

Called to Return

Spring Quarter: Discipleship and Mission

Unit 1: Call to Discipleship

Sunday school lesson for the week of March 17, 2019

By Dr. Hal Brady

Lesson Scriptures: Luke 15:11-24

Key Verses: Luke 15:22, 24

Lesson Aims

1. Recall the details of the parable of the prodigal son.
2. Interpret the parable as illustrating God's response to the repentant sinner.

Not long ago, I was talking with a friend about the difficulty of preaching and teaching on this beloved but familiar parable before us today. How can I help people really understand its significance? How can I put it in a fresh and meaningful way so that people will hear it? In some respects, this essential story of Jesus is just too familiar. And if "familiarity" doesn't breed contempt, at least it breeds the possibility of monotony. But my friend made me feel immeasurably better. He said that no matter how many times the parable of the prodigal son is preached or taught it is heard ever fresh. And I know my friend is correct.

This parable before us today is the very heart of the gospel, and familiarity will not dim its exquisite beauty. No wonder people say this is the greatest short story in the history of the world. This parable, and the other parables in Luke Chapter 15, all have the same theme: it is concern for the lost coin, a lost sheep, and a lost son.

Why was this story of the lost son told? It was told because some of the most respectable people of the day (the Pharisees and teachers of the law) became quite concerned with the company Jesus kept. Jesus was surrounded by publicans (tax collectors), hated in his time as collaborators with the oppressive Roman Empire. Sinners of various types flocked to him. As you can imagine, none of this sat well with the religious leaders opposed to Jesus. Therefore, these religious leaders grumbled about his association with such people, and especially about his eating with them. You see, as he ate with these tax collectors and sinners, he was breaking down the social barriers of his day. So, Jesus told this story to silence his critics.

Here, Jesus is defending his right to associate with sinners for the sake of the gospel. In fact, the gospel is for sinners and Jesus' mission fits his message.

The Assertion of Self-Will

Luke 15:11-16

Home was problematic for him; its freedom carried restraints. This younger son craved a freedom without restraints. To be sure, there were enticing worlds out there beyond the disciplines of home. Life beckoned.

The prodigal son said to his father, “Father, give me my share of the estate.” Now, Jesus’ audience knows that the oldest son in a family has privileges and responsibilities that other sons do not have (Genesis 25:31). One privilege is to receive a double share of the estate (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). In this case, the younger son would receive one third of his father’s holdings and the oldest son two-thirds.

At this juncture, however, the younger son wants to “cash out.” Of course, such distribution is always made at the father’s death. But this request is different! To ask for one’s inheritance before the father’s death is to say to one’s father, “I want you to treat me as if you were dead.”

An angry response would certainly be understandable! But the father in the story simply makes provision for the request. Is he being unwise in doing so (see Proverbs 20:21)?

So the father makes no attempt to hold his younger son back. How could he? Home would not be home to such stubborn alien will. The younger son must first find himself. Consequently, the father divides each son his rightful share. The father, granting his son’s request, pictures a father who is letting a sinner go his own way.

What was feared takes place! This younger son loses no time turning his share of the estate into cash and putting his plan into action. For the audience of Jesus’ day, this is much more than a long-distance move in a modern sense. This son is abandoning not only his family, but also the Promised Land and God’s covenant. Having been born into in Israelite family, he now abandons that identify in favor of something else.

As he lives in a “distant country,” the younger son has no concern for moral boundaries or good judgment. The result is that he wastes the father’s legacy. What could have given the son a start on an independent life later is now dissipated even while his father lives.

It is this 13th verse that also gives the story its familiar name: the parable of the prodigal son. While the word “prodigal” is often associated with the son’s decision to rebel against parental oversight and leave home prematurely, the word actually means “recklessly wasteful of one’s property or means.”

It is reported that when Napoleon drove his armies across Europe and penetrated Russia, he kept a wide path of pillage and conflagration. Years later the route of his army could still be followed and remnants of the waste of war could still be seen. Pieces of cannon, broken spokes of wheels, abandoned camp sites, also spoke one word – waste!

It is such a picture of sin that we now get as we follow the prodigal into the far country. In quest for meaning for his life, his self-will, he missed it completely.

Thus, this younger son squanders his fortune in a distant land. He has grown up in a prosperous household. But now, by his own foolhardy actions, he is estranged from his family and far from his homeland. A famine, however, presents a predicament for him. He’s hungry and needs something to eat, but there is no one to help him. This is something that the dire circumstances that sin produces.

To understand the prodigal’s plight, Jesus introduces an element that is particularly troubling to Jewish people: the destitute man is hired to “feed pigs” – unclean animals (Leviticus 11:7;

Deuteronomy 14:8). This indicates that the “citizen of that country” who hires the prodigal is Gentile. Consequently, it is virtually impossible to honor the Law of Moses in such context. Though the prodigal has forsaken family and country, the pigs remind the readers how far he has fallen (or jumped).

Sometimes we speak of those who make bad decisions as “hitting rock bottom.” At this point, that’s who the prodigal is. The assertion of self-will has done him in.

The Road to Self-Discovery

Luke 15:17-19

We are now at the turning point in the life of the prodigal son. “When he comes to his senses” – these are the words Jesus uses in the parable.

However, we make a mistake if we think that the discovery of self is easy to come-by. More than likely, this son struggled for months or even years battling his self-will. And from our own experience, we know that this battle is real and strenuous. The old saying states that “people who do what they like become the slaves of their likes.” Simply stated, there is no easy road to self-discovery.

But, thank God, this younger son finds that road. At the bottom, he is forced to reevaluate his situation and solution. His previous life of abundance has clouded his judgment. His destitute straits, however, clarifies the picture. Gone is the self-deception and self-will that wanted this chaos for him and others in the first place.

Thus, in “coming to his senses,” this prodigal recognizes that things have to change. He decides that he will be better off as a hired slave of his father than working on the edge of the earth alone. Reality sobers the young man and prompts him to a new course of action. Having acted out of self-will, he now recognizes his sin for what it was. So, he resolves to confess to his father, affirming that he has done wrong, and ask for status as a hired slave.

“To sin against heaven” is to sin against God. It is to violate God’s law and will. God is Father to his people, a generous, loving, forgiving Father who commands his people to show honor to their parents on earth (Exodus 2, 12). This young prodigal’s actions were sadly dishonoring.

In a similar way, abandonment of the covenant people to live as a pagan among idolaters (those who worship idols) is an affront. Jesus’ audience is undoubtedly realizing that the prodigal’s spiritual poverty is more critical than his physical poverty.

So the prodigal son was going to return home with a prepared speech of repentance, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like me of your hired men.” In his desperation, I imagine that young prodigal had rehearsed that speech a thousand times.

A couple of realities are staring him in the face. First there is a legal reality. Because he has already spent his share of the inheritance, his father’s obligation to recognize or acknowledge him as a son no longer exists. Second, this fact is underlined by the son’s callous disrespect for his father. The son has treated the father as if dead. In addition, the son cannot return the inheritance because it doesn’t

exist anymore. The only hope is that his repentance will result in his father's pity and hiring him as a servant. At long last, the prodigal son's on the road to self-discovery.

Maybe, just maybe, this returning prodigal can expect a little pity from his father. Pity! Instead of pity, the father overwhelms him with grace.

The Spotlight Is On The Father (Luke 15:20-24)

In reality, the father is the main actor in this parable. We should never take our eyes off of him. We should observe his actions and reactions. We should listen to him, feel his heartbreak and sense the depth of his pursuing love. The father in this story received a great compliment when it was said of him that "He acts like a mother."

Back to the story! Becoming repentant, the son returns to face his father. The son's repentance and return are necessary to be restored to his family, but will not be sufficient. It will be the father's action that accomplishes the restoration.

"When he was still a long way off, his father saw him ... he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (15:20). This is love unexpected and extraordinary. Of course, the father's reaction indicates that the son's repentant presence is more than acceptable. Without having spoken, the prodigal son has already received more than he hoped for and clearly more than he deserved.

But then the son begins his prepared speech of repentance. "Father," he says, "I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (15:21). However, before he can get to the next part where he says, "make me like one of your hired servants," he is abruptly interrupted. "Quickly," the father shouts to his servants, "Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet" (15:22).

"The best robe," likely very costly, is a sign of son-ship. Such clothing is very costly in the ancient world. The "ring" is not just ornamental jewelry, but likely bears a seal for identifying legal documents in the family's affairs. And "servants" commonly do not wear shoes, while family members do.

The fattened calf is an especially extravagant animal for slaughter, as the owner is foregoing the growth that the animal might attain and the offspring it might bear. This is provision for the most festive of celebrations. Because of his enduring, undeserved love, the father is holding back nothing to welcome his lost son back to the family.

Truth is, we might have expected the father to make some provision for the son to repay what he has taken. But the father offers not a word in that direction. Instead, the father gives generously. His forgiveness for the repentant son is graciously full and complete.

As far as the father is concerned, there is no more special occasion than when a prodigal son or daughter returns home. The dead is alive, the lost is found and there is indescribable joy. We are talking here about Grace – God's Grace! We are talking about God receiving sinners.

An author named Ray Anderson has written a book called “The Gospel According to Judas.” The book is based on some words that Mr. Anderson saw in a men’s restroom in a restaurant in San Francisco. The words were written across the top of a mirror and this is what they said, “Judas, come home – all is forgiven!”

In this parable of the prodigal son, Jesus is telling us the story of every person who has ever turned away from God and squandered the blessings of his love and grace. True, God may not stop a person from turning to a sinful lifestyle. But even so, God, in his extravagant mercy and grace, is always ready to take back the repentant. God may watch in silence as we depart but he leaves the door wide open for our return.

Grace Happens! So says a notice on an office door. When it happens is unpredictable, often unexpected. How it happens is a mystery. Why it happens is because God’s love is unconditional and extravagant. Thank God we can come home again.

Action Plan

1. How do class members define repentance and why do they think it is necessary?
2. What guardrails can a church put in place to help members who are in danger of becoming spiritual prodigals and rejecting Christianity?
3. What should churches do, if anything, regarding unrepentant backsliders whose sins are separating them from the heavenly father?

Information in this lesson were drawn from the following sources:

“2018-2019 Standard Lesson NIV Commentary,” Uniform Series “International Bible Lessons for Christian Teaching,” pages 249-256

“The NIV Application Commentary, Luke” by Darrell Block, pages 411-416

“The Parables of Jesus,” George A. Buttrick, pages 188-194

“Sermons on the Prodigal Son,” Thomas A. Whiting, pages 37-43, 55-62, 90-97

“The Gospel of Luke,” William Barclay, pages 210-213

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