

LUKE 15 11-25-12
The Prodigal Son pt.2
The Return to the Father

Luke 15:11-32

And He said, "A man had two sons. ¹² The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' So he divided his wealth between them. ¹³ And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. ¹⁴ Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. ¹⁷ But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."'" ²⁰ So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; ²³ and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate. ²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' ²⁸ But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. ²⁹ But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; ³⁰ but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.'"

We are in week #2 of our dramatic three part mini-series called *The Prodigal Son*. In our introduction last week I pointed out that if this were a play it would be divided into three parts or three acts. Act one is the prodigal's rejection of the Father. Act two is the prodigal's return to the Father. Act three is the prodigal's reception by the father. Last Sunday we saw that in a quest for independence, and excitement the prodigal greatly insulted and hurt his father by demanding his inheritance early and leaving home for the far country where instead of freedom and fun he found bondage and disgrace and poverty. We left our young friend out in the fields with the pigs, hungry and lonely and hurting. The first part of our story is very sad. The last part of our story is very wonderful as we read of the glad reunion between father and son and the celebration that ensues. The story makes its way from the rejection of the Father to the reception by the father but here is an absolutely critical stage in

between those two without which you would never have the reconciliation, and that is the return to the father. The boy's return to the father is the hinge upon which the story turns. And his return to his father is a picture of the lost sinner's repentance toward God. I remind you that the story of the prodigal is the third of three stories in Luke 15. Prior to reading about the lost son we have read the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin. In both cases when these object were found there was a great party and the conclusion of each story is given 7 *I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.* 10 *In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*” It says there is joy, there is celebration, but what must happen first? What is it that brings on the joy? It is repentance. Repentance is essential. It is essential if you desire to enter into an eternal life with the living God. It is essential if you desire to continue that walk with the Lord. Some people read this story and wonder if it is meant for believers or unbelievers and to me the answer is an obvious "yes." It is meant for sinners, whoever strays from the side of the father, whoever turns aside from his word. Martin Luther said that the Christian life is one of continual repentance. And since repentance is such an important part of the message of Christ and the first principle of relating to a holy God it is vital that we understand what it is. This marvelous parable explains it as well as anything I know. Some people think repentance means you confess your sin. That is true but it goes far deeper than that. Some people think repentance means you feel sorry for your sins. And that too is true but it goes deeper than that. Let's take a look at the prodigal son Act two, the return to the father, and learn what true saving repentance involves.

The first thing we see that it involves is a recognition of my position and condition. Before you can return to the father you have to see where you have come to and that is what happened to the prodigal in 17 *when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!* When he came to his senses Literally it means he came to himself. He got his wits about him again. He took a look at where he was. There is a sense in which the boy had lost his mind. His sin had blinded him to what was real until, until this one glorious day when he came to his senses. Phil Keaggy once wrote a song describing his conversion. He said it was like waking up from the longest dream, how real it seemed until your love broke thru. So the boy came to himself, to his senses. In the pain of his hunger and disgrace he heard the voice of his father calling to him and it woke him up. Praise God it woke him up. Some of you sit here today and you are

still asleep, morally and spiritually you are in a stupor. You need to wake up! and start to deal with the real world. The first thing the prodigal did when he woke was to figure out where he was. Have you every woken up from sleep, especially one in which you have dreamed, and immediately wondered, "where am I?" And maybe at first you weren't sure so you looked around. That is what the prodigal did. And when he did he saw that his sin had led him into a horrible position. Coming to grips with his sin and its consequences was not a pleasant thing to be sure but it was necessary. One of the steps to recovery taught by Alcoholics Anonymous is to take a fearless moral inventory of your life, writing out all your sins and evaluating all the hurt it has brought to yourself and to others. In the conscious presence of God you need to look into your heart. See what is really there. Not what you would like to find there, not what fits your own self-image, not what fits the image you want to project to others but see what is really there. This is by no means an easy thing to do. This process can be painful in the extreme. But it is absolutely essential and it is the first stage in the recovery process. As painful as it is it is the first step toward a life that is abundant and blessed. The Heidelberg catechism asks the question, "What is the first thing we must know in order to live and die happily?" And the answer, it may seem strange but the answer is that we must know how great our sins and miseries are. This is according to the word of God. It fits the pattern of many conversions. I think of John Calvin's testimony (DeWitt 127) contained in a prayer that says this:

Every time that I looked within myself, or raised my heart to Thee, so violent a horror overtook me that there were neither purifications nor satisfactions which could in any way cure me. The more I gazed at myself the sharper were the pricks which pressed my conscience, to such a point that there remained no other solace or comfort than to deceive myself by forgetting myself.

This state of affairs continued until he came to comprehend the mercy of God in Christ. He goes on:

And when my mind had been made to be truly attentive I began to understand, as if someone had brought me a light, in what a mire of error I had wallowed, and had become filthy, and with how much mud and dirt I had been defiled.

Another brilliant man much different from Calvin was C.S. Lewis who, prior to becoming a Christian, took a moral inventory, took a hard look within and wrote, "*there I saw what appalled me; a zoo of lusts, a bedlam of ambitions, a nursery of fears, a harem of fondled hatreds.*"

(Surprised by Joy p.226)- If men such as these whose lives were quite respectable before their conversion could say this of themselves surely the prodigal, in the midst of his degradation could see

the ugliness of what he had done. He recognized his position and condition. He said, "I have sinned against heaven and in my father's sight."

The prodigal saw that his life was a mess, that he was really bad off. And one thing that was key to this perception was a standard of comparison. You see we really only know where we are in relationship to other things. Poor people don't know they are poor until they get around the wealthy. Sinners don't know they are sinners until they see righteousness either in God or in men. For the prodigal, he saw how miserable he was in comparison. 17 *when he came to his senses he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!* He remembered his days of plenty when the servants of his father were better off than he now was. And that told me something. Some of you don't know what a mess you are in because you have nothing to compare it to. Listen to me. Many of us have been where you are now. We have sought to find happiness just how you are seeking to find it, and we want you to know that we have found a better way. When you find the riches of God's grace you know that the men of this world are bankrupt in comparison. We know because we have known life with Christ and life without and when you compare the two there is no comparison. I would do my best to make you discontent with where you are, to make you see how miserable you are, to make you see what you are missing outside of the father's house. When you see where you are, when you really see it, you will not be content to stay there any more then you would stay in a building infested with poisonous gas. We saw last week that it was discontentment with his father's house that led him to leave. Today I would have you see that it is discontentment outside that house that leads him home. He came to himself, saw his awful position and condition and thus began the trip home. True repentance then involves first a recognition of my position and condition.

Secondly we see that true repentance involves a recognition of the father's goodness(R). When he came to his senses in vs.17 the prodigal realized not one thing but two things. He said at the end of the verse, "I am dying here with hunger" but before that he said 17b *How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!* He had two motives for going back home. 1 - he was sick of his sin. 2 - he was drawn home by the goodness of the Father. He came to see sin as a cruel master and his father as a wonderful master. Did you know that the Bible says that the goodness of God leads us to repentance? So often we connect repentance with an attempt to avoid the wrath of God. But it is the goodness of God that draws us home. You see, even if someone feels

sorry about his sin he won't go home unless he believes in the goodness of his parents. Hebrews 11:6 is a great verse and psychologically sound Hebrews 11:6 *without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*

Did you get that? You won't come to God if you think He is going to hurt you. You must believe that he is a rewarder of those who come to him. That is faith and without faith you cannot repent. Shorter catechism #87 says, *Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of and endeavor after new obedience.* That's a great definition. We see it taking place in the prodigal's experience. He had a true sense of his sin and that apprehension of the mercy of God. He saw that his father was a good man. He did not yet realize just how good but he figured that he could count on his father to help him and pity him. He had faith in his father, faith in his ability to help him with his need, and faith in his willingness to pardon. So he got up and he came home.

One of, if not, the most important opinion you hold is your idea of God. I can't begin to tell you how your view of God affects your life. Surely you can see that with the prodigal. What if he had said, "I can't go home like this my Dad will kill me." Ever heard anyone say that? It's the idea that I had better get straight before I go home. But the prodigal was way beyond that point. He didn't care if he did get a lecture. He knew he had it coming. All he wanted was some help from his father and he believed he would find it. Some of you don't believe that about God. You don't come to Him in your need. You don't pray, you don't trust God because you perceive him to be a spiteful shaming deity who would only tear into a sinner like you. You have a twisted view of God. The servants of the Lord have an abundance and He invites you to be his child! If you starve you starve because you choose to starve for in the Father's house there is bread enough for you. If you refuse to come home you will perish and you will perish in the sight of plenty, you are famishing where a table is abundantly spread. What is more there are those you know now sitting at the table and feasting. You have brother and sister prodigals who have gone home and found not a scolding, rejecting father but a welcoming, generous, forgiving Daddy. The prodigal recognized not only his own sin but the goodness of his Father.

The third thing that repentance involves is a recognition of my responsibility. Think about this. Think of all the things on which the prodigal could have blamed his wretched condition. He could

have blamed it on the weather or the economy or his lousy friends. He could even have blamed his parents for what happened to him but he doesn't do any of that. Instead he says to himself and to his father, "I have sinned against heaven and against my father." I admire him for that. So often everybody is to blame for my problems but me. We live in a world that is great at pointing the finger somewhere else. Everyone is responsible for my problems except me. It was my parent's fault. They said it was their parent's fault. I guess it is Adam's fault. And what did Adam say? The woman, she gave to me and I did eat. When you ask around you find the buck stops nowhere. Nobody thinks he is responsible for his mess. How many divorcees have you met who were responsible for their marriage breaking up? How many people do you know who got fired from a job because they deserved it? I'm told that if you go into our prisons you find out that they are filled up with innocent men. Rarely does someone think he deserved what he got. It is always somebody else's fault. There is rampant in our fallen world what I call the victim mentality. We see ourselves as the victims not the criminals. I'm not a sinner, just a product of over-crowded public schools. Sin isn't a choice it is a disease. Take, for example, alcoholism. We are told that it is a disease and I don't argue with that. It certainly has some similarities to disease, but we need to remember as well that it is a self-inflicted disease. It is a result of sin. There are no innocent alcoholics or innocent drug addicts or innocent porn addicts. In fact, I haven't met anyone who is innocent. But we have been brainwashed into thinking that all we are and all we do is merely the result of our genes and our environment. Those are the two big schools of psychological theory. The behaviorists says that all we do is a result of our upbringing and environment. The materialists or geneticist says that all we do is a result of our chromosomes. Either my parents and my society is to blame or my DNA is to blame so we are told. But today I want to stand here as a card carrying Calvinist and say that you do what you do because you choose to do it. You are not a machine but a person who has a will to choose and the responsibility to choose rightly! Myron Augsburger writes (p.99,100) :

To say that change is impossible, to say, "I can't change" is to nurture the false fantasy that my life is controlled by fate. The script for such a life-style goes like this: I had no choice in my birth. I had no choice in my parents, my family, my community. I grew up in a vise. I could not breathe, move, grow. I had no say about anything. I had to stay in line, no back talk, no negotiation. By the time I was five, my personality was formed. By the time I was a teen it was all decided. I was determined, my character was set. I never had a chance. Not enough love, support, trust, faith. Not the parenting, training, education. Not a chance to change it. No opportunity to be different. It was all in the stars, cards, genes, fates, script, conditioning. I live with all the wrong breaks, no luck. I've no choice and can't help it.

Your world and life view, the way you see reality has a big affect on your attitudes about these things. David Chilton in his book, "*Productive Christians In an Age of Guilt Manipulators*" presents a quote from Edward Banfield, a sociologist who did a study of the fundamental causes for poverty in this country. This is highly interesting but I will only quote portions of Chilton (p.231):

In our present-oriented culture, the lower-class individual lives from moment to moment. If he has any awareness of a future, it is of something fixed, fated, beyond his control: things happen to him, he does not make them happen. Impulse governs his behavior, either because he cannot discipline himself to sacrifice a present for a future satisfaction or because he has not sense of the future.... He feels no attachment to community, neighbors or friends, resents all authority and is apt to think that he has been "railroaded" and to want to get even.

Why are people poor? You can be sure it is not their fault and there is a world of very ignorant educated people ready to confirm that claim. But I affirm the study of Mr. Banfield. I have worked with a good number of down and outers and every one of them had this victim mentality. They were not responsible for their sin or their predicament. Don't we see the same thing in middle-class Christians too? One of my favorite books is Jerry Bridges' Pursuit of Holiness because he exposes how we try to worm out from our responsibility for our behavior. We say, in so many words, "the devil made me do it." We talk about being defeated spiritually as if we were passive. We were just too weak to overcome the temptation. Bridges would have us quit talking about victory and defeat and start talking about obedience and disobedience. Don't say "I was defeated" but "I disobeyed." Quit making excuses. I have heard Christians when they are confronted over their sin respond by saying, "Well, that's just the way I am." These are subtle expressions of the victim mentality. Get off it Christian! You are responsible for your behavior. You are responsible for your spiritual condition. Repent. And that means that you recognize that you are responsible. Augsburg says "*Repentance is owning responsibility for what was, accepting responsibility for what is, and acting responsibly now.*" (R) That is what the prodigal did. He pointed the finger at no one else. He said, "I have sinned." That is part three of repentance, recognition of my responsibility.

The fourth thing that repentance involves is confession, confession of my guilt and my unworthiness. When the prodigal came home to father he does not come home with excuses; he does not come home attempting to defend himself. He comes home with a confession of sin. 21 *the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* We see him saying three things here. He says I have sinned against heaven. Often Jews out of

reverence for the name of God would substitute the word "heaven," but the point is the same. He recognizes that his sin has been against God. All sin is against God first and foremost, not against self or others but God. The prodigal acknowledges his guilt before the Lord. But he doesn't stop there. He says, "Dad, I've sinned against you too." That can be hard to say sometimes can't it? But it is essential. Don't think you have repented from a sin until you have apologized to those who were hurt by that sin. Those you hurt need to hear from you. Some of you may have ancient offenses for which you have never apologized. Don't think that time wipes away all sin. God would have you confess your sin and seek to get right with anyone you have offended. The third thing the prodigal says is, "I am not worthy." What this is saying is that, "Dad, I know I deserve your anger. I know I am not fit to be called your son, I have disgraced the family name, but Dad, I appeal to your mercy to make me a servant." Now that is a wonderful attitude. He doesn't say, "Please receive me back because I did the best I knew how." People, this prodigal is given to us as an example of one who truly repents. This is how you come to God. You don't come to God saying, "haven't I been good" for the same reason the prodigal did not say that. You haven't been good. You too are unworthy of acceptance into God's house. Boy, is that an untrendy thing to say! I'm supposed to build up your self-esteem aren't I, not tell you that you are unworthy. Listen to what Robert Schuller has to say in his book on self-esteem,(p.98)

The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say, "I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst." For once a person believes he is an "unworthy sinner" it is doubtful if he can really honestly accept the saving grace God offers in Jesus Christ.

That is an incredible statement and one that completely misses the nature of grace. We say that we are saved by the grace of God. What is grace? It is God's unmerited favor. We say we are saved by mercy. What is mercy? Who is mercy for? Pardon, mercy, grace is only for one kind of person - the guilty. No one deserves mercy. I'll say that again. (R) That is why it is mercy. If you deserved to be admitted into the family of God then it wouldn't be mercy that opened the door but justice. Do you see that? When we come to God we come like the prodigal son not asking God for our due, not asking him for a fair shake, we come appealing to his grace and his grace alone. We come saying, "Lord I deserve your wrath, I deserve your judgment but I beg of you to please receive me and save me and clean me and feed me." Spurgeon said that "*the truest faith is that which believes in the mercy of God in the teeth of conscious unworthiness.*" I would say the very opposite of what Schuller said. Until you know that you are unworthy of God's favor you are not ready to receive His grace. Step four in repentance is to confess your guilt, confess your unworthiness.

The fifth thing that repentance involves is behavior consistent with the repentance.(R) We see two things the boy did that reflected the genuineness of his repentance. The first thing he did was go home. Repentance usually requires action. His going home was not the repentance itself but it was a necessary fruit of that repentance. Some people you know only talk about what a mess they are in. Maybe they enjoy the talk but you know they aren't repentant over their sin. They simply complain about their situation, grieve over it, but they stay in it and keep doing what got them in the mess in the first place. I remember going to the zoo once and seeing this baby elephant standing in a muddy hole tossing mud all over himself. He seemed to enjoy it, but for the sake of illustration let's say there were two elephants standing there in the hole tossing mud on themselves and they got to talking about how much they hated being so dirty and about how bad they felt because they had let themselves get into that condition, and all the while they continue to throw mud on their backs. You say that would be pretty silly. But that is exactly what millions of people do. They just complain about the mess they are in and they never do what the prodigal did which was get up and leave the mess. Their behavior does not fit their words does it? One of the funny things people say to me that I'm sure they don't see any humor in is this: They say, "I've been wanting to come to your church for a long time." I hear that so often it makes me think that we must be putting armed guards out front and padlocks on the doors to keep people away. They want to come so badly but they can't. You see the words are inconsistent with the behavior. Thank God the prodigal didn't stay with the pigs and moan about his problems. 18ab *I will get up and go to my father.* That is a sweet verse. But even sweeter is 20a *So he got up and came to his father* His behavior demonstrated the sincerity of his words.

The other way the prodigal reflected the sincerity of his repentance was in the way he came home to his father. He came humbly. Imagine how this young man would feel coming back home. Here he had boldly, brashly, left the family to do his own thing. Now he returns not with the swagger of confidence but with the stooped over look of a defeated man. He comes home to face the scorn of the servants, and the disgust of his older brother. I have known people who would rather beg on street corners than risk appearing a failure to their families. If this young man had any pride left he would not have gone home. But there was no pride. He had been humbled by his circumstances yes, that's true, but there is a difference between being humbled and humbling yourself. Many times people are humbled by God or by their circumstances but they never humble themselves. Failure does not guarantee humility. It often results in bitterness and hardness, but in this case the boy humbled

himself. He came home, and he came home as he was. There would have been those around to tell him "you can't go home like that. Get yourself cleaned up and looking and smelling decent." Often people think that they will come to God after they get their lives straight. But that is pride telling you that. God invites you to come as you are and He will clean you up. It may be humbling but come to the Lord not as a brave volunteer to join his side but as a loser in need of his help. Come like the prodigal, not presuming upon the grace of God, not arrogantly thinking God should be glad to have you home. The prodigal did not walk in the house, open the refrigerator and say, "Hey, Pops, what's for supper?" He came to be a servant. He came saying it would be a privilege to have the last place among the servants. And because he came like that, because he came humbly the father lifted him up to the status of a son. This is a picture of God's promise that those who humble themselves before Him He will exalt.

It is a wonderful, wonderful thing when prodigals come home isn't it? It is a glorious thing when sinners repent. It says the angels in heaven rejoice, they celebrate! And they do that because repentance leads to life. Did you know that? The Scriptures and the catechism speak of the repentance that leads to life. The father of our story was able to say 24 *this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.* And they began to celebrate. The reason we are gathered here today is to bless our Father in heaven. It is to give the angels cause to celebrate. We have seen what repentance is. It involves a recognition of my position and condition, a recognition of the goodness of the Father, a recognition of my responsibility, a confession of my guilt, and behavior consistent with repentance. Not all of that you can do here this morning but what you can I invite you to do. I speak to Christian and to the unsaved and I invite you to come home, and to find life God's way, the way of repentance. The prodigal regretted going to the far country but he never regretted coming home. Neither will you. Next week we will look even more at what the Father does when a sinful child repents.