can occur.

Identifying The Prodigals That Need Reclaiming

The Lord Knows All His Sheep By Name

The Good Shepherd creates an intimate relationship with the sheep as they know His voice and He knows them. “To him the

porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out” (John 10:3). All that hears the Lord’s voice are added to the church by the Lord. “Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” (Acts 2:47). The Lord is so acquainted with His sheep that He knows the one that is gone astray. “What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it?” (Luke 15:4). The Shepherd takes responsibility for the well-being of the sheep.

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:9-15)

A good shepherd will take personal interest in the sheep.

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
he leadeth me beside the still waters. He
restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of

righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (Psa. 23)

We Need To Compile A Complete List Of All Who Have Gone Astray

The list needs names, addresses, and phone numbers of every member who has gone astray that is still living in the community. Every member can participate in making up the list so as not to leave anyone out. Any member that is not worshipping at another faithful congregation is to be put on the list. When we know the lost by name, the contact is more personal, and it helps us to personalize and sympathize with their condition.

An attendance sheet can be kept to monitor the attendance of members at every service. When evidence of absenteeism is apparent, steps will be taken to help that person get back on track. There is no need to sign in or to even notice that the attendance is even being taken. This will help the elders or leadership know when a problem is occurring.

“Care Groups” can be utilized to encourage those who are attending sporadically before they stop attending completely. These efforts are totally intended to encourage and not to rebuke or to confront. That work is left to the elders when all attempts at fellowship and encouragement have failed. The congregation is divided into several care groups to plan fellowship opportunities that seek to create relationships with each member to help assimilate them into the life of the congregation. These groups assist our elders to watch for the souls of the members to protect against apostasy (Heb. 13:17). This effort is not just a duty but is also a show of love for every member of the body (Gal. 6:1).

Approaching A Prodigal

Knowing Why They Left Helps In Retrieving Them

Most people go astray because of conflicts within the congregation. These are often minor and could have been healed if the proper channels had been followed. The leadership needs to be prepared to hear whatever reasons or excuses are made by the ones we are trying to reclaim. The first place to inquire is “Did the leadership do anything to offend you or fail to do anything to help you?” This is not a time to attack the leadership but recognize that people often hold others responsible for their actions rather than blame themselves. The leadership must not be thin-skinned or defensive as they take a “punch” in order to reclaim a prodigal. The charge might be against the preacher, the elders, or the deacons. The cause of the prodigal leaving the fold might be domestic in nature and involves close family members. More than likely the problem will be with another member that said or did something that was taken the wrong way. Many members are overwhelmed with financial debt; they are too embarrassed to seek counsel and just wander away from the fold. Others are so overworked as they hold two or three jobs to make ends meet. Many of the jobs available for the average worker are in the service industry and do not pay much over minimum wage. Once a pattern of working on Sundays is established, many stay home even on Sundays when they are not required to work. It is not unusual for some to choose to work on the weekends as they can earn time-and-a half or double time pay.

Our Approach To The Prodigals Should Be With Humility And Tenderness

We should always be courteous and polite when we approach those who are weak and struggling. Our attitude needs to be optimistic and friendly. These members are usually guilt-stricken as they know their condition and the purpose for your visit. Be careful to show real interest in the person being visited by listening to them and trying to empathize with their condition. Be ready to do the person a favor as you see legitimate areas of difficulty that you can

address. Try to leave the door open for future contacts if the person does not readily respond to the initial contact.

Love And Compassion Should Be Our Attitude

It is important that we are not rude in our approach. Do not show signs of anger or impatience. Do not raise your voice as if you are fed up with the person. Do not create the impression that you feel you are better than the prospect. Do not get into an argument with them. Do not leave the person with the impression that if they do not listen to you that they are doomed to hell. Do not leave the person in a frame of mind that you could not go up to that person and have an appropriate conversation in the future. The unfaithful member needs to feel compassion and love in the manner in which he is approached.

Some Will Not Be Retrieved

The prodigal left in rebellion and must change his spirit before he will be reclaimed. Others left because they were offended at the truth and could not endure sound doctrine. These must be converted as they do not understand the authority of the Bible and have worldly views of our role in teaching the truth (Gal. 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:2-3). Some never repented or were not truly converted and have no intention of repenting. They felt uncomfortable around truth and sought a place where their sins would not be exposed nor taught against.

Methods Of Reclaiming A Prodigal

Speak Highly About The Church And Its Activities

Do not gossip about members with or before the one you are seeking to reclaim. Speak about the renewed peace and unity that is evident in the congregation. Speak about our goals and our potential as we move forward with great anticipation of great days ahead. Express your interest in them personally and spiritually. Let them know that you and the church have been praying for their return to the family of God. Ask what you can do as an individual or as a church to aid their return. Some need personal attention or teaching one-on-one as to get them grounded. They might have special needs that can be addressed and alleviated. Some need assurance of positive

change if they put the Lord first in their lives and apply Christian principles to their lives.

Make Special Trips To Visit And To Encourage

Call the prodigal that you are seeking to reclaim and ask for an appointment to visit with them. Let them know that you miss them and felt the urge to drop by for a friendly visit. This is to be a casual visit to reestablish contact and to encourage and edify them. At the end of the visit it would be appropriate to pray with them about the seriousness of their condition. Nathan illustrated a story to David that touched his heart whereby he saw the wrong in the illustration. When Nathan applied the story to David, it brought repentance and confession from David. Nathan was respectful and compassionate, but he also was effective in getting David to see the error of his way (2 Sam. 12:1-14). Paul wrote to Timothy and conveyed the same sentiments when he said:

And the servant of the Lord must not strive;
but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,
In meekness instructing those that oppose
themselves; if God peradventure will give them
repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;
And that they may recover themselves out of the
snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him
at his will. (2 Tim. 2:24-26)

Before we approach any prodigal to reclaim them, we ought to pray regularly about their condition to make sure our hearts are right regarding them.

Teach The Lessons For Lost Sheep

We have designed two lessons that are to be used to help reclaim the lost.

“Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins” (Jam. 5:19-20). Lesson one is to remind them of

what happened to them when they obeyed the gospel and obtain forgiveness of their sins. Lesson two is stronger and convicts them of the consequences of being lost and away from God. The leadership will be better received to make these contacts after all other efforts have failed to reclaim the prodigal. The most skillful teacher ought to be used as this might be the final opportunity to reclaim the prodigal. Both of these lessons will follow at the end of this lecture.

Re-establishing Them Into The Fold

They Must Be Given Special Attention Like New Converts

“As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1 Pet. 2:2). Most Christians recognize that babes in Christ need tender love and compassion for them to grow. We are aware that there are many things that they do not know and that they will say and do things based on their newness to the cause of Christ. We should show them patience and forbearance as they need room to grow and to mature. We also protect new converts from people or situations that will seek their destruction by pressuring them where they are weak. The reclaimed prodigal needs the same consideration and patience as the new converts as he is reestablished into the congregation.

Friendships need to be developed within the congregation to help them let the world go. “Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners” (1 Cor. 15:33). The early church made fellowship a critical part of the lives of the new members.

And all that believed were together, and had all things common; And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the

Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

Everybody needs to rally around these reclaimed members and not allow them to feel isolated and return to the pig-pen of sin. We need to imitate the spirit and actions of the father who was waiting for the prodigal to return. The son was received and fellowshiped to let him know how glad the father was for his return home.

Providing For Their Growth And Development

The leadership should consider providing special classes for prodigals when they are reclaimed. Many may have never gone through a new convert's class and would greatly benefit if such material was taught to establish them in the faith.

For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (Heb. 5:12-14)

And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these

things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5-11)

Time needs to be taken with the reclaimed prodigals by feeding them milk until they are able to stomach strong meat. They need to be guided until they are able to add the Christian graces to their lives.

These reclaimed Christians need to be placed in a program of work to develop talents and to get busy working for the Lord.

For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, And said unto them; Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing idle, and saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive. So when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and give them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when

they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came, they supposed that they should have received more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, Saying, These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden and heat of the day. But he answered one of them, and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way: I will give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good? So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen. (Mat. 20:1-16)

Actions Toward Those Who Refuse To Return

Use Corrective Methods Until Proven Rejected

Corrective methods involve teaching through instruction and counsel. As long as they are responsive to teaching, keep on teaching. Teaching brings about conviction and conversion if it is received and applied. The Scriptures will bring one to maturity if they are effectively taught and humbly obeyed. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Teach The Consequences Of Continued Neglect

The prodigal needs to know that the church has responsibilities to lost sheep. They need to be warned of the danger of drifting.

Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word

spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will? (Heb. 2:1-4)

The desire for salvation that led one to get baptized can be replaced with neglect so as to lose salvation eternally. The epistle to the Hebrews was written to show the superiority of Christ over the old covenant. To despise the law of Christ would bring greater consequences than despising the Law of Moses. (Heb. 10:24-31)

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance

belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb. 10:24-31)

Paul wrote to the church at Corinth to warn about disciplinary actions against those living in open sin (1 Cor. 5). Withdrawal of fellowship is to be practiced against those who reject loving attempts to be restored (2 The. 3:6; 1 Cor. 5). We must continue to warn the prodigals of their predicament and assure them of our readiness to accept them back upon their repentance (2 The. 3:14-15; 2 Cor. 2:6-11).

Are You A Lost Sheep?

What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he finds it? And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders rejoicing. And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. (Luke 15:4-7)

Lesson #1

1. Did you learn about Jesus Christ loving you enough to die for your sins, and that he was buried and rose again in three days? _____
2. Were you convicted in your heart to turn away from your sins in repentance and turn your life toward God, so as to be forgiven? _____

3. Did you joyfully confess Jesus as God's Son with your mouth and in your heart make him your Lord and Master?

4. Were you immersed (baptized) in water for the forgiveness of all your sins, rejoicing in your salvation from past sins?

5. Do you still believe in God and are you thankful that He loved you enough to let His Son die for you? _____
6. Are you still thankful that Jesus was crucified on the cruel cross for your sins? _____
7. Did you learn that God desires you to worship Him and will reward you for doing so? _____
8. Does God still deserve your worship? _____
9. Did you value the privilege of prayer that only faithful Christians have access unto? _____
10. Did you learn that every Sunday, when you partake of the Lord's supper, you honor and celebrate Jesus' death for your sins? _____
11. Did you learn that singing in worship is well-pleasing to God and is a means of praising Him for His greatness? _____
12. Did you learn that cheerful giving is the proof of your love for God, and an exhibition of trust in God's promises to bless you? _____
13. Is God's giving of His Son and Jesus giving of His life worthy of asking you to give financially to support His church? _____
14. Are you one of the sheep that have strayed from the fold?

15. Are you in jeopardy of perishing, being away from God?

16. Are we right in leaving the ninety and nine and finding you?

17. Will heaven rejoice over you if you repent and return to the fold? _____
18. Will you make heaven to rejoice by your repentance and restoration? _____

19. Will you confess your repentance now and allow us to pray for you, then announce to the church your desire for restoration? _____
20. Will you re-dedicate yourself to faithfulness that you might grow and make heaven your home? _____

Have You Erred From The Truth?

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins. (Jam. 5:19-20)

Lesson #2

1. Is it possible for a child of God to err from the truth as to lose his soul? _____
2. Are there presently any sins in your life that need to be hid in the blood of Christ? _____
3. 3. Is your soul worthy of being saved from death? _____
4. Does love try to convert a brother or a sister from the error of his/her way? _____
5. Does the church have an obligation to try to save your soul from death? _____
6. If you don't repent of your sins and turn your life around, will your soul be saved? _____

Read: 2 Peter 2:20-22

7. Were you initially saved from the pollution (filth) of the world through the knowledge of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

8. Have you become entangled again into the sinful world?

9. Is it shameful to leave the way of righteousness and re-enter the bondage of sin? _____

10. Is a dog returning to his vomit like going back into the world? _____
11. After being cleansed by Jesus, have you returned to wallowing in the mire (mud)? _____

Read: Hebrews 10:25-29

12. Have you forsaken the assembling of the saints? _____
13. Have you neglected and rejected exhortations to assemble? _____
14. Is sinning willfully a serious matter? _____
15. Do you have a fearful view of the judgment, having forsaken to assemble? _____
16. Will God punish, sorely, those who trample underfoot the blood of Christ and show despite toward His grace? _____
17. Will God judge his own people and execute vengeance on those who are unfaithful? _____
18. Is it fearful to fall into the hands of the living God when you have been unfaithful? _____

Read: 1 John 1:5-9

19. Can you fellowship God while living in sin or darkness? _____
20. Is there any sin the blood can't cleanse if you get back in the light? _____
21. Are you willing to confess that you have repented and allow us to pray for your forgiveness? _____
22. Are you willing to put forth the effort to walk in the light? _____

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The Restoration Of The Prodigal Son

CHAPTER 19

Three Gifts: A Robe, A Ring, And A Shoe

Barry Kennedy

What a blessing it is to be New Testament Christians! There is no greater “title” one can wear than that of a Christian. Being called a Christian should signify to the world that this person wears the name of Christ. Of course, this does not mean that the Christian becomes immune to the plague known as sin. What then are the blessings for being Christians? Hope, which is the “anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (King James Version, Heb. 6:19), is a great blessing. The Christian’s hope is bound within the promises of refuge from the God who cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). Peace! “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Phi. 4:7). Salvation! “Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). Of course, all these are blessings belonging to the child of God. However, Luke 15 records a parable told by Jesus Himself which mentions three gifts given to a penitent prodigal son. These gifts were a robe, a ring, and shoes signifying the fact that restoration has its rewards. This study will discuss the three gifts pointing out the robe as the gift of identity, the ring as the gift of authority, and finally the shoes as the gift of ability.

The Robe—Restoring The Gift Of Identity

People often identify with those who dress as they dress. Take, for example, the little league baseball team. Each player is wearing his own uniform, but their uniforms are all alike. This enables them to

be identified easily. Other examples include the doctor's white coat, the policeman's badge, and the construction worker's hard hat. All these articles identify the person and his or her position. Of course, the clothes are not all that it takes to be a doctor, policeman, or even a baseball player, but there is still a clear identity factor which goes with those articles of clothing.

When the prodigal son came to himself and returned home, he was wearing clothing that identified his failure. Sin leaves a mark on people's lives (Luke 15:14-16). The prophets of old often used the idea of unclean to emphasize sinfulness. The prophet Zechariah saw in his vision Joshua (Israel) needing to remove the "filthy garments" (Zec. 3:3-4). The prophet Isaiah saw himself as being "undone" and a man of "unclean lips" when he was allowed to have a glimpse into the throne room of God (Isa. 6:5). Jesus noted in another parable how the king immediately recognized a "man which had not on a wedding garment" (Mat. 22:11). This man wanted to be a part of the feast, but his vesture betrayed him. The king then commanded his servants to "bind him hand and foot, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mat. 22:13). What do our clothes represent today?

The father saw the penitence in his son (Luke 15:20-21) and gave charge to his servants: "Bring forth the best robe" (Luke 15:22). Notice, the father did not say to his servants, "Go and get some clothes." That would have been acceptable and likely more than the son deserved. This prodigal son had brought shame upon his father's name, and publically defamed all for which the father stood. Many today would be inclined to say, "How dare you come back here expecting anything from me?" In fact, was this not the attitude of the older brother? The father, who of course represents God, said, "Bring forth the best robe." Using this parable, Jesus painted a portrait of how God restores the identity of His penitent children. His son was not going to be just another servant in the master's house. This robe was a symbol, identifying to the world that this is an important person. In fact, the best robe would certainly be reserved for the loftiest of visitors. The father was preparing his son not only to enjoy

forgiveness of his past transgressions but also to be dressed to enjoy the celebration in his honor.

The “best robe” represents God’s desire for His people to be easily identified in this world (Mat. 5:14-16). The word *prodigal* is an identifying word. He was seen as being wasteful, immoral, and selfish. However, his most serious identity was that of being lost. Consider five areas this boy experienced loss as stated by Garland Elkins.

First, he lost that fellowship with his father and all the comforts of home. **Second**, he lost his self-respect. He was unknown, unheeded, and unwanted in the far country. **Third**, he lost all that he had. There is always a famine in the Devil’s territory. **Fourth**, he was humiliated. “And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine” (Luke 15:15). **Fifth**, he was lonely. “And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him” (Luke 15:16). There was neither food nor love in that far country of sin. (125)

God does not give up on His children but longingly awaits their return to Him (2 Pet. 3:9). “The Father did not assign him to the low position he so humbly suggested. Penitence brings forth forgiveness instead of strict justice from the offended parent. The robe and other articles to be worn would not satisfy the hunger of the famished son but indicated the fullness of the father’s forgiveness” (Zerr 173).

Everyone who saw this son wearing the “best robe” would clearly see that he had been restored. No longer was he the prodigal son; he was simply the father’s son. Jesus told this parable in order to identify the great need that people have for forgiveness and restoration. The Pharisees and the scribes could not see any potential in those publicans and sinners (Luke 15:1-2).

When Christians go out into the world today, what style of robe should they be wearing? The world may be able to say, “I saw you dressed in the sinful rags of selfishness.” They may be able to say accurately that they have seen many of God’s children doing things that are very sinful. One point many people fail to see is that a forgiven soul striving to live a faithful life is just as obvious as the sinful life. Just like the tree is known by the fruit that it bears, the actions of a man are indicators of his heart.

But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart: and they defile the man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies: These are things which defile a man. (Mat. 15:18-20)

A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things. (Mat. 12:35)

Oh, to be restored to the Father’s home and to receive the reward of identity! No more to be outcast and forgotten, no more to be looked down upon as a reprobate, and no more to be lost but found and restored to wear the “best robe,” a robe identifying the child of God.

The Ring—Restoring The Gift Of Authority

When Jesus introduced the prodigal son, He described him as one wanting to be in control of his inheritance. It was not good enough for this son to be under the watchful provision of his father. He, as do many today, felt that he knew how to handle his own life better than did his father. He wanted to be free and to be the master of his own destiny. That brings to mind teens lashing out at their parents with the words “You just don’t understand!” There is an old saying, “You don’t know what you have until it is gone.” This statement fits the authority that the prodigal son had lost and finally regained.

The father of this parable is pictured as a wealthy man of great substance (Luke 15:17). No doubt the servants of his house would have viewed the master's two sons as their superiors as well; however, that was not enough for the prodigal. He wanted to be the master of his own life. He, like many, only saw what he could not do, instead of the opportunities that lay before him. If the prodigal son could have known that he would see himself starving and slaving in a hog pen would he have been so eager to ask for his portion? Would he have taken his flight so recklessly into the far country? Sadly, these questions are not as easy to answer as one might think. Consider, for example, how many Christians know that the Bible says,

Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:9-10)

It may be that a lot of people know this to be true but, many reading this manuscript likely know of brothers and sisters in the Church who are guilty of such sins. It is often said that they know better. This may be so, but that does not change the fact that they have turned the reigns of their lives over to the master of darkness. "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (Rom. 6:16).

Satan wants man to believe that he has no choice but to sin. Often Satan gains ground with God's people through the despair brought on by one's inability to be "sinless" or "perfect." John proved that no man can claim sinless perfection when he wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (1 John 1:8). Does this mean that everyone should say that

there is no hope, just give up, or just “throw in the towel”? Of course not, God simply wants man to realize his great need. Jesus said, “They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick” (Luke 5:31). Clearly Jesus was referring to the spiritual healing He came to provide (Luke 19:10). The apostle Paul said, “I can do all things **through** (emph. BK) Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phi. 4:13).

The fact is that God does offer man the authority to overcome temptation. Of course, that authority comes from His Word. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim. 3:16-17). God’s Word illuminates the path of the child of God. “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Psa. 119:105). Light commands its authority over the darkness; likewise, the Word of God commands authority over the darkness of sin. Christians are translated from the power (i.e., authority) of darkness into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13).

The prodigal son had given his authority over to Satan and found the bitterness that goes along with a life of sin. When he “came to himself” in the hog pen, he realized that he had to make some changes. He needed to be restored, but he realized his actions placed him in a position unworthy of being called the father’s son. Through all this, the father placed a ring upon his finger. Of all three gifts, this ring is likely the most unexpected gift of all. One can clearly see the need for shoes and vesture, based upon the dire conditions in which the boy had placed himself. Many people would be willing to clothe the needy. For one to place a ring upon the hand of that same person might be a different story. This father was letting his son know that he was not only forgiven, but his authority as the master’s son was also restored. God’s forgiveness is complete, matchless, and overwhelmingly beneficial. Imagine where man would be today if his forgiveness were based upon the way man forgives. The way man forgives is often said this way, “I’ll forgive you, but I’ll never forget what you did.” Man might also say, “I forgive you, but only after I get even.” God’s forgiveness does not in any way resemble such. “For I

will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 8:12).

The ring on the prodigal son’s finger symbolized the true restoration of a soul that has been returned to his place in the home. No one would doubt his authority anymore, and they would have to answer to the father if they failed to respect his position. In fact, the older brother’s spiteful statement of “this thy son” (Luke 15:30) was answered by the father with “this thy brother” (Luke 15:32). Though one cannot accept everything Charles Spurgeon wrote, his words concerning the ring on the prodigal’s hand are worthy of consideration.

Then came *the ring*, a luxury rather than a necessary, except that now he was a son it was well that he should be restored to all the honours (sic) of his relationship. The signet ring in the east in former times conferred great privileges: in those days men did not sign their names, but stamped with a signet upon wax, so that the ring gave a man power over property, and made him a sort of other self to the man whose ring he wore. (400)

Spurgeon continued by adding that the ring was a complete answer to the part of the prodigal’s confession. “I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son” (Luke 15:21). To this the father said, “Put a ring on his hand” (Luke 15:22). His condition was changed from the muck and mire of sin to the lofty elevation of the master’s son, and from the servant of the hog pen to the authority of the ring bearer. This is an example for brethren even today. Those who are walking in darkness and are in need of corrective discipline must still be respected as brethren.

For we hear that there are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but

are busybodies. Now them that are such we command and exhort by our Lord Jesus Christ, that with quietness they work, and eat their own bread. But ye, brethren, be not weary in well doing. And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but **admonish him as a brother.** (2 The. 3:11-15)

The bottom line is if man is not willing to forgive his fellow man who repents, God has promised that He will not forgive him of his own transgressions. “But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Mat. 6:15).

The prodigal son is not just some feel good story used to help keep children occupied in Bible class. This parable reveals to man God’s strong desire to save, His willingness to restore relationships, and His faithfulness to man even though man often leaves God behind. Some may be asking, “Will the Father allow me to wear his family ring?” Can anyone truly come away from a study of the prodigal son and not see himself referenced in the story? There is a reason the Holy Spirit gave Luke the authority to write these words. The question is, What are we going to do with them?

The Shoes—Restoring The Gift Of Ability

The prodigal’s misadventures placed him in a position of destitution and slavery. It would have been commonplace for the slaves of that day to be barefoot. “Slaves went barefoot. Thus, we have here a threefold symbol of freedom and honor, restored, as the fruit of perfect reconciliation” (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown “Luke 15:22”). Freedom is one of those words that almost sings as it flows from the lip, that is if one truly appreciates his freedom or desires greatly to be free. America has enjoyed the greatest span of national freedom known to man, but has that long-term freedom caused many to forget its value? Could it be said that many Americans do not appreciate

freedom because they have never experienced life without it? Does this not fit the prodigal's attitude when he was at home? Living on his "father's dime" the son failed to see the freedom he had and longed to be "set free." It wasn't long before he found out just how free he really was at home. In fact, his destitution in the "free land" brought him to his senses and produced a longing to be a servant at home. He knew in his heart that he could never be worthy of returning to his former position in the home. What he failed to realize in the hog pen was his father's desire to have him back home.

Many today also fail to take into consideration the feelings of the Father. It is easy to quote the words "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Returning that love through faithful service is something else altogether (John 14:15). Almost anyone can see his need to serve the master when he is on the receiving end of hardships. God is like the father always waiting and watching for His prodigals to return (Luke 15:20). God not only wants His people to cast their cares upon Him but to never forget the fact that He cares for every man (1 Pet. 5:7). The shoes of ability are God's blessing to man showing the confidence He places in man's ability to serve Him. That brings to mind another parable Jesus taught concerning a master bestowing talents (Mat. 25:14ff). Upon reading this parable, one should be reminded that the master gave the talents "to everyman **according to his several ability** (emph. BK)" (Mat. 25:15). God understands very well the ability man has even though we often deny it.

The three gifts are all articles that are to be worn. Also, these three articles could clearly be seen by anyone with whom the son came in contact. The image expressed is one of great compassion shown by the father toward the son who was rejected, disgraced, and even reprimanded by the older brother. Through it all, the father's love still rewarded to the fullest extent. God still wants to restore his prodigals even today. He still longs to deliver the sandals of freedom to the wayward child who is wasting his substance with riotous living. Sadly, it is going to take a few starving days, months,

or years in the hog pen of sin's slavery for some to realize their need to "come home."

Christians are not ready to take on the battle for the soul without having the proper footwear. During the Civil War in this country many hardships befell the soldiers on both sides of the battle.

Both Armies faced problems with mosquitos and lice. Exposure turned many cases of normal colds into pneumonia and other complicated ailments. Pneumonia was the third leading killer disease of the war, after typhoid and dysentery. **A lack of shoes and proper clothing further complicated the problem** (emph. BK), especially in the Confederacy. The soldier's diet was somewhere between barely palatable to absolutely awful. It was estimated that 995 of 1,000 Union troops eventually contracted chronic diarrhea or dysentery; Confederates suffered similarly. Disease particularly ran rampant in the prisons, as many of these conditions that led to disease were very much present. (Goellnitz)

Paul used military armor to describe the Christian's preparation for the soul's battle.

Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and

having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph. 6:11-17)

Notice Paul said that the feet must be shod with the “preparation of the gospel of peace” (Eph. 6:15). The Gospel is God’s power to save man (Rom. 1:16). The Gospel is the good news that Jesus died for man’s sins, that He was buried, and that He was resurrected the third day according to the scriptures (1 Cor. 15:1-4). Therefore, the gospel is that which produces freedom. Barefoot prodigal was enslaved. The father said, “Put on your shoes and take hold of your ability as my son.” He still says the same thing to man today.

Conclusion

God has provided everything that we need for life and godliness. “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue” (2 Pet. 1:3). This parable is one of great instruction on the basics of brotherly love, forgiveness, and of course, restoration. God has not given up on man, even though man may have given up on himself. He still offers the gifts of identity (the robe) as His children, authority (the ring) over the power of temptation through His Word, and finally ability (the shoes) to do His will and have a home in Heaven (John 14:1-6). All the prodigals would do well to see the Father waiting and longing for His children to come in penitence to receive their gifts. It is clear from the study of the three gifts offered to the prodigal that restoration has its rewards.

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CHAPTER 23

Safe & Sound: The Security Of The Father's House

Bob Prichard

I am honored to be able to speak on the Annual Power Lectures. I am truly grateful to the elders of the Southhaven church and brother Webster for this opportunity to share in this great lectureship on the marvelous story of the Prodigal Son.

I was speaking on a minister's panel for a Hospice group, answering questions about death and care for the terminally ill. One of the Hospice volunteers asked what to say if the patient was concerned about sin in his or her life and their relationship with God. The Lutheran minister was quick to say, "God is a God of love. Tell them that they have nothing to worry about."

I had different advice. I said that if the patient had some spiritual concerns that they should be supportive, but also seek to make sure they dealt with whatever was of concern. I could not assume that everyone has a right relationship with God, especially if one was concerned about that relationship.

The Lutheran minister probably represented much of our religious world. I knew him all too well. He was Post-Modernist in his thinking, and basically thought anything goes in the religious world, and everybody is right with God—except for the churches of Christ, of course.

But the security of the Christian is an issue for many of us, is it not? Are we really right with God? Can we know that we have the security of the Father's house? Are we perpetually in the Father's house one day and in the far country the next? How can we be sure where we stand with the Father? Perhaps the confidence that the

prodigal had can help us to better understand our relationship with God as Christians.

The Fatal Decision

The prodigal was safe and sound in his father's house as the story begins. He lost that security, however. Although in his own mind he probably thought it was the father's fault for his restrictiveness, or perhaps his elder brother's attitude, he ultimately had no one to blame but himself. His time in the far country was spent in riotous living, and the portion given by the father was soon gone. He was not wise like Moses, learning the hard way that the pleasures of sin are only for a season.

By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. (King James Version, Heb. 11:24-26)

The Far Country

The problem of being in the far country is that the security a full wallet seems to provide does not last. He was on a slippery slope and could do nothing but fall further and further away from safety and security. Paul warns us, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). This was another lesson the prodigal had to learn through experience.

When Jonathan Edwards first preached his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," on July 8, 1741, at Enfield, Connecticut, the response was overwhelming. Edwards warned that "There is nothing that keeps wicked men out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God." Edwards, through ten "considerations," stressed that God may cast sinners, who certainly deserve hell, into hell at any moment.

God is angry with them, and it is only because of his restraints that the wicked are not immediately given to Satan for torment (“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”).

But the prodigal seemed to know nothing of an angry God. In the far country, he knew only pleasure—and that pleasure was at the expense of the father who had generously given him his inheritance. He needed a wake-up call to see the seriousness of his situation.

The Fields of Swine

To those who first heard Jesus tell the story, there could hardly have been a worse living fate for the boy.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. (Luke 15:14-16)

Just feeding the swine was bad enough, but to be so hungry he envied the swine’s food was the ultimate ignominious situation. This was nothing like what he had experienced in the safety and security of his father’s house. This perhaps more than anything else opened his eyes to all that he was missing by not being in the Father’s house.

The Firm Decision

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called

thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.
(Luke 15:17-19)

What brought about this decision? The prodigal “came to himself” (Luke 15:17) and wanted to go home. The plaintive cry we always hear at the nursing home: “Will someone just take me home?”

Is it any wonder that realtors stress that they are selling homes (rather than houses)? Two proverbs sum the situation: “East west, home’s best.” “Home is where the heart is.” In *The Death of the Hired Man*, poet Robert Frost said “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in” (Daintith 254).

He knew that there was safety and security in the father’s house. And he knew that he *could* go home, although he thought his rebellion had caused him to forfeit his sonship.

The Father’s House

What made him think that he could go back to the father’s house? Why did he think he would find safety and security? It was because it was the *father’s* house. He knew his father. And ultimately it is all about the Father.

The Father Was His Father.

It was not that he just knew *about* his father. He knew his father. He had spent time with him, communed with him, talked to him, learned from him. He had sat at his father’s table, listened (perhaps reluctantly) to his father’s admonitions and had seen how his father dealt with others.

Perhaps our difficulty of believing we have security in the Father’s house is that we just do not know Him as well as we should. John tells us of the Word, “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, *even* to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12-13). Because He gave us power to become the sons of God, we must grow in our love, understanding, and knowledge of Him. Our obedience shows we know him.

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. (1 John 2:1-3)

The Father Was Generous And Loving.

The prodigal experienced the generosity of the Father when he demanded his portion of the inheritance and the Father gave it to him, although He was not required to do so. The Father in heaven blesses all men daily, for He “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (Mat. 5:45). But much more than that, we know that the Father is generous with His children. “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). We now are in a better place to see the love and generosity of the Father, because we have the full Biblical record. “Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:16-17). How can anyone look at the cross of Christ and doubt the love of the Father? In light of His generosity, why would His children doubt their safety and security in His house?

The Father Was Trustworthy.

When the father divided unto them his living (Luke 15:12), He gave what the sons desired but did not deserve. He fulfilled His obligations, above and beyond his actual obligation. The prodigal never had to question if his father had given all that he said he would.

Can we trust the Son when He says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light” (Mat. 11:28-30)? He promises,

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. (John 6:37-39)

He truly offers us safety and security.

The Father Was Wise.

The father was not a dictatorial autocrat. He wisely allowed the prodigal to make his own decisions and make his own mistakes. The prodigal probably did not recognize the wisdom of his father when he was originally in the father's house. But as he looked back, he could see it. He could see that the father had provided all that he needed to make the right decision.

The world seldom sees the wisdom of God for what it is.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the

foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (1 Cor. 1:18-21)

We should proclaim with Paul:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen. (Rom. 11:33-36)

The Father Was Longsuffering.

It must have hurt the father deeply to see the prodigal leave the security of the father's house. He must have known that the boy would be back, worse for the wear. But he let him go and longingly waited for his return. "And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Luke 15:20). The longsuffering father not only waited for the Prodigal to return, but he watched for him and ran to meet him. Surely this is what the Father has done for us as well!

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. (Rom. 5:6-9)

We understand that “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). Knowing that He cares this much for us, why not trust Him to save us.

The Good Shepherd tells us:

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave *them* me, is greater than all; and no *man* is able to pluck *them* out of my Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

The Father Was Forgiving.

Of all of the qualities of the father, the most comforting, the most assuring is his forgiveness. Although the prodigal felt like he was no longer worthy to be accepted as a son, he knew that the father would be willing to forgive him.

One of the first Bible studies I ever conducted after obeying the gospel was with my Missile Combat Crew Deputy and his wife. I was shocked as we came to the end of the study because the wife was inconsolable. She was crying so hard that we had to break off the end of the study and go home, because she could not talk. The next day, after my Deputy and I went on alert duty, my wife went to talk to the Deputy's wife, who was so upset the evening before. She was upset because she wanted so much to be a Christian and knew that she had not obeyed the gospel. But she also knew that God could never forgive her of her sins and that she could not live the Christian life. After Sharon explained to her that God could and would forgive her and that He would help her live faithfully, she was baptized into Christ.

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:6). We have all gone into the far country of sin, yet the

Father wants to welcome all of us back, just as the father welcomed back the Prodigal.

Paul told Timothy,

This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. (1 Tim. 1:15-16)

If God could forgive the chief of sinners, surely we can be sure that He forgives us, and know that we have the blessed assurance He offers.

John tells us that we may know we have eternal life because God has proved it through the Son.

If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater: for this is the witness of God which he hath testified of his Son....And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; *and* he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God. (1 John 5:9, 11-13)

The prodigal, though ashamed of his actions, was not afraid to return to the father's house.

Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because

as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. (1 John 4:17-18)

The gospel is good news, and our faith should show it. "I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake" (1 John 1:12). Our sins truly are forgiven in Christ.

Once Abraham Lincoln was asked what he would do with the rebellious Southerners when they were finally defeated and allowed back into the union. He said, "I will treat them as if they had never been away." Amazingly, that is how the Father forgives.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, 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 15:21-24)

The prodigal was safe and sound in the security of the father's house.

The ultimate theme of this story, therefore, is not the prodigal son, but the Father who finds us. The ultimate theme is not the faithlessness of men but the faithfulness of God.

And this is also the reason why the joyful sound of festivity rings out from this story. Wherever forgiveness is proclaimed, there are joy and festive garments. We must read and hear

this gospel story as it was meant to be: good news! News so good that we should never have imagined it. News that would stagger us if we were able to hear it for the first time as a message that everything about God is so completely what we thought or feared. News that He has sent his Son to us and is inviting us to share in an unspeakable joy.

The ultimate secret of this story is this: There is a homecoming for us all because there is a home. (Thielicke 29)

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CHAPTER 24

And He Was Angry & Would Not Go In: Cutting Off One's Nose To Spite One's Face

Keith Mosher, Sr.

Preface

Lectureships have been a source of inspiration and fellowship for decades in churches of Christ and in schools run by brethren. The Power Lectureship, since its inception and that initial study of providence, has shined as one of the best. Memories of great preaching and great studies are imbedded for eternity in the minds of all who have been able to hear as an attendee or a reader of the books or a watcher of the tapes. To be a speaker is a privilege and so may the Father bless brethren Webster, Jefferies, and the Southaven elders for providing another opportunity to delve into the “unsearchable” depths of God’s Word.

Introduction

To write an essay centered on the elder brother discussed by the Lord in His parable concerning a wasteful son and a loving father is a daunting challenge (King James Version, Luke 15:11-32). During the research of ancient literature, commentaries, websites, and the underlying Greek text, it was discovered that there is **controversy** surrounding the character of the elder brother (Luke 15:25-32). Some writers showed a sympathetic attitude toward the seemingly spiteful older son. One wrote: “The older brother is made out to be the villain, when the fact is that his baby brother has come to

live on his – the elder brother’s – share of what’s left of the family fortune (Taylor 1). The foregoing author quotes Tertullian (an early Christian) as insisting that the parable of the prodigal son must never apply to Christians. Tertullian lived at a time when Christians were being put to death by Rome, and when some did worship Caesar to prolong their lives, church leaders insisted that “God might forgive but the church should not” (Taylor 2).

Other writers, including most in the brotherhood of churches of Christ, embrace the following thinking on Luke 15:29:

The distorted views of the selfish soul are evident in this verse. The older brother has received the double portion (further discussion is needed on this point, K.M.) of the divided estate (v. 12); and he was in fact the owner of the whole estate (v. 31), Therefore it was his duty to have given to the father, not the other way around. If this elder brother had wanted to share a banquet with his friends, it was surely within his power to have done so; but as a matter of obvious fact, he did not wish to share anything with anybody, even resenting the slaughter of the fatted calf for the return of his brother. (Coffman “Luke 15:29”)

This essay will deal with the text of Luke 15:11-32 in order to ascertain just what is the point concerning the elder brother. Was he lost? Is he a stereotype of the uncaring? Do Christians need to know about this elder brother, and why? Note that the younger son and his older brother represent what the message of Jesus is at its very basis. The younger has to rely solely on his father’s mercy, but the elder tried to work for his reward. Neither extreme is useful when one or the other is emphasized. All need the Father’s mercy, but at the same time, all need to obey him (cf. Heb. 5:8-9). The wasteful son would need to go to work on the elder brother’s estate, but the elder son will

have to quit his legalistic and unmerciful attitude and thus “cut off his nose to spite his face.”

The Text

The parable of the wasteful son was taught in reference to the uncaring attitude of the scribes and Pharisees (Luke 15:1-2). Those lost are yet loved by God and He anxiously waits for their return (Luke 15:20). The disappointment over the lost son is replaced by the joy over his return (Luke 15:24). Jesus could have easily ended the parable at this point, but eight more verses are devoted toward the older brother of the wasteful son and the Father’s pleading to love that prodigal sibling (Luke 15:25-32).

The Father in the parable seems, no doubt, to be a description of a loving, merciful God who is anxious to have all of His children at home—saved. The younger son represents all who forsake the Father, but the elder brother is pictured as resentful upon the return of his brother who, the elder brother knew, had wasted his inheritance. “And he was angry and would not go in: therefore came his father out and intreated him” (Luke 15:28).

He Would Not Enter

A rather liberal denomination preacher as to doctrine still experienced a situation worth mentioning here:

Many years ago when I was pastoring in South Texas, I became friendly with an Hispanic family who lived up the street. The couple who lived there had two sons, Joaquin and Pablo, born a year apart. At the time of this particular incident, Joaquin, the older son, had recently graduated high school. Pablo was then a high school senior.

I remember well when the father of the two boys came by and invited me to attend a party in honor

of Joaquin. Right away I was surprised, because Joaquin had been an indifferent student in high school, barely scraping by. He looked to be the picture of a shiftless, overweight young man who had no ambition or direction in life. The contrast between the two brothers was huge, because Pablo was his total opposite. Strikingly handsome, Pablo was the captain of the high school football team. In addition to being a gifted athlete, Pablo was a brilliant student. What's more, he was an ace debater and a thespian. Pablo looked like the kind of young man who could be president by the time he was 30. So my ears perked up when I heard about a party to honor Joaquin. The father explained that his son had joined the Marines. The family was surprised when he had been accepted, but he had. They were sure that Joaquin would not make it through basic training; but he not only survived the experience, Joaquin had graduated first in his class. So now he was coming home covered in glory, and would I come and help to welcome this young soldier back to the neighborhood?

I was delighted to do so. And on the afternoon of the party, the house was crowded with friends and family. The other big surprise was that Joaquin had lost 50 pounds during basic training. Now he looked to be the epitome of a United States Marine—trim and fit and brimming with confidence. Everywhere the guests were talking about the transformation. The ugly duckling had become a swan. The loser had become a winner. The lost boy had found himself. No one seemed more shocked and delighted by this

reversal than Joaquin's parents. They were clearly beside themselves.

After greeting the guest of honor and speaking with his proud mother and father, I ventured into the dining room. There was a wonderful spread of delicious-looking Mexican food. I filled my plate and wandered into the kitchen looking for Pablo. I found him there visiting with an uncle.

I pulled up a chair next to Pablo who was sitting on a stool in the corner eating a bowl of ice cream. I tried to engage him in conversation, but the young man didn't have much to say. That was uncharacteristic, for normally Pablo was a superb conversationalist. He obviously did not want to talk. In just a few minutes, he finished his ice cream and left.

After he had departed, I said to his uncle, "So what's the matter with Pablo?" The man said, "He's in the dog house." "Why?" I asked. "He threw a wild party when his parents were gone last weekend. The police were called, and his grandmother found out about it. When his folks came home, it was really bad."

I pictured the scene in my mind and the contrast between what was presently happening. And then the uncle said, "To tell you the truth, I think Pablo is a little bit jealous about this party. Until now he's always been the good guy around here." Remembering the uncle was an active churchman, I said, "The prodigal son." The older man smiled and nodded. "You got that right!" (Doty)

Why The Elder Brother's Refusal?

The “elder brother” represents those to whom Jesus was speaking who would not seek a lost sheep, coin, or boy (Luke 15:2). The growing popularity of Jesus among the collectors and sinners (those Jews who were unfaithful to the Mosaic covenant, KM) was beginning to irritate the religious establishment. Jesus responds to those critics by parable (Luke 15:3).

The elder brother's situation, who as far as the parable is recorded, is in the background until the wasteful son arrives at home. The older son had been out in the fields and had been working hard

(Luke 15:25). It is striking that the Holy Spirit used the term *presbuteros* for elder in the text. The leaders of Israel are represented by the older son whom the reader meets “in the field” (Luke 15:25a). Doty wrote:

Now we should not image that this is a house on a farm surrounded by fields. No, this house is in the village and the fields could have been far away. It is as if the elder son has been working, overseeing the work in a distant quarter section. At the end of the day, he returns. He walks the same road that his younger brother walked earlier that day. But his father is not watching for him, for he returns every day. He goes out to work; he returns. He comes near to the house, and what does he hear? He hears that a party is going on.

The hard-working elder brother arrives to music, singing, and dancing. There was a celebration! However, he does not yet know the reason for the joy.

Why does he not know? Did he not anticipate nor long for a return by his brother? The younger was estranged and rebellious while absent from the house. The elder was estranged and rebellious in his heart, while he was in the house. The estrangement and rebellion of

the younger brother were evident in his surrender to passion and his request to leave his father's house (Luke 15:12). The estrangement and rebellion of the elder were evident in his anger and in his refusal to enter the house of his father (Luke 15:28-29).

The older brother, by his own words, condemns himself by declaring that he is really not part of the family. "But as soon as this thy son was come" (Luke 15:30a). Note that the older son did not claim his brother but called him his father's son. He showed disgust for the partying and was jealous of a penitent brother (Luke 15:29). By declaring such sentiments, the elder brother had pictured himself as an outcast. He believed he was the victim of an unjust action, for he was the one who worked in the fields. He was the one who never gave his father any problems. "Lo these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment" (Luke 15:30b). Doty added:

How true this story is to the nature of first-born sons, for so often in families, they are the conscientious ones, the ones who are the trail blazers, the ones who distinguish themselves. Being a first-born son myself, I know something about this. There is the feeling, perhaps, of "to whom much is given, much will be required." And so this eldest son is like so many of us, then-hardworking, faithful, but also anxious to preserve his prerogatives. This first-born child, it appears, is just getting warmed up. He is the one who mentions for the first time the notion that his sibling has had relations with loose women: "But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf for him!" So now we reach the bottom line: "Dad, I have never disgraced you. I have never asked for anything prematurely, much less squander your estate on debauched

living; and yet my brother has done all this and you honor him! You do the last thing that should be done. You throw him a party!” Little wonder this story speaks so powerfully to a modern audience. For it may just sound like life in your family or extended family! Clearly what we have in this parable, then, is an intense story of sibling rivalry. We also have in the older son’s complaint the lament of a child who is now shamelessly saying to his father, “It should be my time! Not my little brother’s time! If anyone should be honored, it is ME, the worker, the steadfast one, the faithful son. Attention must be paid, Dad!” If you are a parent, you know how important and yet how difficult it is to be fair, to not take sides. You love all your children, but you love them differently. That is why the father tells his oldest son that the present had to be his younger brother’s time, because he, in effect, had been raised from the dead: “But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this younger brother of yours was dead and has come to life. He was lost and has been found.” If we are human, we tend to keep score. And that is, of course, what is going on here. The older son is calling in his chips. He wants to be recognized for his contributions. He wants to be covered in glory. And if he can’t, he would just as soon sit in the kitchen corner, eat a bowl of ice cream, and feel sorry for himself.

The Legalists Must Have Known

Mahoney noted that: “It would be difficult for Jesus’ opponents among the scribes and Pharisees not to realize that they were being criticized in the person of the elder brother who represented them

in their resentment of all the sinners they complained that Jesus was making so much of.” As noted above, the early church was having trouble accepting converts from paganism and forgiving penitent sinners. Therefore, the unforgiving must be described as taking the part of the elder brother.

It is the father, actually, who is the central figure in the parable and he must deal with a wasteful son and a resentful one. In spite of his brother’s jealousy, the prodigal son returned home and regained his place with his father. Just as the wandering sheep or lost coin is wonderfully found, the father’s joy (representing God, KM) is indescribable when his son returns to him. Note Jesus’ comment “that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons which need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

What should the scribes and Pharisees have known about God? Does Jesus’ parable mean that God loves sinners more than the righteous? Mahoney remarked that:

We might feel there could be a touch here of the so-called ‘mystique of sin’ which has occasionally been alleged of writers like Francois Mauriac and Graham Greene, who in their novels seemed to be fascinated by the mystery and almost the glamour of sin as somehow enhancing or magnifying the mercy and the grace of God. Saint (sic) Paul showed himself aware in his letter to the Romans of the slander directed against him, that he was advocating that people should sin more so that God would then show more forgiveness (Rom. 3:8): as he put it, ‘should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?’ (Rom. 6:1). Sometimes, perhaps, the effects of God’s love in the lives of some individuals may be more spectacular than in the more humdrum lives of others, as was the case with

Paul himself, and with Mary Magdalene, the woman from whom, according to Luke, 'seven devils had gone out.' (8:2)

Those who feel that some sinner has received "more" of God's love than the obedient one has need to recall the following scripture:

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:6-8)

When one considers the attitude of the elder brother toward his returning brother, one is struck with a question that may have been on the older son's mind: "Was the father too indulgent and too ready to forgive?"

Sometimes one may have a little sympathy for the elder brother and as he did, may wonder about why the wasteful son came home. Was that son just needing a place to live or perhaps, just sorry about his situation? After all, worldly sorrow does not cause genuine repentance (2 Cor. 7:10). What did the prodigal son do the day after he came home? Did he join his brother in the field?

Jesus said: "Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Mat. 7:21). Therefore, even though the point of the parable of the prodigal son is about God's love for His children, the elder brother **could** expect to see his sibling working the day after. It is difficult to be loving and forgiving from a human standpoint. Peter once asked Jesus: "Lord how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times" (Mat. 18:21)? Jesus responded with: "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but until seventy times seven" (Mat. 18:22). The elder brother was not

the judge of his brother, and the older son must accept his brother's repentance. If the elder brother remained unforgiving, there is a question that arises.

Was The Elder Brother Lost?

The elder brother insisted on his faithfulness to the father's commandments (Luke 15:29). In fact, that ancient Jew was saying what Moses had commanded to be said when the tithe of the first fruits was offered to God. "I have not eaten thereof in my mourning, neither have I taken away ought thereof for any unclean use, nor given ought thereof for the dead: but I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord my God, **and have done according to all that thou hast commanded me**" (Deu. 26:14; *emph. mine, KM*). After confessing that he had done all that God commanded, the ancient Jew had to pray: "Look down from the holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel, and the land which thou hast given us, as thou swarest unto our fathers, a land that floweth with milk and honey" (Deu. 26:15).

However, the elder brother said he obeyed at all times, but he did not obey, obviously, from a heart of love for his father and, therefore, he should not have expected a blessing. He must have expected to be able to earn his father's blessings! But, when he realized that he had merited nothing for his obedience, he attacks his father and his brother. Did he "cut off his nose to spite his face?"

There are many who "remain at home." They do not waste their lives on riotous living and are faithful in Bible study, worship, and prayer. Many love their inheritance from God and His promise to take them to heaven. But, their lives are characterized by judgment, condemnation, resentment, bitterness, and jealousy. Sometimes one may be prone to describe "lostness" as a visible act because sin dominates one's life. But, some are lost solely because of attitude. The prodigal sinned in such a way that all knew it. But note the heart of the elder brother as he spoke to his father. "But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf" (Luke 15:30).

Since the elder brother had not yet spoken to his brother upon his return, how did the older one know about his brother's sin? And, since he did know, why had he not done a thing to reach out to his brother? Instead, the elder son argues that he is much more holy and deserves more blessings from his father (Luke 15:29). He was a son who "lived his life in service to his father, not because of love but because of duty" (van Popta).

Note the following from the Aletheia College website:

To refuse a father's invitation to a family celebration was seen as totally unacceptable, rude, and a rejection of one's father. Hence the rudeness of the guests refusing the King's invitations. The older brother would usually have played a prominent role in such a feast. But this son refuses to attend. This would've struck the Lord's initial audience as incredibly rude. Remember how Vashti's refusal to attend her husband's feast resulted in her being rejected (Esther 1). What the older son did would've been seen as an insult to all the guests; and many fathers would simply have rejected and disowned their son for this, or at least, expressed significant disapproval. Indeed, this was expected of him by society and the other guests. But yet again, the father humiliates himself and breaks all Jewish norms and expectations of correctness and decency. He leaves the feast! For the host to walk out was yet again seen as totally rude to the other guests—it of course echoes the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep and going off after the one lost sheep. The father doesn't go out and give the arrogant, unloving, disobedient son a good talking to, as the audience would expect. Again, as so often, the Lord's parables set up an

expectation – and then dash it. The father goes out into the darkness of the courtyard, and “entreats” his son (Lk. 15:28). The Greek *parakaleo* means literally to come alongside, as if the father is inviting the son to stand alongside him in his extension of grace. Perhaps Paul is making one of his many allusions to the Lord’s parables when he uses the same word to speak of how he ‘beseeches’ his legalistic brethren (2 Cor. 5:20). (“Bible Lives”)

In the same way that the Jews refused to appreciate the spirit of Christ who “ate with sinners” (Luke 15:2), so the elder brother refused to attend the celebration for his penitent sibling. Thus, the older son represents hard-hearted Israel and any in the church of Christ who share the elder son’s unforgiving attitude while proclaiming themselves to be aligned only with “faithful” brethren, thinking that they are above reproach. “The bad grace and bitterness of the older brother as he stormed away from the happy feast is seen all too often amongst us” (“Bible Lives”).

A Controversial View Answered

Taylor wrote:

One reason the parable of the prodigal son remains lively after some two thousand years of interpretation is because it is so amoral. 1) The son’s return home has nothing to do with loving or missing his family. He comes home because he is dying of hunger. 2) His father forgives him before he ever gets a word of repentance out of mouth. 3) The older brother is made out to be the villain when the fact is that his baby brother has come to live on his—the elder brother’s—share of what’s left of the family fortune. If this

Biblical ethic had been applied in the case of the President, then there would have been no impeachment trial. Once the affair is over and the prodigal comes home, the roast goes straight into the oven. All is forgiven, before any apology is offered. The wages of sin is a lavish party for the sinner. Is this really a story you want your children to learn in Sunday school? It has been an offensive story all its life. Tertullian, an early defender of the faith, insisted that the parable of the prodigal son must never apply to Christians. If it did, he said, then not only “adulterers and fornicators” but also “idolaters, blasphemers, and renegades” would use the parable to pardon their sin. “Who will worry about losing what can so easily be regained?” he asked, and others agreed with him—especially those who had to decide what to do with Christians who had knuckled under to the Romans. If you were an early Christian living in the Roman Empire, chances were good that you would sooner or later find yourself standing in front of an altar to Caesar, with several scary looking soldiers in metal hats inviting you to put a pinch of incense on the coals of that altar. If you said no thank you, you would rather not do that, they would let you know that you either did it or you died—and not only you, but also every member of your household, whom they just happened to have in custody. Under such circumstances quite a few Christians worshipped Caesar (at least for that one day of their lives), and when they tried to return to the fellowship of Christians they often found their ways barred. Novatian, a near contemporary of Tertullian, allowed that while

God certainly had the power to forgive such, the church did not need to forgive.

Note that Mrs. Taylor chooses the Gnostic, Tertullian, as a source for her attacks on the parable. Taylor believes that the elder brother who was “never invited to the party” and “did not know about it until he came home from a full day in the field” is simply asked to make a choice between “being right” and “being in relationship.” However, given the fact that Jesus was denouncing the legalistic scribes and Pharisees, in that they were more interested in the letter of the law of Moses than they were in seeking the lost, Taylor has missed a very important point. That is, Jesus was describing the need for a change of heart in the scribes and Pharisees.

Taylor’s solution is that:

The elder brother’s third choice, I think, is to redefine righteousness—to abandon the lower righteousness (of being right all alone in the yard) for the higher righteousness (of embracing the wrongdoer)—not because it makes sense, or serves justice, or sends a proper message to anyone about facing the consequences of their actions—but simply because it is what the father does. The father embraces wrongdoers. The father welcomes sinners home, even at risk of losing obedient sons and daughters who cannot or will not do the same.

Taylor seems to have ignored the following: “And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger” (Luke 15:17). The prodigal re-thought his wasteful situation and **repented**. He will say he has sinned and needs restoring (Luke 15:18-19). The father did not embrace a “wrongdoer” who kept on doing wrong. The

father embraced a penitent son. To her credit, Taylor does draw an important lesson for a Christian. She wrote:

The people who find it offensive tend to be those who, through heroic discipline or complete lack of imagination, have never broken any of the ten commandments. They have never left home. They have never squandered their inheritance. They have never abandoned their responsibilities, and not all of them are insufferable about it, either. Some of them sound genuinely sad about what they have missed. They wish they could do what other people do—just go for the gusto and deal with the wreckage later—sin boldly that grace may abound—only they cannot seem to do that. Faith has to count for something, they explain. It has to be more than talk. If Jesus did not mean for people to live more virtuous lives, then why did he keep calling them to follow him? Someone has to give it a try.

The self-righteous do stand condemned (cf. Rom. 2:1). But, Taylor chose an incorrect solution to such by commending the position as right and just needing to put the right aside and to go ahead and embrace the wrong doer! No, the elder brother must change. Warfield noted concerning the analogy of the elder brother that:

The effect, you see, is to place the Pharisaic objectors themselves in the category of sinners, side by side with the outcasts they had despised; to probe their hard hearts until they recognized their lost estate also; and so to bring them as themselves prodigals back in repentance to the father's house. That they came back the parable

does not say. It leaves them in the midst of bitter controversy with the father because He is good. And here emerges a wonderful thing. That “seeking love” which is not signaled in the parable with reference to the lost – the confessedly lost – son, is brought before us in all its beautiful appeal with reference to these yet unrepentant elder brothers. For, you will observe, the father does not wait for the elder brother to come into the house to him; he goes out to him. He speaks soothing words to him in response to his outburst of bitterness and disrespect. When, in outrageous words, this son celebrates his own righteousness and accuses the father of hardness and neglect, refusing indeed in his wrath to recognize his relationship either with him or his: the father responds with mild entreaties, addressing him tenderly as “child,” proffering unbroken intercourse with him, endowing him with all his possessions, -- in a word, pleading with him as only a loving father can. Did the elder son hearken to these reproofs and yield to this endearing appeal? It was for the Pharisees to answer that question. Our Lord leaves it there. And the effect of the whole is to show them that, contrary to their assumption, the Father in heaven has no righteous children on earth; that His grace is needed for all, and most of all for those who dream they have no need of it. By thus skillfully dissecting, under the cover of the sour elder brother, the state of mind of the Pharisaic objectors, our Lord breaks down the artificial distinction by which they had separated themselves from their sinful brethren, and in doing so breaks down also the barriers

which held their sympathies back and open the way to full appreciation by them of the joy He would have them feel in the recovery of the lost. Was there one among them with heart yet open to the appeal of the seeking God, surely he smote his breast as he heard these poignant closing words of the parable and cried, no longer in the voice of the Pharisee, but in the voice of the publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" Surely, like one of their own number only a few years later, the scales fell from his eyes and he confessed himself not only a sinner, but even the chief of sinners.

No One Should Be A Lost Elder Brother

The elder brother's resentment resulted in wrong actions (Luke 15:28). He refused to go into the house and hurt himself more than he injured his brother. Note that the father still pleaded with him. The elder brother could never bring himself to acknowledge that he was glad to see his brother back.

The elder brother, from a bitter attitude, rationalized his own actions. Note that without the common courtesy of waiting for his father to explain why he was honoring the prodigal, the elder son could only argue that he had never received what was due him (Luke 15:29) and that his brother was being honored for unconscionable behavior (Luke 15:30). Note that the older brother was blaming the father in both instances; and the father represents God in the parable.

The elder brother's self-justification is typical of the unforgiving heart. He had a strong memory of having done his duty for "Lo, these many years," but there was never a time when he tried to seek and to invite his brother to return (Luke 15:29-30). Certainly the father had to agree concerning the loyalty of the elder brother (Luke 15:31). And the father did not dispute the true nature of his oldest son's character which had been exemplary for "all that I have is thine" (Luke 15:31b).

But, the elder brother, whether from jealousy or indifference or both, disowned his younger brother and attacked his father (Luke 15:30). The elder brother could see only the wastefulness of his sibling **and** the **sin** of his father! What was that sin? It was parallel to what the Pharisees and scribes had said of Jesus, that “This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them” (Luke 15:2). How could the father welcome the boy who had betrayed the family? In other words, how could God welcome any sinner who wanted to come home? Those who imitate the attitude of the elder brother and who do not “forgive men their trespasses” will not be forgiven by God (Mat. 6:14).

The father is pictured as a peacemaker; that is, he began his speech by affirming the elder brother and acknowledges the correctness of the elder brother’s opening remarks (Luke 15:31). The elder brother is set for life through inheritance, but he is not satisfied. If the elder brother had listened without bitterness, he would have heard his father declare that the prodigal would not get one more piece of the father’s estate for “...all that I have is thine” (Luke 15:31b). Note that the father said, “This thy brother was dead” and did not say “this son of mine” (Luke 15:32). The father stated an irrefutable fact—your brother needs forgiveness!

Conclusion

The elder brother knew about his sibling’s sin and did not seek him to save him (Luke 15:30). The elder brother was more concerned about keeping what he had than he was about the lost estate of the younger, wasteful one (Luke 15:29). The elder brother, if he continued in his bitterness, would be lost and would have “cut off his nose to spite his face.”

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CHAPTER 25

Neither Transgressed I At Any Time Thy Commandment: Combating A Holier Than Thou Attitude

Steve Higginbotham

I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, according to their own thoughts; A people who provoke me to anger continually to my face; Who sacrifice in gardens, and burn incense on altars of brick; Who sit among the graves and spend the night in the tombs; Who eat swine's flesh, and the broth of abominable things is in their vessels; Who say, ***'Keep to yourself, Do not come near me, for I am holier than you!'*** These are smoke in my nostrils, a fire that burns all the day. (New King James Version, Isaiah 65:2-5)

By naming the parable Jesus spoke in Luke 15:11-32 the “Parable of the Prodigal Son,” it is possible that an unintended emphasis be placed on just one character in the parable, specifically, the son who left home. However, there are three characters in this story, all of whom share equal importance and teach equally valuable lessons. The son who left home, the son who stayed home, and the loving Father at home all teach important lessons about the nature of God and man.

My assignment is to examine the actions and attitudes of the “older brother” in this parable and to offer practical advice concerning how one might avoid what is commonly called a “holier-than-thou” attitude.

Out of nowhere, Jesus introduces a twist to what was otherwise a story of joy and reconciliation. Actually, prior to telling the parable of the “Lost Son,” Jesus set the stage by telling two other parables which convey the same theme and culminate in the “Parable of the Lost Son.” Jesus began Luke 15 by telling the “Parable of the Lost Sheep” (Luke 15:1-7). The gist of the parable is that the Shepherd sought after his lost sheep, and when it was found, there was great rejoicing. Jesus then immediately followed that parable with the “Parable of the Lost Coin” (Luke 15:8-10). Both of these parables brought to the forefront the great joy that is experienced when one finds that which was lost. However, in the “Parable of the Lost Son,” Jesus adds a new dimension that had not been contemplated in the previous two parables. This new dimension was the introduction to the “older son.”

What should have been an occasion of great joy was met with anger and contempt by the older son (Luke 15:25-32). The reason for his misplaced anger was that he was disappointed with the implications of his father’s grace and was also blind to his own shortcomings which led him to possess a “holier-than-thou” attitude. Let us consider both of these wrong-headed attitudes in light of God’s Word.

Disappointed With The Implications Of God’s Grace

When one considers a Biblical example of one who was disappointed because of God’s grace, surely one’s mind is taken back to the prophet Jonah. When God commanded Jonah to go preach to the city of Nineveh, Jonah boarded a ship in Joppa and went the opposite direction toward Tarshish in disobedience (Jon. 1:1-3). Some have attempted not to excuse his disobedience but to lessen the disgrace of his disobedient decision by saying that fear could have been a factor. After all, the Assyrians were the enemies of Israel and

for an Israelite to march into the capitol city of Assyria and preach against them could likely have resulted in Jonah's death.

While I do not deny this was a dangerous "assignment," I do not believe the text gives any support to such a supposition. The only stated reason for Jonah's disobedience was that he was disappointed with the implications of God's grace. Note what the text states:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. So he prayed to the Lord, and said, 'Ah, Lord, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that you are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, one who relents from doing harm. (Jon. 4:1-2)

In other words, Jonah fled from God and his responsibilities, not because of fear, but because he knew that God would forgive them if they repented. He knew God was a gracious God, and he did not want Nineveh to repent and to escape God's wrath. They were his enemies. From Jonah's perspective, they deserved punishment, so he fled. Imagine that! A prophet of God fleeing from his responsibilities because he was disappointed with the grace of the God he served! Imagine a prophet who would have rather seen his listeners punished than saved! But this was the attitude of the prophet Jonah.

Another passage that comes to mind when one considers being disappointed with the grace of God is the parable Jesus told in Matthew 20:1-16. In this parable, a landowner hired men at different times throughout the day to work in his vineyard. The men who were hired in the morning received a fair but equal pay as well as the men who were hired late in the afternoon. Rather than being amazed by the grace of their employer in paying men who had only worked a short time a full day's wage, they became angry. Their employer had not treated them unfairly. He gave them a fair wage to which they willingly agreed. Their anger was not because they were mistreated,

but because they were disappointed that the landowner would be so gracious to others.

Is this not one of the root problems of the older brother in the “Parable of the Lost Son”? It is not that his Father has ever mistreated or wronged him; rather he was just disappointed with the extent of his Father’s grace. Like Jonah, he did not want reconciliation; he wanted someone to pay for his sins!

And then there is one’s own story. This ugly attitude that is so easy to see in black and white print is not so easily seen when we, ourselves, exhibit it. Several years ago, I baptized a man who was dying. He was truly sorry for his sins, full of regret for wasting his life on himself and for waiting till he was dying before he obeyed the Lord. Shortly after his baptism, this man died. A few weeks after his death, a woman who had recently lost her unbelieving husband to cancer, spoke up in Bible class and said, “I don’t think it’s fair for ‘so-and-so’ to wait until just before his death to obey the gospel and be granted entrance to heaven because he didn’t do anything to deserve it.” My reply to this woman was that she was absolutely right. He did not do anything to deserve it, but I quickly pointed out to her that she had not done anything to deserve going to heaven either, and if this man should not be granted entrance, then neither should she be granted entrance upon the very same basis. Friends, no one is “deserving” of heaven, and all who will dwell there will dwell there because God is a gracious God.

How dare one resent the grace of God at work in the lives of others when he himself needs that same grace! Have not all sufficiently sinned that one should realize how thankful he should be that God is not stingy with His grace? Rather than resenting and being disappointed with the grace of God extended to those who have wandered so far away, should not such instances give one hope and cause one to rejoice?

Take note at how this disappointment with the Father’s grace affected the older brother. In Luke 15:28, the record says that he was “angry” and “would not go in.” In other words, his disappointment with his Father’s grace affected his “attitude” and his “behavior.” Because

he did not appreciate his Father's grace, he was angry when he should have been rejoicing. Again, what is plain to see in black and white is not always so easily seen when it manifests itself in one's own life. How many people do you suppose have been anxious to get through a worship service so that they can get to the restaurant or get back home to see a ball game only to be "delayed" by one who responded to the invitation to be baptized into Christ? Could one's attitude be less than noble at such times? Could one have ever had the thought, "Great, now I'll be late because someone wants to be baptized or sister so-and-so responded for prayers?" How many preachers have been harshly criticized because their presentation of the gospel of Christ exceeded (literally by a matter of minutes) a self-imposed time for what some deem an appropriate length for a sermon?

These events are not events that should elicit anger, but rather joy! Furthermore, if one finds that such events stir attitudes that are less than joy and thanksgiving, one might need to consider his own appreciation of God's grace.

Consider how this disappointment with God's grace not only affected the older brother's attitude, but it also affected his behavior. He refused to attend the party that he should have attended. When one obeys the gospel and becomes a child of God, he understands that Jesus called him to deny himself, pick up a cross, and follow him daily (Luke 9:23). It is not always easy to be a disciple of Jesus, but what helps us to push through the difficult times is an appreciation of God's grace. When one comprehends his own sinfulness and indebtedness, he is given the impetus to do the things that otherwise he might not have done. Where you find one who is struggling with his behavior, you will find one who does not have an acute awareness of his indebtedness to God and does not properly appreciate God's grace.

Self-Deception & Pride: The Roots Of A "Holier-Than-Thou" Attitude

If it were not so serious, it would be comical to contemplate this older brother saying to his father, "Lo, these many years I have

been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time..." (Luke 15:29). Is that not one of the most pompous untruths ever spoken? Everyone who has raised children knows that such a statement grossly misrepresents the truth and demonstrates a self-serving, selective blindness to one's own shortcomings.

Just today, as my family and I were driving to lunch, I asked my fifth-grade daughter about some fussing that was taking place between two of her close friends. As I questioned her concerning why one was upset with the other, she said with all seriousness, "Dad, I don't know what's going on between them. I don't get involved in fourth-grade drama." I about wrecked the car! Are you kidding me? She exhibited two things in that statement that reminded me of this older brother about which I was writing. First, she tried to place herself above the petty squabbles common to lowly fourth-graders and second, she did not recognize that though her "fifth-grade" drama is not to be confused with "fourth-grade" drama, it is drama nonetheless.

This older brother was blind to his own shortcomings but keenly aware of the shortcomings of his younger brother. Such an attitude has led to coining the phrase "holier-than-thou." What a "holier-than-thou" attitude signifies is an attitude that is quick to point out the shortcomings of others while glossing over one's own shortcomings. The prophet Isaiah identified this attitude and in fact, actually used the identical phrase when he described those with this attitude as saying, "Keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you!" (Isa. 65:5a). But note the effect that this attitude has upon God. Isaiah said, "These are smoke in my [God's] nostrils. A fire that burns all the day" (Isa. 65:5b).

In a nutshell, the problem with this attitude is pride. How dare a man be anything but humble when it comes to his spiritual life? The apostle Paul reminds one that "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10) and again, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). If this was not enough to bring one to humility, Isaiah knocks the props out from under one's self-righteousness when he said, "But we are all as an unclean thing and

all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (King James Version, Isa. 64:6).

One cannot help but wonder if pride is considered as such an abomination to God (Pro. 6:16-19) because it is born and sustained by self-deception. For besides God, who should know one’s own weaknesses and frailties any better than oneself. Thus, in light of that, how can someone dare pretend that he stands on a higher footing than those around him? Pride is little more than a masquerade that God sees through completely.

Overcoming A “Holier-Than-Thou” Attitude

Thus far, two problems have been identified which this older brother had: 1) He was disappointed with the implications of God’s grace, and 2) He possessed a “holier-than-thou” attitude. However, at this point, let us consider what one can do to avoid becoming like the older brother in this parable. I would like to suggest four actions that should be taken that will keep one from possessing a “holier-than-thou” attitude.

Be Tolerant of One Another.

Paul instructed the Ephesians to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32). Being kind and tolerant often requires effort, but they bear good fruit. The disciple of Jesus needs to make tolerance and kindness a holy pursuit and a way of life.

Consider how many church problems are caused because of petty grievances. How many relationships have been destroyed and how many churches have been split, not by doctrinal error, but by a lack of tolerance and kindness shown toward each other. Instead of being swift to anger, one should be slow to anger (Jam. 1:19). Instead of gunning for a fuss, one should be pursuing peace (Rom. 14:19). Instead of searching to expose some flaw in others, should not one seek to cover their flaws (1 Pet. 4:8; Pro. 17:9)?

Before one gets angry with another, one would do well to ask the following questions: 1) Was the action taken or the word spoken

done to hurt you intentionally? 2) Was the action taken or the word spoken while attempting to accomplish good? 3) Did the action taken or the word spoken make God angry? If one would consider these three questions, many of the conflicts one has with another would disappear, especially when one considers the third question. If an action does not make God angry, then a person needs to develop maturity and work toward that same end. In order to keep from being considered “holier-than-thou,” one must develop tolerance.

Mutually Confess One's Own Weaknesses.

James wrote, “Confess your trespasses to one another and pray for one another” (Jam. 5:16a). If one is to avoid this “holier-than-thou” attitude, he must be willing to confess his own weaknesses. This confession acknowledges one stands on the same footing as others. At best, all men are sinners, saved by the grace of God. However, when one pretends to know nothing of sin or temptation, he turns others away because they know it to be hypocrisy.

Be aware there is a fine line between two extremes with reference to confession of sins. The first is the act that suggests one has no sins of which to repent. The second danger is seen when one confesses all the gory details of his sordid past, almost to the point it leaves one wondering if he is confessing or bragging. Confession of sin ought to be born out of brokenness, not bragging rights.

If the church is to thrive, she must understand the weaknesses in others and be open and clear concerning her own shortcomings and weaknesses. How else could one expect the church to grow? It is hard enough for one to make himself vulnerable by confessing his shortcomings and struggles but to do so in an environment that acts as though they cannot understand and does not support one in his struggle against sin is just about asking too much.

Do Not Doubt The Genuineness Of Another.

Because man is unable to see the heart, he sometimes judges one's genuineness on insufficient evidence. One may pass judgment on a brother because of the repetition of a sin. However, the Lord makes it clear that this is not a good way to judge another's genuineness (Luke 17:4; 1 Cor. 13:5). Do any struggle with sin? While some particular

sins may not bother or tempt a person, surely all would admit that others do. Would one want to be judged by the number of times he has succumbed to temptation? If not, the “Golden Rule” would cause a person to refrain from judging others on the same basis (Mat. 7:12).

Sometimes one will doubt the genuineness of another upon the basis of the sin that was committed. The more outrageous the sin, the more doubt one has as to the genuineness of the faith in others. However, how would such a basis of judgment cause one to think of David, Peter, Paul and a host of other great Bible characters?

Sometimes one will doubt the genuineness of another simply because he lacks a personal commitment to the sinner. When the sin is committed by a person’s loved one, it becomes easy to forgive. But if the same sin is committed by someone other than one’s family and friends, it becomes much easier to pass judgment.

If one is to avoid a “holier-than-thou” attitude, he cannot doubt another’s genuineness. The reason a person cannot do this is because of his human limitations. One cannot see into the heart to see what motivates another person’s actions (1 Cor. 2:11), thus he must resist making another person’s outward behavior the whole criterion for judgment.

Avoid Indiscriminate Denunciations Of Sin.

In order to avoid a “holier-than-thou” attitude, one must put forth the effort to discriminate between sinners. It would be much easier to treat all sins alike, but this would be unfair. True, all sin separates one from God and has the potential to eternally separate one from God, but that is not to say that all sin is the same. Jesus Himself stated that some sin was “greater” than others (John 19:11). When one fails to make distinction between a struggling Christian and a defiant and rebellious Christ rejecter, he is not only being nonsensical, but unbiblical.

Does this mean one should go soft on sin? Certainly not. Condemn sin; all sin! Do not ever minimize the guilt of the sinner. But at the same time, do not fail to make distinction. For example, if one sees no difference between the unrepentant prostitute and the

engaged couple who in a moment of weakness succumb to temptation, how could he ever expect that couple to confess their sin? Surely one can see that these situations are not the same. Granted, both are sin; both must be confessed and condemned. But is there no distinction to be made between the two?

By introducing the older brother into this set of three parables in Luke 15, Jesus knocks the props out from under many smug, self-righteous, “holier-than-thou” people who have never “wandered far from home,” but who because of their sour and prideful attitude are just as lost at home as the younger brother was while he was in the “far country.”

May God help us to combat a “holier-than-thou” attitude. Not only because it involves one in sinful pride and self-deception, but it also all but destroys one’s effectiveness and outreach to the lost.

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CHAPTER 26

Thou Never Gavest Me A Kid, That I Might Make Merry With My Friends: Accusing The Father Of Favoritism

Raymond Bush

The parable of the prodigal son has been preached and written about more than most, if not all, of the other parables. Could it be possible that it is because this situation occurs more than the others? The focus is usually on the one who left and returned, the prodigal, more than the one who stayed behind. There may be more who stay behind that have an attitude like the older brother than we would like to think about. It just might not be manifested as was the older brother in the parable. For example, have you ever heard something such as, “I know he or she went forward asking for prayers but I will wait and see if they really repented before using them.” Maybe we have all been a little reluctant about someone like that before.

I want to present some background material before getting to my main point about favoritism. I want us to look at a portrait of the Fallen, a portrait of the Father, the earthly example, then a portrait of the Foolish, and finally a portrait of the Father, the heavenly example. In order to see what brought about the attitude of the older son, we must examine the younger son.

A Portrait Of The Fallen (Luke 15:12-20)

What He Wanted (Luke 15:12)

The younger son approached his father and said, “Give me the portion of the goods that falleth to me.” Under the Law, he could

request his inheritance before the death of the father and receive his portion, which would be one-third of the inheritance since the older son would receive a double portion (King James Version, Deu. 21:16-17).

Where He Went (Luke 15:13)

After he received his inheritance, he gathered all together and went into a “far country.” It does not tell us where it was but that he journeyed where he wanted to. He now had the financial means to do so. Sometimes in life we just make the wrong choices; I am sure he felt free to do as he pleased and go where he wanted and spend freely because of receiving the inheritance.

What He Wasted (Luke 15:13-14a)

One can just imagine all the **fun** he was having, or at least what he believed was fun. He was living it up just like so many young folks think they are doing today. He was living an abandoned life, lacking in moral restraint, recklessly wasteful, and wildly extravagant. That is what we call riotous living. He had wasted his substance which is his living. He had wasted his self which is his life.

What Went Wrong (Luke 15:14b-16)

In Luke 15 verse 14 the Bible says, “There arose a mighty famine in that land.” The famine was brought about because of the lack of rain which means no crops were able to grow. The prodigal son began to be in want for food.

The prodigal son was humbled by feeding pigs (Luke 15:15). Feeding the pigs was a detestable act to do for a Jew because the pig is viewed as an unclean animal. It was bad enough to be joined to a foreigner but to have to do something such as feeding pigs was absolutely horrible. When one goes off to a far country and wastes what he has, he finds himself doing things he would not normally do.

The prodigal son was hungry but no food was supplied (Luke 15:16). For the prodigal son, it has come down to eating with the pigs or starving. How many people in our society have gotten themselves into similar situations? Just think of the people who have left the

church and gone off into a life of drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, stealing, robbery, or such like. Some of these people will realize their mistakes and come back to the church, but far too many of them never will. It is such a tragedy to waste one's life and end up in torment eternally.

When He Woke Up (Luke 15:17-20)

According to Luke 15:17-19, the prodigal son **reasoned**. He began to think about the servants at his father's house; they had plenty to eat and he was starving. When he came to himself, he realized that he needed to go home. He believed he deserved no more than to be a hired servant for his father so that at least he would not be hungry. He began to think of what he may say to his father. "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee. And am no more worthy to be called thy son" (Luke 15:17-19).

Luke 15:20 tells us that the prodigal son did **return** home to his father. It is the wisest decision he had made since leaving home. How many in this land we live in have gone back into the world, the far country, who need to wake up and come home to God, Christ, and the church. Yet, there are some who will say, "I don't attend services anymore, but I have not left the Lord." When they cease assembling to worship and are not serving God, they have left the Lord also. The prodigal son is certainly showing people today that riotous living is not the way to please God and also that being in a "far country" away from God is not where anyone needs to be. Thank God he demonstrated that one can return to the Father.

We can all probably think of some we have known that have left the church because of some sin they would rather be involved in than be faithful to the Lord. What about someone who has divorced his wife for a reason other than fornication and married another woman, causing both to live in adultery but will not get out of the situation (Mat. 19:9). In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, Paul says that fornicators and adulterers, along with many other sinners, will not inherit the kingdom of God, but "such were some of you," but no more.

A Portrait Of The Father, An Earthly Example (Luke 15:20-24)

Perceives: Able To See Or Hear (Luke 15:20)

One cannot help but wonder how many times the father had looked in the direction from which the son left in hopes to see his son returning. How his heart must have ached as he looked for the son many times but never seeing him until that special day when he saw him from a great way off coming toward home. Compassion welled up in his heart and he **ran** to meet him; he did not stand and wait for the son to come to him; he fell on his neck and kissed him. As the son was saying the things he had rehearsed in his heart to his father, his father interrupted him and told his servants to bring the best robe, a ring, and shoes for his feet.

Passion: Ardent Adoring Love (Luke 15:20, 24)

The father's love is certainly demonstrated in what we have seen in Luke 15:20 but look at what he says in Luke 15:24, "my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." The one whom he loved is back where he should be. Without having experienced a situation such as this, it is hard to fathom how joyous and thankful one would feel.

Pardons: Seen In The Father's Actions (Luke 15:20, 22-24)

The pardon by the father of the son is certainly demonstrated as you read Luke 15:20, 22-24. His compassion was shown by falling upon his neck and kissing him as well as requiring the servants to bring the robe, the ring, and the shoes. The pardon and compassion are also shown through the killing of the fatted calf, the music and dancing, making merry. All seems to be well again for this father, but is it really?

Preparation (Luke 15:22-23)

One may ask what is meant by preparation. The father's heart was prepared by the teaching of God's Word. We must consider an Old Testament passage and see it practiced here. Micah 6:8 says, "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" We are using this father at this time from the earthly standpoint. The father demonstrates that he recognizes

that he knows what is good from God's Word and what it means to do good. He also knows what is required of him in doing justly. That means he is to be fair in his dealings with others but especially with his own son. There is no doubt that he is doing just that. To love mercy means to be kind, considerate, and merciful towards everyone that needs your kindness. Certainly in practicing these acts, one is walking humbly with God. We all must strive to do so.

A Portrait Of The Foolish (Luke 15:28-32)

Full Of Anger (Luke 15:27-28)

When the older son comes in from the field, where he obviously has been working, and hears music and dancing, he asks one of the servants what these things meant. The servant informs him that his brother who was gone has returned home. Rather than rejoicing as his father had, he becomes angry and would not go in to celebrate with them. The father comes out and pleads with him trying to persuade him to come in and rejoice that his brother has returned.

Falsely Accuses (Luke 15:29-30)

One can almost hear the venom coming out of his mouth as he speaks, or perhaps yells, at his father. "Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment" (Luke 15:29). This sounds much like the Pharisee of Luke 18:10-12. He had been such a good man, "not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican" (Luke 18:10-12). He fasted twice in the week and gave tithes of all his possessions. The Pharisee was not justified; neither was this oldest son and yet he says, "Thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29). One can hear the anger and sarcasm rolling off his lips as he falsely accuses his father of treating him differently, showing favoritism to this wasteful riotous brother who he says "destroyed his living with harlots" (Luke 15:30).

Folly Of His Attitude (Luke 15:31-32)

Has this angry son forgotten that he had remained at home with the father and that all that his father had was his? Could he not have

had a party anytime he wanted to? Why would he accuse the father of favoritism when he could have killed the fatted calf anytime? He definitely has an attitude problem, his anger is unjustified, and his attitude is completely wrong. He would not even acknowledge that the one returning was his own brother. He said to his father, “Thy son,” not my brother. (Luke 15:30) One would think he would be glad to see his brother, but all he could see was the years he had been working his brother had been out ‘living it up.’ Maybe he is accusing his brother of doing what he would like to have been doing, lying with the harlots.

A Portrait Of The Heavenly Father

A Loving Father Who Shows No Favoritism

Genesis 18:16-33 is the account where Abraham reasons with God about Sodom and Gomorrah. God has revealed to him that He is going to destroy these cities because their sin is very grievous; however, Abraham knows that Lot and his family are in Sodom so he asks God if He would “destroy the righteous with the wicked” (Gen. 18:23). He asks God if there were 50 righteous, would he destroy them also. Abraham asks, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25) God says he would spare them. Abraham then asks about 45 then 40, 30, 20, and finally 10 and God said he would spare Sodom for 10. We all know the rest of the story: 10 were not found. Only four in Sodom were found to be righteous in Sodom, Lot, his wife and two daughters.

God Perceives

God is able to see the outward just as we can see the outward. He made us that way. We can see what man does, but God can also see the heart, what man thinks. Jesus said in Luke 16:15, “Ye are they which justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts.” God made man and He knows how he functions. Not only does He know how man’s body functions, but also knows his heart, what is within. When the 11 apostles were seeking to replace Judas in Acts chapter one, they had appointed two men, Barsabas and Matthias. They prayed, “Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show

whether of these two thou hast chosen” (Acts 1:24). Think about that; God knows the hearts of **all** men.

God Is Passionate

There is no better way of showing God’s love than what is stated in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” God’s love for man, whom He created, is so great that He gave His very best as a sacrifice for undeserving humanity. In Romans 8:31-39 Paul shows how much God loved us in not sparing Jesus but delivered Him up for us all and shows that no one or anything can separate us from the love of Christ and the love of God. If people would only accept the Word of God and obey it, a loving God will add them to the church (Acts 8:47). His love should motivate one to believe in Jesus, His Son, and repent of one’s sins or perish (John 8:24; Luke 13:3). One must confess Christ as the Son of God and then be baptized for the remission of sins (Acts 2:37-38). God shows no favoritism because whoever does His will, He will save from their sins.

God Prepares

God sent His Son—according to Galatians 4:4—when the fullness of time came. He came to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). He came to prepare a place for them while here on earth in that He promised to build his church as described and established in Acts chapter 2 (Mat. 16:18; Acts 2). The church is a prepared place for those who obey God while here on earth. Jesus has gone to prepare a place for those who love him, obey him, and stay faithful to him. That place is in heaven (John 14:1-3; 1 Pet. 1:3-4).

God Is A Legislative Father—He Pardons

Let us look at Isaiah 55:7, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” God is encouraging those who are separated from Him because of sin to return and He will pardon their sins and receive them back. It is clear He shows no favoritism for any who do as He says, He will pardon them.

In encouraging Israel and enjoining upon them to keep His commandments in Deuteronomy 10:12-17, he reminds them that he regardeth not persons. That is, He shows no favoritism. In 2 Chronicles 19:6-7 God reminds the judges to take heed what they did because they were judging for God, who was with them and not man, and that with God there was no respect of persons.

We need to focus on Ezekiel 18. One will need to read the entire chapter as we will only be discussing certain passages and making application to them. In Ezekiel 18:1-3, God is not allowing the parable of sour grapes to be used anymore. In Ezekiel 18:4, He says all souls are His, soul of father or soul of the son and “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Eze. 18:4). He then talks about the just man who does right, beginning in Ezekiel 18:5, and lists some sins he has not engaged in through Ezekiel 18:8 and in Ezekiel 18:9, He states that in essence if he has obeyed Him, he shall live. He speaks of a son begotten of this man in Ezekiel 18:10-13 that is a robber, a shedder of blood, and other sinful things and according to Ezekiel 18:13, “He shall surely die.” God says, “If he beget a son, that seeth all his father’s sins which he hath done, and considereth and does not such like,” and enumerates those sins his father did, “He shall not die but shall live” (Eze. 18:14-17). As for his father, “He shall die in his iniquity” (Eze. 18:18). In Ezekiel 18:19, Israel wanted to know why the son would not die and they ask, “Doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father?” God says no, that what he did was right and that “he shall surely live” (Eze. 18:19). Ezekiel 18:20 reads, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.” God says in essence that you do not abide by that parable any longer.

God then shows that if the wicked turns from his sins and obeys God’s commandments, “he shall surely live, he shall not die, all his transgressions...shall not be mentioned,” but now “in his righteousness he shall live” (Eze. 18:21-22). God shows by way of a question that He has no pleasure in the wicked dying, but that if they

return from their ways they will live (Eze. 18:23). God then shows that if the righteous turns and does according to the abomination that the wicked does he will die; “All his righteousness he hath done shall not be mentioned” (Eze. 18:24). Yet Israel said God’s ways were not equal. But God said, “Is not my way equal? Are not your ways unequal?” (Eze. 18:25). God then repeats in essence what He had already said, “when a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done he shall die” (Eze. 18:26). In Ezekiel 18:27, God says, “When the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive.” Because he considers and turns away from the wickedness, “He shall surely live, he shall not die” (Eze. 18:28). God again points out by way of question that His ways are equal, but Israel’s ways are not (Eze. 18:29). In Ezekiel 18:30, God shows that He will judge Israel and encourages them to cast away their transgressions and make a new heart and a new spirit. He then asks, “For why will ye die?” (Eze. 18:31). In Ezekiel 18:32, God reminds them that He has “no pleasure in the death of him that dieth. Wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.” How can anyone study this chapter and think that God shows favoritism? God has made it clear: obey Him and live; do not obey Him and die.

He Probes

In Luke 6:46 Jesus says, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” This is a question that probes to the very depth of one’s heart. There are multitudes of religious people who call him Lord that have not even obeyed the first principles of the gospel. They have heard some of God’s Word and believe on God and Jesus as His Son and may be sorry for their sins, but they have not really repented (turned from sin with the abhorrence thereof), nor confessed that Jesus is the Son of God, but confessed that He is Lord. These people have certainly not been baptized (immersed) for the remission (forgiveness) of their sins and yet want to call him Lord. Read Romans 10:17; Hebrews 11:6; Luke 13:3-5; Acts 8:37; Matthew 10:32-33; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4 and Galatians 3:26-27 to confirm

that these who have not obeyed these first principles still want to call Jesus Lord. Another probing statement is found in Matthew 7:21-23, “Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” They will ask, “Have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?” (Mat. 7:22). His response will be, “I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Mat. 7:23).

Romans 2:6 states that God “will render to every man according to his deeds.” He will render to some eternal life and to others indignation and wrath according to Romans 2:7-8. He then reminds us in Romans 2:11, “For there is no respect of persons with God.” Colossians 3:24-25 shows that some will “receive the reward of inheritance, for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:24). Then in Colossians 3:25 we read, “He that doeth wrong shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons.” These two passages should convince anyone that God is not showing favoritism in His dealings with men.

A Longsuffering Father

There are many places in the Old Testament that would illustrate this, but I want to use one in the Old Testament and two in the New Testament.

God Delights In Pardoning Those Who Repent (2 Chr. 7:14.)

He demonstrates His compassion and longsuffering to His people who are called by His name, who will humble themselves, pray, seek His face, and turn from their wicked ways (repent); then He will forgive their sins. This is not a word for word quote but the gist of what is said. Who could read this and not think that God is a loving, longsuffering, forgiving Father? We can safely say that He did these things so many times in the Old Testament that surely we can believe He will still do so even in our day and time.

God Desires The Prodigal's Return (Mat. 11:28-30).

Just as the father in the parable was looking for and longing for his son's return and was thrilled when he came back, how much more the heavenly Father when one of His return. Even those in heaven

rejoice when one returns. Luke 15:7 says, “Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth.”

Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” This is the Lord’s invitation to the prodigals to come back home. Probably every church building in any given community would be overflowing if everyone in a “far country” would return to their Lord.

God Desires That None Perish.

We can read in 2 Peter 3:9 that “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” God has always carried out His promises and this one is no exception. He is referring to His coming that some were scoffing at in 2 Peter 3:4. He is also patient toward us in His longsuffering and has no desire to punish but definitely will if one does not obey and follow His teaching. In 2 Peter 3:10-11, He lets us know how horrible it will be in the day He brings all to an end and tells us the kind of people we are to be and encourages us to look for and be ready in 2 Peter 3:12.

Precepts To Follow

We are to **receive** those who repent and accept them with love as Paul encouraged those to do for the one withdrawn from in 1 Corinthians 5:5. He had been guilty of having his father’s wife. Paul had encouraged them in 2 Corinthians 2:5-10 to confirm their love toward him and forgive.

We are to **respect** their request even as the father did the prodigal son, no matter what the wrong has been. When one returns confessing the sin and asking for our prayers, we must accept their repentance and receive them with open arms, doubting nothing.

We should **rejoice** at their return again as the father did in our parable (Luke 15:7) If we all practice these three R’s, it would make the lost’s transition back into the fold easier. Our heavenly Father, being no respecter of persons, certainly receives the prodigal back. He respects the prodigal’s repentance and return and rejoices that

he has done such. Can we do any differently? I think not. Let us remember the words of the apostle Peter in Acts 10:34-35, “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”

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CHAPTER 27

This Thy Son—Accepting The Responsibility To Be Our Brother’s Keeper

Matthew Jones

The question is as old as the first brothers to walk the earth: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (King James Version, Gen. 4:9), and God’s answer has always been the same. This struggle has echoed down through time even to the time of Christ when he told “the pearl of parables,” highlighting a troubled elder brother. It is of great importance when considering the elder brother, as described in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, that the student look to himself. This study will take into consideration what responsibility, if any, each Christian has in consideration of both his wayward and his faithful brethren. The focus will be mainly upon the Christian’s response and responsibility in matters concerning those who have come home, and it will be fourfold: a pronoun problem, a crucial contrast, a reasonable response, and a simple solution. What should a Christian learn about his responsibility to be his brother’s keeper from the elder brother as he is described in Jesus’ parable (Luke 15:25-32)?

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he

hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as **this thy son** was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

A Pronoun Problem

A pronoun is a word that stands in place of a noun. In the following sections particular attention will be paid to the possessive pronouns used by each of the individuals portrayed in the parable. The thought to keep in mind is that among possessions and people, men only truly take care of that in which they have a personal investment. In the case of human relationships, this would be appropriately be described as belonging to one another, or in one word—family (Parker 352).

The Prodigal's Pronouns

There is no need to dwell greatly upon the prodigal's condition or attitude since this volume has sections wholly devoted to those topics; however, for the sake of understanding the brotherly responsibility to prodigals, it is useful to notice briefly the prodigal's pronoun usage in his various states. First, consider that even in the depths of his despair and filthiness of his sins he refers to the father as "my father" (Luke 15:17-18). Second, upon his repentance and return he regarded himself unworthy of the father using the possessive pronoun "my" in calling him "my son," and remarked, "And [I] am no more worthy to

be called thy son” (Luke 15:19). Even feeling unworthy, he calls the father, “My father.”

The Elder Son’s Pronouns

The elder son does not claim ownership of his brother. He responds to the father’s entreaty with, “Neither transgressed I at any time **thy** commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this **thy** son was come which hath devoured **thy** living” (Luke 15:29-30). “He could not see that if his father had gained a son, he had gained a brother” (Lightfoot 123). When a Christian considers his role as his brother’s keeper, he can quickly learn from the elder brother’s speech that pointing a finger and distancing self from the penitent sinner is not acceptable. His error is seen clearly in the treatment of his brother, but it began in a lack of love for the father: one must love the Father in order to properly love his Father’s sons (Parker 23).

The Father’s Pronouns

The Father’s pronouns are particularly striking and instructive to the one who desires to respond properly to the one coming home from the far country of sin. Upon hearing his son say that he is unworthy to have his father call him his son, he responds, “This **my** son was dead, and is alive again” (Luke 15:24). This shows the *paternalism* of the father who wanted nothing more than to have the family whole again (Butler 310). Furthermore, the reader notices the answer to the elder brother’s “this thy son” statement with, “This thy brother was dead and is alive again” (Luke 15:32). The father changes only two words from his previous statement in verse twenty four, but teaches volumes to one who has responsibility toward his brother—**My** son is **thy** brother.

The Non-Family Pronouns

It is easy to look over the servant of whom the elder son makes his inquiry, but such would be a mistake for his speech is the key to seeing the full picture of the pronoun problem in this parable. Notice that he did not say “our father” or “our brother.” Why not? He is not in the family. This pattern of speech on his part should not be read into too much, but it is a good example of how one speaks as an

outsider to a family. It is a further indictment of the elder brother’s “thy, thy, thy” attitude (Lange 291). Likewise when a Christian speaks of brethren, the wayward, or those who are returning without the delicate possessive pronouns, at least implied, “our” and “my,” he should see it as an indication that his heart is not in the right place to be his brother’s keeper. He is taking the neutral, at best, stance of one not in the family.

A Crucial Contrast

The above section fleshed out the heart problems that kept the elder brother from being his brother’s keeper, and now a contrast will be made between two brothers in order to draw a Biblical picture of a true brother. What a great difference can be seen when Jesus Christ, the greatest Brother that ever lived, is contrasted with elder brother in his parable. As is discussed at length in other sections of this volume, the elder brother represents the Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus’ day. Knowing this, a Bible student can see immediately the polar differences in the two, and he can immediately take lessons from Jesus’ confrontations with these sects. Keeping the elder brother in the confines of the parable’s description of him, however, also yields a strong contrast between him and the greatest Brother, Jesus Christ.

Investment In The Pre-Prodigal

There is no evidence at all in the beginning of the parable that the older brother had any close connection or strong bond with his younger brother. When the prodigal decided to leave, there was no brotherly sentiment holding him back, no interjection by the older brother seeking for the young man to stay. How different this is from the attitude and relationship Jesus has with men who are faced with temptation and trial. In contrast to the picture of the elder brother standing silent as the prodigal began his journey into sin, see Jesus reach out His hand to a struggling, sinking Peter (Mat. 14:30-31). See the good example of our Brother when He counted us worthy to be called brethren, “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren” (Heb. 2:11).

Actions Toward The Prodigal

Consider God's patience toward the wayward throughout time. Historically, God has had patience even with stubborn and difficult men. Brown commented concerning this patience:

Now, *First*, This is designed to represent to us the goodness of God; how strangely gentle and winning he has been towards those that were strangely forward and provoking. He reasoned with Cain: *Why art thou wroth?*

He *bore Israel's manners in the wilderness*, Acts xiii. 18. How mildly did God reason with Elijah, when he was upon the fret (1 Kings xix. 46), and especially with Jonah whose case was very parallel with this here, for he was there disquieted at the repentance of Ninevah, and the mercy shown to it, as the elder brother here; and those questions, *Dost thou well to be angry? And, Should not I spare Nineveh?* Are not unlike these expostulations of the father with the elder brother here. (750)

This patience and pleading with the wayward stands in stark contrast to the attitudes and actions of the elder brother. Where in the parable is the elder brother's attempt to bring his brother home? One might say, "The father did not make an attempt, so why would the brother be indicted for failure to do so?" The answer again is found when one views the actions of the Christian's Brother, Jesus Christ. Jesus left His place in heaven to come to this far country that was full of sin in order to bring his prodigal brothers home. "Was it not an 'Elder Brother' who left home, and went into the far country 'to seek and to save that which was lost, and to give his life a ransom for many'" (Buttrick 200)? There is an excellent section in this volume that instructs as to how one might reach out to the prodigal and bring him home. The Father did not come; the Brother

did. The purpose here is merely to establish that a Christian must be like one of the two brothers under consideration. The question echoes, "Am I my brother's keeper even when he is gone, lost in a seemingly hopeless state of sin?" Jesus was.

Reception Of The Penitent

The part that seems easiest to some would be the reception of one coming home. This is a victory, something men are accustomed to celebrating in day-to-day life. "When a sinner comes to Christ that is a great event—Far greater than a political victory or sports victory. We need to rejoice in these spiritual victories more than we rejoice in the earthly victories," commented Butler (310). When considering the far greater victory of one coming home to the Lord, it seems that there would be a natural reaction in a positive way to the realization that one who was lost is found; one who was dead is alive. The brother from Luke 15 had no such reaction. He distanced himself from his brother physically and verbally. Buttrick noted "Many a man has been driven back to the far country by the lovelessness of the elder brother" (200). The first step to tending to the needs of a brother is to come near to that brother. This is true no matter the state of the brother, but it should be particularly relished when that connection has for some time been severed by the ugliness of sin. Furthermore, this embrace should be sweetened by the fact that the recipient of the prodigal was a constant companion and encourager to the prodigal before he began his deviant journey and because of the countless hours spent in prayer on that one's behalf. The recipient ought to tear up at the thought of all the failed attempts he made to bring the prodigal home, and after all that, here he is, washed, clean, restored: this my brother. No such attitude is found in the elder brother, neither such actions. "And Jesus reckons as lost every loveless man, every man who looks upon his brother with cold and critical eyes, regardless of how utterly his despised brother may have wasted his substance with riotous living" (Chappell 171-72). However, our Savior, our Brother, is in the presence of the angels and therefore rejoices greatly at a prodigals return (Luke 15:10). Never a moment goes by that one of His who went wayward is in a state of

sin that His pain is not great, but He is no longer here to reach them directly. It is up to the brothers in the world to be the keepers.

A Reasonable Response

A response to the elder brother of the text is, in fact, a response to many of the people with whom a Christian is associated. Furthermore, such a response calls that Christian to respond to some that he would regard as great men and women of the faith. There is no doubt that among the religious leaders being depicted by our Lord as this older brother, there were many who were considered great and holy men. Their daily actions aside from their attitude toward the lost would have earned them respect in the eyes of many. In like manner, the Christian who responds to this elder brother will be responding to the elder, deacon, preacher, Bible teacher, etc. who has won respect because of great works and constant labors but who has utterly failed in this matter of the heart.

In the parable the Elder Brother is not impressive.
In the parable we are ready to hurl stones at him.
Out of the parable he is not anathematized. Out
of the parable he is held on considerable regard.
And, in strict fairness, a certain tribute must be
paid him. He was steadily industrious; on the
day of rejoicing he came in late from the field. He
was conscientious, dependable, and consistent.
(Buttrick 198)

Chiefly, however, a proper response to the actions of the elder brother ought to be a response of introspection. It would be far too much like him and like the Pharisees he represents to sit back and say, “Yes, those around me do struggle with this problem,” and then move on unchanged by the message.

In light of the previous sections concerning the elder brother’s actions toward the prodigal, how should one respond to him? Some give him a pass, trying to argue that he is misunderstood and has a

reasonable complaint to his father. Such would argue that it is not fair that he worked so hard and did not receive what this wicked brother received for merely ceasing wicked behavior. One who would argue such would be showing the elder brother inside him. Also, such an argument is blasphemous; it allies the one making it with the Pharisees and Sadducees and, therefore, against the Lord. Rejecting this response, the Christian may embrace, rather than attempt to soften, the stinging lesson of this hardhearted brother. Given that many of the shortcomings of the elder brother have a tendency to show up in congregations of the Lord's church and the individuals who make it up, throughout this section, as a response is made, it would be fitting to substitute "self" for "elder brother."

Response To The Elder Brother's Actions

"Self, stop working so hard at what seems righteous that you overlook the needs of the brother in your midst." Of course our Brother teaches us how to avoid such foolishness.

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha was not doing wrong things; in fact, that which she did could be considered good. It is true that the reader should not make too much of a parallel between this text and the text of the prodigal son, but the one point that can be seen in the Lord's response that

certainly would apply to the elder brother is that he should have been looking away from his many great works and focusing on his struggling brother. Merely busying oneself with morally sound tasks does not mean that that one is doing what is right or “needful.” It is good to consider what Roy had to say: “The attitude of the elder son could have induced his brother to leave” (69).

“Self, be active in being a good brother before the crisis comes.” Our Lord epitomized the concept of being a good brother to the greatest extent possible; “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). It is interesting that Christians often find it difficult to do for one another that which our Lord requires that they do for those who are enemies.

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same. And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil. Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6:31-36)

Jesus indicates that the actions required to be a good brother to those whom a man loves is a task so simple that those in the world carry it out. He does not paint the picture that such care is worthless, but that it should not be viewed as tedious as would be caring in that way for an enemy. How much then can one challenge self to be loving and caring toward “this my brother?”

Response To Jesus' Action And His Reason For The Parable

The Lord taught this parable as an answer to the words and attitudes of the religious leaders of His day. These men exhibited great pride and self-righteousness, which lead them down the path of complacency toward those morally wrong individuals whom they deemed unworthy of God. They, in their accusation of the Lord, used their brethren as a method for insulting the Lord. Rather than helping the wayward, they used them as ammunition in a battle against the One to whom they should have been bringing them. The Christian can respond to the Lord's actions and words in two ways. First, it is not wrong to associate with immoral individuals in order to bring them to the Lord. However, the Christian, in this situation, must follow the Lord's example in not getting entangled in or condoning the actions of those whom he is reaching. Second, the Christian should respond to those who would argue against being a brother's keeper by doing what Jesus did: teaching. Some will undoubtedly hold the Pharisee line and argue against the loving attention that needs to be given to the wayward brother. These individuals should be taught and encouraged to do the right thing and have the proper response to the prodigals with whom they have association. The response necessary in both these cases is to consider Jesus' words and actions and be a little more like Him every day.

Response To The Charge To Be "My Brother's Keeper"

To properly respond to what can clearly be seen to be the Christians' duty to his brother, that Christian must first turn the parable inward and find where he stands in relation to the characters depicted in the parable. "What attitudes are indicated by my recent words and actions?" one might ask.

At this point you have invested some time in considering this portion of this volume, and a challenge comes to you. Would you be willing to stop learning or pondering and start applying? Are you a person of action? This writer challenges you to do what he did, to take a sobering look at self and recognize the need, if any, for change in your life. Simply consider and respond to the following questions.

Who were the last three people to respond at your congregation?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(Can you name them? First and last name?)

Why did each respond?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(Can you recall each specific struggle and need?)

What have you been doing since then to help encourage each?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

(Prayers and cards are good, but what have you **done**?)

A brother in Christ is the Christian's responsibility at all times. He should receive care and thought even as he walks daily in faithful adherence to God's Word. The occasional oversight to one's brotherly duty to such a brother is understandable, but how does the Christian defend himself when a fellow brother goes forward and broadcasts to the church that he is coming home, struggling, or hurting. The charge to be his keeper is real. It requires prayer. It requires a kind word. It requires **action**. How can a Christian's response end at the hug given after service? Does the problem somehow disappear? Does Satan throw up his hands and surrender the fight? Does the world withdraw its influence upon him? No! The brother will go out and face the same difficulties the next day but will he face them with the constant support of a whole family of Christians? What is the answer to the charge to be "thy brother's keeper"? It is answered when the invitation is less about getting them down the aisle than

it is about helping them in their daily lives. The charge is met when “going forward” is not merely met by a hug and a pat on the back but by a daily devotion to the brother who responded in accordance with the need that he stated. It is answered when Christians make a concerted effort on a daily basis to get the wayward brother there in the first place so that he may respond to the invitation of our Lord to come home. It is met when brothers encourage one another in the first place so that they have the support necessary to help them choose not to go off into the far country to begin with.

A Simple Solution

Strive to be like the Father and the third brother of the parable, the One who told it.

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CHAPTER 28

Lost At Home: Going Astray Without Going Away

Tom Holland

Jesus' parable of the prodigal son was initially a response to the criticism of the Pharisees and scribes because, as they charged: "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). Jesus used three parables in His response to the criticism. First, the parable of the lost sheep. The lesson: "There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repents" (Luke 15:7). Second, the parable of the lost coin. The lesson: "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10). Third, the parable of the prodigal son in which Jesus explains the meaning of repentance and one son who repents and the older boy who needed to repent.

The meaning of repentance is seen in a contrast of attitudes. The younger son said to the father, "Give me the portion of the goods that falls to me" (Luke 15:12). But after a journey into a far country where he wasted his possessions, he "came to himself." Sin is a state of moral insanity. When the younger brother "came to himself," he resolved to go home with a totally different attitude. He determined to go home, beseech his father for forgiveness, and humbly say, "Make me like one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19). His arrogant "give me" selfish demand was gone. He now humbly implores, "Make me" as a hired servant. His attitude has made a 180° turn.

Many heart-teaching lessons have been based on the change of mind of the prodigal and the gracious, merciful, loving acceptance of the father.

Jesus' parable has been identified as "The Prodigal Son" and "The Parable of the Lost Boy." The Scottish commentator, William

Barclay, calls the parable, “Parable of the Loving Father” and Barclay observed: “The parable should never have been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, for the son is not the hero...it tells us rather about a father’s love than a son’s sin” (213). It seems that an identification “Parable of a Penitent” would be both accurate and appropriate because the parable explains forces for good that can produce repentance, or a change of mind. The parable may well be identified as the “Parable of Two Lost Boys.”

The Most Frightening Word

The word *lost* has been identified as the most frightening word in the English language. One can only imagine the heart-breaking, mental anguish, and overwhelming sorrow of parents who have a child abducted or kidnapped, or the enormous grief of those who have children that are swept out into the ocean by the strong force of an undertow.

Jesus used a word for *lost* which means a loss of well-being, not a lost existence. Vine said the word *lost*, sometimes translated *destroy* means ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being” (“Lose”).

It is tragic to be lost “in a far country” of waste; a waste of talent, precious days of life, and opportunities for meaningful service. However, it is just as serious to be lost at home.

Why The Older Son Was Lost At Home

There are basically three reasons the older brother was lost at home. These reasons may be summarized as the “ABCs” of being lost at home.

The older brother was lost because of an ungodly attitude. He has an attitude of resentment. Resenting the good fortune or the blessings of another is harmful, both emotionally and spiritually.

Preachers may develop a resentful attitude toward other preachers. Older preachers may resent the success of a younger preacher, especially if the services of a younger preacher are desired more than the services of an older preacher. Ideally, the support

and encouragement of an older semi-retired preacher should be a blessing to a younger preacher. But older preachers may develop resentment of a younger preacher.

Members of a congregation may resent elders and their authority. In a time when there seems to be a general resentment of authority, people may develop this spiritually unhealthy attitude. People with a lot of formal education may resent having to respect the authority of elders who do not have as much formal education. Wealthy members may resent the authority of those who do not have as much material wealth.

People may, like the older brother in Jesus' parable, resent the attention a wayward member receives when he/she repents of sinful living and seeks the restoration of fellowship with the Lord's people. The older brother told the father, "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29).

Younger members in a congregation may resent the older members and view them as "old fogies," especially if the younger people want to become like a religious denomination.

The older members may resent younger members because of their immaturity. Paul urged Timothy to be "an example of believers."

Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. (1 Tim 4:12)

The apostle Peter gave inspired instruction that will prevent resentment of both young and old.

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.' (1 Pet. 5:8)

Not only was the attitude of the older brother wrong, his behavior was also wrong. When he came from the field and heard music and dancing, the older brother asked one of the servants to explain why there was music and dancing (Luke 15:25-26). The servant said, “Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.”

The man’s younger brother has been “dead” but was “alive again.” The younger brother had been “lost,” but he has been found. It was a time of rejoicing but not for the older brother. Why did he not rejoice? How long had his younger brother been gone? Had he ever gone and tried to find his brother? Was he not glad that his brother has come home “safe and sound”? Did the older brother think that in addition to his part of the inheritance, which the younger brother had “wasted . . . with prodigal living,” that he would now get more inheritance from the older brother’s part of the inheritance? Whatever the reason, the older brother’s reaction was deplorable.

So what was the older brother’s reaction? “He was angry” (Luke 10:28). Imagine that! His “lost” brother was home safe and sound and his older brother is angry because of the reception! What happened to brotherly love?

The emphasis given to brotherly love is evident to anyone who reads the New Testament. In the practical application of the book of Hebrews, the inspired writer declared, “Let brotherly love continue” (Heb. 13:1). The word *continue* translates as present sense and “calls for a continual and consistent action” (Rogers, Cleon L, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers, III 549).

The book of Hebrews is an exhortation to some brethren who were “neglecting the great salvation”; some who were in danger of having an “evil heart of unbelief” that would cause them to depart from the living God; some who needed to be taught again the “first principles of the oracles of God”; some who were having trouble discerning, or judging, good and evil; and some who were in danger of crucifying the Son of God “afresh” (Heb. 2:6) However, God’s powerful Word (Heb. 4:12) could call them back to their first love for and commitment to Christ, so the inspired writer said, “But, beloved,

we are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation” (Heb. 6:9). So how should the Lord’s faithful people react when “better things” are demonstrated? “Let brotherly love continue.”

It is sad, but sometimes true, that people become angry with elders and for some reason they evidently think that they have “freedom” to say to and about elders some very harsh, critical things.

People in the church sometimes become angry with preachers and write anonymous, critical letters to them, or these angry people try to get elders to “fire” the preacher.

The next behavior of the older brother: he “would not go in” to the joyful occasion (Luke 15:28). He reacted like a spoiled child. How many times do elders/bishops have to deal with members who demonstrate a similar reaction to a building program, either to build or not to build, to support some mission effort or not to fund it, or to discipline or not to discipline a wayward member? Sometimes those who cannot have their way go away. Sometimes they stay and vocally display their lack of appreciation for elders.

People who resent a preacher will sometimes sit and stare at him with an intimidating look while the preacher is presenting the sermon. Or they will refuse to speak to him at the close of the service. Or they will turn in attendance cards with uncomplimentary things written about the preacher on the back of those attendance cards.

What did the father do when he learned about the behavior of his older son? “Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him” (Luke 15:28). The word *pleaded* translates a word which means “to entreat, to beseech, to beg” and is stated in such a way that “indicates ‘he kept beseeching him’” (Rogers, Cleon L., Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III 149).

Sometimes it is necessary to beseech, or plead with, angry members of the church. The wise man observed, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh words stirs up anger” (Pro. 15:1).

The attitude and the behavior of the older brother were not all of the problems he manifested; he also demonstrated a critical spirit. In fact, he criticized both his younger brother and the father.

His criticism of this brother was such that the older brother did not even acknowledge that they were brothers. He said to the father, “This son of yours,” not “my brother” (Luke 15:30). Talk about bitterness of spirit; that is shown in the way the older brother identified the younger brother. There is an implied criticism in the way the older brother identified his brother.

The next criticism comes from the explanation that the younger brother “has devoured your livelihood with harlots” (Luke 15:30). The word Jesus used to describe the wasteful living of the younger brother is translated “riotous living” (King James Version) or “prodigal living” (NKJV) “though the word does not necessarily signify ‘dissolutely,’ the parable narrative makes clear that this is the meaning here” (Vine, “Riot”). While it is the older brother who specified the kind of immoral behavior, the younger brother is accused of “devouring” the father’s livelihood with prostitutes (Luke 15:30).

Furthermore, the older brother criticized the father for rewarding prodigal living with a party! “You killed the fatted calf for him” (Luke 15:30). What the older brother did not know, or what he refused to accept, was the change that had occurred in his younger brother. The younger brother who came home acknowledged that he was a sinner. He said to the father, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21). The brother who came home humbly is not the brother who left arrogantly. His pride took him away. His humble, penitent heart brought him home.

The father tried to reason with his older lost son who was not lost because he had left home and “wasted” his substance in riotous living but stayed at home with a selfish, unforgiving, defiled heart.

It is sad when erring brethren go “out from us” (1 John 2:19) because they fall in love with the world (1 John 2:15), or when they are deceived by the doctrines of “antichrists” (1 John 2:18), but it is tragic when people without the “first love” or who are “lukewarm” or those who practice immorality “stay at home” (Rev. 2:4; Rev. 3:16; Rev. 2:20).

Lessons From The Older Brother

It would be interesting to know if the Pharisees and scribes got the lesson of the older brother. The three parables—the lost sheep, the lost coin, the two lost boys—were initially spoken to them and the older brother was indeed descriptive of them. It is true that as the Pharisees and scribes charged, Jesus “receives sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2); however, Jesus’ association with sinners was not to condone their sin but to lead them to repentance. The joy came when one sinner repented (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10). The prodigal fall and return illustrates the nature of repentance.

The Pharisees and scribes also needed to repent, to experience a change of mind relative to those who do not repent.

God’s people need to examine their attitude toward the unfaithful. Does the Lord Jesus want His faithful children to try to bring the erring ones home? James wrote:

Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turn him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins. (Jam. 5:19-20)

What is my attitude toward those who have erred? There is no indication in Jesus’ parable that the older brother had made any effort to find his lost brother and bring him home.

Is my attitude one of indifference or involvement? If I am indifferent toward the erring, why? Am I afraid I would not know what to say and thereby embarrass myself? Do I fear rejection, that the brother or sister will resent my efforts to convert them? Do I really understand that the one is a lost sinner who has erred or wandered away from the truth? Would the “someone” who is to bring the wanderer home be restricted to a preacher or elder?

Personally, I would rather try and fail in bringing the erring back to the truth than fail to try. The opposite of indifference is involvement. The means available for converting the erring would

include personal contact or going to the person's home or place of business. The contact may be made by letter, especially if the erring lives at a great distance. The telephone may be utilized.

The attitude I show in efforts to convert the unfaithful is crucial to getting them to repent and come home. If the wanderer sees genuine love and humility, these virtues will enhance the efforts.

What is my attitude toward those who come back to the Lord after bringing shame and reproach on His church? Will I doubt their sincerity of restoration? Will I take the time to speak words of encouragement to them? Or will I like the older brother resent the love and attention that God's people are showing them?

It is sad indeed when people, like the prodigal son, "waste" (Luke 15:13) time, talent, influence, worship opportunities, and the honor that could have been given to the Lord with a faithful life. But it is also sad when one "stays at home" with an attitude of indifference relative to a lost brother or sister and who can criticize but does not try to convert those who have erred from the truth.

The person with an "older brother" attitude needs to repent as surely as the prodigal needs to "come to himself" and resolve, "I will go to my Father and confess that I have 'sinned against heaven' and throw my soul into the loving arms of a gracious God."

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CHAPTER 29

Finishing Strong: Faithful Unto Death

Perry Cotham

I am grateful to Brother Webster and to the elders of this good church for the invitation to speak on this program. Brother Webster is a good gospel preacher and this is a good congregation.

The truths of God's Word on this simple and much loved beautiful Parable, given by Christ on the Prodigal Son, will go into many parts of the world and will be helpful to many precious souls. Thousands of sermons have been preached on this parable and still continue to be taught as long as time shall last.

To complete the series and to summarize the story as told by Christ (King James Version, Luke 15:11-24), I think three points need to be stressed. First, the boy left home of his own accord. The father did not force him to leave home, to go into a far country, and there to waste his money in riotous living. The Bible teaches that man is a free moral agent. Today, a child of God can, on his own decision, depart from the faith and quit the church. He can fail to attend the worship services, fail to study his Bible, and fail to live a Christian life. Man is not born in sin; he can choose right or wrong. "The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father" (Eze. 18:20). So, the Prodigal Son left home of his own accord.

Sometimes, one will use the apostle John's statement in 1 John 3:9 that a child of God "cannot sin." But the word is used in the sense of "cannot afford to sin," because the Word of God is in his heart and he cannot afford to sin; he cannot do wrong while following the Word of God in his life. For example, maybe he is asked by former friends to forsake the assembly of the saints on a Sunday morning,

go with some “buddies” and play a round of golf. He can say, “No, I cannot go.” He could go, but he does not want to go and violate the teaching of Hebrews 10:25-29. The Bible does not teach that a child of God cannot fall from grace, or violate the old expression, “once saved, always saved.” For the reason given above, he says, “I cannot go.”

Second, one can resolve to repent and to turn back to the Father. The Prodigal Son, with his money all spent and being hungry in the pig pen, resolved to go back home. He was ready to say, “Father, I have sinned; I have done wrong; I now repent.”

Of course, God, the Father, wants His erring children to come back home just as the father of the Prodigal Son wanted him to come home. Peter wrote that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9); Jesus taught that people should repent or perish (Luke 13:3-5).

Repentance is one of the hardest commands to obey. It has often been referred to as the most difficult commandment. Many people do not understand the meaning of Bible repentance. It is not just saying, “I’m sorry; I have done wrong.” Bible repentance requires action on the part of the sinner. When one takes action, it may mean many different things in a person’s life. It can mean giving up activities, friends, acquaintances and tempting pleasures. One who is truly repentant will turn away from whatever is causing him to sin. Paul declared that godly sorrow “worketh repentance” (2 Cor. 7:10).

On the day of Pentecost when believing sinners cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said unto them, “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:37-38). Three thousand people heard Peter’s message and responded to the Lord.

Standing on Mars’ Hill, Paul declared that God commandeth all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). God’s Word is written to reach those in the world, but God also calls every unfaithful child of His to repent (cf. 8:20-24). So, repentance is God’s universal command. Repentance is not just regret, conviction, or expressing sorrow. It is

not just the confession of sins, but the forsaking of sin. One might stop stealing but wish to keep the money or material items stolen, but that would not be forsaking the sin he has committed. Such an attitude is not true repentance.

The Prodigal Son, after he lost his inheritance and all means of sustaining himself, made up his mind to go back home to his father. As he started down the road back home, he may have looked back and given the pigs a permanent wave goodbye and kept going toward home. The parable of the Prodigal Son demonstrates the fact that a complete spiritual change must occur in one's life.

Greed on the part of the Prodigal Son caused him to turn from his father and make an impulsive decision to take his inheritance and leave. He left to pursue what he thought he wanted, but he did not count the cost of this decision. The Prodigal Son did not come to repentance until all his material gain was taken from him.

In like manner, sinners must make a spiritual change. A change of mind and heart will result in a change of conduct. The Scripture points out that godly sorrow can produce true repentance. One must turn away from sin and turn toward God and what is said in His Word. Just as in the parable of the Prodigal Son, this may not be an easy task. Turning to God may mean giving up associates and giving up activities that lead away from what the Bible teaches.

One aspect of repentance is restoration (Mat. 3:8). Restoration may be a difficult or impossible process. If one is guilty of stealing, it might be easy to say, "I am sorry I stole your property." If one chooses to keep the stolen property, there is no true repentance. One needs to follow the admonition in Leviticus 6:1-4, "he shall restore that which he took" (cf. Num. 5:7; 1 Sam 12:1-3). In other forms of sin, it may be impossible to make restoration. In the parable, the Prodigal Son took his rightful inheritance, but he brought nothing back to give to the Father. The father accepted his repentance and provided the son with gifts and a celebration.

Another teaching from this parable is that repentance requires more than a verbal promise. One must take action as the Prodigal Son did in going back to his father. If he had said he was repentant

but stayed in the pig pen, his situation would not have changed. When the Prodigal Son made the decision to return to his father, he experienced a complete reformation of his life. The Bible says the Prodigal Son came to himself and said, “I have sinned.” He achieved reformation of his life when “he arose and went.” When the Prodigal Son approached his home, his father ran to meet him and gave him complete acceptance. The message of the parable is that God will offer the same acceptance to a truly repentant sinner.

Third, and finally, the parable of the Prodigal Son implies that he must have promised his father that in the days that would follow that he would remain faithful to him as long as he lived. The Bible teaches that the child of God must remain faithful unto death. There are many passages of scripture that so teach. This is the heart of the subject tonight, faithful unto death.

To the church at Ephesus, the Lord said in His letter, written by the apostle John “be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life” (Rev. 2:10). Certainly, one must remain faithful as long as he lives, but even if he is called upon to die as a martyr, he is to remain faithful to the Lord. According to church history, many of the early Christians died as martyrs as faithful children of God.

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of
his saints. (Psa. 116:15)

Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord . . .
that they may rest from their labours; and their
works do follow them. (Rev. 14:13)

One does not die into the Lord. One is baptized into Christ (Gal. 3:27; Rom. 6:3) as a penitent believer. The believer can remain strong and faithful unto death and then in eternity live with the Lord in heaven forever (Rev. 21:4). “Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14).

Hence, the apostle Paul had urged the early Christians in these words: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). If one has wandered away, he should come back home and then remain faithful to God as long as he lives, for “he that endureth to the end shall be saved” (Mat. 10:22).

In every one of the letters to the seven churches of Asia, the encouragement to faithfulness is always given:

1. To Ephesus: “To him that overcometh”(Rev. 2:7)
2. To Smyrna: “He that overcometh” (Rev. 2:11)
3. To Pergamos: “To him that overcometh” (Rev. 2:17)
4. To Thyatira: “He that overcometh” (Rev. 2:26)
5. To Sardis: “He that overcometh” (Rev. 3:5)
6. To Philadelphia: Him that overcometh” (Rev. 3:12)
7. To Laodicea: “To him that overcometh”(Rev. 3:21)

In view of these many statements of scripture, we encourage all Christians to be faithful unto death and thus finish life’s journey strong in the Lord. Peter assures that those who do not fall will have an entrance “into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:10-11). So, Christians finish strong: faithful unto death. And (8) “He that overcometh shall inherit all things” (Rev. 21:7).

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CHAPTER 30

It Was Meet That We Should Make Merry: The Proper Response To The Sinner's Return

Paul Sain

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. (King James Version, Luke 15:32)

Introduction

The word *POWER*, by which this excellent lectureship is known, is a key word in well-known passages of Scripture (Rom. 1:16; Eph. 1:19; 1 Pet. 1:5; Rev. 19:1). The oral presentations in this series are uplifting and a rich blessing spiritually. The printed volume is an ongoing benefit to a brotherhood and the accurate benefits will only be known in eternity.

The Father's Response To The Prodigal's Return

Briefly reflect on the multi-step process of the prodigal coming to himself, taking inventory as to his deplorable condition at that time, thinking it through ("coming to himself"), making the decision to go home, planning what he would say to his father, and then putting his thoughts into action (getting up and going home). While the text does not specify this, we can certainly imagine the return trip was filled with "Wonder how my father will react?" "Will he be angry? Will he allow me to be as a hired servant?" "What can I say; what should I

say first; how should I say it?" "I am afraid of what might happen when I get there!"

Go to the text of Luke 15 and note again:

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. (Luke 15:20-21)

The significance of the father seeing the son while “he was yet a great way off” suggests he was watching and looking for him; no doubt he had continued to pray he would come home, each day hoping this would be the day. When he saw him, he did not wait at the door for him, but instead he ran to him. The son was not able to get all the way home before his father was embracing, rejoicing at the fact of his return. “Fell on his neck” in the original language shows the father carrying him down to the ground.

The son began his prepared words for his father, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight” But the father did not allow him even to complete his speech. He was thrilled and blurted out,

Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, 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.

Words fail to capture the joy of any father upon the corrective action of a child. During the time a child is rebellious and away from God, the parent is in pain, agonizing, hurting, praying, longing for that precious one, whose soul is worth more than the whole world, to

come to himself and return home. Thus, when that time comes, and the penitent heart expresses a desire to “come home” and “be right,” then they realize a joy and happiness that words cannot capture!

When the elder brother returned from the field and heard the merry-making, he inquired what was occurring. The Father went out and urged him to come in (Luke 15:28). The son was angry, reflecting on the long time he had been home (while his younger brother was away), and he had never had a party celebration with his friends. The father’s response is the focus of our lesson: “And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found” (Luke 15:31-32).

Reflect a moment further on the words “my son was dead . . . he was lost.” The father had suffered great loss. For days, weeks, and months, he had felt despair and sorrow over the condition of his son’s rebellion. Thus, upon the son’s return, his son “is alive again . . . found”!

We Have All “Been There”

God’s Word clearly states that “all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). Some have committed sins of greater consequence than others, but there are none that are completely righteous (Rom. 3:10). Thus, we can recall times when we were on our knees, begging for our family, friends, or total strangers to be patient and forgiving. We knew we did not deserve their understanding of our failure, nor should they accept or tolerate our sinfulness.

Without mercy, love, and grace from our Heavenly Father, we would be hopelessly LOST and condemned to torment for all eternity. Yet, we recall vividly the words of our Saviour who declared that unless we extend forgiveness to others, we have no right to expect forgiveness from Almighty God.

For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if

ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Mat. 6:14-15)

Common sense demands that we possess and extend to others the same love, patience and forgiveness we so desperately seek from our Saviour.

When one repents publicly of sinfulness in his life, there is almost certainly embarrassment over his actions. The individual would give most anything (money, deeds, etc.) to be able to rewind the clock, undo the deed, take back the transgression—but such is not possible. After acknowledging the sin, sorrow is expressed, forgiveness is sought—restoration and acceptance is sought. Often it is not the words spoken that matter the most, but just having others express their love and acceptance conveys the greatest value.

Jesus further taught that we should be forgiving again and again when our brother sins against us, then penitently seeks our forgiveness.

Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him. (Luke 17:3-4)

Jesus taught forgiveness throughout His earthly ministry. We even recall the instruction of our Lord in Matthew 18:

Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Mat. 18:21-22)

Who Are The Erring And What Is Their Spiritual Condition?

Who?

The obvious source for a valid definition of the term *erring* must be the Scriptures. Notice the following references: one “overtaken in a fault” (Gal. 6:1); “left thy first love” (Rev. 2:4); “forsaken” Christ (2 Tim. 4:10); “walketh disorderly” (2 The. 3:6); “cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine” (Rom. 16:17); “sin willfully” (Heb. 10:26); and “unruly” (1 The. 5:14).

What?

Of greatest concern to God’s faithful must be the spiritual condition of the erring. Tragically, we often pursue with great diligence the lost (those who have never obeyed the gospel), and at the same time neglect to pursue with great diligence the lost (those who initially obeyed the gospel but have fallen away). The spiritual condition of the erring is described in Scripture as: “shipwreck” (1 Tim. 1:19-20); not in fellowship with God (1 John 1:7-9); in a worse condition than before becoming a Christian (2 Pet. 2:20-22); and and there remaineth no more sacrifice for them (Heb. 10:26). They are in danger of death (Jam. 5:19-20). They are not in fellowship with God (1 John 1:7ff). Bluntly stated, and with great sadness, it must be concluded: they are lost, without hope, without Christ, doomed to eternal torment!

What Should Be Our Response to An Erring Member That Returns?

The following suggestions (not in order of priority) will help us respond to one who returns to faithful service.

First and foremost, **be eager to forgive!** Sincerely receive the one who has been away from their Lord back into the faithful family.

Strive to restore them, in a spirit of brotherly meekness (Gal. 6:1). Action is urgently needed. They are in danger. We must go after the lost sheep. If they remain in that condition when they face God in judgment, they will be eternally lost. Our actions must be framed in an attitude of “meekness.” We love and care for them. Whatever we say or do, it must be evident that our

actions and/or words are due to our being concerned and interested in their soul.

GO! Go to them! Go to them and tell them their fault! Matthew 18:15-17 outlines for us a course of action.

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

Never should we possess an attitude of “They have embarrassed us, so let’s get them out of the church.” Our consuming desire must be one of “Let’s help them make their lives right and get them back into faithful service.”

Reflect the attributes of our Lord and Saviour. Follow the example of Christ (1 Pet. 2:21-24); endeavor to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5-8) in love, compassion, mercy, grace, forgiveness, etc. If in doubt, ask yourself “How would Christ respond at this time?”

Admonish them as a brother (1 The. 5:14). Our obligation is to “warn them” and lovingly help them to see their dangerous condition. We do this as a brother (1 The. 5:15) with kindness and tenderheartedness (Eph. 4:31-32).

Walk in their shoes. Show compassion by feeling their pain, hurt, and sorrow. Accept them as penitent sinners (as are we all) who want fervently to please God and get to heaven. Understand that even many of God’s faithful have fallen short and sinned in a public way (Moses, David, Noah, Peter, Simon, Judas).

Forgive, genuinely forgive. Blot out the transgression (as much as possible). No longer hold that person chargeable for that

sin. Erase it from the ledger of your mind. Do not hold them hostage regarding their action. Refrain from the attitude of “I’ll forgive you, but I will not forget it!” or “I’ll forgive you but if you ever do it again.”

Reflect the “one another” relationship found in Christ. Love one another. Be kind one to another. Forbear one another. Exhort and encourage one another. Prefer one another, and yes, forgive one another.

Do not reflect the attitude of the elder brother. Even if our Christian brother or sister has sinned directly against us, let us be eager to forgive and restore them. James 5 exhorts all to grudge not one to another lest we be condemned (Jam. 5:9). If even the spiritual fail to restore the erring brother, it is possible that we may also be tempted (Gal. 6:1).

Remember Christians are at war with a powerful, vicious enemy. Satan is the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4) and wields powerful devices and wiles (2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11). While we may lose some of the skirmishes, the fact remains – we can win the war– victoriously able to reach our eternal goal.

Conclusion

The problem of man is sin. The only remedy is Jesus Christ and His saving blood. We must contact the blood of Christ (in baptism) to be saved of our past sins. As we walk in the light (1 John 1:7ff), the blood of the Son of God keeps on cleansing us of our sins. Without the second law of pardon, we would ALL be hopelessly and helplessly lost.

Before this moment in time, almost certainly we have already found ourselves in need of forgiveness from a friend and brother – or we will soon find ourselves in such need. May it never be said that we did not possess a forgiving spirit from another.

Practical Observations/Suggestions

1) Realize we are on the same team; all seeking to reach heaven eternally.

We are not competing and only one will receive the prize. We passionately want our brothers and sisters to serve faithfully, get back up when they fall, and one day hear their Saviour say “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

2) Christians continually need the help and forgiveness of others. I need your help. You need the help of others around you. We stand taller and stronger when we stand together.

3) We prove our genuine love by words and deeds. Words are cheap and easy to utter. Actions truly prove our love. Actions capture and express the feelings of our heart (the Bible heart, the mind).

4) Rejoice! When one leaves a state of LOST and becomes SAVED-REJOICE!

(Whether at the time one becomes a Christians and is baptized into Christ or especially when one returns to their first love [Rev. 2:4]).

5) Reflect Christ-likeness to your restored brother or sister. Stand by and with them. Take up for them. Introduce them to others. Be their friend and supporter. Encourage them with words and actions of love.

CHAPTER 31

Our Elder Brother

Denny Petrillo

Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’ (New King James Version, Luke 15:1-2)

“This man receives sinners!” The hard-hearted attitude of the Pharisees and scribes was clearly revealed by this statement. They obviously believed that these types of people were unworthy of any association, let alone having the privilege of actually dining with Jesus. To say that He “receives” sinners is to accuse Him of accepting them and closing His eyes to their sinful ways. They, by contrast, had taken the high road of purity and holiness. They had not defiled themselves with such sinful activities, nor would they. They were the chosen of God, the best of the best, God’s elite. Even a casual look at their lives indicated their dedication to the letter of the Law. No way, not in this life, would they ever defile themselves by associating with such ilk. Jesus, on the other hand, has proven Himself to be no Messiah. He is not even a good Jew! This self-righteous attitude of the Pharisees and scribes elicited a response from Jesus.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third of a series of parables told by Jesus (The Lost Sheep, Luke 15:3-7; The Lost Coin, Luke 15:8-10; and The Lost Son, Luke 15:11-32). Each of these parables has a direct link to the complaint made by the Pharisees and scribes. Notice the parallels and repeated concepts in all three parables:

1) Something is lost (sheep, coin, son). Note that the word *lost* (*apollumi*) occurs eight times (Luke 15:4 [twice]; Luke 15:6; Luke 15:8; Luke 15:9; Luke 15:17; Luke 15:24; Luke 15:32).

2) That which was lost is found. Note that the word *found* (*heurisko*) occurs six times in this section (Luke 15:5; Luke 15:6; Luke 15: 9 [twice]; Luke 15:24; Luke 15:32). Along with this point is the phrase *that which was lost has been found* (Luke 15:6; Luke 15:9; Luke 15:24; Luke 15:32). It is interesting that this phrase is found twice in the last parable.

3) There is great rejoicing (Luke 15:6; Luke 15:7; Luke 15:9; Luke 15:10; Luke 15: 32)

4) Friends are invited to share in the joy (Luke 15:6; Luke 15:9; Luke 15:22)

5) There is a point made about sin (*hamartolos* – Luke 15:1; Luke 15:2; Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10; Luke 15:18; Luke 15:21), **and repentance** (*metanoeo* – Luke 15:7 [twice], Luke 15:10).

6) There is heavenly joy. Jesus makes a comment about joy in heaven including the angels over “one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10). Note that the parable of the Prodigal Son has no such comment.

The parallels between all three are striking, and all are important for the Bible student to note. The third parable, however, has received the most attention. It could be argued that the Parable of the Prodigal Son is the most well-known of all of Jesus’ parables. This attention is well deserved. The greatness of the parable and the mastery of Jesus in story-telling are without equal. Over the years, preachers, teachers and Bible class teachers have been able to make many powerful applications about God’s love for the lost and His willingness to receive them back.

Yet what is often overlooked is the fact that this is not just a parable about the son who was lost and then who was found. Jesus introduces this parable with the following: “A certain man had two sons” (Luke 15:11). This is, therefore, a parable about **two** sons, not one. It is our goal in this paper to consider the characteristics and arguments of the older brother in the parable, and then to draw two

modern-day applications; one by asking who represents the older brother today? and second, by considering the role Jesus plays in our lives as our spiritual older brother.

The Role And Function Of The Older Brother

Above, it was noted that there are many parallels between all three parables. Yet, there are striking differences. Whereas the first two parables have *three* main characters (shepherd, sheep, friends; woman, coin, friends), the third has *four* main characters (father, lost son, servants, older brother). Also, as noted above, the first two parables talk about there being “joy in heaven.” The last one has no such comment. It seems the sour, joyless attitude of the older brother has replaced that repeated refrain! And since this is a parable about a man with “two sons” it is important to consider the role the older brother plays.

Positive Characteristics of the Older Brother

Not everything Jesus says about the older brother is negative. Consider some of his positive traits:

First, he stayed with his father when his brother deserted him. Like his brother, he could have exercised the option to leave. He could have taken his share of the inheritance, ran off, and squandered it. Instead, the older brother remained with his father. He demonstrated a loyalty and family commitment that his foolish brother did not. In his mind, this faithfulness should mean something.

Second, the older brother continued working. Whereas his younger brother was out partying, living the “high life,” he was “in the field” (Luke 15:25). He reminds his father that “lo these many years I have been serving you” (Luke 15:29). Thus the older brother was not a lazy man but by all counts demonstrated a positive work ethic. Apparently the father was wealthy enough to have servants doing the difficult field work. This is confirmed in that five times the text notes that the father had a plurality of servants (Luke 15:17; Luke 15:19; Luke 15:22; Luke 15:26). Yet the son was out working.

Third, the older brother was an obedient son. In Luke 15:29 he says “I have never transgressed your commandment at any time.”

The literalness of this statement might be doubted, but the text itself does not dispute the accuracy of the claim. He has been a faithful son, doing what his father has commanded. It might even be argued that while he was out working diligently in the field, thus obeying his father's directive, his younger brother is being thrown a party! To him, this is neither right nor fair.

Negative Characteristics of the Older Brother

What is clear in the parable is that the older brother represents everything that is wrong in the otherwise joyful event of the penitent brother. Note the older brother's negative characteristics:

First, he was one that quickly became angry. After a long day of labor in the field, he returns home to the sound of music and dancing (Luke 15:25). He inquired about the purpose of the festivities and was informed about his younger brother's return and the party being thrown in his behalf. Upon hearing this news, he became "angry." There seems to be no careful contemplation about the transpiring events. He reacts, and he reacts negatively.

Second, he is stubborn. With the festivities taking place and all making "merry" (Luke 15:24), he "would not go in" (Luke 15:28). He objects to the reason for the party and will have nothing to do with it. To him, it would be hypocritical to participate in a celebration that he vigorously opposes. Therefore, he stubbornly stands outside.

Third, his years of service to his father were not out of joy but duty. The principle of loving service (e.g. John 14:15) is totally absent here. Was he serving his father for the right reasons and because of honorable motives? No, instead he demonstrates an attitude where he grudgingly complied with his father's wishes.

Fourth, he is jealous. He is envious of the fact that his father would do this for his brother, when he never did this for him (Luke 15:29).

Fifth, he has a martyr complex. He complains that his father never threw him a party that he might "make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29). Yet we were told in Luke 15:12 that the father "divided to them his livelihood." This means that, as the older brother, he

received two-thirds of the father's inheritance (Deu. 21:17). This being the case, why did he not throw himself a party? He had the money to do it. But instead, he chose to be the martyr and just complain about how difficult things are for him.

The father answers in deep sympathy that the accusation that he has not given him his due is devoid of truth. All his riches were and are constantly at his elder son's disposal. If he has not received any real enjoyment of them, he is the only one to blame for it—because he has become inwardly estranged from his father, he has been living as one of his servants and not as his child. He has left unused the riches allotted to him by his father. (Geldenhuis 410)

Sixth, he was selfish. He could only consider what he wanted and what he needed. What concern does he display for his brother? Is he ok? Did he return healthy? “He could not see beyond his own virtue and righteousness to recognize what his father had already given him, and what his newly chastened brother needed. They were both locked into a behaviour that put self first and everyone else nowhere” (Clark-King 238).

Seventh, and most importantly, he was spiritually blind. He was so self-absorbed that he failed to see the big picture of love and forgiveness. The fact that his brother was in a serious spiritual condition and had now returned should have brought unbridled joy to his heart. But he cannot see it. This is the most important point of the parable as established in Luke 15:1-2. Jesus receives sinners, but the older brother refuses to do so.

The Logic of the Older Brother

Many of us grew up with this parable. We have thought about it. We have played out the entire event in our minds. As a result, there is a certain appeal to the logic of the older brother. Consider some of his arguments:

First, the younger brother foolishly squandered his inheritance (Luke 15:30). This fact alone should bring shame to him, not honor. The father is going to throw a party for one who has been doing nothing but partying for who knows how long? How does that make sense?

Second, the younger brother has “devoured your livelihood” (Luke 15:30). The father had worked hard to establish this inheritance. The younger son did not appreciate the value of that estate, because he did not appreciate the effort it took to obtain it. The word *devour* (*katesthio*) means “to waste” (Bauer 532). It indicates a lack of concern for something’s worth or value.

Third, the younger brother had been living an immoral life. He points out to his father that his brother had been wasting his money “with harlots” (Luke 15:30). How the older brother knew this is not stated, but the text earlier (Luke 15:13) confirms that he had squandered the estate with “prodigal living.” The word translated prodigal (*asotos*) means “wastefully” (Bauer 148). The word does not demand the meaning of being with harlots, although that certainly could be what was meant. The New American Standard translates this word in Luke 15:13 as “loose living.” The New International Version translates it “wild living.” The King James and American Standard Versions translate it as “riotous living.”

Fourth, the younger brother just shows up and the father lays out the red carpet for him. According to Luke 15:20, the father received the prodigal back before he had a chance to repent.

Whatever the crime, very few of us would deny the possibility of forgiveness, but most of us would insist on penance, on the sinner’s heartfelt confession and willingness to pay for the wrong that has been done. Then along comes this story of instant forgiveness with no strings attached, and we cannot miss the point: that the extravagant love of God both fulfills and violates our sense of what is right. (Taylor 10)

It is easy to vilify the older brother as unloving and vengeful but should not the younger brother be made to “bring forth fruits worthy of repentance”?

Fifth, the younger brother disrespected the father. By asking for his inheritance and then leaving, he is demonstrating that he wished his father to be dead (since that is normally when one receives his inheritance). There was no love shown whatsoever in the action of the younger brother.

In effect, the younger son was wishing the father dead, for the notion of passing on an inheritance while in good health is unthinkable. No Middle Eastern son ever asks for an inheritance, let alone is given it! Normally the father would explode with rage, for this is the ultimate insult. It is even more remarkable that the son was able to sell his share. Furthermore, the elder brother should have refused to accept his brother's request and intervened. His silence indicates his refusal to do so and demonstrates that his family relationships are less than adequate. (Forbes 215)

Sixth, he has faithfully fulfilled his duties as a son and what did he get out of it? At first glance, it seems it would have been better for him to have imitated the foolish and sinful behavior of his brother. Then, upon returning home, would have receive the “hero's welcome” that he never received by staying (Luke 15:29-30).

The church thrives on its ministries to the poor, the broken, the sick, and outcast, but what about those of us who are holding our own? What about those of us who work hard to keep our jobs and stay in our relationships and take care of our health and pay our dues but never seem to get any credit for it, while the homeless and

the addicted and the downtrodden get all the attention? What do you have to do to get a party around here? Do you have to go off and squander your inheritance before you can come home to be embraced, and kissed, and assured that you belong? (Taylor 11)

Seventh, he is no longer sure he wants to be a part of this family if this is the way the way the father is going to treat him. His faithfulness is ignored; his brother's unfaithfulness is rewarded. Therefore he says to his father, "this son of yours" (Luke 15:30). He wants no connection to him whatsoever.

Jesus: Our Older Brother

The parable of the Prodigal Son does not make a parallel between the ways the older brother acted in contrast with how Jesus acts. If any parallel is made, it is that Jesus is the father in the parable, because in the parable the father received the sinful son back, and the initial accusation was that Jesus "receives sinners" (Luke 15:2).

As in v. 2, by telling the story Jesus identifies himself with God in his loving attitude to the lost. He represents God in his mission, the accomplishment of which should elicit joy from those who share the Father's compassion. (Leifeld 983)

This raises the issue of christology, for the parable is certainly an implicit christological statement and a declaration of authority. It is not a depiction of the love of God in general, but of God's love coming to concrete expression in Jesus. Seen in its literary context (15:1-2), this parable, as do the previous two parables, serves

to provide a justification for Jesus' ministry to outcasts and sinners. It is he, who by the very actions for which he is reproached demonstrates the compassion, patient love and unconditional acceptance of God for the lost. (Forbes 227)

The New Testament teaches that Jesus is our brother (Heb. 2:12; Heb. 2:17). If we were to re-write the parable, with Jesus Himself serving as the older brother, how might the story have been changed?

First, Jesus would have been pro-active in trying to keep us from squandering our spiritual inheritance. The older brother made no attempt to stop his younger brother from making these foolish choices. Yet Jesus continually pleads, both in the Gospels and through the words of His Apostles and prophets, for us to make wise choices. In the Sermon on the Mount, He encouraged people not to lay up earthly treasures but heavenly ones (Mat. 6:19-21) and to have a proper view of money (Mat. 6:22-24). He reminded all men to build their lives upon Him and His words (Mat. 7:24-27). Later in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus invited all men to come to Him (Mat. 11:28-30) and taught us the meaning of true discipleship (Mat. 16:24). The prodigal son had a skewed view of money, but Jesus taught that even if a man gained the whole world but forfeited his soul it would not be a wise trade (Mat. 16:26; cf. 1 Tim. 6:6-10). In Luke 19:1-10 Jesus reaches out to Zaccheus, by trade one of those sinful "tax-gatherers." But Jesus considered Zaccheus to be worthy of salvation, in spite of the sinful choices he had made (Luke 19:7). But Jesus clearly explains His role in Luke 19:10: "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." As our older brother, Jesus is seeking to save all who are lost in sin.

Second, Jesus as our older brother would be looking for us to return to Him. In the parable, the father saw the son coming even when he was "a great way off" (Luke 15:20). It is clear that the father

was looking for the son's return, just as Jesus would be looking for our return to Him from a life of sin. The beginning of the three parables of Luke 15 said: "Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him" (Luke 15:1). Jesus was always interested in reaching out to those who wanted to get their lives back on track spiritually.

Third, Jesus as our older brother would find great joy at our return to God. The older brother in the parable was angry about the reception given his younger brother (Luke 15:28). But Jesus, along with the heavenly host, would find great joy when a sinner repents (Luke 15:7; Luke 15:10).

Fourth, Jesus as our older brother would fellowship with us. The brother of the prodigal refused to join the party. He was going to have no part in this sinner's return (Luke 15:28). Jesus, however, would not stand outside and "refuse to go in." He fully accepts the penitent sinner and considers them His brother.

Another issue is the fellowship that Jesus was enjoying with the "sinners." This "fellowship" seems to confirm the idea that Luke 15 is about Christian restoration to fellowship, even though the word "fellowship" does not actually occur. The word "receives" uttered by the Pharisees means exactly that, to "welcome or receive." Furthermore, even allowing that Jesus was having "fellowship" with the "sinners," it was primarily social in nature as a path to evangelism, leading ultimately to a spiritual relationship. (Hillman 33)

Fifth, Jesus as our older brother would be accepting and forgiving. The older brother in the parable could only focus on the sins of his younger brother, rather than the possibility that he has returned in humility and repentance (Luke 15:30). Even as Jesus was enduring the agony of the cross, He demonstrated His forgiving

spirit (Luke 23:34). What the younger brother did to his father was terrible. Even worse was the sinful lifestyle that he led. But the father welcomed him back anyway, and Jesus would do the same for us. We must never think our sins so grave, so abominable that we could not find forgiveness in the arms of Jesus (cf. the Apostle Paul in 1 Tim. 1:12-16).

Jesus came to Israel. From the Pharisees' point of view, Israel largely consisted, on the one hand, of sinners (those who had departed from the Mosaic Law and the interpretation of the Pharisees) and, on the other hand, the religious leaders who "had kept the commandments from their youth." Jesus came to all of Israel, but it was predominately the sinners, the lost—just like the lost son—who sought Jesus. The sinners were unclean and immoral like the younger son. On the other hand, the Pharisees, like the older son, were righteous in their own eyes and not only rejected God's forgiveness through Jesus, but resented the fact that the sinners came to Him. The story fits the religious leaders so well; it almost becomes a prediction of their attitude toward Jesus. Like the older son who became angry and jealous, so the Pharisees were jealous of Jesus and this motivated them to ultimately crucify Him (cf. Matthew 27:18; Mark 15:10). (Hillman 37-38)

Sixth, Jesus as our older brother would be our advocate. In the parable the father did not need any encouragement to accept back the penitent son. But if he did, he wasn't going to get any encouragement from the older brother. In Christianity, it is comforting to know that when we sin, "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

Seventh, Jesus as our older brother would be understanding and merciful. In the parable the older brother considered what his younger brother did inexcusable. Yet when Jesus became man, He understood the power of temptations:

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all *points* tempted as *we are, yet* without sin. (Heb. 4:15)

Therefore, in all things He had to be made like *His* brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things *pertaining* to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2:17)

Conclusion

The study of the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son provides a vivid contrast to the way Jesus, as our older brother, relates to us. His willingness to sacrifice Himself for us, and then to welcome us back when we've made so many sinful choices is indicative of His nature. No one could ever ask for a better brother, Lord, or Savior. It is interesting to note that the parable provides no conclusion. What ended up happening with the prodigal? What did the older brother end up doing? We can "write" our own conclusion to the parable. But one thing is clear. Jesus has not changed. His love and forgiveness abound still today.

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CHAPTER 32

A Christian Counselor Looks At The Parable Of The Prodigal Son: What I Would Have Said To A Heartbroken Father, A Rebellious Son, And An Angry Brother

Jerry Martin

Most of us have heard the following statement: “When your children are small, they step on your feet, but when they are older, they step on your heart.” There is probably not a better illustration of that truism than the story of the prodigal son. The family relationship was designed by God to provide for us the companionship, fellowship, instructions, protection, and preservation necessary for a healthy existence and assured survival. Since the family relationship is such a close, intimate relationship, when a member of a family “breaks rank” to pursue unhealthy and dangerous spiritual paths, their separation causes caring family members great hurt and concern.

The only way to provide true Christian counseling to those individuals and families that are struggling to navigate through life’s challenges is to first have studied, researched, and consistently applied the principles presented in the ultimate textbook on relationships, the Bible. The Bible, divinely co-authored by God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, is the best selling counseling textbook ever written and provides the ultimate expertise on human relations, meaning of life, and lasting happiness (King James Version, John 1:1-4; John 1:17; John 6:63-68; John 10:10; John 14:23-27; Mat. 7:24-25; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3). Jesus, one of the co-authors, was prophesied to be the “Counselor” and the “Prince of

Peace” (Isa. 9:6). In order to be effective as a Christian counselor, one must study under, learn from, work with, and be supervised by the Master Counselor Himself, Christ.

As a Christian counselor, I have learned that in order for me to provide the best possible therapy for my individual clients, I have to gain insight into, and background from, that client’s family experience. The parable our Lord shared in Luke 15:11-32 provides a fascinating case study. What I will attempt to do in this lecture is to give the reader insight into how a counselor might work with this family. By no means do I want to distract from what the Lord intended for the parable to teach. Since the father of the parable depicts God and His love and forgiveness for His children, I will be particularly cautious in presuming to give advice to the father of the parable. I simply want to give some practical application of the spiritual principles that this powerful story provides for us as we strive to develop and maintain healthy, functioning Christian families.

What I Learned From Family History Information

Therapeutic relationships begin with the client providing background information from their personal and family history. I will assume all of us have experienced the methodical process of filling out the medical history forms when visiting our family physician’s office. Professional family therapists use the same process when assessing a client’s emotional and systemic needs. The background information that is gathered allows the counselor to get to know the client and aids the counselor in determining if something in the client’s family experience in their past might have contributed to the problem being presently presented by the client. Such intake information will also help the counselor to determine what relationships and resources might be available to the client in order for him/her to have the best chance of being able to address successfully any dysfunctional issues that may be identified. The intake information available to us in the parable under consideration is insightful.

The Father's Intake Information

- This is a man who had two grown sons.
- He appears to have owned a considerable amount of property.
- He employed, housed, and cared for a number of servants.
- He owned and managed livestock.
- Others described him as being prosperous, respected, fair, understanding, patient, open, loving, compassionate, and forgiving.
- This man could have easily been called “the ideal father.”
- This father appeared to have devoted his life to providing for and protecting his family, both monetarily and morally.
- He provided the instructions, example, and environment for growth, as well as an opportunity for choice.
- He appeared to be consistent in his own character and behavior.
- He had an obvious love for both of his sons.
- He seemed to have been understanding of both sons' life choices and the consequences those choices produced.
- He was willing to give his younger son his inheritance early.
- He considered all of his remaining inheritance to belong to his oldest son.
- He was willing to meet both sons where they were emotionally and spiritually with the desire to restore them to where he always desired for them to be.

The Younger Son's Intake Information

- He was the younger of two adult sons.
- As a young adult, he appears to have been self-willed, resistant toward authority, detached from other family members, restless, and ready to disconnect from his protective environment.
- His personal behavior demonstrated disrespect, irresponsibility, wastefulness, immorality, and stubbornness.

- He made up his mind that he wanted to make his own choices in life, without making his own money to finance his new life.
- He demanded the portion of substance he believed he deserved.
- Though according to family religion and custom he would have inherited one-third of his father's estate, he preempted the normal order of the inheritance process with his request for an immediate disbursement of his portion of his father's estate.
- He gave no reason for his requesting his inheritance, other than his determination to see the world without the restraints from, or connections to, his family of origin.
- Upon request for his portion of his father's inheritance, he did not appear to have had any appreciation for how the wealth was accumulated, nor how to use it wisely. He had no specific plans to invest, manage, or protect his newly acquired fortune. He appears to have been unprepared to discipline himself or budget his money.

The Elder Brother's Intake Information

- He was the older of two adult sons.
- He is introduced as a compliant, hardworking, morally upright, and trustworthy son.
- He stayed at home and worked to care for and build up the family estate.
- He appears to have been morally and financially disciplined.
- However, this son's feelings for and actions toward others demonstrated an attitude of anger and deep resentment, immaturity, poutiness, self-righteousness, self-centeredness, jealousy, and suspicion.
- Underneath his publicly displayed disposition of compliance and obedience, the elder son appeared to have harbored in his heart a rebellious attitude toward his father's decisions and requests.

- He appeared to have filled his heart with resentment toward his lost brother.
- He displayed a suspicious attitude toward the relationship shared by members of his family.
- He demonstrated suspicion toward his father's motive in providing a celebration upon his younger brother's return.
- He displayed suspicion of his younger brother's penitence and his motive for returning home.
- As the elder son, he displayed anger at the attention being given to the younger brother.
- He nurtured his anger by questioning the motives of others who celebrated his brother's return and refused to join the celebration.
- His rebellion, jealousy, suspicion, and resentment is so deep he refused to acknowledge the younger son as his brother.

What I Would Have Said

The counsel a Christian counselor gives to individual clients must always be thoughtful, caring, individualized, and clear. Sage counsel is vital, crucial, and essential if families are to address division and dysfunction successfully. Such counsel should be given only after proper background information is gathered and studied. A Christian counselor will assess the intake information that is retrieved from the individual clients, but he must also conduct a research study for possible solutions to any problem, or potential problem, that is present in the intake information. Based on what I have learned about this prodigal son and his family, I would offer the counsel recorded in the next few paragraphs to each of the identified individuals. The counsel recorded in each paragraph will be given in the order that the events are presented in the story, and will be an orderly compilation of what I perceive would have taken place in multiple sessions over a period of time.

What I Would Have Said to a Heartbroken Father

If I had been asked to offer counsel to the father in the story of the prodigal son, I would start where the narrative starts and attempt

to remind him of what he did right. I would reflect with him on each of his experiences and help him measure his decisions in a realistic way. Since the father in the story did the right things, at the right time, and in the right way, my role would be to remind and reassure him that he was the proper father. The following paragraphs record what I would anticipate my conversation being with the father:

What you are experiencing is common to all parents. When children are taught correctly, there comes a time when they have to choose whether or not they will live by the principles they have been taught. Your wisdom, in consistently teaching your children through verbal instructions and pattern of life, is a perfect and inspiring example for your sons and to all parents.

Do not take your youngest son's request for his inheritance and his subsequent decision to leave home, as a sign of failure. His time away may be necessary for him to really comprehend and appreciate what you have taught him and why. Regardless of the changes and experiments taking place in the world, your example provides a stable, workable and permanent pattern for your sons and can be a template for fathers of every generation to follow. In order for me to have a fuller understanding of factors contributing to your younger son's departure, I am curious as how your older son has reacted to his younger brother's request for his inheritance, the fact that you granted the request, and then the reality that his brother left home.

As you pray for your younger son's safety and look constantly in the direction of the far country to which he journeyed, do not give up hope nor change who you are or what you do. One day, he may long to come home and it will be important for him to find you where he left you.

My assessment, from the information I have gleaned from you and your sons, is that your recognition of the individuality of your two sons illustrates fatherly wisdom. You appear to have taught your sons early on that life is about choices because you knew this is how they would learn responsibility. You equipped your sons to make life choices by establishing and maintaining thoughtful, understandable, fair, and consistent rules. Such rules hold families

together and provide guidance to, as well as boundaries for, each individual member to the family. Proper rules create a foundation for learning mutual respect, responsibility, and independence. You were successful in creating rules that were both positive and protective. You are to be complemented for not cluttering your children's or your servants' minds with endless rules and regulations, but rather, you accentuated basic core principles of life's requirements that were clear, specific, and achievable.

You chose consequences that were reasonable, logical, and age appropriate. You took time to educate your sons concerning each rule and the associated consequences. You were willing to allow your children to experience the consequences of their choices. Though your heart was broken by your sons' behavior, your honesty, integrity, selflessness, fairness, consistency, and compassion has wielded, and will continue to wield, a powerful influence on your family, friends, and everyone who witnesses the story of your life. Your youngest son articulated to you, in his own words, an understanding of the rules and the consequences.

Following the return of the younger son, I would have asked the father to describe the following: How did you feel when, from a distance, you first saw your younger son returning home? How would you describe what it meant to you to have your lost son express sincere remorse for his actions and view it as a privilege to be in your presence in any capacity?

I would then have reminded and reassured the father of the following things:

- Your rules, and the consistence with which you assured they were fairly enforced, brought about your son's restoration.
- Your son not only knew the way home, but he expressed confidence in who and what he would find when he got home.
- Your erring son's return home, and the attitude he expressed at his return, is a testimony to your consistent parenting.
- Your attitude of forgiveness is inspiring and reveals who you really are.

- Your willingness to demonstrate openly your forgiveness by declaring your son restored to his family status and celebrating his restoration publicly illustrates the rejoicing in heaven over a sinner who returns to the heavenly Father.
- Your willingness to leave the celebration to talk with your older son, giving him explanation for the celebration, demonstrated that you love both of your sons equally.
- Your compassionate and forgiving spirit demonstrates the love of our heavenly Father.
- You demonstrated your wisdom as a father by reminding your older son of his place in your life and in the family. “Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”
- Do not change a thing. Everyone depends on and is comforted by consistent character and sameness!

What I Would Have Said To A Rebellious Son

Based on the intake information acquired from the younger son, I would have identified a young man with a presenting problem of rebellion. I would begin my counseling, in the first session, with the following approach to soliciting information that would give me deeper insight:

- Why did you ask for your inheritance to be given to you early? Have you thought about how you are going to manage your fortune?
- How do you feel about your father and how would you describe your relationship with him?
- How do think your father feels about you?
- How do you feel about your older brother?
- Why do you want to go into a far country?
- Who are your friends? Are they really your friends?
- Now that you are away from home, in this far country and out of money, how do you feel about the decisions you have made thus far?

- Describe your mental and physical condition that caused you to be willing to be in the hog pen eating their food.

After assessing, with the younger son, why he made the choices he made and where those choice had led him, I would turn my attention to helping him to determine who he now wanted to be, which direction he wanted his life to go, and how he could make the changes necessary to set and reach new goals for his life. The part of this section will give what my conversation with the younger son may sound like:

You do not have to be here. You can start your journey home today. Your father is waiting for you and has constantly looked for your return. It is an important first step for you to acknowledge the blessings your father consistently provides in his house. It is good to see that you have recognized where you are physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is even more important that you have determined where you want to be physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It is a sign of sincerity and strength to admit that you have sinned. Wrong choices cannot be corrected until one recognizes, acknowledges, and abandons them.

Though, admittedly, you were rebellious and worldly in your choices in the past, you have obviously learned from the mistakes of your past so remember: “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered” (Psa. 32:1).

Going forward, let yesterday be your teacher, today be a treasure, and remember that tomorrow is tentative. Your choices of yesterday brought you and your family sorrow. Yet, the lessons you learned from yesterday’s experiences are invaluable to you in making better choices today. Yesterday taught you that you are responsible for your own choices and that all choices have consequences. Let us look at some things that yesterday taught you:

- Your yesterday experience, which led you away from the protection of home, taught you all that home has to offer you.
- Yesterday taught you to see your father as a caring, compassionate, and consistent role model for your life.

- Yesterday taught you that worldly living will take all that you have and give you nothing in return.
- Yesterday taught you that you could return home any time you wanted and that the longest and the hardest step in that journey home is the first one.
- Yesterday taught you that forgiveness can be yours if you are honest with yourself and others.
- Yesterday taught you how good forgiveness feels and the celebration that it incites on earth and in heaven.
- Learn from what your yesterdays have taught you and look at today as a treasure. “Buy the truth, and sell it not; also wisdom, instruction, and understanding” (Pro. 23:23).

After helping the younger son reflect on his past mistakes, what caused them, and what he had learned from them, I would have challenged him to take what he has learned and encouraged him to make wise and healthy choices in the future. My advice and challenges would include the following truisms:

- Refuse to waste a minute of your time with your family.
- Count your blessings each day.
- Tell you father, family, and friends each day how much you appreciate their contributions to your life.
- Seize daily opportunities to do good to all men, especially to your family.
- Remember, procrastination perpetuates yesterday’s failures, paralyzes today’s actions, and robs tomorrow of its greatest potential. “Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth” (Pro. 27:1).
- Look at tomorrow as the “to be continued” chapter of your life.
- No one is guaranteed tomorrow. So, you must be serious and sober about what you write on each daily page of the story of your life because you could be recording “the end.”
- If you are blessed with tomorrow, it will immediately become “today” and you will have to be prepared to continue your life’s story where you left off yesterday.

- Though previous chapters of your life recorded rebellion and irresponsibility, you have been blessed with the opportunity to make sure current chapters record a different story about a different son and a different brother.
- Never forget the lessons that yesterday taught you.
- Value every day as a treasure from your creator.
- Always be prepared to use to its fullest potential any tomorrow with which you are blessed.

What I Would Have Said To An Angry Brother

If I were to have counseled the older brother of the parable, I would have started by asking the following questions:

- How would you describe your relationship with your father? How do you feel about your father?
- Are you happy living at home? Do you think your father has provided a good environment in which you can live and prosper? Have you talked to your father about your personal feelings toward him?
- How would you describe your relationship with your brother?
- Tell me how you felt about your brother requesting his inheritance early and leaving home. Did you try to talk him out of leaving home?
- Did you miss your brother while he was gone?
- Have you given much thought to how your father felt not knowing exactly where your younger brother was or how he was doing?

After hearing how the older son might have responded to the questions listed above, I would want to share the following observations with him:

Your father seems to view you as an obedient, loyal, hardworking, committed, and trustworthy son. The positives I see that you have going for you are that you have been blessed with a father who cares about you and has provided a safe, as well as a prosperous, home environment for you. His plea to you would be, “My son, give me thine

heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways” (Pro. 23:26). Your father has given you access to everything he owns. Religious and family custom would seem to assure that you would inherit your father’s entire fortune. Your attitude toward, and comments to, your father indicate some deep-seated and unresolved emotional and relational issues. You appear to be resentful of your father’s relationship with your younger brother. You appear to be either resentful or jealous of your brother’s life choices and unforgiving of his mistakes. “He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that rejecteth a matter separateth very friends” (Pro. 17:9).

Though you have always had access to so much, you appear to be unable to enjoy any of the things with which you have been blessed. “He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city” (Prov. 16:32). From what I have observed, you do not appear to respect nor appreciate your father nor his role in the family. “Hearken unto thy father that begat thee” (Pro. 23:22; Pro. 16:31; Exo. 20:12). Though you have been in the physical presence of your father, there appears to have developed a great emotional distance between you. I would make the following suggestions to you:

- Take a long and insightful look into the mirror to see the person who you are presently and to determine the person you truly want to be. “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life . . . Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee. Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established” (Pro. 4:23-26).
- Make a list of everything you consider a blessing in your life and focus on acknowledging and expressing gratitude daily for your blessings.
- Emulate your father in his attitude and his treatment of others.
- Spend as much time as possible listening to and talking with your father. He has much he could teach you and he has much confidence in you.

- Arrange to talk to your brother to resolve any differences that have developed over the years.
- Be prepared to describe your feelings clearly to your brother and to listen to him with an open mind. No problem can or will be resolved without open, respectful, and consistent communication.
- Learn to rejoice with those that rejoice and weep with those that weep.

Life is brief, at best, and today is a treasure that should be valued and used wisely. Do not waste a minute of your precious time being bitter or resentful. If you find yourself angry, that is the warning sign, not the problem. Anger warns us of danger. Anger can be caused by many different feelings, such as fear, abandonment, betrayal, etc. What you do about anger can become the problem, so it is important that you learn to channel your anger safely in a healthy and controlled way. Going forward, I would encourage you to focus on the things that you control and let go of those things over which you have no control. Be realistic!

What I Would Say To You

To parents I would say, “Provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). To sons and daughters I would say, “Obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth” (Eph. 6:1-3). I would say to all of you, “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Pro. 4:23).

Counseling, like Bible study, is profitable, to the degree one applies the revealed truths to his own life. In counseling, as in Bible study, we are prone to apply what we learn to another. We often listen to counsel from the vantage point of, and with our focus on, someone else’s shortcomings or needs. The challenge is to see ones’ self in any discourse that is presented and strive to apply what one learns in a way that provides personal growth as well as relational harmony.

When I was a child, back when the networks and television stations shut down at night, the local newscasters would ask, “It is ten o’clock. Parents, do you know where your children are?” It was and is important for parents to know where their children are. It is equally important for children to know not only where their parents are but also the important role their parents play in their lives. The prodigal in this parable knew where to find his father. What a difference it made in the growth, development, survival, and restoration of this son for his father to have been present consistently in his life. When the prodigal was physically and morally separated from his father, he had no doubt that he would find his father where he left him, overseeing a morally healthy and upright home. Unfortunately, though the older son never physically left his father’s presence, he was unable to see the blessings of his father’s house nor did he recognize the value of emulating his father’s behavior.

This entire lectureship is given to a thorough examination of the lessons that can be learned from the story of the prodigal son. I would challenge you to read every lecture often, glean the truths presented, and make application to your life. Acknowledge the blessings you have, never take them for granted, and never abandon them. Never allow yourself to become a self-righteous, self-centered, jealous, resentful, or angry person. Remember that compassion and forgiveness are characteristics and gifts of our Heavenly Father. We should strive to emulate His character and share His gifts.

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CHAPTER 33

The Picture That Jesus Painted: An Artist Looks At The Parable Of The Prodigal Son

Don Iverson

The greatest event in the life of mankind was purposed in the mind of Almighty God even before the foundation of the world was laid (King James Version, Eph. 1:4). The greatest exhibition of love was seen as a silent omnipotent Father heard His Son say from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me” (Mat. 27:46). Our incomparable satisfaction of acceptance and reconciliation is seen in God’s abundant mercy which has “begotten us again unto a lively hope” (1 Pet. 1:3) through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the story which Jesus reveals in twenty-one verses of the fifteenth chapter of Luke. This is the gospel in miniature, the story of the Prodigal son.

I am an artist by trade. I take images from my mind and use paint, my fingers, and a brush to reproduce them on paper or canvas. The ability God has given me with my hands does not necessarily make me unique because we all are artists. We all have the ability to imagine through our mind’s eye. The Hebrew writer refers to this *mind’s eye* as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). It is the expectation of God that we see the unseen, and unless we are willing, He is displeased (Heb. 11:6).

In my profession there is a great deal of personal interpretation. Given the same subject, hundreds of artists will each produce totally different images. A painting begins with the understanding and the

perspective of the painter. Such is true with the story of the Prodigal. Like varying colors produced by a prism depend on the source of light and the angle, so the picture of this wasteful young man is viewed very differently by all of us. The colors seen by the lost will greatly differ from those seen by the saved. Points emphasized by one gender might be completely overlooked by the other. The impact of the story on a man without children will be distinctive from that of a father. As a grandfather, I can now say the impact of the story in my life has once again been enhanced. Men often say that every time they read the Bible they see many things in a different way, yet the Bible does not change. Men change and with change comes a different perspective with emphasis placed on points unique to one's own life experiences.

Unlike us, God does not see by faith or imagination. God's vision is reality based (Jude 23). We imagine eternal life for the sinner. God sees the interminable abode of the lost. His perspective, the angle from which we all seek to look, is pure and true, while our discernment is often gilded. It is possible to be totally blinded by the things that surround us (2 Pet. 1:9). My wife teaches the Bible to ladies in the southern part of India. Her translator, Kannamal, is a blind thirty-seven-year-old lady. Cathy recently explained to Kannamal that even though she has had quite a few different translators, she (Kannamal) is probably the best. In her very typical, very positive way, Kannamal explained how she is not encumbered by sight. She went on to make clear how her abilities to understand and hear are enhanced and how she is not distracted by that which surrounds her. The point: focus. Though blind, in the physical sense, this sister sees more clearly than most brothers I know. Perhaps her ability is more pure, a more God-like perspective. Sometimes we see, but we do not see (Mat. 13:13).

So we are all artists, and what our mind's eye sees depends on whether we care. If we are the center of our own universe, Jesus' story will not affect us much. If we choose to keep our heads in the sand, this narrative will have little effect. An artist studies his subject, striving to get into the situation. What finally comes out on the paper will reflect whether his mind was in his work or whether it

was merely the slight of developed hand. Our subject is the greatest thing that has ever happened to mankind. We study and we preach, and what comes out will reflect either that which is in our hearts or merely what is on our tongues.

“You’re being too emotional,” some might say! But I pity the pathetic man who stoically looks at the precious gospel story without the ability to shed a tear. Like Jesus, our passion should move us to weep as we look at the cities in which we live (Mat. 23:37). Like Paul, our spirits must be stirred when we see the world “wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16). The Bible is more than mere words; it is images. Like an unaware artist, one who lacks the ability to be emotional will have minimal effect. One of the greatest evangelists of all time was Jeremiah. Hear his passion. “But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock is carried away captive” (Jer. 13:17). Instead of calling this *The Story of the Prodigal Son* perhaps we should rename the account *Anguish Over Lost Souls*.

Contrasting Images Of Two Sons

The picture of the prodigal is set against a certain background, a circumstance in which he was molded. For the most part, I am a historical artist. Before I paint a narrow-gauge locomotive, I research the background. I need a clear understanding of the purpose for the tanks, tubes, and lights. The background information will enhance the way I paint a locomotive climbing frozen steel tracks in the mountains of North Carolina. I feel complimented when I overhear an on-looker’s remark about the feel or mood I created on the paper. This is generally the result of background study.

The prodigal’s elder sibling cannot be ignored in the overall picture. In fact, the contrast helps to define our view of the younger brother more clearly, beginning in Luke 15:12. Not only did the younger get his portion, but the Father “divided unto them his living.” The elder brother also took that which his father had worked so hard to accumulate. Perhaps he felt as if the inheritance belonged

to him, that he was deserving. Of course, much more is revealed regarding the character of the older brother in the later chapters as the younger brother returned home. A painting, a visual concept, must reveal character.

I would paint the older brother as a very typical looking man. He would have a farmer's tan, a dark face and neck with a glowing white forehead. You will remember that the older son was in the field working when his younger brother returned home. This loyal son, as he was so quick to remind his father, had remained the father's servant (Luke 15:29). One can only imagine that his shimmering head and calloused hands were worn proudly in front of his father. Complaints of early mornings and evening backaches might have been constant reminders from the son to the father, "I am the good son." His character would have little difference from that of the Pharisee who "prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers" (Luke 18:11).

In my painting of the older brother, the setting would be in the father's home as he watched his younger brother deliver the devastating news to his father. His clothing would be humble; no jewelry, nothing flashy. The tricky part would come in capturing the show of pity in his tear-filled eyes with a smirk slightly hidden beneath, carefully connected to the sneer on his cheek. You know what I mean. It is the same look you often see when one comes gossiping in order to elevate himself, while at the same time saying, "Bless their hearts. I just want you to pray for them."

The older son's mouth would be closed with his lower lip slightly drawn in and to one side. Why should he speak up? Why should he be bothered? Now he could have it all. Now there would be more attention for him. He could sit with his aunts and uncles and talk about the "poor heathens of the world" and sing and rejoice together that they were not a part. All the while the father stands outside weeping, watching and hoping.

The older son is visible during the beginning of the story and then re-appears at the end. What happened in the middle? Did he

sit idly and watch his little brother march off to hell? We are not told. Jesus said, “Go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother” (Mat. 18:15). We cannot lose sight of the purpose for this entire chapter in which this story is found. Jesus began talking about a lost sheep and the shepherd who left the ninety-nine in search of the one precious lamb. Carrying it on his shoulders, he returned, calling together his neighbors and friends to rejoice with him. Following his first example, Jesus began telling of the joy of one lady and her friends after anguishing, searching, and finding her lost coin. The third story is about the prodigal and the theme throughout this whole chapter is things that were **lost**.

This is not just a Hallmark-channel-type movie that Jesus inserted for our enjoyment. The story is emotional, and it was meant to be so. The design is not to make us simply blow our noses and wring our hands but to get up off of our laurels. This is a call for us to use our talents and love for souls whose repentance will bring armies of angels to their feet with rejoicing. But that will not happen until we care, and I wonder if the older brother really even cared.

Years ago, my youngest daughter and I stopped by Hardee’s for an evening snack. As we started to leave, we noticed a stray, starving mutt sitting at a distance on the cold sidewalk. Returning to the restaurant, I bought a hamburger. “That dog will not have anything to do with you,” explained the lady behind the counter. Within minutes I was back, purchasing another hamburger. The staff was amazed, watching as the dog ate from my daughter’s hand.

“Take him home with you,” they all urged. I and my elated daughter obliged.

The next morning, Boaz, as my daughter named him, had run away. He journeyed four miles to return to Hardees only to be beaten and torn by a pack of other wild dogs. We were in a quandary. We knew if we took him back, he would only run away again. But later in the day, Dr. Calvin, our local vet, showed up at my business with the cleaned, stitched, and drowsy canine in his arms. “They told me at Hardees that this is your dog,” Calvin explained.

My wife's heart could not argue. "Put him in my car," she said. Courtney, our daughter, was jubilant when she came home from school. It was the middle of winter and there was a heavy snow on the ground just after sunset as Boaz was allowed outside to *do his business*. But Boaz had more on his mind, and he started dragging his way down the mountain on his way back to Hardees. Courtney and her mother knew what would happen if he left. This time he might not even survive. Frantically, they called, whistled, and begged, but Boaz just kept going. Frustrated, they sat down in the snow and began crying. The pup stopped and listened. The tears continued to fall, and soon Boaz was there by their side, as if he sensed their love and care. In an instant, they nabbed him and carried him back to our home. Several years ago, when our daughter was home on break from Freed-Hardeman University, we all gathered round to comfort Boaz as he died at a ripe old age. After that second attempt, he never tried to run away again. What kept him? We believe Boaz finally understood our love and care.

In the face of the older brother can be seen self-righteousness. Later, we observe anger, hostility, and a determination to elevate self in comparison to his brother. He seemed void of love and care for the well-being of his brother. Who knows but what sincere heartfelt passion and tears might have kept his little sibling away from the far country.

The Portrait Of The Prodigal Son

Portrait is defined by Webster as "a pictorial representation of a person" ("Portrait"). This is what every realism artist seeks to depict. His character is not difficult to locate. One simply needs to walk down the streets of America or visit the nearest mall. My intention is not to insult anyone who grooms himself well. Saints should seek to be at their best at all times (Col. 3:17). I might also add that the observations regarding Jesus' Bible character of male gender applies equally to ladies. We live in an age when girls are just as prone to the parties and revelings of the far country as the guys.

As the image begins to form in my mind, it rests on a foundation of pride and selfishness. “For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (Gal. 6:3). In three brief verses Paul summed it up well.

For men shall be lovers of their own selves,
covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers,
disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy,
without natural affection, trucebreakers, false
accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those
that are good, traitors, heady, highminded,
lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God.
(2 Tim. 3:2-4)

The eyes of the prodigal would be very significant in our portrayal since “there is a generation that are pure in their own eyes, and yet is not washed from their filthiness. There is a generation, O how lofty are their eyes! And their eyelids are lifted up” (Prov. 30:12-13). We have all seen the look. Sometimes the eyes roll. At other times they look up as if to say, “Would you please get over it?” A look to the side can well express making fun or one’s unwillingness to listen.

One ready to depart for the far country would have an insatiable look. “Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied” (Pro. 27:20). In other words, “the grass is greener on the other side of the hill.” Miserable is the man who does not have the ability to appreciate and be satisfied with where he is (1 Cor. 7:24; Phi. 4:11). Restlessness would have been evident in the prodigal’s look.

In my painting, the prodigal would be walking away, looking back over his shoulder for a brief know-it-all glance. His \$200 sunglasses would be perched high on his moose-filled, reared-back head as if to say, “I will show you!” His designer jeans, slid half-way to his knees, would likely be from Abercrombie. His exposed \$35 boxer-shorts would make the outfit complete, saying, “Hey bro, I

am not like my stone-aged family. I'm conformed to the world... one rockin' dude." Wearing a shirt one size too small, his tattooed bicep would be made prominent by the backpack he carried in his hand. He does not walk. He struts to the condescending music being piped to his drums through the latest brand of ear buds. Through the door you can see into his bedroom. One wall is filled with posters of athletic heroes, and the adjoining corner displays an ad for Skoal.

A portrait should seek to convey the mind of the subject at the instant when it was painted. The prodigal's young mind, if he is to be a young man, would be filled with so much contempt, he might well stop to put his fist through his father's wall as he thinks about how stupid everyone else is. "They don't get it. I hate this stupid town, this stupid house, and all of these stupid self-righteous hypocritical people. Some day they will know just how smart I truly am!" Proverbs 26:12 reads, "Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? There is more hope of a fool than of him."

The Face Of A Man In A Far Country

How do you paint the face of a man in a far country? It is easy. Look around. It is the face of our lost neighbors, our wayward families, and friends gone astray. I have been there. You have been there. We "walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air...without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:2; Eph. 2:12). The man in a far country is on-his-own, without direction.

Several weeks ago I was attempting to share the gospel with a recent newfound acquaintance. After fifteen minutes, he opened his heart, pouring out the steps of his tragic life. He spoke of his former happy life as a husband and father to his two young sons. He loved his family so much that he even forgave the infidelity of his wife, well, at least on the first account. When his wife sought a divorce, he contested. He wanted to keep his family together. Sadly, her mind was already in far places.

Seeking an escape, my friend began drinking heavily. Upset because the judge only allowed him to be with his boys two days per week, he spoke harsh words to his wife. She responded with a restraining order. Being even more upset, he violated the order by calling his wife on the telephone. The police put him in jail for a week. Upon his release he went directly to purchase more alcohol. Drunk, he went to the house of his former wife and the results were thirty days in jail. He explained, "Don, you would have thought I would have had better sense, but when I got out the next time, I did the same exact thing." The last time he was incarcerated for over six months, during which time he placed himself in a rehabilitation program. He has been sober every since his release, a number of months ago. Hopefully, the alcohol is behind him, but the scars and the damage will remain for years to come. As I thought about my colleague, I reflected on my own life, my faithful wife, and the happy life I live as a result of following God's Word. Except for my rescue, my life might have been much like his. "But now, in Christ Jesus, ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13).

As a young preacher, one of my first sermons was against the sin of social drinking and its affects. Brethren who claimed to be "more mature" accused me of being naïve. Little did they know I had grown up with an alcoholic father who often beat my mother's bloody body until she was no longer conscious. Many of my brethren are in fact naïve, not having suffered such consequences, shame, and embarrassment. I loved my father, and I remember well how, at the age of fourteen, I sat by his soon-to-be-covered grave thinking of the sad loss. That is the world. That is the far country.

Let me pause long enough for a brief commercial in which I would like to remind all of us that a far country is just that. Africa, Europe, and Asia contain many far countries. The Father is watching and waiting. Every Oriental, Latino, African, European, American, and Indian are His offspring (Acts 17:29). He knows each and every one of them by name. The Creator is watching while we, the older brother, merely watch with Him. We pray for our poor heathen

brothers as we sing enthusiastically in perfect four-part harmony *Send the Light*. The preacher preaches about that glorious day and we close the service with *It is Well With My Soul*, “when our faith will be sight,” and we rejoice to think we will be called up to meet Him in the air. But the Father watches. He knows when the trumpet will sound and when the Lord will descend. He also knows the billions of souls who will look to the sky and ask, “What is happening? What is this?”

An unmentioned portrait in this lesson is the Father’s reaction to the son who remained behind. His loving sincere words say “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). Though not mentioned in this story, God fills in the blanks in other places in the Bible. He says to go and bring our brothers home! The missing section of the narrative in this account is the Father pleading for the rescue of his lost son. “Awake to righteousness, and sin not; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame” (1 Cor. 15:34).

The picture I would paint of the son in the far country would be much different, almost unrecognizable from his earlier portrait. The image is that of a broken man. With pride stripped away, he now has frown lines where once his skin was smooth. His unwashed, wrinkled oversized shirt likely came from a heap he discovered in a back-alley. To see his eyes and wrinkled face, you would have to call him by name for his head is bent low. His gadgets are gone and so are his friends. His self-esteem is crushed, and he feels unworthy of life.

When I was in the fifth grade at Fork Creek Elementary, Donna was my girlfriend. We went everywhere together. Like all nine-year-olds, we wrote silly love letters and talked about the day we would be married. When I arrived at school one day, I was completely crushed to see her on the arm of Harvey. To add insult to injury, Harvey was the ugliest boy in my class. Perplexed, I sat during recess staring into space.

Toward the end of the same day, during class, Harvey laid his head on his desk and began crying and blubbering profusely. It was

impossible to ignore. Our teacher, Miss Betty asked, “Harvey, what is the matter?” He just kept bawling. After being asked the same question repeatedly by the teacher, Harvey finally raised his red snotty face.

Gasping for air after every word, it was hard to understand as he bellowed out, “I, I gave Da-Donna a da-dollar to be my ga-girlfriend. Tha, tha money is spa-spent, and now she won’t be my girlfriend any more.” This was a profound moment for me, one of my first lessons in the ways of the world. Oftentimes, when the money is gone, so are your friends.

The Image Of A Jubilant Father

The story is so touching we can scarce contain our tears. It is difficult to imagine the face of God. In 1511, Michelangelo attempted to paint God’s face in his famous work *The Finger of God* on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. I went to Rome to see it and was I ever disappointed. But the day is coming when we “shall see his face” (Rev. 22:4). Jesus told Philip, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). The clearest possible image we can have of the Father is seen in the righteousness, love, compassion, holiness, and love of Jesus Christ. How could anyone capture that on canvas?

Jesus tells us in the prodigal narrative of the Father. He was a compassionate man who willingly ran to his child. At the same time, he was a moral man of righteous judgment who would not forgive an unrepentant child. I can imagine a face, seen above the back of the son. His chin is tucked firmly into the shoulder of his son’s garments. Tears run down his face as he strains his lips to kiss the neck of the son he remembers. This is the joy “in heaven over one sinner that repenteth” (Luke 15:7), joy beyond any celebration ever held in any stadium. This jubilant moment overshadows any graduation, any wedding, and any elation over a newborn grandchild.

But my picture has three characters rather than two, and the third is not the older brother. The third is the one who brought the sinner home to the Father. As the Father opens his eyes, He glances approvingly at the figure in the corner. I hope it is me. I want to be

there. Because there is no greater joy on earth than bringing prodigals home to their Father.

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Ladies' Classes

CHAPTER 34

A Public School Teacher And Parent Looks At Surviving The School Years

Jeannie Gilpin

Encouraging someone takes love, time, and effort. It is a wonderful feeling to have influenced a person to make good choices and live as a faithful Christian. On the other hand, when that person is your own child, it is the ultimate feeling of accomplishment.

It is no surprise to hear that we influence our children in both good and bad ways, unintentionally. Have we ever really given any thought as to the overall goal we have as Christian parents? Is it to rear doctors, lawyers, teachers, preachers, and authors? Yes and no. The church needs members with money, resources, and talents that may help the church thrive as we teach our neighbors and seek Heaven for ourselves. Yet, what is our ultimate goal? It should be that of rearing faithful, God-fearing Christians who will go out into the world and build another house with the same goal. Many decisions, temptations, and choices must be successfully hurdled in order to see this become a reality. Truly, everything in life must fit around this one thing, but it is the main thing.

Temptations began with the very first people. Even though temptations are still around, each generation seems to have a new standard of temptations with which to wrestle. When children are very young and are presented with temptations, we are there to either stop it before it starts or punish when necessary. Godly parents must decide what the rules will be and expect the other members of the

family to abide by those rules. God has given us rules to live by so that we will have the best life. Breaking them is called sin. Sin must always be punished and a child ought to learn this in his own home when he is very young.

In the role as their parents, I am aware that we have the power to force them to obey our rules while they are in our home and occasionally it is necessary to do just that. But might I suggest that we broaden our thoughts from simply thinking about obedience in our home and also focus on what kinds of choices they will learn to make so they will make good ones when they are on their own. The goal, remember, is rearing God-fearing Christians. Do the strategies we use to guide them in the right way encourage them to want to make good decisions when they have a home of their own?

At best, we have them for 18 years. It will not always be a completely smooth road from beginning to end. There will be many times when you will doubt your standards and your stand on many issues. You will wonder if they are obeying your rules because they are forced to or because they want to do the right thing. It will be many years before you know the answer to that question if you ever know for sure.

Your own children are sure to face struggles and temptations because you know you did and you still do. During the school years, they are especially prevalent. Whether we want them to or not, the philosophies, the reactions, and the decisions that our children see us make while in our home will oftentimes transfer to their adult home one day in the future. Proverbs 22:6 says, “Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (King James Version). This is a general Bible principle every parent should follow. There is a way in which a child should go in order to make good choices and have a good life. While they are living at home, you have the right to ask them to walk in this way, and you have the resources to make them go if they are reluctant. We want so very badly for our children to have the best life possible with no regrets.

While growing up, children struggle with many, many things. They struggle with being responsible, being honest in everything, and covetousness. They struggle with their looks. “Why am I too short, too tall, too big, or too little? Why do I have freckles, acne or curly hair? Is it OK? Am I OK?” Children struggle with the parent/child relationship. “Who am I? Where do I fit it? Am I normal? Why can’t I do what my friends are doing?” Children also struggle with building their own faith based on the Christian examples they have seen in their home. I would like to mention ten things that we as parents can do that can make the path clearer as they grow and mature into God-fearing, mature Christians.

Be Prayerful

Tell your children you pray for them. Pray with them and for them. Encourage them to pray by asking them to pray for things with which you are struggling. It will not only help them grow as a Christian, but it will allow them to see that you also struggle with life as an adult and it will be expected of them. It will be monumental in their development as a Christian to hear you pray out loud for them. Pray for their spouses you do not even know yet. Pray out loud for the wisdom they will need to be pleasing to God. Pray for their faithfulness while they are at school the next day.

Be Memorable

Think about what your children will remember about the time they spent in your home. Are you hospitable? Do you encourage others by opening up your home to friends, family, and people who need your help? If so, you are setting a good example that they are likely to follow. Do you eat dinner together as a habit? What about family devotionals together before bedtime? What was your reaction as you accidentally ran through the garage door? What trips or vacations will stand out in their adult minds? Being memorable will more than likely mean turning off the television. Soak up every moment you have while they are still at home. Television parades immorality in front of your children and contradicts the very principles that you are trying to instill. You can make choices easier for your child if you make sure there are some things they do not see.

Be There

Things that are seemingly “little” to us matter a lot to a child. If you are there for every play, game, or school night, they will come to realize just how important they are to you. They will feel loved and important and will react with respect and love. Go to every teacher’s meeting and encourage them. If they are a snowflake on the back row of the play, be there. If you know before you leave home for that away game that they will be sitting on the bench that day, be there anyway. If they are marching in a halftime show that you have seen over and over, be there anyway. Be there when their face says things did not go very well at school that day. Be there when their friends are mean and hurtful. Be ready with what you will say. It will be a good time to teach them that they are a special treasure to God. It will give you a great opportunity to teach them that when they are on God’s side they will sometimes be persecuted and not popular. It will also be a good time to teach them that it will be so worth it. Stay close to God, stay focused on the prize, and you will get it right.

Be Vigilant

It is very easy to become a parent, but very difficult to be a good parent. The Bible warns us of the dangers that await them outside the confines of our safe homes. In First Peter 5:8, he tells us to “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” A good parent stays up late until the last is in safely, intercepts phone calls from evil-minded associates, and demands openness and honesty from every member of the family. A good parent might have a reason to look through a purse or a dresser drawer. There should be no locked bedroom doors. A good parent says **no** when that is the answer needed. A good parent is not another friend. They are blessed with wisdom and guidance from Almighty God to set boundaries to guide their children safely to Heaven. A good parent realizes that learning disappointment is just as important as learning success.

Be Firm

Teach them discipline, as self-discipline is ultimately the goal. You will not always be there to tell them what the right thing is

according to God's law. Set boundaries and stick to them. Have rules. Do not ignore behaviors you do not want to cultivate. There is a saying, "That which you ignore, you allow. That which you allow, you endorse." When children are very young, there will be many battles over what will be allowed. When these battles are learning experiences, time will teach a child if you are united and consistent. However, when it comes to a test of wills, you must not lose those battles. Justice should be carried out thoroughly and swiftly. The Bible, written by the One Who made us, mentions discipline over and over. He disciplined His people when He loved them still. If we love our children, we will use whatever means necessary to see that they walk in the right path. The Bible says, "Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him" (Pro. 23:15). It also says, "Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (Pro. 23:13-14). Discipline sometimes may involve tears.

Begin very early teaching them to do their chores happily because it takes an entire family all doing their part in order for a home to function properly. Set standards for their school work. Make sure they learn about deadlines. Ensure that they know you love them and will always be there to help them, but you will not clean up their messes for them, inside or outside of the home. They will do that. God expects parents to teach their children that there are consequences for poor judgment and bad behavior. It encourages children to take responsibility for the choices they make. It encourages children to look to God for guidance. It encourages children to try to avoid the sad consequences of poor decision making.

As a public school teacher, I see parents who defend their children, even when they are in the wrong. As I try to mold young lives on a daily basis, I sometimes see parents who are unwilling to listen to the facts; facts that would assist them in disciplining their children and possibly saving them much heartache in the end. Many parents do not want their child ever to be disappointed but are still unwilling to take a stand in order to steer them away from trouble. A

child should learn that there are consequences to any action and he will bear them if he makes the wrong choice. God expects no less.

The teen years bring experiences into your home that you cannot imagine when your children are babies. Parents who have failed to lay a solid foundation are bound to have some frightening moments during these years. Everything is mysterious and new to a teenager with newfound freedom. Parents wonder if we have taught them enough to steer them clear of temptations that will obviously be in their way at some point. Parents must fight as hard as they can to keep the world from pulling them under. Being a good parent requires patience, persistence, and prayer.

If you are rearing teenagers in your home now or you will be soon, the topic of dancing is sure to come up in today's society. For some, the questions are hard and the ensuing struggles are not fun. For others, the answers are easy. For those parents who have trained their children and talked to them about the behavior that is expected by God, life will be a little easier. They might be tempted to want to "be with the crowd." If you want not only to survive these years but help your child to grow into a mature Christian as an adult, the answer to dancing is "No." No going just to take pictures or see what is going on. You as a parent need to make that decision for them. Realize that dances are no place for Christian young people who want to begin a home someday with the love of their life . . . with no regrets. Since parents know from their own experiences how powerful influence is, the best thing we can do to encourage them is to say no. Tell them there are some things that worldly people do that Christians cannot do and still be pleasing to God. Tell them about Daniel and his friends.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not,

be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up. (Dan. 3:16-18)

Tell them about Luke 6:22 where God tells us, “Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of Man’s sake.” The best thing you can do as a parent to help your child withstand temptations is to be firm.

Be Frugal

We are rearing a generation of children who do not know the meaning of the word *no*. Children should not have everything they want. In fact, **no** one should have everything they want. Children should have to work for some things, wait for some things, and live without some things. Are we teaching our children to be good stewards of God’s money? Are we modeling bad behavior by getting into too much debt? Children should know about shopping at thrift stores and buying things on sale. They should know what it means to sacrifice. You will be encouraging your child to set the proper priorities and to think about what God expects with regard to our giving. Putting God first is a mindset that is modeled and learned just as with anything else in life. You will encourage your child to choose this kind of life as an adult if you have lived it before them while they were in your home.

Be Nosey

There should be very few secrets within a strong, loving home and never any locked bedroom doors (except for parents’). If the occasion calls for further investigation, never be afraid to look under their bed, in their desk, or on their computer for anything which indicates they are being tempted to do wrong. Put the home computer in the busiest part of the house with the heaviest traffic and monitor it at all times. Satan wants your child and he is willing patiently to wait for the day when you decide your child has earned your trust and no longer needs to be monitored in this area. As a parent, you not only have the right, but also the duty to ask where, when, and with whom

they are going out. You have the right to know when they should be expected home. You should not only know their friends' names, but the names of their parents, as well. Go to any lengths possible to get to know their friends before they spend time with them away from you. Christianity is not a democracy, but a monarchy with God our Father as the perfect King. In a similar way, the home should not be a democracy. It should have two parents who have their minds focused on doing God's will and rearing God-fearing Christians who will one day leave the safe surroundings of home and go out into a world that wants to devour them. Therefore, children should be reminded that they have no "rights" until they are providing a living for themselves in another home. You will help your children survive these scary years if they know you care enough to ask all the right questions and to guide them with whatever measures are called for.

Be Forgiving

Our children will make mistakes just as we did and it will not be the end of the world; though, at the time it may seem as if it is. When they make mistakes, be there to comfort them. If they need to ask for forgiveness from someone, help them do it. If they need to come back to the Father, show them how. You will encourage them to mend broken relationships if you show them how to mend yours. You will encourage them to mend a broken relationship with God if you have lived a godly life before them. Forgive and forget, just as God's Word teaches us. Tell them to keep on keeping on when they are tripped up by Satan's wiles and craftiness. It will encourage and lift them up if you are living a forgiving life before them. Do not bring up past mistakes. Teach them to learn from them. When you are wrong, say you are wrong and apologize. It does not make you weak in their eyes. On the contrary, it makes you their hero.

Be Accepting

Each child is unique and different, even if they were reared in the same home with the same two parents and the same set of rules. They will not make the same choices you did. Each child, whether the oldest, the youngest, or somewhere in between deserves to see his or her dreams become a reality in their life and not have to live

in the dark shadow of an over-achieving sibling. Each child deserves your encouragement in developing his or her own special talents. Each one deserves your unconditional love. There are many choices to be made along the way.

Even with Adam and Eve, the choice seemed so clear. There was only one thing that God held back from them, yet that was the one thing they chose. Satan is the father of lies. He lied to them, he lies to us, and he will lie to our children. He questioned God's Word in Genesis 3:1. He twisted what God said in Genesis 2:17 by adding only one word: "Ye shall **not** surely die." The devil has also been known to try to distort Scripture to trip us up in our daily walk.

In Matthew 4:1-11, the devil came to Jesus in the wilderness. He tried to tempt Jesus to take his eye off the prize, but he was unsuccessful. Using every trick in his toolbox, Satan even resorted to quoting Scripture: "For it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee: and in their hands they shall bear Thee up, lest at any time Thou dash Thy foot against a stone" (Mat. 4:6). But Jesus knew the Scriptures and that was His weapon of choice.

God will still punish one who has been lied to. According to the standards of the world, hardly anything is a sin anymore. James 4:7 says, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, he will flee from you." As we are going about our daily lives interacting with our children, are we making sure we are helping them to get the Word of God into their hearts and minds so that they are prepared to do battle with the devil? We will not be there to do it for them. Romans 14:12 teaches that each of us will give an account for the things we have done. If a strong foundation is laid at home during the school years, children will have a much easier transition from child to adult and will more than likely have learned from Whom all blessings flow. If the lines have been clearly drawn during their life, the choices will be much easier to make.

Make sure your children know that sin is pleasurable for a season . . . and then the bill comes due. Every choice we make as a child or as an adult fits into one of two categories—carnal or spiritual. Moses chose to suffer affliction with the people of God rather than to enjoy

the pleasures of sin for a season (Heb. 11:25). Moses made a choice and so must we. As parents, there are some choices that we must make for them, such as whether or not they will attend worship, Bible class, youth activities, or dances. These choices should be made for them before they are even born. There are other choices that we need to help them make, such as their career choice (perhaps one that might hinder them from serving God as they should), or their choice of associates while they are under your control. There are still other choices that, as parents, we cannot make for them. These may include whether or not to become a Christian, being open and honest, or making the decision to do the right thing in certain situations. And while we may not want to admit it just yet, there are some choices that are not ours to make. That special someone that they choose to be their mate for life falls into that category. We should be teaching them and guiding them during the dating years, helping them to see the importance of choosing the right one. However, the final decision is up to them. We must show them that there are choices to be made every day of our lives. As Joshua so plainly said in that long ago,

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord,
choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether
the gods which your father served that were
on the other side of the flood or the gods of
the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as
for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.
(Jos. 24:15)

He was a man taking a stand in the best interest of his family.

Be Normal

Be involved in a variety of things with your children. God's plan is that His people will be a shining light to the entire world. We are the only Gospel some will ever see. If Christian families are not involved in good, wholesome activities with others in the world, how will we ever influence them? Every parent has the right to decide how and where their children will be educated. I was a stay-at-home

mom for twelve years. On the mission field in Tanzania, I taught fourteen children on nine grade levels, with two of those being my own. When we returned home, we decided our children would attend public school. They played sports, took music lessons, went to camp, and had sleep overs. They debated evolution with science teachers throughout their high school careers. Both went to state schools after graduating from high school. One went from there to the Memphis School of Preaching and the other earned a Business degree from the University of Alabama. It is possible to rear Christian children in the world and not be of the world. Everyone has personal preferences as to how this is best accomplished. It is not right or wrong in and of itself, but it was the right thing for our own children. The point is that the training God meant for our children to have should come from within the home, not without. The church cannot do in four hours a week what is our responsibility day in and day out. It is **our** responsibility to rear them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord and to set the standards by which they are to live. Being involved in activities with people who do not know the Lord only glorifies Him when we act and speak as His children. Showing our children how to live in the world, but not be of the world will encourage them to withstand the temptations of the world and give them the example they need to grow into adults who know how to do the same.

Will you survive the school years? That depends to a great extent on the kind of training you deliver and the kind of attitude with which they accept this training. Do not assume they will pick up on it through osmosis. Tell them what God expects from their lives. Show them by example how to live Godly lives and overcome temptations when they arrive. Teach them daily the principles found in God's Word so they are ready to go to battle with the devil. Use everything in your power to lead them and encourage them in the right path. Once they are on their own, the choices are up to them. God help us to be Godly parents.

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CHAPTER 35

The Prodigal Daughter: Applying the Parable To The Fairer Sex

Cindy Colley

There have been a couple of occasions in my lifetime when I felt very far away from the person who could provide security in a time of fear. I recall that, in the days following 9-11, I was in a foreign country without my husband. I can still remember moments of fear on the plane and in the airport. I recall another occasion when I became extremely ill very suddenly when my husband was overseas. Very recently, while traveling in our home state, I found it impossible to make it home before the tornadoes violently careened through our north Alabama community and I sat alone in a county jail—the closest shelter I could find—where I lost any means of communication with Glenn. Being removed from his voice, his touch, and his reassuring decisiveness during times of crisis intensifies my fear and compounds my pain.

But the desperation of being without that person who solidified my world does not hold a candle to the hopelessness I would experience if traveling in the far away country of sin—lost and without God. Living far away from God is something people all around me routinely do. I mean, they go through their days without consulting Him. They pillow their heads without a thought of His will for their tomorrows. They make choices, big and small, without referring to His criteria for decision-making. But I cannot fathom distancing myself from God. I cannot imagine taking on the

weighty choices of...say...parenting or interpersonal relationships without the wisdom that comes through prayer and study. Once someone has lived in the house of the Father—once she has known the comfort that comes from passages like Romans 8:28, Matthew 6:33, and Romans 8:1—how can she ever get her heart's consent to travel in her spirit to the far away country? I stand amazed at those who live there without the benefits of homeland security and the comforts of home. In fact, the only thing I can contemplate that might be worse than living in the far country would be knowing that my child was living there, particularly if there were things I had done or left undone that may have prevented her going. I believe it was no accident that, when the Son returned, the Father saw him a great way off. I would be on the front porch looking down the road every day for a glimpse of my child's return from eternal danger.

I love the parable of The Lost Son. Of course it chronicles the journey from the foreign country back to the Father in the most vivid language and with the most tender of appeals known to any literature. I know that the son, once home, had grown in his respect for the father and his appreciation for home. I am also aware that the older brother, who never physically left the house of the father, was miles away from his father in his heart. There was a real sense in which both of those brothers needed a journey to be in the security of the father's will. As I think about the different attitudes that made them both lost, as it were, I think about my own two children, their own coming of age and some of the surprises of accountability. As Caleb and Hannah became more independent in high school and left for college, I truly believe that they never left home in their hearts. Oh, they were pretty good at cutting the apron strings with Mom and Dad. They did not call every day and sometimes we felt a little dejected when it seemed they had to close the dorms for them to make the trip home. But they carried with them the spiritual principles that had been the foundation and meaning of home for all of their lives. I believe they remained faithful through the teen and college years.

All of that to say this: When I contemplate the story of The Lost Son, I think of the two mentalities portrayed in the children—the one who rebelled outwardly and the one who stayed at home while becoming haughty and self-righteous before the father. Of course, there is one sense in which every every single person has spiritually left for the far-away country (King James Version, Rom. 3:23). Every one of us has not a plea except to fall down before the Father, throwing our sinful selves on His mercy.

But when we think about this story's application to our earthly families, I hope that we can make room in our imaginations for a third category of children. I pray my children will never be prodigals walking away from the Lord, no matter how temporary their time in the far-away country might be. But I am just as passionate in my hopes that they will never be outwardly beautiful, but inwardly full of dead men's bones (Mat. 23:27) as was the older brother in the parable at hand. I want my children to be at home with the Father on their insides and on their outsides! My husband and I want them to be working with their bodies and with all their hearts in the fields that are white unto harvest. We are prayerfully hoping for neither the prodigal nor the older brother.

When our children left home for a Christian university, they found themselves surrounded by those who had been negatively influenced by an immoral culture during the high school years. Many of the kids there had walked away from the Lord during high school into sexual impurity, drunkenness, lewd entertainment forms, and pornography. They, in short, had lived in the far-away country. My kids and others, while certainly never perfect, had, through the grace of God, remained faithful throughout the high school years. As those who had, in their own words, "hit rock bottom" during high school, began to know kids who had never left the Father's home, they began to belittle the faith of those kids who had walked through the tough high school days in obedient faith. Statements like "You can't appreciate Christ like I can, because you don't know what it's like to really need His grace," were frequently aimed at them. Such statements finally evolved into the accusation that kids who are

really striving to do and to teach the will of God are hypocritical and, again in their words, “holier-than-thou.” In short, the prodigals were accusing the faithful of having the “older brother” syndrome.

So, for our purposes today, it is important that we answer the question: Is it possible to have children who go directly from the innocent ages of pre-accountability into faithfulness and who maintain faithfulness all the way to and throughout adulthood? Practically speaking, do we have to choose between the prodigal and the older brother? Can we raise children who stay “at home” in the Father’s will, without haughtiness or hypocrisy? I believe it is not only possible, but it is the required goal of faithful parents. I believe we should not only be warning our kids about having the attitude of the older brother, but we should also do everything within our power to keep them from the far country. It is the “how-to” of the latter that comprises the focus of this lesson. Specifically, how do mothers protect their daughters from the “far-away country”?

First of all, I think that we, as moms, have to recognize that there is a border between the homeland and the far-away country and we have to think it is a big deal if our kids are attempting to wander back and forth over the border. So many parents today have been so mesmerized by the culture themselves, that they actually take pleasure in seeing their kids “fit in” in the far-away country. Thus, we are well into the second generation of chameleon Christians. We are comfortable changing our colors when we associate with those who are of the world. We somehow believe that if we, in our personal moral descent, are a couple of steps behind ... say, Hollywood... or MTV...or even the worst neighborhoods in our metro areas, that we are good with God. Activities to which we would have objected a few decades ago are now considered acceptable. Social drinking, mixed swimming, and dancing are examples of such activities.

My daughter spoke recently at a ladies seminar in which she taught the dangers of engaging in the activities that surround and occur at the prom. One of the girls in attendance was convicted that, as a disciple, her purity and influence would be compromised by her attendance at the prom. But when she went home and told her

“Christian” mother about her decision, she got this raging response: “I knew I should have not let you go hear that Colley girl. I figured she would put these crazy ideas in your head! And you most certainly ARE going to the prom, so just put that little spiel you heard today out of your mind!” With this sort of support and encouragement, this young girl will be in the far country in no time at all.

Another mom told me that she wanted her children to participate in all of the school activities and sports even if they occasionally had to miss worship to do these things or even if some of the activities were a bit of a moral compromise. “After all,” she said, “I don’t want them to think being a Christian takes all the fun out of life.” She, too, is putting her children on a quick trolley to the far country.

It is past time that Christian parents developed a healthy fear of what is in the far country. It is a place of waste and riotous living and it exacts a great toll on the hearts of our children. When the young son went into the far country, he never dreamed that he would, before long, be friendless, destitute and begging for sustenance. But the devil really wants to find your children while they are wandering in his territory. He really does stalk, “as a ... lion ... seeking whom he may devour,” (1 Pet. 5:8). Protective mothers build walls around the hearts of their children at very early ages. They make it clear to preschoolers that there are certain compromises we will not make as teens. They have a healthy fear of going near the border. They understand that passages like “Abstain from all appearance of evil,” (1 The. 5:22) and “Flee fornication” (1 Cor. 6: 18) contain operative verbs that are for our own protection. Such apostolic warnings are like “danger” signs placed along the border of the far country. They caution us to stay away from the border and remain far from the zone in which we become easy prey for the lion. It is much easier to stay in the safety zone at sixteen if our daughters have made decisions as preschoolers that they will never drink beverage alcohol, engage in lustful activities, or spend long periods of time alone with boyfriends. All of this is just basic homeland security against the principalities and powers that would wreck your daughter’s spiritual well being. Please know, as you read, that I am aware of my shortcomings as a parent.

This advice is resultant from sometimes getting it right, but perhaps more often learning from mistakes. It is advice given from an older woman—a woman in between parenting and grandparenthood—a woman who fiercely hates the devil for his robbery of innocence and ultimate fulfillment from the children of our generation.

So here are some security measures we must take when our daughters are very young and as they grow to keep them from the far country:

Have a daily family Bible time. This is just what it sounds like: a time when Mom and Dad assemble the family unit and spend time telling accounts from the Good Book, studying the meanings of its imperatives, figuring out the practical ways to apply it at young ages, and doing fun activities relative to the passages being studied. The two key factors in making this work are consistency (never skipping a day) and informality (doing it wherever you are and making it inclusive and fun). If Glenn and I had to put our fingers on just one important “must-do” for raising faithful kids, this would be it. Incorporate games and scavenger hunts and memorization contests and prizes and friends. Have long times and short times, times in the van, and times beside the tub of your toddlers. But take the time for this invaluable ritual. It reminds them (and you) daily of the danger at the border.

1) Make some early decisions about marriage. That’s right. When your daughter first begins talking, she should be able to tell you that she will grow up and marry a Christian. Then as she moves toward adolescence, she should have a list of outward characteristics for which she will be looking as she chooses this mate...things like purity in entertainment choices and in language, respect for parents, avoidance of pornography and alcohol, etc.... For our personal dating checklist, visit cindycolley.blogspot.com and type “dating check card” in the search bar.

2) Just say “no” to certain activities, but do it before the stakes are high. Your child should have vowed at least ten years prior to the first temptation to drink, that she would never let alcohol pass her lips. She should understand that dancing and

attending the prom are not even options well before upper elementary school when the pressure begins to mount. If you start early, the decisions have been stated and restated so many times that the words and the reasons come easily. If you, yourself, are unaware of the Biblical reasons behind avoiding the dances, take a close look at the word *lasciviousness* in Galatians 5:19-21. Notice that Thayer, in his respected lexicon includes, among other things, these words in his definition of the Greek word for lasciviousness: “unchaste handling between males and females, indecent bodily movements.” But I really think a sober and reflective mom could take a look online at the kind of dancing done at proms today and at the extent of immodesty and indecency present and draw the same conclusion with or without the word study. Those of us who are married (that’s moms) really do not have any reason to have our heads in the sand about the dancing that is popular today. This kind of dancing, along with immodesty, should make an early decision for moms about whether our daughters will be cheerleaders. But remember: decide, convey, and repeat these decisions early and often.

3) Talk a lot about modest dress. Some time during elementary school, study with your daughter the meaning of 1 Timothy 2: 9, 10. For a study guide of this verse refer to a book and DVD series called “Pure on Purpose” by Cindy and Hannah Colley or use your own Bible reference books. Excellent studies and beneficial quotes from young men are also found in a modesty study in the book “GIFTS,” by Hannah Colley. Be sure to make your study practical by applying the principles to the latest fashion trends. I am convinced that, if moms and dads would stop promoting and funding immodesty, the sexual temptations that ensnare their daughters would greatly decrease. When girls stop looking like streetwalkers, guys tend to stop treating them like streetwalkers. I am amazed at what parents who claim Christianity deem acceptable for their young teens to wear to the mall. I am sorry for the boys who are trying to keep pure hearts as they encounter extreme immodesty in every public place. Again, I believe fathers who are honest and righteous will figure this out even

without a study of 1 Timothy 2. I believe they understand Matthew 5:28 and that they can make the connection. They should step up to the plate and lead mothers in the quest to promote modesty in their daughters. It should go without stating that all popular swimwear available in stores today falls into the category of immodest apparel. It is NOT true that young men who are tempted by scantily clad women at the mall are unaffected if those women are at the beach (or on the volleyball court, for that matter). How foolish parents are when they make circumstantial exceptions to modesty regulations.

4) Communicate about sensitive matters. This is your job, moms. This is very important and it is a job no one else can do as effectively as can you. The devil is very brazen and articulate in getting his message about sex out to our daughters. They hear it at school, on the television (even during commercials), at the mall, and on Facebook. The time has long since passed, when moms could speak in general terms to their daughters about sexual purity. We have a lot of explaining to do and for some of us, it is excruciatingly embarrassing to discuss whether or not oral sex is sex. But, because of the ever-encroaching ideology of the far away country, we must. Discuss with your daughter what is and what is not appropriate touching. Discuss where it is appropriate for her to have her hands when she is on a date and how to sit properly when guys are present. Talk to her about oral sex and homosexuality and about STDs and about the God we serve Who made the rules about sex for our ultimate joy and benefit. Talk to her in very practical terms about things she should avoid (sitting in a guy's lap, giving him a massage, removing articles of clothing, having him unzip her dress when she goes to change, spending time alone with him in places where they will not be disturbed, putting her hand on his inner thigh, French kissing, lengthy full-body hugs, etc . . .) You may be thinking, "I had rather have a root canal than discuss these things!" Well, the price of being aloof about these things is much higher than you want to pay.

5) Be the parent. Stay at home and bake those cookies when your kids are watching movies with their friends of the opposite sex. Have a "no kids left alone with members of the opposite sex" policy

at your house. Perhaps you trust your teens explicitly. That is good. But do you trust all their friends? Further, do you want to protect your kids' reputations? By now you may be thinking in terms of a twenty year sentence to remaining at home every Friday night, if you have multiple kids. Think of it this way: You are going to pay a high price at some point for parenting those kids. Do you want to pay it on the front end and rear them to be responsible faithful adults or do you want to pay it as you raise your illegitimate grandchildren or worry about where your kids are at one in the morning or as you place your daughter's name on a waiting list at the rehab facility? Come on, moms. Let us pay the price the first time around. Besides, hanging out with your kids can be fun . . . well, at least tolerable, if you are rearing respectful, Christ-centered teens. Of course, being the parent means more than just being on site during the teen years. It means making unpopular decisions and then sticking to your guns. You cannot be your child's parent and still be perceived by her as a friend at all times. Sometimes she will vehemently disagree with your decisions. At these times, choose to be the parent. When you do, you are, in reality, being her very best friend.

6) Get control of the media in your child's world. The responsibility for the content of every CD and DVD in your house is yours. You are responsible for the programming that enters your home via television or computer. It is not easy to be in charge of the media because it comes in so many forms that compete for the attention of your children. One is listening to the ipod with earphones, so you do not even hear what she is ingesting. At the same time, in another room, another child is on Facebook and that is next to impossible to monitor fully. Yet another room is where girlfriends are gathered after school for homework and television. I know the media monitoring duty is relentless. But did you know that there are the worst of vulgar sexual terms, the promotion of homosexuality, and/or intense descriptions of all kinds of sexual activities in some of the most popular songs in the U.S. currently? Did you know that this filth is a regular occurrence in chart toppers in our country? Are you aware that the average age at which young

boys are first exposed to pornography is age eleven and that it most often happens at home (“Statistics”)? Did you know that, if your children are average television watchers in America today that they watch one thousand, six hundred eighty minutes of television each week compared to three and a half minutes of conversation time with parents weekly (Herr)? Have you considered that by the time your children finish elementary school (if they are average watchers), they have witnessed eight thousand murders on television. Can this be good? But, perhaps even more disturbing is the fact that Hollywood seems to have a fetish with the sexualization of teen girls, portraying their characters in more sexual situations currently than their adult counterparts: 47 % to 29% respectively. This data was drawn from a study done during the 2009-2010 viewing season and was collected from the twenty-five most popular prime time shows in the twelve to seventeen-year-old demographic. The study also pointed out that ninety-eight percent of the teen sex portrayed was outside of committed relationships and seventy-three percent of it was portrayed in a humorous context (McKay). Is it any wonder that girls in our middle schools openly discuss their sexual relationships and view them as not only acceptable, but actually see a sex-filled lifestyle as a prize to pursue? It is imperative that parents remember that the responsibility to put trash where it belongs is theirs. They are paying the cable bill, buying the CDs and DVDs, and funding the trips to the movies. They purchased the computer and they pay for the WiFi connection. We can, if our vigilance turns to neglect, purchase our children’s passage to the far country.

6) Communicate positively. Obviously the camel that carries the burden of successful parenting is communication. If you, as a mom, are diligent in initiating the suggestions listed above, there will be a lot of parent/child communication going on at your house. But, as you will quickly note, it will not all be positive. There will be a lot of limitations, restrictions, and a lot of saying “no.” So make a conscious effort to inject some reinforcing and affirming words in your parent/child dialog every single day. Once when our daughter seemed to be moving toward a stage of “what-do-mom-and-dad-know?” rebellion,

Glenn and I stepped back to evaluate. We found that almost all of our daily communication time with her was spent correcting mistakes or rebuking for unruly behavior. We consciously decided that I, as the parent who spent the most time with her, would make a point of getting down on eye-level with this precious daughter three times every day and talking with her about her personal character traits that were a blessing to our home and family and others in our church and community. I was amazed at the results. Within days, Hannah was anxious to please us again. It was almost as if her will to be an integral part of our family was restored. When we settled on this trial and error plan, we also decided that I would take time off for leisure with her—a one on one time every week. We went to the mall and window-shopped. We went roller-skating. We stayed at home and played a game. We made pottery and we went to get a milkshake. We just made sure that what came to be called “Mother-Daughter Time” did not involve work or negativity. I am so glad we did this. She still comes home from her collegiate world sometimes and asks if we can have Mother-Daughter time.

And finally, one more thing that many parents are missing as their children move closer to the border. Your children, while living under your roof, do not have privacy rights. Their drawers, backpacks, ipods, pockets, purses, and computers all belong to you. If you do not have all user names and passwords, get them and begin using them today. These passwords may be very important to your child’s internet safety, but, more importantly, and far more frequently, they might be key to your child’s security in the Father’s house. God gave you that daughter and the responsibility to bring her soul back to Him. We cannot afford to be afraid of interference in our children’s businesses. In fact, that interference is the Biblical purpose of parenthood. We must be compassionate and committed enough to make sure our children do not have school, internet, or peer worlds that are separate and secret from parental monitors.

Each time I write or speak about parenting, I realize that successful childrearing all comes down to an ancient Deuteronomy six philosophy. It is about first loving the Lord with all of my heart,

soul, and mind. That is with the emotional part of me that laughs and cries, the spiritual part of me that worships and studies, and the logical part of me that makes tough decisions. All areas of my life must be controlled by the fact that I am given over to the Lord. Simply put, the parenting journey will not turn out well if I am attempting to get my kids to stay at home while I, myself, am venturing into the far country. It is secondly about diligence in teaching as my children get up in the morning, as they sit, as they walk/ride, and as they go to bed at night. It is an all-encompassing job that takes eighteen good years per child. But moms, if you do this job with all your might, and you can successfully keep your kids (body and soul) in the Father's house until they leave your care, the chances are great that they will never cross the border into the far country. They will never engage in the riotous living that steals friendships, money, virginity, security, self-respect and, most tragically, access to the Father. If your child is headed toward the border, may I beg you, as her mother, to immediately put on your running shoes? Go after her with every tool at your disposal, beginning with prayer and stopping at nothing. Your window of opportunity is brief, at best, while your wait on that porch, may be very long and full of regret.

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CHAPTER 36

Teaching Ladies To Be Godly In A Pagan Culture

Cathy Iverson

At first glance of this title, one might ask, “What exactly is the definition of a godly woman and why do godly women need training?” It is certainly not by our own goodness or righteous deeds that we are considered godly (New King James Version, Tit. 3:5; Isa. 64:6). We are saved by grace for good works, but the good works in no way make us godly or worthy of salvation. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them*” (Eph. 1:8-10).

Though a woman by her own merit is not “worthy of salvation,” God expects us “to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called” (Eph. 4:1). A godly woman is simply one who turns her life over to God. She no longer lives for herself, but for Him (Gal. 2:20). Because of her love and appreciation for His grace and love, she strives to be like Him! “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God. . . . And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:1; 1 John 3:3).

As Christian women, we must consider ourselves to be “in training” that will continue until our final day on this earth. Even the inspired apostle Paul said that he was not satisfied with his spiritual growth but was constantly striving to attain “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phi. 3:12-14; 1 Cor. 9:27).

Knowledge of the Word of God is imperative to the training and maintenance of a godly woman. Through the Scriptures (literally “written word”), God has provided everything that we need to know to accomplish this task (2 Tim. 3:16-17). As we look in God’s Word, which He compares to a mirror (Jam. 1:22-25; 2 Cor. 3:18), we see areas where we need to make corrections, but we also see the image of Jesus Christ. It is this image that we strive to emulate all the days of our lives (John 14:7-11; 2 Cor. 4:6; Gal. 4:19; Eph. 4:13).

In our worship, we sometimes sing the song *Let The Beauty Of Jesus Be Seen In Me*. Though Jesus had no physical comeliness (Isa. 53:2), the beauty of Jesus is seen in His character and His teachings! The way we become godly and remain godly is to become more and more like Him. We often praise God for the sacrificial death of His Son, and rightly so, but equally worthy of praise is the fact that He **lived** a perfect life to leave us an example and to equip Himself to be an understanding Mediator (Heb. 2:17-18; Heb. 4:14-16)!

In Philippians 2:5-8, each Christian is admonished to emulate the humility of Christ. The very last night of our Lord’s life on this earth was spent teaching this important lesson. Though He began by washing the disciples’ feet, the lesson continued in everything that followed. He warned them yet again of what was about to happen to Him. He even foretold of His betrayal by Judas, their desertion at His arrest, and ultimately Peter’s denial. Notice that the beautiful promise of John 14:1-3 about heaven follows these revelations. Often because a new chapter begins, we fail to notice what precedes it. When Jesus says, “Let not your heart be troubled,” He is no doubt referring to their reactions to what He has just been warning them about. Although He was about to suffer the most horrible death known to man, He was concerned about *their* “being troubled.” He reminded them that He was leaving so He could prepare a place for them in heaven! Amazing grace!

Have you ever noticed on that night **how many** of the things that He said are to give comfort or aid to someone else? To the “daughters of Jerusalem” who were weeping for Him, He said that instead they should weep for themselves because of the impending destruction of

Jerusalem (Luke 23:28-31). To the thief, He comforted by assuring him he would be with Jesus that very day in paradise (Luke 23:43). To his mother, He provided someone to care for her after His death (John 19:26-27). To his Father, He asked Him to forgive the very ones who were crucifying Him (Luke 23:34).

Humility is definitely an attribute that the godly woman should obtain, but it does not come without effort. The Bible admonishes us to be “clothed with humility” (1 Pet. 5:5). As mothers, we all understand the necessity of training our children how to dress themselves. Tying shoes, buckling belts, buttoning shirts, etc. all take effort and practice to master. In the same way, clothing ourselves in humility requires the same.

The Holy Spirit uses military terms to emphasize the importance of humility in James 4:6-7, “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.”

The Greek word for “*resist*” is defined by *Vine’s* as “anti, against, to arrange, originally a military term, to range in battle against.” (Iverson 143)

A prerequisite to grace is submission to God. To be humble is to submit to God. To “*submit*” is the same as to *subject*. This military term (in the Greek) meant to rank under. It is like the lowly military man who bows to the authority of the higher ranking officers. (Iverson 145)

So when we are proud, God sets up in battle array against us! Yet, when we humble ourselves and resist Satan, we join God’s ranks and with Him set up in battle array against Satan. No wonder he flees!

Our Lord also knew that we would be bombarded by the influences of this world in which we live. Just before His crucifixion, He prayed, “I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are

not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth” (John 17:15-17). Once again it is through our training in the Word of God that we can not only become godly, but we can be protected from this pagan world that is ruled by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4)!

There is only one true and living God. He is the Creator of this world and all who live in it. “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard” (Psa. 19:1-3).

Every human being begins as a child of God and remains so until he reaches an age when he has the ability to choose to accept or reject Him (Mat. 18:1-3). Before creating this world, our merciful God made a plan through His Son whereby every sinner could be reconciled to Him and be adopted as His child (Eph. 1:3-5). That “everlasting” gospel or “good news” is for “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6).

Throughout history, rejecting the true and living God, man has invented his own religion (Rom. 1:20-23). It is difficult to determine exactly how many religions that have been started by man. “There is a growing collection of over 43,870 adherent statistics and religious geography citations: references to published membership/adherent statistics and congregation statistics for over 4,200 religions, churches, denominations, religious bodies, faith groups, tribes, cultures, movements, ultimate concerns, etc.” (Home page).

The largest religion made up of 2.1 billion people (33,830 different denominations) is “Christianity” (“Major Religions”). It is the only religion with a risen Savior and the only religion with a book that contains the evidence to show that it actually comes from the true and living God. Unfortunately, most of the people who claim to be classified under the category of “Christianity” deny the authenticity and validity of that very book. Most consider parts of the Bible to be mere legend or fraught with error! They write their own “creed books” to explain what they believe. Many even include modern day prophets that contradict and add to the very Word of God! “And in

vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mat. 15:9). They claim a belief in God, but by their works, they deny Him (Tit. 1:16). This is my reason for enclosing the word Christianity in quotes—most of these are Christians in name only. “Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son” (2 John 9).

It is quite interesting that when studying the history of the church and its apostasy, this progression began as “Christians” tried to add pagan practices to God’s plan for His church. They also began to reorganize to look more and more like the world and the Roman government. When reformers like Martin Luther and others began to once again look in the Bible for their authority, they attempted to reform what had become the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, most reformers left many of these pagan practices in and failed to restore the church to what God had originally designed.

The second largest religion (1.5 billion) is Islam (“Major Religions”). They, like Christianity have a belief in one Supreme Being. Their origin actually begins with the Old Testament, but they trace their religion through Ishmael rather than Isaac. Though they recognize Jesus Christ as a prophet, they deny Him as their risen Savior! Just as Satan so often does, they began with a little truth, but by changing and adding to it they have perverted the very God that they claim to revere. Their “holy” book, the Koran, quotes much of the Old Testament, but by their additions to God’s Word, they demonstrate very well what happens when man authors a “holy” book. Their book is full of fallacy and contradictions!

Hinduism ranks number three with over 900 million. To name a few more of the top religions: Chinese traditional (ancestor worship), 394 million; Buddhism, 376 million; Primal indigenous, 300 million; African traditional, 100 million; Sikhism, 23 million; Juche, 19 million; Spiritualism, 15 million; and Judaism, 14 million. Then there are those who profess no religion: atheist, agnostic, humanist, and non-religious. Altogether they make up 1.1 billion (“Major Religions”).

Our God is so great and full of mercy. He wants all mankind to know Him and praise Him for Who He is and for the things with which He has blessed us. Though His creation speaks loud and clear of His glory and magnificence, without knowledge of His Word, no one can know whom He is or how to serve Him. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom. 1:16). All will stand before Him to be judged by that Word (John 12:48).

2 Thessalonians 1:7-9 is a warning to us that all these millions and billions of people that we have mentioned thus far are doomed to an eternal punishment. They need to know about God. We, as Americans, especially American Christians are the most blessed people on the face of the earth. Not only are we blessed with material wealth, but also we have free access to knowledge of the Word of God. If we do not share that knowledge with the rest of this lost world, we are also the most selfish people on the face of the earth. “Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak *this* to your shame” (1 Cor. 15:34). As daughters of the Kings of Kings (1 Tim. 6:15), our “vocation” (King James Version, Eph. 4:1) is to train the other women of this world to know God and how to become like Him—“godly.”

My husband, Don, and I have had the opportunity and privilege to study with Atheist and Ancestor Worshipers in Hong Kong, Hindus and Muslims in India, and Buddhists in America. Even though all of these came from such diverse backgrounds, beliefs, and cultures, God’s Word connected with each of them in a profound way! The Bible is truly “the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16), but we must also be prepared, “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15) and “always *be* ready to *give* a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear” (2 Pet. 3:15). Different situations require different approaches to this “training.”

In studying with Atheist, we began with scientific evidences recorded in the Bible thousands of years ago that have only been

discovered by man in the last few hundred years. For example, man thought the earth was flat until Magellan's voyage in 1521 proved it was round. God recorded this fact in the Bible 3000 years ago in Isaiah 40:22. In Luke 17 (written over 2000 years ago), Jesus pointed out that someday when He returns to the earth, some will be sleeping (night time), some grinding in the mill (afternoon), and some working in the field (morning) (Luke 17:34-36). Though men did not have this understanding, Jesus knew that the earth on the other.

Additional evidence that the Bible came from God is the many prophecies recorded there. Often, hundreds of years before their birth, rulers are identified by name and exact details of what they would accomplish are recorded (i.e., 1 Kings 13:2; 2 Kings 23:4-5).

However, even before we could persuade an atheist to study with us, the first major obstacle we had to overcome was the religious division in "Christianity." They would say, "How can Christianity be true, when its believers are so divided?" Our Lord knew this would be a problem as He worded His prayer to the Father, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21).

Most of the people that we taught in Hong Kong were young, educated, English speaking students. They were very intelligent and very receptive to God's Word. Our major challenge with those who came from an Ancestor Worship background was the parents. In Ancestor Worship, the children offer sacrifices to their ancestors who have died. They make elaborate paper houses, cars, money, etc. and burn those in worship. The teaching is that the smoke and ashes float up to "heaven" and re-form into actual houses, cars, and etc. that their ancestors can then enjoy in the hereafter. As we would study with these young people, their parents were quite agreeable to some of their children becoming Christians. In their minds, Christians were morally good people who honored their parents and took care of them. However, they did not want *all* of them to be converted,

because then they would not have anyone to take care of their needs in the world to come!

In recent years, we have had the opportunity to work in South India primarily in the state of Tamil Nadu. Brother Jim Waldron had been working there since 1988 establishing preacher training schools. He also had the foresight to begin the Coimbatore Bible Institute For Women (CBI) in India. He saw a great need for the “training of godly women” to enable them to not only reach the other women and children of India, but also to be well equipped as preachers’ and elders’ wives. Besides taking intensive Bible classes for two years, they also are taught tailoring, typing, and other things that will help them to find good employment when they return to their homes. Since 1995, there have been over 800 young women trained! Many of them are now married to preachers (even some of the directors in the preacher training schools) and are doing many mighty works for our Master.

Though Don had made many trips to India, I only began accompanying him in 1999 when our youngest daughter went to college. On most of our trips to India, I have the opportunity to teach for two weeks to one month at CBI. Three years ago, Arasukamari, the current director, requested I teach a lesson on Couples of the Bible. These lessons are in keeping with Titus 2:3-5 where the older women are to teach the younger women about being good wives, mothers, and “godly” women. They have been printed in a book to be used by the graduates in teaching in the villages. They are still in the process of being printed in Tamil, as well as Malayalam. While doing a seminar on this subject in Thirunelveli, there were some Muslim women in attendance. Later the brothers were able to set up Bible studies with some of the husbands because they were pleased with what God’s Word had taught their wives!

The people of India are predominately Hindu. Hinduism is as varied as the villages that claim it as their religion. They worship multiple deities but really have no one authority to dictate what they exactly believe or practice. Most of the religion is based on superstition. The illiteracy of the people contributes greatly to the

confusion. Almost 18% of the men and over 34% of the women are illiterate (“Literacy in India”). Their “gods” are created from their imaginations or legends that have been passed down through the centuries. It is actually very much like the city of Athens in Acts 17 when the people were so afraid they would leave out a god that they had an altar built to the “unknown god.” As a matter of fact, when doing village evangelism, Don often very effectively uses Paul’s sermon in Acts 17:22-34 to teach the Hindus about the foolishness of thinking you can make your own gods.

This superstition of Hinduism prompts the Hindu priest to tie a string around the waist of a new baby and then later in life something similar is placed around the wrist to help protect him from evil spirits and disease. They also put Hindu “paint” on the forehead for the same purpose. Many times we see Hindus cut off this string and remove this paint just before making their confession of Jesus Christ and being immersed for the remission of their sins. Even though some become Christians, this foolishness can be very difficult to overcome similar to the way it was in the early church (1 John 5:21). Often the mother-in-law will put the black Hindu markings on their newborn grandchildren for protection. Her Christian daughter-in-law has a difficult challenge in that she usually lives with her husband’s parents! Jeremiah assured the people long ago that they did not need to fear these false gods (Jer. 10:3-5). On the other hand, Paul told the early Christian that he would “become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor. 9:21) and encouraged consideration of the weaker brother and tolerance about the eating of meat that had been sacrificed to idols and then sold in the market place (1 Cor. 8). The Christian woman must be discreet in the way she handles these situations remembering that her goal is to win those around her to Christ.

One of the most common symbols of being a Hindu woman is the wearing of a red dot on your forehead. Again, the opinions on the purpose for this dot are varied, but almost everyone considers you a Hindu when they see the red dot. You also have some Christian women who like to wear the decorative, adhesive dots for “fashion.”

They want to be like the world (Rom. 12:1-2). Even though this has become fashionable, a Muslim or a devoted Christian would never be seen wearing a dot of any kind.

In southern India, girls choose to wear a bindi (red dot), while in other parts of India it is the prerogative of the married woman. A red dot on the forehead is an auspicious sign of marriage and guarantees the social status and sanctity of the institution of marriage. The Indian bride steps over the threshold of her husband's home, bedecked in glittering apparels and ornaments, dazzling the red bindi on her forehead that is believed to usher in prosperity, and grants her a place as the guardian of the family's welfare and progeny. The area between the eyebrows, the sixth chakra known as the 'agna' meaning 'command', is the seat of concealed wisdom. (Das)

Though the significance is debateable, its origin is definitely religious and usually indicates that the woman who wears it is married. This presents a very delicate situation to the married Hindu woman who decides to become a Christian. In order to appease her Hindu husband, she continues to wear the dot (1 Cor. 8). These new converts often face so much persecution. Last December when a young Hindu mother was baptized into Christ, upon returning home to her Hindu husband, she was beaten severely. She could not even get out of bed for a couple of weeks, but as soon as she was able, she was back at the worship services of the church of Christ. There was a special service on New Year's Eve, and she was beaten again for staying too late. The first time that Don and I met her was two months later when Don was preaching at the congregation where she is a member. That morning, she had brought two visitors with whom she had been studying—they were baptized into Christ that

very day! Finally, her husband called Santhanaraj to ask why his wife was so steadfast in her determination to obey God rather than him. No matter how much he beat her and forbade her to serve God, she continued to be diligent in her service. They arranged a meeting and began studying the Bible together. A couple of months later, her husband was also converted! There is probably not a better example of the power of 1 Peter 3:1-2!

Hindus also believe in karma and reincarnation. Karma is defined as “1. Action, seen as bringing upon oneself inevitable results, good or bad, either in this life or in a reincarnation: 2. The cosmic principle according to which each person is rewarded or punished in one incarnation according to that person’s deeds in the previous incarnation” (“Karma”). Consequently, anyone who is an orphan, a widow, or has any kind of handicap is considered by most to deserve their fate, because, after all, they caused it by the deeds of their past existence.

From Don’s very first trip to India, he was heartbroken by the many children who begged in the streets. In April of 2001, he asked Aruldass, Lilly, Krishnan, and me to discuss his ideas for starting an orphanage for the many neglected children in India. His plan was to create a small village of cottages with 5-6 children in each cared for by a Christian housemother. He hoped this would cause them to bond together like a family and prevent creating an institution type orphanage. In our meeting we determined that the cost would be approximately \$25 per month per child and \$3750 for each cottage (the cost is now \$35 and \$4500). We also discovered that the three and a half acre property next door to CBI was for sale. Don asked our Indian brothers to check into the purchase of the property, and we would approach the elders at Banner Elk about this plan. In September of that same year, by God’s providence and the help of American brethren, we had purchased the property and took in our first 5 orphans at Deva Anbu Illam (God’s House of Love). Currently we have 120 children living at DAI and 12 who live in the second orphanage (Deva Kiruba Illam – God’s House of Grace), which was started in 2010 in Thirunelveli.

In June of 2003, a 10-year-old little boy named Manojkumar came to DAI. He was wearing long pants to cover up his disfigured foot that was broken when he was much younger and never properly set. His guardian had obviously told him to keep that foot hidden or we would not accept him! The next day, Don was walking across the campus. Monajkumar (dressed in a pair of shorts and shirt) and Suresh were sitting in the dirt playing. Don immediately noticed his foot. When this poor little boy realized that Don had seen his foot, he had the most frightened look on his face. Because Don could not speak Tamil well enough to reassure him, he just sat down in the dirt, got Monaj in his lap, and began to “pet” his foot!

Monaj just turned 18 in February. He is a fine Christian young man. He has an excellent Bible knowledge and even does quite well in school. On our last trip the brothers asked for a tutor to be hired for him and 3 others who, with a little help, should be able to attend some kind of college or technical school next year after graduation. God is great! I am so thankful for the true and living God and His church! He is compassionate and merciful. Just like our “godliness,” any “compassion” that we have is learned from and comes from Him (2 Cor. 1:3-6).

Tamil Nadu is the southern most state of India, as well as one of the poorest. The poverty is beyond anything that we as Americans have ever experienced, as the average salary is about \$3 per day. Even the modern cities have open sewers. Though things have somewhat improved over the years, many of the villages where we teach consist of small one- or two-room houses often with a dirt floor. Most have no indoor toilets or even running water. They carry their water from a community pump or water faucet. Because of the scarcity of water, sometimes it is only available a couple of times a week. It is not uncommon to see women with their plastic vessels lined up waiting for the water to come. They then fill up as much as they can carry back to their homes to be used for cooking, bathing, etc. After all these years, I thought I understood their situation until a brother recently asked Don about where we get our water at home in America. Don told him that we have a well. He questioned further, “But where do

you get your bathing water?” Again, Don told him we have a well. In amazement, he asked, “You bathe in your drinking water?”

Initially, I felt such sympathy for the women of India because of their lack of the material possessions and the conveniences that we enjoy as Americans. However, as I have observed the “godly women” of India living in this pagan culture, I actually have more concern for my American counterparts. In America, we are often so busy taking care of our “things” that we do not have time for what is really important. We are not anxious to go to heaven, because we have it pretty good right here on earth!

Once Don and I were doing seminars in two villages that were about 15 kilometers apart. Because of a lack of meeting facilities, the men from my village had gone to hear Don, while the women from there had come to hear me. About 100 women were sitting cross-legged on mats on a concrete floor. Some were nursing babies or struggling with small children. The seminar was 4 hours long! At the end, I had to wait for Don to come and get me. The women actually asked me if I would teach more until he got there! “Blessed *are* those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled” (Mat. 5:6). The women of India have their priorities right. They love God and His Word and are anxious to spend eternity with Him in heaven. He comes first in their lives!

We consider nations like India to be a pagan nation, but just like the Jews of old, our “Christian” nation of America is beginning to become more and more like the pagan world around us. Ezekiel’s vision in chapter 8 revealed three abominations each worse than the one before. The first abomination was that they had “hidden” pictures of idols in the temple of God. The greater abomination occurred as the women wept for their idols, with the even greater abomination still, being that the people turned their backs on God, and faced to worship the sun! It seems that in the beginning they were only hiding the idols, next they gave them their hearts, until finally they had completely turned their backs on God!

These warnings are not just for the Jews or even for our country of America, but they are warnings for God’s temple today, the hearts

of godly women and men (1 Cor. 6:19). In Ezekiel's vision, he was also asked to measure the temple. As Christians, we need to measure ourselves "daily" (Heb. 3:13) to make sure that we are "living soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Tit. 2:12) lest we become the pagans.

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Children Are Like Live Wires: They Must Be Well Grounded

Teah McWhorter

When I saw my topic, I was reminded of a bulletin board that I saw several years ago as I was visiting a congregation in the Gatlinburg area. Such a powerful sentiment caught my attention at that time and I am glad for the opportunity to explore the topic at this time.

Since this sentiment has a foundation in electricity, maybe we should start there with our discussion. Electricity is so much a part of our lives—not just daily but actually moment to moment—that maybe we take it for granted. And I know that most of us do not really understand how it works. Do we have any better understanding of what to do with our children? As we discuss some basic principles of electricity, think about these in relation to how we deal with our children.

Brian and Lamb make this comment in “How Electricity Works”:

When the same mysterious force energizes a loved one’s touch, a stroke of lightning and a George Foreman Grill, a curious duality ensues: We take electricity for granted one second and gawk at its power the next. More than two and a half centuries have passed since Benjamin Franklin and others proved lightning was a form of electricity, but it’s still hard not to flinch when a particularly violent flash lights up the horizon.

On the other hand, no one ever waxes poetic over a cell phone charger.

What does “grounding electricity” mean and what is the purpose? Electric current passes through wires to power electrical devices. The very nature of electricity itself, the passing of electrons from one atom to another, allows for the possibility of this flow to escape its intended path. One wire must in some way be connected to “ground” or “earth” to allow the flow of “leaking current” to be carried away for harmless disposal. If not, this leaking into other parts of the appliance could cause severe shock damaging the appliance and anyone who came in contact with it.

Sometimes the use of the equipment causes static charges to build up. If there is no way for these to be carried away harmlessly, again there is the risk of electric shock or maybe just static cling.

We must also be aware of the electricity that comes from outside sources such as lightning. We have all felt the damage that lightning can do to appliances, non-electrical objects and even people. Lightning rods help diffuse this electric current to form a type of grounding protection (Brian and Lamb).

But what does this have to do with our children? Children are bundles of wonderful energy. Do we not all sometimes wish that we could have just a little of their exuberance? They are at a point in life where they are taking in so much information and absorbing so many details of life itself and then testing and practicing what they have learned. They hop and skip and run and jump and collide with the varied objects of this world. But their physical stamina allows the bumps and cuts to heal and the heart to go on exploring and learning all about life. What about their spiritual life? How do we ground them so that the spiritual bumps and cuts do not debilitate them?

First, just as with electricity, their energy must be channeled. It must be directed and controlled by someone with more experience and knowledge. God says that is the parents’ responsibility. “Train up a child in the way he should go” (Pro. 22:6). “And, ye fathers,

provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). The **Bible Knowledge Commentary** points out that fathers “provide for the physical and spiritual needs for training, disciplining children in righteousness.” Second Timothy 3:16 says such comes through the scripture. “Children are to obey ‘in the Lord’ (Eph 6:1) and parents are to train and instruct ‘in the Lord.’ He is to be the center of their relationships and of their teaching and learning” (Walvoord and Zuck, “Eph. 6:4”).

We read in Proverbs 29:15, “The rod and reproof give wisdom: but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame.” This includes both the stick for punishment (Strong, “Shebet”) and words for instruction and reasoning (Strong, “Towkechah”). Again in Proverbs 29:17 we read, “Correct thy son, and he shall give thee rest; yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul.” We see a similar definition for this word *correct* explained by Strong as “literally with blows or figuratively with words”, synonyms being “chasten, instruct, punish, reform, reprove, teach” (“Yacar”). A mother cannot leave a young child to make the important choices for himself. Little children are not ready to decide what time they need to go to bed or whether they are going to have donuts instead of a balanced meal for breakfast or whether they want to go to Bible class or not. You can help them learn to make choices by starting with simple options like which one of two shirts to wear today, but it is not appropriate to allow a child to wear her pajamas to worship because that is what she chose, because she pitched a fit, or because you want to keep peace. The choices you allow them to make as they grow must still be under your guidance and they must understand the borders. This is how they practice the pattern that we live by as adults where our choices must remain within the boundaries God our Father expects of us.

Another way that we guide and nurture our children is in the understanding that the world does not center around them. The family lifestyle should not be focused on providing things and non-stop social events for our children. I hear of parents who run constantly to take their child to this practice and that game and these lessons

and that birthday party and this sleepover after they pick them up from day care where they left them because they had to go to work to provide funds for all these activities and wants of the child. There is no time for God and we are nurturing a very selfish attitude. Rather, let us guide them to a life of service to God and others instead of a self-centered, self-serving life. Help them see the needs of others. Help them share and care. If they get everything they want and all of life is focused on them and their wishes, we are not being fair to them. We are not guiding them in the way of the Lord.

Children are intelligent. They want to know why. Help them understand why a certain choice is made or what the purpose of a rule is. Granted, sometimes the reasoning simply is that I am the mom and I said so and that should be sufficient. Sometimes there are things they are not old enough to understand yet or things that you really should not tell them that affect a decision you make. But if you want them to accept those times, you must first help them understand the why of obedience. Teach them to think and reason and to choose to do what is right because it is right. That does require a little “encouragement” in the form of consequences when they do not choose to do what is right. It is a shame that instead of helping our children accept and handle the consequences of their personal choices, we want to protect them from those consequences.

How many times do you respond to your children’s lack of obedience with a reminder of Ephesians 6:1? This is the first commandment children need to learn, and if they can talk, they can repeat and learn to apply this. Teach them to love God and want to please Him. Also explain that God told you that you are supposed to be in charge and that He requires you to expect them to obey and punish their disobedience. So . . . you work together to please God.

The Old Testament speaks of stoning a disobedient son and we think that sounds so very harsh. But it was a deterrent to save their souls. We live in a world that says let kids do whatever they want to do and never tell them no. Now we have a generation of adults that cannot function in the real world where they must submit to a boss

or not have a job and where ‘no’ is a way of life. They cannot keep a job, they expect someone else to provide them with the lifestyle that their parents gave them. They complain that the world is out to get them. There is no sense of responsibility or self-discipline. But we fail to understand that this started when they were little.

Some would say, “But oh, I just love him too much to tell him no.” or to spank him or whatever bothers them about child rearing. “Oh, I can’t stand to hear him cry.” God explains to us that if we do not discipline them, we do not love them. “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” (Pro. 13:24). “Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying” (Pro. 19:18). “If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?” (Heb. 12:7). Love them, truly love them, not only in word or sentiment but in action which requires their obedience.

For a closer look at Proverbs 22:6, notice these comments in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

Hanak [Hebrew word translated ‘train’] seems to include the idea of setting aside, narrowing, or hedging in. The word is sometimes used in the sense of “start.” Child-training involves “narrowing” a child’s conduct away from evil and toward godliness and starting him in the right direction. Gleason L. Archer points out that this Hebrew verb is similar to the Egyptian h-n-k, which means “to give to the gods” or “to set up something for divine service.” He suggests that in verse 6 this gives “the following range of possible meanings: ‘Dedicate the child to God,’ ‘Prepare the child for his future responsibilities,’ ‘Exercise or train the child for adulthood’ “ [Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982, p. 252]. (Walvoord and Zuck, “Proverbs 22:6”)

Parents must guide the flow of a child's "electricity." This energy must be grounded, focused into learning the truth, and doing what God wants. The build-up of leaking, unchanneled energy goes into activities that can prove dangerous to the physical and/or spiritual health of the child.

Discipline does not just mean saying no or punishing misbehavior. Discipline includes practicing the good things. We can empty the heart of evil thoughts but fail to fill it with good and it is still empty. It is going to fill up with something (Mat. 12:43-45). So make sure it is filled with good things. When you tell a child no to something you do not want him to do, give him something good to replace it. Fill his life so full of good things that he does not even have time to see or think about doing the bad or the not-so-good things. Fill his life so full of God-centered activities that he does not miss those hours and hours of practice or ball-playing that interfere with worship or the prom and other sinful worldly activities that some of his peers talk about, or the obsession many have with the things of this world (toys, sports, certain brand-name clothes). Those things may not be bad in themselves, but when we allow them to rule our lives we have lost our self-control and our heavenly focus. Live and teach Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you." Instead of filling his little mind with meaningless twaddle or even garbage in front of the TV or video games, fill it full of wonderful stories from God's Word. While he helps you put away the silverware, sing Bible songs. When someone is in need of prayers, stop and, with your children, pause to pray for them. Teach them how to behave first at home and then expect the same in public and in other people's homes so you can go together to visit and bring cheer to those who so much need your love and encouragement. No one really wants little terrors to visit in their home, but a well-behaved child brings many smiles. Remember, the most important thing is God and His Word and His family. Focus on the things that will take you and them to Heaven.

Bible class teachers, do not waste that precious little bit of Bible class time with coloring and crafts but rather get excited about the story of God's Word. And no, by story, I do not mean a fictional tale. I mean the truth that God expresses through the lives of all the characters in His Word. Make it come alive by teaching with passion and using songs and visuals to help them see and love the Word of God. Do you enjoy a boring, read-out-of-the-teacher's-manual, fill-out-the-workbook kind of class? Are those the memorable classes? Then how can you make them memorable? How can you help them hide God's Word in their hearts? Is your class full of boring busywork and blah blah? Or maybe in trying to make it interesting, we have gone for fluff and play that has no meaning associated with God? Make it fun but make it about learning. God's Word is exciting! Challenge your students of all ages to grow. Ground them in the truth taught in a loving, appealing way, but do not sugar coat the consequences for those that disobey. Expect good behavior in class, fill the time with meaningful study and activity, challenge them to do good, and do not accept anything less.

This is how we provide that "grounding" in the Word of God that protects them from their own destruction. The way Dear Abbey put it was, "If you want children to keep their feet on the ground, put some responsibility on their shoulders" ("Children Quotes").

A practical application of this principle begins by having your toddler help you pick up the toys. As he grows, this progresses to you helping him to pick up the toys. The next step is challenging him to pick up all his toys while you get the dishwasher loaded. Do not allow him to stop until the job is finished. Praise him for a job well done. Remember, it is a process of growing. Expect his best, but do not expect him to do your best; give him time to be a child but a child that is practicing to be grown up; let him cook in your kitchen; or decorate your table or whatever; it does not have to be perfect. He has to learn. Give him something worthwhile to do and accept his best effort with lots of praise and appreciation. Challenge him, keep him busy with good things to fill his days rather than spending all your time telling him what not to do. That works with babies,

too. When you say, “Don’t touch that,” give them something else to touch! Calm a boisterous child with music or reading. Did you know that you can practice their sitting still in worship by holding them quietly on your lap while you read to them each day?

While we are directing the current of energy that flows through our children, we must also be aware of the “static” energy. That random loose burst or slip can bring about shocking results and can allow worldly things to develop a strong pull on our children’s lives. When you drag your feet on the carpet and then touch the door or the person standing beside you, you might give you a slight shock. Children find this exciting and they want to try it over and over again. A little static “testing” to see if you really mean not to get out of that bed at naptime is very normal for children. But when we let those little tests go by unresolved, the “shock” gets even stronger. The tests get bigger, the children older and bolder. The temptation gets even stronger for them. How can they resist if we have not stopped that shock every time it sparks, if we have not grounded them in the faith, if we have not taught them to use God’s Word to break the static for themselves. David said in Psalm 119:11, “Thy Word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.”

Teach them the principles and then be firm and consistent in applying them. It seems that the worst problem with the behavior of little children is not their own desire to be disobedient but in the failure of us as adults to be consistent with them and to believe that they can and will be good. We assume they will disobey and then we yell at them when they do; one time we punish the wrong and the next time we let disobedience go unpunished. We give them idle threats of punishment, “If you do that again” or we “count to ten” in an attempt to get control but then what comes next? We change the rules depending on how we feel or what is convenient for us rather than what is best for them. They never know what to expect. Children generally behave how we expect them to behave. If we believe they are bad, they will show us they are. If we truly expect them to be good, believe that they are, and treat them that way, they will try to be good. That does not mean they will be perfect or that they will

never test you. But the atmosphere will be different depending on our behavior and expectations as parents. Children need consistency and direction encompassed in love.

The lightning rod protects us from outside forces. As long as we stay in a building that is grounded by a lightning rod, we are protected. But there comes a time when we must step outside. This is the way we protect our children from the devil and his influence. We shelter and nurture them while they are young. We do not send them out to stand in the rain in a thunderstorm. Neither should we send them out in the world to face the teachings and behaviors of adults and peers in a worldly school environment all alone. We might be fortunate that lightning did not strike but who wants to take that chance. You cannot “teach them diligently unto thy children, and ... talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up” (Deu. 6:7) if you are not with them, if you send them off to school and day care for someone else to teach. So does this mean I never let the children out of the house or keep them shut up like monks in a monastery? NO! It means I control the contacts and influences while they are too young to stand alone. Take, for example, crossing the street. Shall I leave my toddler who can barely walk to take out across the street to grandma’s house all alone? First of all, he can barely walk. Second, he has no wisdom to watch for cars. Third, he may not even know the way yet! But I would expect more of a teenager and allow more freedom regarding “street crossing” depending on who he’s going with, what street he’s crossing, and the destination intended, taking these in the figurative sense. Does it mean that my toddler does not go to grandma’s house? Of course not. It means that we cross the street together so they learn which way to go and how to watch for danger and how to behave when we arrive.

Surround your children with people that love God, people who make wise counselors. Take every opportunity to include your children in reaching out to tell others about God and His Word and His love. Invite other children to play or work or study with them when you can control the atmosphere. Lightning strikes when the

atmosphere is in turbulence. Just like you would protect them from the electricity from the clouds, so protect them from the strikes of the devil. Teach them how to stay away from such dangerous situations so that when it is time for them to choose, they have a foundation in fleeing “youthful lusts” and know how to follow right (2 Tim. 2:22). Teach them to stay away from temptation rather than trying to expose them to it (1 Tim. 6; James 4:7; 1 Cor. 6:18; 1 Cor. 10:14).

Those who surround your children will have a powerful influence over them. Will you choose to surround them with those that love God and that will encourage them to do right, who will be a grounding wire against the lightning? Or will you send them out in the storm without protection?

For those of you who are not hearing this lesson for the sake of your own children, think about how you can be a lightning rod for the children around you. Do you encourage them in good things? Do you praise their efforts to do right? Do you live a godly life before them to light their path, to show them the way? Are your own wires firmly grounded?

Let us look back at the topic again. “Children are like live wires, they must be well grounded.” If consistency and love are the grounding wires, what must they be grounded in? All the consistency and love in the world is pointless unless it is anchored in the Word of God. In other words, a grounding wire that is not grounded does not really work. What is the force that settles us, that protects us, that is our foundation? Second Timothy 3:15 tell us that “from a babe” Timothy had known the Holy Scriptures which were able to make him wise unto salvation.

Jeremiah 31:33-34 talks of the covenant God made with Israel when he said, “I will put my law in their inward parts and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people . . . for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them.” Grounding in the word of God, in the law of the Lord, is an absolute.

In Joshua 24:15, we read when Joshua gave Israel the challenge to choose; he said he and his household would serve the Lord. And

that generation did. But on the other hand we have Eli, in 1 Samuel 2:34 - 3:13, who knew of his sons' evil ways and did nothing to stop them but rather indulged them in their wickedness. Joshua's children were grounded in the knowledge of God. Eli's sons were grounded in the idolatry and wickedness of the world around them.

If we want our children to be like Jesus, we will see that they grow in "wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and with man" (Luke 2:52). We take care of their physical needs for growth and knowledge and teach them how to love and be loved the way God wants.

In Ephesians 3:17-19, Paul tells us that Christ must dwell in our hearts by faith so that we, "being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God." In Colossians 1:23, he uses "grounded and settled" in the faith "not moved away from the hope of the gospel." In Colossians 2:6-8, he wrote, "Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught . . . beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ."

Of course, these last are admonitions to adults. But we know that our behaviors and our characters are most easily molded when we are young. And so if we can ground our children in these truths, then when they are adults, they are firmly rooted and able to withstand the strikes of the devil. And yet, we still have the warning to beware.

In Deuteronomy 4:9-10, God reminded Israel, "Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but teach them thy sons, and thy sons' sons; Specially the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children."

Why did God keep saying “Don’t forget! Teach your children!”? Because we all—from little to big—have to be reminded over and over again. In Isaiah 28:9-10 we read, “Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little.”

Follow the challenge of our Lord as he closed the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 7:24-25). Be wise. Build your house on the rock. Ground your children on solid ground, faith in God the Father, not on the sand.

One final note in this discussion is expressed in this little verse: “There are two things we give our children; one is roots, the other is wings.” We have to give them the right grounding, the right foundation, the strength to stand on their own. Then we must find the right time to let go of the hand and let them fly.

We can do this if we follow the admonition of Proverbs 3:5-6, “Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.” When we have put our trust in God and followed His way to teach our children, their lives will be focused on trusting Him and following His way. Psalm 92:13 assures, “Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God.”

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