

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

If you were asked to explain the Christian gospel to a group of people who had never heard it before, and if you were permitted to use only one passage of Scripture, a good story to choose would be the one recorded in Luke 15. This story, usually spoken of as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," is, without doubt, the greatest story ever told.

Jesus was led to tell this story because of a complaint by some religious leaders that he insisted on eating with "sinners." His concern for the salvation of sinners offended the orthodoxy of his day. In response to this complaint he told three stories - the first had to do with a lost sheep, the second with a lost coin, and the third with a lost boy. In each case he defended his desire to save the lost.

In the third story the first character presented is the father, who represents God. It was Jesus who taught men to call God "Father." Seventeen times in the Sermon on the Mount, twenty-two times in the fourteenth chapter of John, as well as in numerous other passages, Jesus used this term to describe God - and he made it clear that God is not only his Father, but our Father. To people who were able to perceive God only as power, judgement, and law, Jesus added another dimension. He wanted all men to understand the paternal love of God. The father in the parable was a man of means, a man who had something to offer his children. In all these respects, he was an appropriate symbol of the heavenly Father.

Early in the story the second main character is introduced - the wayward younger son. He knew better than to act as he did, because he had known his father's care and love - but he was utterly ungrateful. His father's ambitions for him meant nothing; his father's ideals he spurned; his father's feelings were of no consequence. He was completely selfish. Greedily he insisted on his share of the inheritance - money that had been earned by his father whose counsel he disregarded. Wastefully he spent this money, thinking nothing of responsibility or future needs. Prodigally he lived in sin, sinking deeper and deeper into "riotous living."

This young man was a type of the sinner. Sin is lack of concern for others. Sin is disloyalty. Sin is lack of discipline. Sin is selfishness. The sinner is a self-centred person.

It is interesting to note the father's response to his son's request for his share of the inheritance - "And he divided unto them his living." We may wonder why the father was willing to give his son resources that he knew his son would squander; but isn't God like that? "He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." God showers His blessings on people who misuse them and do not deserve them.

Things didn't go well in the "far country" to which the young man went with such expectations of fun and freedom. He didn't plan on famine, but famine came. He soon found himself the servant of a master far more demanding than his father had ever been -

poverty. This dread dictator drove him from bad to worse, and finally to the fields where he not only herded swine but lived like them.

This suffering was not arbitrary punishment for his sin. Why did he no longer have money? He had spent it all. Why didn't he have friends? He had forsaken his real friends and chosen the wrong type. Why did he have no home? He had left his home. Sin very frequently has its "Built-in" punishment. It was not the father who imposed these conditions on his son. They were the results of the son's folly.

Many a prodigal never comes home from the far country - he lives and dies a swineherd; but this story has a better ending. This young man finally "came to himself." He saw himself as he was - a fool, a sinner, an ungrateful wretch. He made a decision - he would return home, he would repent, and he would appeal to the generosity of his father to accept him as a "hired servant."

How different was the long trip home in hunger and rags from the journey into the far country! What a chastened lad turned that final curve in the road from which he could see his father's house! He did not realize how love had been looking down that road ever since his departure. He did not realize how his father had dreamed of the day when he might return. He did not realize how his father's constant prayer had been that, someday, his boy might come to himself and return home.

But it was not long before he felt the impact of his father's love. He had no more than turned that final corner before he was recognized. Then followed the warm, affectionate greeting. The robe was thrown over his rags. The father's ring on his finger indicated that he was a member of the family again. The shoes on his feet distinguished him from the servants. The feast was a joyous affair. The father's happy cry revealed his joy, "This my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

No passage of Scripture describes more clearly God's dealings with sinners. God's love never fails. To every repentant sinner is extended the warm handclasp, the robe to cover his wretchedness, the evidence of belonging to the family of God. "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repents." God cannot save sinners until they are willing to be saved, but once they turn their faces toward home, He is there to meet them. Every decision to come home is met with divine acceptance.

There was another character in the story - the older son. He was not a rebel like his younger brother. He stayed at home, worked faithfully, and obeyed his father. Why did he react to his brother's return so differently from his father? The basic reason was that he didn't love his younger brother as his father did. He had never wept for loneliness as he wondered about the whereabouts of his brother. Rather, he had congratulated himself that he was not rebellious and wayward as was his brother. His statements to his father revealed that he had guessed how his brother had been living, but he had no idea how his brother had suffered. He didn't want a prodigal to receive recognition, at least until he had proved himself. The record says, "He was angry."

Jonah too, was angry because God chose to forgive Nineveh. Both of these men are types of the many "good" people who lack concern and sympathy for the lost. The story of Jonah closes with God's plea to be concerned about the thousands of unsaved people in Nineveh. The story of the prodigal son closes with the father's words to the older brother: "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad; for this your brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

We should learn the valuable lesson that God is not only trying to reclaim the rebels outside of the church - the prodigals who have lived riotously in a "far country" - He is also pleading with the bigots in the church, the sanctimonious ones who couldn't care less about their fallen brothers. God's love knows no bounds. His grace endeavours to draw all men into His fellowship - into a mutual love and loyalty toward one another and Himself.

Years ago a British subject was arrested in a foreign country and incarcerated in a dungeon. England demanded his release. The king of the country refused. So England dispatched a small army to the country, with orders to find the prisoner and bring him home. This they did. It was unusual for a nation to have an eye sharp enough to see across the ocean and an arm strong enough to reach into that far away dungeon and rescue one citizen - one of many millions.

The God of the universe is like that - only infinitely more so. His eye sees every prodigal, no matter where he may be, and His heart awaits every decision to return.

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