

## CHAPTER II

# THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON AND THE ESSENCE OF SIN AND OF THE GOSPEL

The Parable of the Prodigal Son, though found only in Luke's Gospel, is one of the clearest and fullest expression of the Truth in so few words and provides the basic structure for what follows. This prompts me to state that all of the canonical gospels are important to understanding. Each makes its own contribution and each would leave gaps in our comprehension were it not available. This parable is one of the unique contributions of Luke. It is found in its entirety in Luke 15:11-32 and I ask you to refer it. It begins:

*There was a man who had two sons.*

## Family

Please mark this down immediately: the Truth, the Absolute Truth, has to do with a family – with a parent and children: *there was a man who had two sons*. Already, we have a clue as to why babes can understand, for this is the essence of their first experience in the world. They know two things – themselves and the parent – and that is really all any one needs to know! This will seem at first to relativize the Truth by drawing insights from the human family, and it would – except that the logic runs in the other direction. In the realm of the Eternal Absolute, the fundamental relationship is one of parent-child. By ordering our propagation as a family unit of parent-child relationships, the Father has enabled us to understand the absolutes. If, for example, our propagation were by means of asexual binary fission, we would have little if any ability to understand them.

## Gender

There are two other things that require comment here. First, Jesus has chosen to express this Truth in terms of a single parent. Second, with rare exception he has assigned male gender to all parties. The parent, therefore, is the father; the children are sons. This does not – I repeat for emphasis – does not indicate a gender bias on the part of Jesus. If it did so indicate, his Truth would be relativized immediately and therefore could not be absolute. The fact that spiritual parentage is singular rather than dual dictated his choice of gender because he spoke, and yet speaks, to a male dominated society. Because spiritual parentage is singular, he chose one parent. He chose the father because, had he chosen the mother, he would have raised distracting questions in a culture where the father is the head of the family. Opting to keep it both simple and applicable to his disciples who were mostly male, he also held to the male gender when defining the children (with one exception) so that they are sons, not daughters. This distinction, however, is irrelevant in applying the Truth, which is absolute. His Truth includes mothers and daughters on an equal basis with dads and sons. We could substitute the word 'parent' for 'father' and 'children' for 'sons' and do no damage to the Truth, but here we hold to the

terminology of Jesus.

## Parable and Allegory: Defining the Elements

A parable is a simple story told to express the essence of a wider truth, and this one about a prodigal son is no exception. When there are numerous elements in the parable that correspond to different aspects of the wider truth, we more accurately call it an allegory, which is appropriate to this parable. Every element of the story represents a wider and more ultimate reality.

There are a father and two sons, and it will be helpful if I identify them. The father represents God, the Father who is in heaven. The sons include a younger and an elder. We easily identify the elder son, for two things characterize him in the way the Father speaks of him later in the parable: *Son, you are ever with me, and all that is mine is yours*. Now, in John's Gospel, we find Jesus saying *All that the Father has is mine* (John 16:15), and *He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him* (John 8:29). The elder son clearly represents Jesus. He has woven himself into the story! The younger son is any one of us and it is around him that the story revolves.

## Act I: Free Will

The younger son said to his father: Father, give me the share of property that falls to me. The father divided his living between the sons, and soon the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country. You will have noticed that the opening scene is the family home, characterized later as the Father's house, but now it changes to the far country. The Father's house, from which the son has just departed, represents heaven with its eternal glory, and the far country is our world. We have already learned something very important: in the ultimate and absolute sense, this world is far from the eternal glory; it is a far country. In addition, the parable suggests that we have our origins in the Father's House, that is, in heaven, just as did the prodigal. Furthermore, as in many families, there is an impatient, willful and assertive son who can't wait to realize his independence. He cannot wait for his inheritance – he wants it now.

Having received his inheritance, he is eager to invest it or to spend it in ways to his own liking and he must go out into the far country, away from the Father, in order to do all these things that his willfulness and independence demand. We have to notice something more: the father makes absolutely no effort to dissuade the young son from his intentions, nor does he seek to withhold his inheritance from him. This son is obviously old enough to be accountable – therefore he gets what he asks for, his inheritance and his freedom, without resistance.

We learn from this that we are creatures of free will, and to protect and preserve that freedom the Father does nothing to turn us from our errors. The father did not have to give the prodigal his inheritance, but he did, without objection. The father did not have to let him go into the far country, but he did, without dissuasion. The father surely knew the son was heading for heartache and despair, disappointment and desperation – yet he said nothing, did nothing, to stand in his way. This helps to explain why God seems so far off when, in the midst of our tribulations, we seek him and cannot find him. We are in a far country and we are on our own, and there is nothing he can do without compromising our freedom and integrity as personal entities having free will.

He has planned it this way! Free will is fundamental – it is why we are here. It is basic to almost everything. It is not evident at this point, but later you should realize that the younger son's inherent character compelled him to go into the far country to assert his free will. It was no more proper for him to assert himself in the Father's house than for an earthly adolescent to assert himself by taking charge of the parental home. He must leave to do it properly, and we will find that this world, our far country, was created for the purpose of providing a locale for the exercise

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of freedom of the will. That is why we are here now, and not in heaven.

### Act II: His Association

The scene changes to the far country, and the young son is having a ball! Loose living and all that! But, when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country and he began to be in want. Fast action characterizes this drama! But the time required is not important to the story or its message, and so the younger son squanders his inheritance in a land of famine in few words. Perhaps years have passed – no matter – this man is under a compulsion to do something to survive: *He went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine.*

There are two things to note here. First, examine the expression, *he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country.* Jesus could have said that he “found employment” or used some similar expression, but this *joined himself to* expression implies that he became a part of the system that prevailed in the far country. He may have been an adopted son, an indentured servant, a slave, a junior partner, an employee or hired servant – all of these are details that do not matter. What is important is that he joined himself to a citizen, and this is precisely what we do here in our far country. We join ourselves to the citizens and become a part of the system, dedicated and committed. The Prodigal Son became of the far country, just as we have become of this world.

The second thing to note is his assignment. The citizen sent him into his fields to feed swine. Jesus carefully selected this occupation as one that, for a Jew, was among the most degrading. The hogs are unclean, and so the Prodigal became unclean, which symbolizes our unclean, sinful condition before our Father. It expresses unworthiness for our home of origin. Yet even though he has descended so low his problems are yet unsolved, for the famine is so great that there is insufficient food for him, and He would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate.

There is no mercy, for no one gave him anything. This statement characterizes the society of this far country, and of this world. It is true, of course, that in times of prosperity this world knows a good amount of giving to the poor and destitute. Remember, though, that the far country of the Prodigal is under a great famine, and it is every man for himself so that *no one gave him anything.* Of course this also includes his father, who likewise gave him nothing. We can expect similar experience should a great famine afflict this world.

But now something wonderful happens. In his desperate condition, he came to himself. Then he said, to himself, *How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger. I will arise and go to my father and say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.*

I need add only these comments: His value set was radically transformed. The life of the far country that had seemed so precious to him was suddenly nothing. Here I perish with hunger! Then he remembered at last his father's house, and the well fed hired servants and he saw treasure in heaven! *Even my father's hired servants eat better than I.* Then, there was his confession: *I have sinned against heaven and before you.* Additionally, all his pride is gone. Humbled and contrite, he must express the bankruptcy of his soul: *I am no longer worthy to be called your son.* Finally, a ray of hope: *Make me as one of your hired servants.* The curtain falls on Act II.

### Act III: Unclean

This act opens on yet another scene. He has put his resolve into action. He has arisen to go to

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his father and is on the road home, nearing his destination and in great anxiety. He is much perturbed of mind. Will he be accepted? Will he be condemned? After all, he has absolutely no claim on his father or his father's house. He has squandered his inheritance in the far country. He doesn't deserve a moment's consideration, and he knows it. But he has had a change of heart. Whereas at first his heart and his treasure were in the far country, now his heart is in his father's house and all he treasures is there also. Will the father be merciful and accept him as a hired servant? That is surely the most he can hope for, and something gives him the faith to believe, in hope, that his father will accept him. We must remember that he has just left his job with the swine and is unclean in every way. His body is dirty, perhaps clothed in dirty rags, and he is ceremonially unclean due to his contact with the swine.

But before we raise the curtain on this act, let us take a moment for reflection. Let us recognize the two states of mind of the prodigal that have been described. First there is the proud, selfish, independent youngster itching to break free, then indulging himself fully in his freedom. Second, there is the humbled, repentant, bankrupt soul turning homeward in the conviction of sin and his own unworthiness. These are the states of mind that characterize us – some one, some the other. Either we are the independent, self assertive, self-willed individuals seeking earthly gain and squandering our heavenly heritage on trash or worse, with our minds set on earthly things, or we have experienced a conversion. Humbled, in recognition of the folly of our past pursuits in this world, we have, in our hearts, resolved and put into action the plan of the prodigal, with faith and in hope: I will arise and go to my father.

The curtain rises. There he is, sorrowfully but hopefully taking those painful steps – but look! There is someone on the road ahead of him! Who is this running towards him? *But while he was yet at a distance, his Father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*

What an incomparably wonderful scene – the Father on the road running to meet the Prodigal! Have you ever considered what it means, this thought that God, your Father, could be running to meet you? Even though you are near naked and unclean, so very unclean.

This scene forces us to recognize that the father had been at the door, looking down that road for him all along, in love for him, in deep concern for him, hoping someday to see the errant son approaching. At this point the father doesn't even know about the change of heart, about his resolve, his brokenness – no, he only knows that he sees his beloved, errant son, coming home! And so his feet take flight, he runs with joy to meet him, takes him, in all his uncleanness, to his bosom and kisses him! Finally the astonished and confounded son blurts out his well rehearsed words: *Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son!*

His Father interrupts him. He doesn't want or need to hear any more. He can't bear to see his beloved younger son so distraught, dirty, robeless and barefooted. He cries out so that the servants at the house can hear: *Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found! And they began to make merry.* We are seeing here that of which Jesus elsewhere spoke, the *joy in heaven over one sinner who repents.*

## Act IV: The Elder Son

But there is yet one more actor to say his piece. From the field the elder son heard the sound of rejoicing, the music and the dancing. He called one of the servants and asked what it meant. And he said to him, *Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.* But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, *Lo these many years I have served you, and I*

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*never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf! And he answered him, Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It is fitting to make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.* So Jesus, the elder brother, reveals in the telling of the parable how he is tempted to view us, his younger siblings, and so falls the curtain on the fourth and final act.

### The Essence of Sin and of the Gospel

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is reduced to its simplest form, this is all that is left. It is all we need to know to find restoration to the Father's house. We, in our far country, are squandering our heritage while asserting the freedom of the will in opposition to the will of the Father precisely as did the prodigal. We do so for so long as we persist in seeking to find our lives, our gratification, our relationships, and our fulfillment in this world and in terms of worldly entities.

That is all that the prodigal intended. The Father wants absolutely only one thing from us, the same thing that the prodigal's father wanted: that we arise and go to Him. Apart from this we can never please Him and are forever mired in sin, for sin, in its essence, is this seeking, like the prodigal, to find a fulfillment in this life, in this world, on our own and according to our own desires. We are dead until we turn towards heaven. We are lost until we turn towards the Father. The parable emphasizes the importance of this by stating it twice, once in the Father's explanation to the servants and again in his explanation to the elder brother. *For this your brother was dead and is alive, was lost and is found.*

So Jesus of Nazareth came into the midst of the dead when he entered this world. To a young man who wanted to *go first and bury my father*, Jesus responded, *Follow me and let the dead bury their dead* (Matthew 8:22). Yet again, he said, *Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live* (John 5:25). We are all dead – dead to the Father – unless and until we hear the voice of Jesus, the elder brother and the Son of God who came that we might have life (in the Father's house) and have it abundantly (John 10:10). We are lost until we turn to him who came to seek and to save that which was lost (Matthew 18:11). He is uniquely qualified to lead us to the Father's house.

The Father's will, the only thing he wants of us, is simply this: COME HOME!