

## The Sinner's Return.

Text: Luke 15:11-32

1) The Sinner's Return

Suggested Hymns:

311, 851, 391, 170, 352

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Luke 15:11-32, <sup>11</sup> *Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood.*

<sup>13</sup> *And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. <sup>14</sup> But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. <sup>15</sup> Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. <sup>16</sup> And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.*

<sup>17</sup> *"But 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! <sup>18</sup> I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."'*

<sup>20</sup> *"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' <sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; <sup>24</sup> for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.*

<sup>25</sup> *"Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and*

*asked what these things meant. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ <sup>28</sup> “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him.*

*<sup>29</sup> So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup> “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.’ ” (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

A parable is an *“earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”* A parable is really a comparison. It is a picture or story, true to fact and to experience, from which the reader or hearer is to draw a practical lesson.

A parable serves to hide from those who have no spiritual insight the truth which is being expressed, while to those who read with the eyes of faith it unfolds and illustrates the mysteries of the Kingdom of God.

The purpose of the parables of our Lord is most clearly stated in Matthew 13:11–17 as follows, *“Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ... <sup>13</sup> Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. ... <sup>16</sup> But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear.*

The parables of Jesus, then, are to hide the truth from those who resist God and despise His Word, but to discover the truth to those who love God and seek to know Him better.

We have before us today the pearl of all parables. It is a veritable gold mine of precious truths. As you listen to it and read and study it, you will see your

sin and your Saviour reflected, first in one, and then in another phase of this masterful Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Today we shall seek, with the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, to discover only the chief secret message it contains.

We shall not consider especially the manner in which the young son left his father's house; nor how he wasted his living and lost his friends; nor the fact that he was young, which makes his life such a powerful warning to youth.

We shall not consider the unmerciful anger of the elder brother, who was so quick to judge, but focus our attention on the one chief thought of the story, namely, the return of the Prodigal Son.

Since he is a type of everyone who has been prodigal, or wasteful, with the inheritance which he has received from his heavenly Father, we must bring ourselves into the picture.

Let us therefore consider *The Sinner's Return*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. The Sinner's Return**

The Prodigal Son was not willing to eat his daily bread from his father's table. Therefore, before the father's end had drawn near, he asks for his inheritance. Now, the kind father, although he is under no obligation to do so, grants the desire of this ungrateful son and divides to him his portion of the inheritance.

Perhaps part of this inheritance, as was often the case, had been passed on from generation to generation. A part, no doubt, the father had painstakingly laid aside as a sort of savings account. Now, these savings of a lifetime were to be the son's inheritance for his lifetime. It was not the allowance of a day, but all that he could expect to have coming to him, his full and sufficient share.

Bear in mind that this is a story, not only of two imaginary sons and their father, but also of things which have often happened, and still are often happening, in real, everyday life.

Never forget that to all of us, his sons and daughters, our heavenly Father gives a full and plentiful inheritance. In our holy Christian faith we confess: "I

*believe that God has made me and all creatures, that He has given me my body and soul,”* etc. This is my inheritance.

To each sinner the Father divides his portion of health, of faculties of mind and body, of riches and talents, and of a thousand earthly advantages. ***“He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”***<sup>1</sup> So every person among us receives his inheritance. This is the common inheritance of all men.

But when you became a Christian, you received a further special bequest. All your debts, your trespasses, your sins, were cancelled. Your record was wiped clean. Your sins, which were as scarlet, were made whiter than snow.

By His holy indwelling, the Holy Spirit brought you peace and joy, happiness and victory in His holy name. You were given a deed to an eternal mansion in the heavens and the hope of a glorified body, which will never see corruption.

Yes, God has given each of you a great and precious inheritance. It is at your disposal, but if you are to be a loving son, you must do with it as God pleases for your happiness, and His glory.

Now look again at the Prodigal Son. He turns his back on his father as soon as he has the inheritance in his grasping hands. And right here is where the trouble begins. He did not want to be subject to anyone. It irked him to live under any authority except that of his own carnal desires.

We can just picture such a young man going to his father in all the boldness and disrespect and eyebrow lifting of youth, and saying: *“Now, see here, dad, I’m going to leave home. The way we live around here is not the way people live today. This place is too dull. People of my age are a new generation. We have new ideas, and we want to enjoy life. Now that I have my inheritance, I’m going to live my life my way.”*

With few other words of farewell, we can well imagine, he takes his inheritance and struts down the road, cocksure that he will get on perfectly well by himself, without any advice or help from anyone. His inheritance is all he needs. He is independent now. His pockets are full, but he has little in his heart and less in his head, as he takes his hasty leave of his father. This is base ingratitude!

Do you begin to see a secret message in the text? Jesus is speaking here to us of everyone who wandered away from God and has turned his back on his heavenly Father, from whose hands he has received all his inheritance for life.

Often it is the ones who have received the richest inheritance for life, with fine physical, mental, and social endowments, who feel the most independent but have the smallest regard for the Giver of every good and perfect gift, for the Father, who gave them these things.

They turn their backs on God and boast: *“Look! My brilliance and my strength have won me all this. I am a self-made man.”*<sup>2</sup> But we must all make confession in the words of Isaiah: *“All we like sheep have gone astray.”*<sup>3</sup> We have turned our backs upon our heavenly Father.

Many people are not willing to turn and to look to God from whom they have received all the blessings of life. With callused hearts they seek to blame Him for the condition in which they find themselves, saying, *“Why did God allow me to do this?”*

But, oh! how we weak and sinful mortals ought to put our fingers to our lips and stop to think of the amazing grace of God, by which He has made us free agents and not robots or animals of a lower order in creation!

God has made us in His own image and has placed us in the world to lead our own lives. He holds no one in the bounds of a good life by force. We belong to Him. We owe Him love and honour and obedience and service, but He will never compel us to stay with Him or to love and obey Him.

He made the great stars to follow courses which they can never break. Planets, much larger than our own, cannot vary from their appointed pathway by so much as the breadth of a hair without His permission. But God did not make us stars, but men. He did not make us birds, flying north or south in season by following the pattern of natural instinct. He didn't make us fish, to follow the narrow confines of a mountain stream, nor did He make us sheep to be driven and herded into flocks and shut up in a sheep-pen.

And by no means does God ever tempt us to do that which is evil. We read in James 1:13, <sup>13</sup> *Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.*

However, God has given us liberty and authority over all of the creatures of the world. He has given us a mind, and with it he has placed on us the responsibility to use it, to stop and think, and to meditate.

So when the Prodigal Son turned his back on his father, it was his decision; and when and if we turn our backs on our heavenly Father, it is our decision and our responsibility.

But notice again how the progress of the parable unfolds. Now the Prodigal Son, who has turned his back and left, stops and turns. But watch closely as he stops. Take note that he does not stop of himself. Of his own volition he would still be going.

But something halts him — a bitter experience which was in reality a gracious visitation of God to stop him on his reckless way. As he squanders his inheritance, it soon runs out. His fair-weather friends soon run out on him, too.

Then a famine hits the land. He becomes a swineherd and is starving at his job. He would gladly have eaten of the dry bean pods, the husks which he was feeding to the pigs, but he was not permitted to do so. The light has left his eye; the colour has gone from his cheeks; the song from his lips; and the fine clothes from his back, and he stands in a slump, a pathetic figure, destitute and in rags. He is a man at the end of his rope.

The gracious visitation of God may come in many ways, sometimes, as to the Prodigal Son, by swine and husks, sometimes by war and loss of loved ones, sometimes by ill health and a hospital ward, sometimes by the voice of a condemning conscience.

The good Lord often speaks to people through a restless memory or a broken home or wayward children. The storm and the lightning may bring Him near, or the noise of battle and the bursting shell, just as does the timely preaching of the Law by fearless preachers of the Word. In all these ways, and many more, God comes near and walks with men. He sits with us through anxious days and stands by our couch through sleepless nights. All this He does that, as a helpful Friend, He causes us to stop and think and to consider the way in which we walk.

It was just so, by the gracious visitation of God, that the Prodigal Son “*came to himself*” and stopped to think. That was the first hopeful moment of that

waster's life when he began seriously to consider his ways. Now, with adversity as His brush, the Lord sweeps the cobwebs from his thoughtless mind.

O young people especially, stop and think! Remember your Creator in the days of your youth!<sup>4</sup> But who is not as a child in the sight of the Father? Should we not all take warning and think on our ways? Note well, it is a God-given privilege and blessing that we can stop and think.

When God made man and all other creatures, great and small, He made the animals greater in this or in that respect than man. He made the lion stronger, the deer swifter, and the giraffe taller, but He gave to man this crowning grace that he can think. So do not forget your special inheritance.

Do not be as the ass or the mule, which have no understanding,<sup>5</sup> or the foolish goose or the laughing hyena, but be a man! Use your head! You are the crowning creature of His six days loving labour, to whom alone He has given reason and sense, in the image of His own. For the sake of Him who gave you your mental faculties, use them. Think about the heavens and Him who made them and you. Go to the little ant, and watch and think.<sup>6</sup>

In the day of prosperity think on the truth that every good and perfect gift comes down from above. Think in the day of suffering and bereavement, that all things work together for good to those who love God. We are told in Philippians 4:8, *whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, ... —meditate on these things.*

The Psalmist says in Psalm 119:59, <sup>59</sup> *I thought about my ways, And turned my feet to Your testimonies.* When the sinner, driven to the brink of despair by his evil ways, begins to think and repent of his sins, his old companions make fun of him and say, “*He is crazy.*” But the truth is that he was foolish before, and now he is in his right mind. He has come to himself. Sin is insanity. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

Once again, we see the wayward younger son. The first thing he thought of when he came to himself was his sin and the distance which separated him from his father. Now he begins to appreciate what living with his loving father once had meant to him and what a fool he had been to leave him. He frames in his mind and heart an excellent confession. <sup>18</sup> *I will arise and go to my father, and*

*will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you,<sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”*

Every wandering sinner must first consider that it is sin which separates man from God. And the chief torment of the damned in hell will surely be this, to know that except for unbelief, they would be dwelling with the Father in the mansions prepared by the Lord for those who love Him. Therefore let every sinner speedily repent of his sins, which separate him from the Father.

The Holy Scriptures might well be looked upon as a case book of confessions and repentance, in which the confession of the Prodigal is recorded as one of many. The experiences of repentant men and women provide the most absorbing passages of the Bible.

David was a prince among the confessors of the Scripture. It was David, who wrote the penitential psalms, the 6th, 32d, 51st, 130th, and the 143d, to be a guide to all people in the confession of their sins. For example Psalm 130:3-4,<sup>3</sup> *If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? <sup>4</sup> But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared.*

Down through the years we come to Peter, who wept bitter tears of repentance; Judas, who went out and hanged himself rather than confess to the Lord; and the repentant thief on the cross, who said to the blasphemous robber at his side, *“Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? <sup>41</sup> And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.”<sup>8</sup>*

We read in Proverbs 28:13,<sup>13</sup> *He who [hides] his sins will not prosper, But whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.* The repentant tax-collector goes down to his house justified.

The father detects a figure in the distance, down the road. While his eyes can yet barely discern the form of a man, his heart recognises the figure of his son. He runs down the road to meet his young, wayward son.

The father does not look upon the rags of his son, his ears do not wait for a long confession, but he reaches out to receive the returning one into his arms.

Thus the father's tears of forgiveness were more than a match for the fine confession the son had prepared to make.

In true-to-life stories the forgiveness which a wayward son receives from a neglected and forsaken father or mother is not always as perfect as that displayed by this loving father in the parable. Sometimes the springs of human kindness, even in parents, dry up, and they cut off their children who have been disobedient from any further consideration at their hands. The door to what was once their childhood home is forever closed in their faces.

But the father of the parable is a picture of our heavenly Father, always ready to receive the returning sinner and wipe out the record of his sins. When they brought to Jesus the man who was a paralytic, He said, "***Son, be of good cheer; your sins are forgiven you.***"<sup>9</sup> And the Son, Jesus Christ, does nothing but what He sees the Father do. In this way the Father will speak to us as we return.

This is the Parable of the Prodigal Son returning to his father. There is in the Bible another story which also tells of the return of a son to His father. This Son never turned His back on His Father; He did not waste or lose a bit of the inheritance which had been given to Him, and He did not have to return with a confession of guilt upon His lips. He was always about His Father's business and continually working the works of Him who sent Him, so that His Father could say of Him: "***This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.***"

May every sinner surely know that the way for his return to the Lord God in heaven has been perfectly prepared by the Son of God, who has perfectly accomplished the work of salvation and who, as a loving elder brother, sits at the right hand of the Father and welcomes, with the rejoicing heavenly angels, every sinner who returns home. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:45

<sup>2</sup> Deut 8:17

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 53:6

<sup>4</sup> Eccl 12:1

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 32:9

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 6:6

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<sup>7</sup> Prov 9:10

<sup>8</sup> Luke 23:40-41

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 9:2