



Love Community Baptist Church

Wednesday Night Virtual Bible Study

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The Prodigal Son

By John MacArthur

Luke 15:11-32

11 And he said, A certain man had two sons: 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. 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. 14 And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. 15 And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. 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! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, 19 And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. **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. 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. 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: 23 And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill [it]; and let us eat, and be merry: 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. 25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. 27 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. 28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. 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: 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. 31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. 32 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.

HIS RETURN

FOR THE SCRIBES AND PHARISEES, THE NOTION THAT someone like the Prodigal Son could ever find any kind of forgiveness or redemption was far beyond their comprehension. In the first place, they would automatically take a cynical view of every token of repentance coming from someone who had sunk as low as this. Second, their whole concept of righteousness was faulty, because it was based largely on a legal merit system.

The scribes and Pharisees thought people could become righteous through lifelong devotion to a complex system of religious works.

So, they had no category in their theological system to account for how someone like the Prodigal Son could ever be saved from the wrath of God and brought into divine favor.

A SURPRISING TWIST IN THE STORY

Luke describes the Pharisees as those who “trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others” (Luke 18:9; emphasis added). In their view, hatred for a rebel like this was justified. They assumed the Prodigal was beyond saving, and in fact, they were perfectly happy for him to receive the just deserts of his sin. As far as they were concerned, the Prodigal’s repentance was an unwelcome kink in a story that already had a very clear-cut lesson about the due consequences of sin.

They were prepared to affirm that lesson— until the Prodigal repented. Then suddenly, the central figure in Jesus’ tale became a serious challenge to their religious system.

But in Jesus’ telling of the parable, the Prodigal Son’s crisis in the pig fields was a turning point, not the end of the story. The Prodigal did repent. This was heartfelt, deep repentance, and we see its genuineness in every step of the plan the Prodigal carefully outlined for his return to the father’s household.

He finally realized how egregiously he had sinned against his father. He could now see that his father had always been gracious and good. And he finally acknowledged that he himself had been wrong—it was entirely his own fault (and his own sin) that brought him so low. He confessed freely that he was not worthy of any more grace or favor. And yet the Prodigal planned to appeal to the father’s great loving-kindness anyway: “When he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants’ ” (Luke 15:17–19).

That was the new plan, and it was a good one. Rather than trying to evade responsibility for his sin, the younger son would face it squarely. Rather than running further away, he would go home.

He would make a full confession and throw himself on his father’s mercy. This was, after all, his one remaining hope. The love of self and sin that had once made him so blind was now gone. He knew he had permanently forfeited his rightful status as a son, but even being his father’s hired servant would certainly beat feeding pigs for a living. Furthermore, whatever disgrace he might face by going back home was nothing compared to the shame of living with swine. He would make a full confession and throw himself on his father’s mercy. This was, after all, his one remaining hope.

The brief insight Jesus gives into the heart and mind of the Prodigal is one of the best and clearest examples of true repentance in all of Scripture.

FACING REALITY

The first significant step in the Prodigal’s return involved taking an honest look at his situation. That meant facing the ugly reality of what he had become, accepting responsibility for what he had done, owning up to the severity of his guilt, admitting his utter helplessness, and turning to someone who could truly help. Here the father comes back into the story, and it is significant that the father’s first point of reentry into the parable occurs in the mind of the Prodigal Son. The young man finally remembers his father.

He also knew in his heart that his father had every legitimate reason to treat him with severity rather than mercy. Evidently, he still held on to the delusion that by evading responsibility, accountability, and

morality he could eventually gain the kind of liberty he sought. But now finding himself alone and helplessly ensnared in a truly deadly kind of bondage, he finally realized the folly of that way of thinking.

Sin might promise freedom from responsibility and moral constraints, but in reality, it always results in a much worse kind of slavery: the forced death-march of sin (Romans 6:16). Sinners caught in sin's web are helpless to extricate themselves or avoid the inevitable destruction sin causes. That's why the Prodigal's plan B—his best strategy for working his own way out of the mess he was in—was doomed from the start.

The citizen from whom he sought help had essentially abandoned him to die in the fields with the pigs. Sin's companionships are always fickle like that. Sin might promise freedom from responsibility and moral constraints, but in reality, it always results in a much worse kind of slavery.

The younger son's next words are important because they succinctly and accurately express just how desperate his situation really was: "I perish with hunger!" (v. 17). The stark honesty of that admission is refreshing. It was no hyperbole. He literally was starving to death. He would die soon if he remained in these circumstances.

Here, I am convinced, is where true repentance always begins: **with an accurate assessment of one's own condition.**

No sinner has the means to atone for his or her own sin or the ability to overcome the power of sin that holds us. Our sin has put us in a desperate situation. Of course, that is much harder for a pompous, respectable sinner to acknowledge than it is for a wretched swineherd. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matthew 9:12).

Simply and honestly facing the reality of his own circumstances is what caused such a monumental change in the Prodigal's attitude toward his father. Prior to this, he had not showed a hint of respect, affection, or even simple appreciation for his father. Now he was forced to confess that he would be vastly better off at the lowest level of servitude under his own father than far away in the pig fields, reaping the bitter fruits of his "freedom" and literally facing death as a reward for his foolish pursuit of selfish pleasure.

HIS ONLY HOPE: PERMITTED TO BE A HIRED SERVANT

It was a truly amazing turnaround for the Prodigal Son to reach the point where he would even consider being a hired servant to his father, and it's a very clear indicator that he now realized just how low he had sunk. The Greek word translated "hired servants" in this verse is *misthios*. It refers to day laborers—the lowest of all workers on the economic scale.

Day laborers were society's most desperately poor. Unlike slaves, they had no master continually caring for them. They were on their own, and they lived as best they could on whatever they could earn from day to day. Many of them were homeless and unskilled. So hired servants were the poorest of the poor.

But the Prodigal remembered that his father paid even the lowest of his hired servants more than enough. Day laborers who served his father actually had leftover food. That confirms what we have already observed about the father's character. He was generous, kindly, and compassionate. He regularly showed kindness to people by doing not only the minimum of what the Old Testament law and social custom required but even more. That reality finally came home in the son's mind.

REACTIONS TO THE PRODIGAL'S CHANGE OF HEART

This parable, as we have seen, was tailor-made for Middle Eastern agrarian culture. Jesus' audience understood the imagery clearly and knew that the Prodigal Son had got himself into a mess from which there seemed to be no earthly way of escape. So all of them would be profoundly moved by the Prodigal's change of heart— although in different ways.

On the one hand, those who understood and identified with the youth's dilemma—people who were likewise sin-sick, discouraged, and longing to get out of whatever pigsty their lives had become— would find a ray of hope in his turnaround. Their ears would perk up to see whether the Prodigal would find redemption. Or was he already hopelessly beyond the point of no return? Jesus had deliberately framed the plot so that it might well seem that way.

On the other hand, those who listened through the filter of a Pharisaical worldview had already written the boy off completely. In their view, there was simply no way back from the disgrace and degradation into which he had sunk. Such sin, in their estimation, was so permanently defiling as to be (for all practical purposes) unforgivable. That was, after all, the very reason they objected to Jesus' habit of ministering to tax collectors and other outcasts.

From the most devout Pharisees to the most desperate sinners (particularly those hoping to find some kind of deliverance for themselves), virtually all Jesus' hearers would share this one common presupposition: if the Prodigal had any hope of redemption whatsoever, it lay in a lifetime of hard work to atone for his misdeeds. In other words, all Jesus' listeners would intuitively understand the Prodigal Son's planned course of action. He was thinking the way anyone in that culture would think. Everyone fully understood that if the son were truly repentant, he would need to come crawling back to the father as a beggar. He would have to express his repentance verbally, be severely humiliated and scorned, shoulder all the public shame he had subjected his family to, and do everything he could to make restitution.

In that culture, where honor and shame meant so much, such things were simply understood. It was the only way to restore the honor of the father. It was the only way for the son to regain any shred of dignity. That's what the boy needed to do, and that is just what he planned to do. He was ready. He was broken. He was alone. He was downcast. He was penitent. He believed in his father. As a matter of fact, this is a wonderful picture of the repentance that accompanies salvation—because of the way his repentance is inextricably bound up with faith in his father. He trusts in his father's mercy. Penitence therefore draws the Prodigal's heart and thoughts back to the father, rather than sending him fleeing even farther away. That is precisely what makes the difference between mere remorse and authentic, saving repentance.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Far from a mere mind change or an intellectual exercise, genuine repentance always demonstrates itself in the brokenness of the sinner's self-will. The sinner who has desperately tried to hide from God now diligently seeks Him instead. Apart from this quality, all the sorrow in the world is just meaningless remorse. Far from a mere mind change or an intellectual exercise, genuine repentance always demonstrates itself in the brokenness of the sinner's self-will.

- Recall, for example, that Esau regretted selling his birthright, and he wept bitterly while pleading to get it back (Hebrews 12:17). That was not authentic repentance.
- Judas confessed that his treachery was wrong, returned the money he got for betraying Christ—and then went out and hanged himself (Matthew 27:3–5). That wasn't real repentance either.
- David, on the other hand, in Psalm 51, fled directly into God's presence and pleaded, "Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me" (v. 11).

The man who has not been dealt with by the Spirit of God and has not been convinced and convicted, tries to get away from God, to avoid him at all costs. He does not think, he does not read the Bible, he does not pray; he does everything he can not to think about these things. But the extraordinary thing about the man who is convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit is that though he knows he has sinned against God, it is God he wants—“Be merciful to me, O God.” He wants to be with God—that is the peculiar paradox of repentance, wanting the one I have offended!

That is how repentance works. First of all, the sinner comes to himself and to his senses. He begins to look at reality and assess where he is. He realizes he is headed inevitably toward death and destruction and eternal damnation. He cannot keep going the same direction, so he turns to the Father, whom he has dishonored. Having spent a lifetime hiding, he now wants only to be in the Father’s presence. He is therefore willing to acknowledge his own guilt and bear the shame of it. He is willing to do anything he can possibly do to honor the One he has so dishonored. But something also tells him he can cast himself on the Father’s mercy, forgiveness, and love—and find some measure of acceptance. This is the flip side of true repentance, and it’s the very essence of saving faith.

That’s what self-denial means, in the sense Jesus called for it: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself ” (Luke 9:23). There was no question of whether he should go home or not. He had reached the point where the only way he could survive was by turning back to the father he had spurned. His only thoughts now were about how to do it.

I love the way the Prodigal rehearsed how best to verbalize his repentance. It proves that when he said he was taking responsibility for his own wrongdoing, he meant it. He had thought this thing through. He had no expectations, asked for no special privileges, and made no demands. He wasn’t negotiating terms of surrender. He fully and unconditionally relinquished all his rights. He simply confessed his sin, threw himself on his father’s mercy, and begged to be made the lowest of servants.

He was in the same situation as the servant in the parable of Matthew 18:22–35, who owed a debt of “ten thousand talents” (v. 24)—an incomprehensible amount, far more than the national debt of a country the size of Israel in those days. (How much was it? In 2 Kings 18:14, Sennacherib demanded tribute from King Hezekiah in the amount of “thirty talents of gold.” Best estimates suggest thirty talents probably added up to some seventy pounds of gold. Ten thousand talents would therefore be more than 11.6 tons of gold!) That was an enormous personal debt, an utterly impossible amount for any servant to earn by working for it. Yet the servant begged to be permitted to try. He fell on his face in front of the master and pleaded, “Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all” (Matthew 18:26). And the master had mercy and simply forgave him.

The Prodigal Son was in a similar position. There was no way he could ever make full restitution. But he was nevertheless willing to sacrifice everything for the rest of his life to do whatever he could. The Pharisees and virtually everyone else in the crowd understood exactly what the young man was thinking. It was just what had to be done. The Pharisees’ doctrine was based on working to earn divine favor. The Prodigal Son was penitent, and he trusted his father enough to come back home. But as far as the Pharisees were concerned, that was not going to be enough. He still needed to earn his way back into the father’s good graces. **They had no concept of a mercy so great that the Father would grant full forgiveness and instant reconciliation before the sinner ever even performed a single work.**

CARRYING OUT THE PLAN

One clear indication that the Prodigal Son’s repentance was genuine is seen in the simple fact that he followed through with what he told himself he would do. “He arose and came to his father” (Luke 15:20). Apparently, he fulfilled his promise immediately, without hesitation. That’s another factor that separates authentic repentance from mere regret. It was not enough for the Prodigal Son to say, “I have sinned” (and merely wallow in his own despair) while remaining in the far country. He needed to go to his father

and make that confession directly to the one he had wronged. That was the ultimate proof his repentance was genuine, and there would be no change in his circumstances until he followed through with that aspect of it.

It could not have been an easy expedition. But the younger son remained single-mindedly devoted to fulfilling his repentance. We know this because, when he arrived at home and his father met him, he immediately began to articulate the confession he had rehearsed—verbatim. Those words reflect, then, what was truly on his heart. This was no halfhearted performance contrived to trick the father. It was deep, authentic, heartfelt repentance. He was acknowledging without conditions and without reservations that he had wronged his father—and was then throwing himself on the father's mercy.

Consider this: of all the iniquities the Prodigal had indulged in, the one sin with the most potential for evil was the great distance he had put between him and his father. He was determined to remedy that transgression first of all. Everything else would come in its time. He truly was seeing things more clearly now. No point in dragging it out. No need to meditate on the plan any longer. Now was the time to act. "And he arose and came to his father" (v. 20). The Prodigal was at last going home.

MacArthur, John F. The Prodigal Son: An Astonishing Study of the Parable Jesus Told to Unveil God's Grace for You