

## 12.9.19 - The Prodigal Son

We received this email from one of our readers Jerry Sledge recently. It is very insightful. We would like to share it with you. We will look at the verses to expound on the story. Here is Jerry's email:

*In the story of the prodigal son it is stated that he "sold all that he had". Since there was a market for used clothing ...I believe that he returned to his father nude. His father gave him a robe to signify that the son was not a slave, but his son. Clothing indicated the status of the wearer much as Scottish plaid indicated the family or clan. I also believe that the ring (signet ring?) was given him to allow him to do business in his father's name.*

This parable is the third one in chapter 15 of Luke. The first two are about the effort that God puts into finding lost sinners and getting them saved. This parable shows the difference between the two elements of His audience--publicans and sinners for one group and Pharisees and scribes for the other group **Luk 15:11 And he said, A certain man had two sons:** The "certain man" represents God the Father and the sons represent the two groups. The title "son" usually is used to identify saved people in parables and we will assume that is the case here. Getting saved makes you a permanent member of God's heavenly family. The younger son represents the saved people in the publicans and sinner's group and the older son the saved people in the Pharisees and scribe's group. In case you did not notice, these groups are well represented today. We should be able to find ourselves in one group or the other, maybe a little of both. There are worldly saved people and self-righteous saved people and mixtures in between

The younger son was worldly and the older son was religious. The younger son wanted to have a good time with freedom to do it his way while he was young and asked: **Luk 15:12 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.** Now he had all he though he needed to have a good time. Not his problem if it was a hardship for

the Father. What a callous attitude for someone who depended so much on the provision of the Father to reach adulthood. Since he could not expect his Father to approve of the things he wanted to do: **Luk 15:13 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.** He obviously wanted to do it his way without help or control from the father. Note it did not say the Father tried to stop him. The prodigal needed to learn how it would work his way before he could be helped. This is an example of how far our free will extends. God allows us to do things that He knows will be very harmful to us as preparation for teaching. The cross is represented by the hardship caused by dividing the inheritance early. Daily provisions would be the provisions of the Father for the son to reach adulthood and his share of the inheritance. Notice there are no details on what "riotous living" involved.

**Luk 15:14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want.** He probably did not do any trading or work during this time and would have come to the end of his money without the famine. It would just take longer. As often happens, our bad decisions bring us to a condition similar to this. He curbed his riotous living when he no longer could meet his basic needs. Today we can continue our riotous living till the credit card is maxed-out. Then we are not only in want, but in debt. We do not like the restrictions, but being in want may be better than the effects of riotous living. This is an example of God's loving hand looking very negative instead of helpful because we can not see the future very accurately or are happy being willingly ignorant. Being delayed by an accident is better than being involved in it both are negative and not part of our plans.

**Luk 15:15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine.** Notice he did not sell himself into slavery. He would lose his freedom to return if he was a slave. The people in the group Jesus was teaching were all Jews. Feeding pigs would have been at the bottom of their list of ways to earn

money. This shows how low the prodigal, a Jew we will assume, had humbled himself. You will pick up the smell of the pigs when you work around them, which tells everyone what you have been doing. The prodigal could not even pretend he was doing alright when away from the pigs. Everyone would know his humble employment with just one breath near him.

**Luk 15:16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him.** Pigs are four-legged garbage disposals. They eat anything that has any nourishment in it at all. Usually something that could not be used for human consumption or for most other farm animals. This guy missed a lot of meals before he reached the condition given in the verse above. While living riotously, he certainly had some really nice clothing. He did not wear it while working with the pigs if he still had it at this time. Clothing could be used to secure a loan at this time which means it had much more value than today. If he spent all as stated in verse 14, that would include his clothing and he bought food instead of cheaper clothing as suggested by verse 16. You sell or trade all that you have of value to buy food before you consider competing with pigs for food.

**Luk 15:17 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!** There were enough poor people at this time because of physical handicaps that able bodied men got no help other than work or slavery. If our present welfare system had put a cushion under the prodigal, he may have never come to himself. Welfare needs lots of decrement to tell who needs help and who should suffer and "come to himself". I fear that our system is not used to help people, but to buy votes. Notice how bad God needs to let our lives become before we abandon our pride and make our way back to Him. Remember we are all very similar in weaknesses. All of us have gone our own way and stayed there longer because of pride then needed to see that it was the wrong thing to do. We need to see ourselves in these parables or we lose the benefit of their teaching.

**Luk 15:18, 19 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.** The Greek word used for "hired servants" is only used twice and both times in this parable. We have little choice but to accept the translators rendering. It may not be proper to say the prodigal wanted to be his father's slave, but he was willing to give up the privileges of sonship. He also was certain his Father would accept his offer. If he was in a far country, we can be sure it was a long walk back to his Father. No money for a ride as he probably had leaving. Fasting and a long walk requires confidence that the results will be acceptable before starting on the trip. In light of the other parables before this one this is the main point i.e. God will accept you back no matter what you have done or how far you wandered away. This point is better illustrated in the next verse.

**Luk 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.** This had to be a great relief to the tired, hungry traveler. No, I-told-you-so lecture. No need to hunt his Father or get past the doorkeeper. The Father was expecting the son to return. This has to rank just a little below the cross in showing how much God loves us and waits to help us! The Father could not help the son until he humbled himself because it did not work doing it his way. But, with that done God will do more than we expect to help us. Helping before this change of heart keeps the prodigal thinking it is working his way. We may not be getting the help from God because it would seem we were able to make it work our way.

**Luk 15:21 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.** This must have been much easier to do after the welcome he got from the Father. He did not get to the offer to be a hired servant. Either the Father stopped him or he could see it was not needed. If the Father

had left him make his offer, for contrast almost to the point of humor imagine if the Father answered his son, "We have all the help we need now. We have not recovered from dividing the inheritance yet, but Amos down the road is looking for hired servants." This is the message the Pharisees and scribes sent to the publicans and sinners by their behavior. I fear that the church sends the same message to those in the world by their behavior unconsciously.

**Luk 15:22 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:** The Father says nothing about removing the clothing that his son is wearing and replacing it. That fits with "had spent all" included clothing and the son was naked. There is no way, that we know of, to tell how many people were naked because they wanted food more than clothing and were too poor to buy both. A master would provide clothing for domestic slaves because it reflected on his wealth, but not hired servants or field slaves. The Father went beyond accepting his son as a hired servant and put the label of son on him in attire with the best robe and authority which the ring represented. This is another key point of the parable...he was still a son (saved) and loved by his Father in spite of his bad behavior. We are never disowned by the Father, but He will not help us if it will allow us to think our way is working.

**Luk 15:23, 24 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.** The verse above is largely spiritual since it represented restoring the son as part of the family. The body can adjust to nakedness much better than to lack of food or no food. This verse seems to meet the greater physical need for food, but note how close the spiritual and physical are related. Both verses have physical aspects and spiritual aspects. Again, for contrast: "I will admit you are my son, but you need to earn your own way like the other servants. You may sleep with the slaves till you earn enough to provide yourself with better accommodations. There is a little stale bread left on the table and a little mutton from last evening if you are

hungry." The son would have stayed with the pigs if he expected to get this kind of treatment. He probably did not expect a fatted calf, but certainly expected a nice meal and some celebration that he was back.

**Luk 15:25-28** 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. The Father loved both sons/groups as shown by the effort He put into calming the older son. This is the other group Jesus is addressing. They feel that their works should put them in control of everything the Father wants to do i.e. their righteousness gave them control of all religious activities. This son has no understanding of the love of a father for a son. If he had children, he had no spiritual ties to them. They were glorified hired servants. He expected the Father to treat the prodigal according to the contrast statements above. "Brother, you had your fun, now it is time to pay. You can start by washing my feet (the job of the lowest slave)." Feasting and celebrating was not on his list of treatments for the prodigal. He wanted justice for others especially the prodigal and mercy for himself. Although the following verse will show that he did not feel a need for mercy.

**Luk 15:29** 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: I would guess that he did not ask for a kid to celebrate with. The beliefs he was worshiping would not allow celebration. He probably suffers from memory loss on "transgressions of commandments". He missed the spirit of the Father completely. The older son is guilty of what Satan accused Job of, he is working for the inheritance, take that away and you will see how he really feels about serving the Father. The prodigal is a threat to his share of the inheritance. His pride was works, not doing it his way, but doing what

his beliefs dictate. When life does not go as he thinks it should, he accuses God of being unfair to him. A person with this form of pride does not often "come to himself". He is the last and the least possible cause of the problem.

**Luk 15:30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.** Is there a little whine here from the elder son? "I worked long hard hours all these years and did not even get a young goat to make merry with, and you killed a young ox for this worthless son of yours." Notice the assumption about the behavior of the prodigal. There was no Facebook, no TV, no radio, no newspaper and no telephone at this time i.e. there was no way for the older son to know how the prodigal spent the money. This assumption may be a glimpse into the wicked heart of the older son. The thought has to cross our minds before we can imagine someone else engaging in the behavior. Without his belief worship, the older son may have done some "riotous living". A positive for belief worship. Notice the Father/God was accused of being unfair with his treatment of the elder son compared to the prodigal son.

**Luk 15:31, 32 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.** The prodigal gets no inheritance. He will be on his own when the Father dies, but our heavenly Father will not die and we do not need to apply that part. The prodigal will be more willing to try new ideas for the Father because he knows that if he does not succeed the Father will still accept him. This applies to us when God asks us to do something that we can not see our way through i.e. step out on faith. If we can lose the Father's favor we will not venture much. The verse in **Luk 7:47 Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little.** applies to the relation between the prodigal and the Father compared to the older son. The prodigal and the Father will have a much closer relationship than the elder son will ever

experience. The elder son will always feel that the Father loves him only because he does the things in his belief list. Those of us who have not gone into "bad sins" or into the world need to guard against this form of pride.

To answer the question of whether the prodigal was naked when he returned to the father...the answer is most likely yes! That said, there are two more important questions to answer. First, what attitude do we have? Are we looking for fulfilment in the world and its pleasures? Are we the faithful son, but full of pride and religiosity rather than living under the grace and provision of the father with humility and gratitude? And second, how do we treat others who have been prodigals? Do we treat them like a long-lost brother and welcome them back with love and full restoration as the father does or do we sit back with condemnation and judgmental legalism with a bitterness that I am so much better than they as I did not stray?

We can decide today to not be the worldly son or the religious prideful son. We can decide today to be the son saved by grace in spite of our sinful state with true humility and gratitude. We can also decide today to treat others like the father does...with truly unconditional love and forgiveness and restoration.