

SUNDAY BIBLE STUDY NOTES

— June 17, 2018 —

Pastor Leslie Smith

SERIES: Reaffirming the Biblical Foundation of the Family

SERMON: The Prodigal Father

TEXT: Luke 15:11-24

Central Message:

This parable, the best loved of Luke's parables, falls into two parts: the first focuses on the younger son, the second on the older son. The father is the protagonist throughout the parable. The younger son asks for his share of the inheritance, probably a third of his father's estate as the younger of two sons (Dt. 21:17). The essence of a man's inheritance in that time was land and the only way it could be received was upon the father's death. Thus, his request was essentially, "Father, I wish you would drop dead." Even though the father could divide the land before his death, he retained rights to the use of the land. The younger son, in selling his portion, left his father without rights to the land's use. A person's property is his until death, and the family's property was meant to maintain its oldest members until their death. So, to demand his share early and then to dissipate it rather than to manage it responsibly for his parents' sakes, is to say to his father, in effect, "You are already dead to me".

He goes into the pagan world, as many Jews did to seek their fortunes in the land around Palestine. His goal is to find himself, but he ends up by losing himself, reduced to working with unclean animals. The parable tells us that he "came to himself," (Lk. 15:17). At this point, the parable's emotional richness begins to draw us in so that we identify first with one then another of its characters. The boy is hungry. He is humiliated. He knows he has made a mistake and is desperate to survive. Does this mean he genuinely repented? We can't be sure. The narrative

shows him sitting among the pig pods rehearsing what he will say to his father. Can we trust his sincerity? Is he just saying whatever it takes to fill his stomach? The story doesn't fill in this gap for us.

The culture of Palestinian villages was one of honor and shame. Honor was connected to how one was perceived in the community. The son has brought shame on his father and his whole family by his behavior. He can expect to be shamed by the village. His decision has affected the whole village. It has put his family's future means of making a living at risk. It has undermined their honor and place in the village and soured their relationship with their neighbors.

The younger son could expect that the townspeople would be hostile to his returning to the village. He was a son who had lost his money to Gentiles or married an immoral woman. They would gather around him, breaking jars with corn and nuts and declare that he was to be cut off from the village. His entry into the village would be humiliating as his townspeople expressed their anger and resentment toward his actions.

When the father sees his son, his compassion is inspired and he moves toward him. We are reminded of the sequence in the Good Samaritan of seeing someone suffering, having compassion, and taking action (Lk. 10:33). He may have been seeking to protect his son from the insults of those he must pass by on the way home. His behavior is strange. Fathers did not run to their children. This is more maternal behavior, as is the kiss. Here the father exposes himself to humiliation to prevent his son from being humiliated. His behavior is strange; it is not the way the male head of a household would act in Jesus' time. He is the patriarchal head of the household. His running to meet his son is an expression of a love so strong that one is willing to cast one's dignity to the winds, to put aside one's power and position for the good of another.

The term prodigal means wasteful and recklessly extravagant. Prodigal is a term usually applied to the son but the father's love for his prodigal son seemed wasteful and recklessly extravagant as you will see from the text. Thus, we have

labelled him as the “Prodigal Father”.

The Explanation of the Text

Luke 15:11-12 *“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.”*

Can you envision the disappointment of this father? He has worked hard all his life, has built a livelihood for his family, and has no doubt hoped that his son would follow in his footsteps. He has planned to turn over the family business to his sons when he retires.

Now his son is asking for his share of the inheritance before it is time. The father could refuse. If he does, his son may hate him forever, may go away on his own, destitute and bound for disaster. But he loves his son, so after weighing the advantages and disadvantages like any wise father, he calculates what is due his son, and gives him the value of it. Maybe in his heart, he is still hoping that the son will start a business of his own, make his own wealth, and find a good wife with whom to settle down. There is still a chance that the young man will be successful on his own.

Luke 15:13 *“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.”*

The young son leaves home. He doesn’t go across town, or down the road—he leaves the country. His father is heartbroken. The son for whom he had such high hopes is gone. He is out of touch--so far away that his father can’t check up on him to see if he is all right, so far away that His father cannot give him godly advice. This is no doubt a deliberate choice by the son to keep his father from interfering with his choices.

AMITY BIBLE CHURCH

“To Know God and To Make Him Known”

He wastes his inheritance, blows it all on wasteful living. He wastes it on prostitutes and ne'er-do-wells, fair-weather friends who abandon him when the money is gone. You know the type. Hangers-on who are in it for the short haul, draining him dry until all his inheritance is spent. Then they leave him alone.

His father pauses from time to time throughout the day, wondering where his son is and what he is doing. Is he behaving? Is he in trouble? What if he needs guidance or assistance of some sort? He thinks back on the joyful birth of his younger son, the happy youth as his son grew into a young man. He remembers the innocent child at play, the eager young boy who listened to his father's words.

The father looks away toward the horizon, tears blurring his eyes, longing for the familiar silhouette of his son, returning from the far country. Stare as he might, there is no one there. Sadly, he turns away and goes about his business. Life is not the same as it was. The happiness is gone. He asks troubling questions of himself. Did I do the right thing? Should I have refused my son his inheritance? He would have despised me! But I have lost him anyway! Where did I go wrong?

Luke 15:14-15 *“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.*

Can you picture how low he has sunk? The Jews did not eat swine--or hogs--and certainly his father would not have approved of his new vocation. But it is all that he can find, because there is a food shortage and times are hard. Have you ever been around a hog-pen? The stench of hog urine and feces is so over-powering that one can hardly bear to approach it.

Luke 15:16 *“And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.”*

The boy is so hungry that he is willing to eat the cast-off grain husks that were not fit for human consumption. Why do you think that they were feeding them to the

pigs?

About this time, the father is undoubtedly receiving reports from migrants looking for work or traders passing through. He hears reports about the famine in the far country, and he wonders about his boy. Is he all right? Is he getting enough to eat? Is he able to hang onto his inheritance? Basic necessities become very expensive when they are scarce. He stands outside, looking toward the far country. He weeps, crying into the night: “Son, are you alright? God forgive me for letting him go away like that!”

Luke 15:17 *“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!’”*

The boy starts thinking about his situation, and realizes how much his father means to him. His father is a kind and generous man, a godly sort. He would be much better off working as a hired hand for his father, where he would be well-fed and looked after. He gets homesick, and sick with the realization of the terrible mistake he has made. He longs for his father’s love. He wrestles with the pros and cons of returning home, poverty-stricken, emaciated, and spiritually broken. He finally makes up his mind.

Luke 15:18-19 *“I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven, and [h]in your sight; ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.’”*

The boy realizes that he has sinned against his father on the earth, and his God in heaven. He decides to go home. He dreads it. His father will be angry that he went away and wasted all his inheritance, and is reduced to this pitiful state. Yet, having somewhat matured lately, he decides to return home to his father.

Luke 15:20 *“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.”*

The father, ever watchful for his son, dejectedly gazes across the fields, watching the path home as he has done hundreds of times. He spies a figure, a familiar silhouette—could it be his lost son, returning home? He breaks into a run, half fearful that he is mistaken, half joyous to think that his son is at long last returning home. Weeping uncontrollably, he runs to his son, throwing his arms around him, kissing his neck.

Luke 15:21 *“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.’ ”*

The son knows what he deserves. If his father were to disown him and demand that he leave immediately, that outcome would be deserved.

Luke 15:22-24 *“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.”*

The tearful father is overjoyed beyond belief. His lost son has returned home. His son has learned his lesson, and he knows where safety and comfort are. His father rejoices and calls for a celebration, a big party to welcome his son home. He gets out his nicest suit of clothes, gives him a ring—a sign of both wealth and trust—and has his tired and damaged feet sheathed in comfortable shoes. Now, he orders up a fatted calf, reserved for special occasions, and orders a feast prepared.

Why? His son had been lost to sin and the world, but now is safely at home in his father’s tender, loving care. The household is buzzing with laughter and preparations for merry-making. The lost son is alive and home, and his father is happy once more.

The faithful, older son returns from a grueling day of work out in the farm fields. He is tired and hungry, ready to eat and rest. As he approaches the house, he

hears the sounds of a party. What is going on? Upon hearing the news of his brother’s return, the elder son grows angry and resentful, so much so, that he refuses to go into the house where the party is in full swing.

His poor old father is distressed. Happy to see his lost son returned, he now has to deal with the animosity of the elder son. He begs to the boy, “Please come inside, my son. Join the celebration. Your brother is snatched from Satan’s grasp. Rejoice with me.” He is hurt and puzzled by the elder son’s behavior, wishing him to understand the importance of what has transpired.

The son is still angry and obstinate, seething with resentment toward not only his younger brother, but now his father, as well. “I have behaved well”, he reminds his father, “I have done everything you asked me to do, working the farm hard and helping hold things together. And did you ever reward me with a party for my friends? No, never!”

“My brother took half the family fortune that you worked so hard for, and threw it away on prostitutes—whores—and you reward him with a party?” He is incredulous, beside himself, in his anger.

Ah, the loving father! Through tear-clouded eyes he understands what his son misunderstands. “But, Son, everything I have is at your disposal. It is yours! When we divided the inheritance, your brother got his, and the rest is yours! Don’t you see that? It is all yours!”

“But as a responsible, mature person, surely you see that it is proper for us to be glad that your brother, who could have lost not only his fortune, but his life as well, is returned safely to the family. Don’t you see—he was brought back to us from the dead? He **was** lost, but no longer—he is home!” What a loving prodigal father!