

## *The Prodigal Son* **REPENTANCE**

February 24, 2019  
Sunday of the Prodigal Son  
Revision E

### **Gospel: Luke 15:11-32**

The Gospel lesson began with a younger son asking his father to divide the inheritance up between himself and his older brother before the father's death. According to Hebrew laws and customs regarding inheritance, land was a permanent inheritance of one's tribe and family. It could be sold, but every 50th year (the year of Jubilee), the land reverted back to the family of its original owner. Thus, land that was sold became less valuable as Jubilee approached and the sale involved the sale of so many years' crops and not the land itself (Leviticus 25:8-17). Personal property such as livestock, precious metals, jewels, etc., were divided up by fathers and given to their sons as an inheritance. In the Gospel lesson, it was this personal property that was divided up and given to the younger son.

According to Hebrew custom, the oldest son had the "birthright" and was given a double portion. For example, in a family of five sons, the oldest got a two sixths share and the others got one sixth shares. However, the oldest was required to provide for their mother for the rest of her life and for any sisters until they got married (this included the sister's dowry!) out of his extra share (Unger, Bible Dictionary, p. 376-8). This was to be the case even if the oldest was the son of a wife who was not the father's favorite (Deuteronomy 21:15-17). Thus, in the case of the Prodigal Son, the Prodigal got one third and the older son got two thirds.

The Prodigal took his one third of the fathers' liquid assets and journeyed to a far country -- that is, a place where Hebrew law did not apply. If he had squandered all his inheritance in Israel, he might have had some recourse to starving since provision was made in the Mosaic Law to care for the poor. In addition, he could get back to his family's land during the year of the Jubilee. But in this far country -- where unclean animals like swine were raised -- he found himself envying the carob pods (v.16) that were fed to the swine. Carob pods have a large (up to 10" long), leathery exterior and the pulp from the pods is still used today as cattle feed. If it is good quality, it is roasted and ground and used as a chocolate substitute. Eaten raw, however, it is just cattle (or pig) food.

The Prodigal's lifestyle in the far country devoured the father's livelihood (or liquid assets) in wasteful living. In verse 30 the older son remarked how his brother had devoured his wealth with harlots (Greek: *porne*). Thus he joined or glued himself to harlots in that country where the Epistle lesson describes the impact of this. And when his wealth ran out he joined or glued himself (Greek: *kollao* as in the Epistle lesson, 1 Corinthians 6:16) to a keeper of swine. In a downward moving spiral, the Prodigal Son had been given over to uncleanness (as in Romans 1:24) and his body was being dishonored, maltreated and abused. It's the counter example to the Epistle lesson: If one insists in the desire or passion of one's heart to take the

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limbs or members of Christ and join or glue them to a harlot, the Lord will react. By sinning against his own body, which was the Temple of the Holy Spirit, the Prodigal brought his maltreatment down on his own head. And having been given over to this, he finally “came to himself” and realized what he’d done. For some people, this is the only way that they can get saved.

In his repentance, the Prodigal realized that he’d sinned against heaven and against his father (v.18). He sinned against heaven by joining the Temple of the Holy Spirit to harlots; he sinned against his father by squandering the gifts he had been given. In planning his return to his father, he made his confession to God. When he came to his father, he also made his confession to him. That his confession was genuine is indicated by his humility and sense of unworthiness (I am no longer worthy to be called your son, v.21) as opposed to his previous arrogance and independence (give me the portion of goods that falls to me, v.12).

Isaac of Nineveh said, “Baptism gives freely and demands nothing except faith; but if a man sins after baptism and then repents (like the Prodigal), God does not forgive him freely but demands works, suffering, sorrows, contrition, tears, a long time of mourning - and then forgives. The Lord forgave the thief freely, merely for his confession uttered on the cross, and promised him the Kingdom. But in the case of the woman who had sinned, He demanded also faith and tears” (Directions in Spiritual Training, Texts 135, 157). We need to understand the effects of our sins.

The Prodigal’s father responded with three things, which have symbolic meanings:

- a robe for righteousness (Isaiah 61:10)
- a signet ring for family identity (Haggai 2:23)
- sandals for walking according to the Gospel (Ephesians 6:15)

But most of all, the Prodigal’s father responded with love. The father’s love for his younger son can be summed up as follows: “Love suffers long and is kind...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” (1 Corinthians 13:4-8). The father had evidently been looking for his younger son since he saw him when he was still a great way off (v.20). Yet, the father didn’t lecture him or nag him or go to the far country and try to drag him home. He had to let him go; otherwise the Prodigal may never “come to himself” and realize the consequences of his own actions. This is difficult to do, especially regarding someone you care about very much.

But what about the older brother? As the father stated (verse 31), all that the father possessed now belonged to the older brother due to the division of the liquid assets (verse 12). One can criticize the older brother for not showing love to his brother. This is valid. But there’s more to it than that. Matthew 20:1-16 is the Lord’s parable of laborers in a vineyard. Some were hired at daybreak and worked all day; others were hired in the late afternoon and worked only one hour. Yet they all received the same wage, which angered those who had worked all day. The older son may very well have felt that “It’s not fair!” for the younger son to be welcomed back as a son. As a servant, okay; but not as a son. Under Hebrew Law, the older son was now responsible for providing for his destitute younger brother until the younger brother could get back on his feet financially. The father would not re-divide the liquid assets; but

Hebrew Law required those that have goods to care for those that have not (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

The main point in Jesus' telling the story of the Prodigal Son concerned the response of the older son. In Luke 15:1, "all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Jesus to hear Him". But the Pharisees and Scribes complained that He received them and ate with them (15:2). So Jesus directed a series of parables at them beginning in Luke 15:3.

<b>PARABLE</b>	<b>MESSAGE</b>
The One Lost Sheep	More joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over 99 who need no repentance,
The Lost Coin	Joy among angels of God over one repentant sinner.
The Prodigal Son	The son was dead and is alive; was lost and is found.

Cyril of Alexandria (4th -5th Century) went on at length to de-spiritualize this parable. Some people in his day interpreted the older son as representing the holy angels, while the younger son, man. Others interpreted the older son as Israel with the younger son, the Gentiles. Cyril said not so! The theme in this parable was spoken by the prophets, "Return, O Israel, to the Lord your God; for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take words with you and return to the Lord" (Hosea 14:1). "Therefore I will judge you, O House of Israel, each according to his conduct", declares the Lord God. 'Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you. Cast away from you all your transgressions, which you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O House of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies', declares the Lord God. 'Therefore repent and live'" (Ezekiel 18:30-32).

Cyril went on to say, "As the Pharisees and Scribes made this outcry at His gentleness and love to man, ...Christ very necessarily set before them the present parable, to show them clearly this very thing: That the God of all requires even him who is thoroughly steadfast and firm, and who knows how to live in a holy manner, and who has attained to the highest praise for sobriety of conduct to be earnest in following His Will. So that when any are called to repentance, even if they should be men highly blamable, he must rejoice rather and not give way to an unloving vexation on their account" (Commentary on Luke, chapter 15). Thus the Prodigal represents the tax collectors and sinners that were coming to Jesus with repentant hearts while the older brother represents the Pharisees and Scribes who were hardening theirs.

Coming into the Kingdom of God, all receive the same wage -- the crown of life. There are other crowns or rewards such as spoken of in the Parable of the Talents. But here, the focus is on the joy in heaven when one sinner repents (Luke 15:7). As the father said, "...your brother was dead and is alive again and was lost and is found" (v.32).