

This Week in the Word

Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens. Ps 119:89.



Calling the Lost **Study Scripture: Luke 15:11-24**

Lesson 3, March 16, 2019

Key Verse

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:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Luke 15: 22 & 24

INTRODUCTION

Our lesson today deals with what is commonly known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This Parable has in addition been given many names, such as the Parable of Loving Father, The Parable of the Forgiving Father, The Parable of the Lost Son, The Parable of the Two Sons, The Son Who Came Home Again. Obviously different views and interpretations of the parable are expressed in the various titles given.

Luke 15 is a very peculiar chapter for many people, for this chapter is apparently broken up into three different and distinct parables: namely, The Lost Sheep in verses 1-7, The Lost Silver Coin in verses 8-10, The Lost or Prodigal Son in verses 11-32. The word “prodigal” which is commonly used in this Parable means wasteful or prone to foolish extravagance. Those that use this title of the Prodigal Son therefore generally emphasize this feature of the younger son.

When we look closely however we see that there is really only one parable but it has three pictures. There is no interruption in the flow of the verses, and the illustrations flow smoothly one into the other. In verse 3 Jesus actually is said to speak “this parable” to the people, and the singular is used, indicating that the entire chapter is really constituting “one” parable.

What we have here therefore is not really three parables, but one parable with three aspects. Each illustration fits in very well with the other to give us a complete picture and doctrine.

Jesus seems to be teaching that the sheep, the coin, and the Son were all lost, and that all of them were worth saving. One writer says that
“It was serious to lose a sheep, worse to lose money, and worse of all to lose a Son. A sheep is valuable, money more valuable, but man is the most valuable of all”.

Clearly then, everything in this chapter with its three separate pictures, repeats the same doctrine. Jesus was concerned about something that was lost, and there was joy when the thing that was lost was recovered. The build-up however, is to the case of the human son who was lost and found. God cares for human beings more than anything else and so this parable teaches amazing lessons about the nature of God.

It is therefore noted that Jesus is using this parable to teach about our relation to God, that is, what God thinks of us, and how he reacts to what we do. In addition, He is showing us what He means by His command that we should love one another. We are taught how we must display this love when we face specific situations in life.

Generally speaking however, there are some fundamentally different ways in which this parable is interpreted.

Some people believe that this parable is teaching about a believer's restoration to fellowship with God. In this view God owns something. Sometimes He loses some of the things He owns. It is taught here then that the children of God will come back to Him. Believers can therefore be restored to fellowship with God.

Other people believe that the Parable teaches that people who are lost, or unbelievers, can come to Christ. In this view everybody who hears the message of Christ have a responsibility to come to Him, and receive a new position in Christ. This of course, gives Gentiles hope that they might be lost now, but they can come to Christ and be accepted by Him.

An even more fundamentally different view emerges if we look at the Parable, and try to view it the way that a Jewish person listening to Christ might interpret it. In fact, when one looks at the interpretation of this parable by Jewish believers in Christ, a very different picture emerges about the meaning than that generally taught by Gentile believers in Christ.

What we have done is take the Parable out of its Jewish context, and extend the apparent meaning of the Parable, to apply to Gentiles who come to Christ. There might be some justification to extend the lesson to Gentiles, but one should be very careful in ignoring some descriptions in the Parable, and placing more meanings to the parable, than might in fact be there.

Since most of us are acquainted with the interpretations given by gentile Christians, it will be instructive to look in some detail at how Messianic Christians approach this parable. To understand this, we would also look at the events in verse 2, specifically at who the Pharisees were, and why they behave the way they did.

This raises the important matter of who people really are and how they appear in the public view. This has application to both Jew and Gentile.

We note therefore that this is a parable of two Sons, a younger “prodigal son” and his older dutiful brother. Do not miss the point however that both of them are equally lost. They are both equally in need of something. One son has needs that we can see clearly for his needs show outwardly; they are visible and are evident. The other brother has needs too but his needs or lacks are obviously not so evident as those of his younger brother.

The lessons for us therefore are quite clear for the Bible parables are designed to teach us spiritual truth, truth from God's perspective. God hope that we will understand the spiritual truths and benefit from them rather than treating the parable as just a silly and entertaining story.

We learn therefore that some people today have needs that are easily seen while others have needs that are far less apparent. They might not even know that they have these needs. But remember that all of us on earth are united by a desperate need for Christ and for understanding God's heart for the lost.

So as we look around us remember that there are not really two types of Christians, those who have just come to Christ and are in recovery with an obvious desperate need for Jesus, and those who seem to have no desperate need for Jesus. Never forget that it is very difficult to predict who is who for we do not know how life will unfold and how life will be like for the different professing Christians that we meet.

Note therefore that 1 Corinthians tells us that God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise so when we look at people in the church or those outside we do not know whether they have all kinds of hidden lustful ideas, secret gambling habits, and secret pornography habits while they look pretty good on the outside. We do not even know whether those outside who look pretty bad are going to be among the called ones and whose life would be totally changed while those on the inside who look pretty good will never really come to Christ and in the end Christ will deny them saying that He never knew them. We really cannot tell the book by its cover. So be careful in your dealings with people. Treat all well and encourage all you meet telling them about the need to have Christ's indwelling them.

Note also the role that money plays in this drama for it represents the value that people put on the world's goods and properties and so it's their priority in life They want money.

But note again that easy money leads to out of control behaviour and a pretty terrible life. We see this familiar pattern among successful political and religious leaders as well as

others. So Christians as well as non-Christians should be careful to warn their children of what could happen to them and not be foolish when we speak about sin for we know that sin is fun and quite rewarding in the short-term. Drugs, wealth, music of all kinds, are among the pleasures of sin but this is not lasting for it tastes good only for a little time.

What sin does produce is “deadness”, a void, a restlessness where one is breathing but one is not really living. So in this story the father would say, My son was dead but has returned to me and now is alive.

This Bible also raises the question in our minds as to why the father, if he represents God the Father, didn't slap his son when he came to him with foolishness, and why he allowed him to go his own stubborn way which leads to death. Why does God not pursue sinners in the way that we think is best? Romans chapter 1 helps us to address that issue.

JESUS, ISRAEL REPENTANCE, AND THE MESSIANIC HOPE

Note that in verses 1 and 2 we have Publicans, Sinners, Pharisees, and Scribes coming together to hear Jesus. This was therefore a Jewish gathering.

People in that ancient nation of Israel believed firmly that Messiah would come, and would save them, because of the Covenant promise God had made to Abraham in Genesis 12.

They believed that God had been intimately associated with Israel, had loved Israel, and had never left Israel for very long despite her behavior. God had commanded Israel to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and mind, and secondly, to love their neighbors as themselves. Israel was therefore obligated spiritually to God and their neighbor.

Israel had been regarded as God's Son, and as his elect people. See Deuteronomy 14: 1. In Exodus 4, Israel is called God's firstborn Son. God had been considered the Father of Israel. The history of Israel was therefore a history of a 'Son' of God who had journeyed away from God. They had betrayed God and dishonoured him, by not loving him, and their neighbour. They had committed many sins, which had been highlighted and denounced by the prophets.

The Prophet Hosea, had actually spoken of Israel as a rebellious adolescent child for whom the father had provided, and loved, but yet they had responded with rebellion, defiance, and then departure from God. Still however, God had regarded them as a Son beloved, even though they were wayward and rebellious. The Father had longed for them to return to him, and had patiently waited for them to return.

The listening Jews, given this background, would likely have heard in this Parable what one writer called

“The unwavering hope on the part of the father to see his Son repent. Never is there talk of banishment or disinheriting of the errant Son. However, the business of the family must continue and this responsibility will fall to another as long as a Son is away.”

One Son was good and faithful to his father, while the other was not, but yet the father had compassion for his prodigal Son who finally recognized his sinful ways, then got up and came to his father, admitting his sinful ways, returning to obeying the first Commandment.

The appeal from Jesus, as was the appeal from the Prophets such as Isaiah and Hosea, was to get up, and return to the father.

Isaiah had said,

“the ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider.

Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evil doers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.....

Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Isaiah 1: 2, 3, 18.

Of course, God frequently said that He had always stretched His hand out to these rebellious children of His, for He intended to restore them. See Isaiah 1: 26, 27. There was therefore no doubt about their inability to come to Him on their own. He would bring them to Him. Their illness however, was grave, for pride, that worst of all sin, was holding them in his grip and causing misery. The nation must however, return to God the Father, for He would welcome the repentant Son, who came back to Him to live in purity and obedience.

There were however faults in those who had not left Him and gone into blatant and open iniquity and sin. They might have stayed closer to God and worked for Him, but they were not by any means perfect, for they had to learn to have compassion as the Father.

Jewish believers in Christ therefore looked at this parable as one which calls the erring nation of Israel back to Him. The father wants all of Israel to return to Him, and once again love Him with all their heart, and soul, and mind, and their neighbor as themselves.

This would be a marvelous time for Israel and for the Gentile world. This will be a time of restoration and life.

As Paul puts it later in Romans 11: 15

“For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?”

The call therefore to Israel in this Parable was to return to God through Jesus Christ, who was the only one who could remove their alienation from God.

In a tearful supplication in a penitential collection titled "Remember the Covenant", we see this emphasis in the prayer of a Rabbi, after he recounted a similar story of a Son, a Prince, who wasted his life. The Prince's features had become haggard beyond recognition, and became scarred. He then came back to his Father, who did not recognize him by face, but finally recognized his voice and he was restored to his position as Prince. The Rabbi prayed:

"So it is with us. We are children of the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, who, in His love, has selected and exalted us above all peoples. He entrusted onto us the sacred Torah that brings spiritual enrichment to man and leads to the pathway of righteousness and truth. But we have strayed from this pathway He set before us. We departed from His Commandments. We were removed from our land; our iniquities distorted and corrupted all these things. As a result, our holy appearance has been altered. Our glory has been mutilated into a destructive void. And now, with the advent of our Holy Days, we become remorseful over all our misdeeds. We cry out to Him, 'Hear our voice! If you do not recognize our appearance, at least You must remember our voice, for we are Your children. Be gracious unto us and receive our prayer with merciful favor.'

The parable represents God as a common Father to all mankind, to the whole family of Adam. We are all His offspring, have all one Father, and one God created us, Malachi 2:10. From Him we had our being, in Him we still have it, and from Him we receive our maintenance. He is our Father, He is our source of education and portioning of us, and henceforth He will put us in His testament, or leave us out, according as we are, or are not, dutiful children to Him.

Our Saviour hereby intimates to those proud Pharisees that these publicans and sinners, whom they thus despised, were their brethren, partakers of the same nature, and therefore they ought to be glad of any kindness shown them. God is the God, not of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles, (Romans 3:29): the same Lord over all, that is rich in mercy to all that call upon Him.

In the parable it represents the children of men as of different characters, though all related to God as their common Father. He had two sons, one of them a solid grave youth, reserved and austere, sober minded, but not at all good-humoured to those about him: such a one would adhere to his education and practice, and not be easily drawn from it: but the other was volatile and mercurial, and impatient of restraint, roving, and willing to try his fortune, and, if he fall into ill hands, likely to be a rake, notwithstanding his virtuous education. Now this latter represents the publicans and sinners, whom Christ is endeavouring to bring to repentance, and the Gentiles, to whom the Apostles were to be sent forth to preach repentance. The former represents the Jews in general, and particularly the Pharisees, whom He was endeavouring to reconcile to that grace of God which was offered to, and bestowed upon, sinners.

Let us therefore now look at the text, and see what lessons are traditionally gleaned from the Parable. Hopefully, we will see Jesus' direct appeal to Israel and to the Pharisees, to cultivate the correct attitude. We will then be properly able to extend this lesson to our own behaviour and attitude to others.

THE TEXT

In verse 1, tax gatherers and sinners came to hear Jesus. In Israel at that time, the term “sinner” referred to all those who persistently failed to observe the Commandments of God. However it also referred to those who held occupations that everybody despised, such as that of tax collector, those handling dead bodies, or forbidden animals, and so on.

Anybody who associated with those kinds of people, were regarded as a minimum as compromisers, tainted, and impure. Jewish leaders stressed that good people should follow strict “apartness”. Of course, tax collectors were regarded as traitors, and greedy exploiters and oppressors.

All religious Jews had a duty to keep away from such people who were ‘sinners’. It was forbidden to entertain ‘sinners’ in your home, and to show mercy to those people who did not have “knowledge” of the Law.

In verse 2 it is stated that the Pharisees and scribes were annoyed that Jesus treated the ‘sinners’ cordially, comforting them and being host to them.

Here we note the importance of table fellowship. By eating with these ‘sinners’ Jesus was declaring that he accepted them fully as people, for that is what breaking bread with someone implied.

THE PHARISEES

The Parable was given to correct the attitude of the Pharisees and the Scribes.

Christians have a very low opinion of the Pharisees, because they attacked Jesus often, and treated him disrespectfully. Jesus made some stern judgment against them, and so the ‘Pharisee’ is regarded as a self-righteous, hypocritical person. But that is not a full picture, and we should understand exactly what Jesus was teaching the Pharisees and the people.

We do know that the Pharisees were separatists. They kept themselves away from the Maccabean rulers as well as the Herodian Kings because these people followed practices that were against the Law of God. Note that the rulers of Israel were very corrupt, and compromised with pagan ways. The power struggles and corruption finally led to the Romans taking control of Palestine in 67 B.C. Rome then installed their puppet rulers which the Pharisees hated. They constantly fought with the Sadducees who came from the upper classes, and who collaborated with the Romans. They were not however above joining with the Sadducees and the supporters of the Herod Dynasty to oppose Jesus. They not only separated themselves from the power hungry opportunists, rulers and politicians of their day, but they also separated themselves from the mass of people because the multitudes were very lax about observing the requirements of the Law of Moses.

The Pharisees wanted to separate themselves from the contamination of the world, and this itself was not a bad idea. But they were so obsessed with ‘purity’ that they gave this a higher priority than showing compassion, or even saving a life. See Luke 10: 25-37.

The Pharisees were clearly the most accurate interpreters of the Law: they were held in high regard by the people. Their biblical interpretation was very orthodox, and they fought to keep all the laws of Moses, Sabbath observance, prayer, tithing, as well as their own traditions. They fervently studied the Old Testament, and interpreted everything about it. These interpretations and traditions came to be considered equal in inspiration and

authority to the biblical Commandments. We know for example that they deduced 39 different prohibitions against certain acts on the Sabbath, simply because the Bible said that one should not work on the Sabbath day.

There was no doubt that the Pharisees desired to know and obey God's word. They were good students of the Bible. They definitely were right in rejecting the apostasy of the rulers, and the corruption in the leadership. They took the biblical commands seriously, and desired to know what God wanted from his people. They insisted that the laws of God should be practiced everyday, and not just by the priests and Levites. They were therefore great teachers of the Law.

The problem was that they began to look down on those who were less observant and less spiritual than they. They developed the attitude of trying to impress the people by openly displaying their almsgiving, their fasting, their prayer, and whatever appeared religious. They became elitists, and elevated the letter of the Law above the spirit of the Law. Their theological arguments became more and more complex, and their rules more and more trivial and difficult to follow. The Pharisees forgot that obedience and good works were worthless if one did not have the right attitude, and love for God, and for the neighbors. They added so many rules that Jesus had to rebuke them for laying grievous and heavy burdens on the people that they themselves could not move. They were therefore not practicing what they preached.

With that kind of attack, the Pharisees certainly did not like Jesus, for He attacked their authoritative manners, and criticized their teachings and their practices. Jesus condemned them as self-righteous hell-bound people, who were inwardly corrupt, hypocrites, proud, greedy, and with the wrong priorities. See Matthew 23: 27. Jesus regarded them as blind guides who were leading the people astray.

Jesus constantly urged them to pay more attention to the "weightier matters of the Law" (Luke 17:10) and not focus so much on the relatively more trivial things.

The Pharisees could not accept Jesus because He attacked how they kept the commands of the Torah, and criticized the oral Law they had developed. He did not fit their image of the Messiah who would overthrow the present evil rulers such as the Sadducees, Herod, and the Romans, and then set up a glorious kingdom along the lines of righteousness preached by the Pharisees.

The Pharisees were spiritually blinded, having been led astray by their own obsession, thus moving away from the love of God, and love of neighbour that the Scriptures really taught.

Jesus therefore had to defend himself against the false accusations of the Pharisees, showing them that he associated with sinners not because he believed their immorality was right, but because he knew that God had compassion toward those who were lost, and Heaven itself was joyful when a sinner returned to God.

Jesus did not hide the fact that 'sinners' were lost, but he emphasized that finding and changing sinners was good. This encouraging of 'sinners' to change, should be the primary aim of every follower of God.

Jesus illustrated this in the examples he gave. When the shepherd lost a sheep he searched for it diligently until he found it, and then shared his great joy with his fellows. When the poor woman lost her coin, she turned her houses upside-down to find it, and

then shared her tremendous joy with all her friends. There was therefore tremendous joy in Heaven when one sinner repented.

Clearly, the lost sheep and lost coin were symbols. Jesus had been leading up to his real goal of talking about lost people. He therefore now dealt with what He really wanted to say, for He wanted to tell the Pharisees and the scribes that they should not be pointing the finger at sinners, but instead should be encouraging them to change and to come to God.

In verse 11 Jesus then began to tell this climactic story. Note that a parable is that method of teaching using a comparison between two things. The word parable comes from a Greek word meaning a 'likeness' or 'comparison'. The parable began by introducing a man who had two sons, not just one.

The comparison and contrast between the sons, which is the point of the parable, is brought out immediately. The younger son, the prodigal, takes the center stage at the beginning, while the obedient older son and his attitude, takes center stage at the climax. The younger son approached his father, with the request that he be given his share of his inheritance. The Jewish Law of inheritance stated that if there were two sons, the elder son would receive two thirds of the estate, while the younger son would get one-third. Normally, the inheritance was given only when the father was near to death. The children had no right to the estate except by way of a gift. The younger son therefore, though entitled to his share, had no right to claim it during his father's lifetime.

The truth of the matter is that it is bad, and the beginning of worse, when men look upon God's gifts as debts. It is the great error of sinners, and that which ruins them, in being content to have their portion in hand, now in this lifetime to receive their good things. They look only at the things that are seen, that are temporal, and covet only a present gratification, but have no care for a future felicity, when that is spent and gone. Christians as well as those who do not know God are prone to this type of thinking. With Christians we have God and the Holy Spirit with us to lead us away from such prideful thoughts. Now it is upon us to help those who do not know God to realize what errors they have made in not trusting God and what lies beyond the temporal veil. And why did he desire to have his portion in his own hands? Was it that he might apply himself to business, and trade with it, and so make it more? No, he had no thought of that. He was weary of his father's government, of the good order and discipline of his father's family, and was fond of liberty falsely so called, but indeed the greatest slavery, for such a liberty to sin is.

In this case the father granted his request. The listening Jews would know immediately that this boy was 'no good' and did not care about his father. Everyone would know the boy was headed for trouble. The listeners would immediately condemn this action for it was regarded as a bad idea to break up estates too quickly, especially when a son just wanted to get the money in his hands, and couldn't care less about his father's feelings.

This is possibly the greatest danger that children of God- fearing parents face, an apathy to God, those who are religiously educated, but are impatient of the confinement of their education, and never think themselves their own masters, their own men, till they have

broken all God's bands asunder, and cast away his cords from them, and, instead of them, bound themselves with the cords of their own lust.

Here is the original of the apostasy of sinners from God they will not be tied up to the rules of God's government they will themselves be as gods, knowing no other good and evil than what themselves please. He was willing to get from under his father's eye, for that was always a check upon him, and often gave a check to him. A shyness of God, and a willingness to disbelieve His omniscience, are at the bottom of the wickedness of the wicked. He was distrustful of his father's management what his father would be laying up in future for him.. He did not like the limits placed on him. He was proud of himself, and had a great conceit of his own sufficiency. He thought that if he had but his portion in his own hands he could manage it better than his father did, and make a better figure with it. There are more young people ruined by pride than by any one lust whatsoever. Our first parents ruined themselves and all theirs by a foolish ambition to be independent, and not to be beholden even to God Himself and this is at the bottom of sinners' persisting in their sin--they will be for themselves.

It is likely that the listeners would begin to understand what Jesus intended, since Jesus had been criticized for mixing with sinners, who were far away from God and accused by the Pharisees of living riotously, in contrast to the older son who remained with his father and did only 'good' things.

In this story, the boy left home very quickly, putting as much distance as he could between himself and his home, squandered his money with drunkards, prostitutes, and party animals. He wasted his possessions, literally scattering it, leading an extravagant lifestyle.

A sinful state is a state of departure and distance from God. First, it is the sinfulness of sin that it is an apostasy from God. Sinners are fled from God: they go a whoring from Him. They revolt from their allegiance to Him, as a servant that runs from his service, and they say unto God, Depart. They get as far off Him as they can. Secondly. It is the misery of sinners that they are afar off from God, from Him who is the Fountain of all good, and are going further and further from Him. What is hell itself, but being afar off from God?

A sinful state is a spending state: As to this world, they that live riotously waste what they have, and will have a great deal to answer for, that they spend that upon their lusts which should be for the necessary substance of themselves and their families. But this is to be applied spiritually. Wilful sinners waste their patrimony for they misemploy their thoughts and all the powers of their souls, misspend their time and all their opportunities. They do not only bury, but embezzle the talents they are entrusted to trade with for their Master's honour and the gifts of Providence, which were intended to enable them to serve God and to do good with, are made the food and fuel of their lusts. One sinner destroys much good, Ecclesiastes 9:18. The good he destroys is valuable, and it is none of his own they are his Lord's goods that he wastes, which must be accounted for.

In verse 14 the logical result of his actions are recorded. He spent it all, and immediately was caught with his pants down. A mighty or terrible famine (recession) came, and with no money and nobody to help, he was in bad trouble.

A sinful state is a wanting state: Wilful waste brings woeful want. The misery of sinners, come from that fact that they have thrown away their own mercies, the favour of God, their interest in Christ, the strivings of the Spirit, and admonitions of conscience: these they gave away for the pleasure of sense, and the wealth of the world, and then are ready to perish for want of them. Sinners are wretchedly and miserably poor, and, what aggravates it, they brought themselves into that condition, and keep themselves in it by refusing the supplies offered.

In verse 15, the boy had to take a job that no self-respecting Jewish boy would take. One can imagine the crowd shuddering when Jesus said that the son had to go and feed pigs.

A sinful state is a vile servile state. When this young man's riot had brought him to want, his want brought him to servitude. The business of the devil's servants is to make provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof, and that is no better than feeding greedy, dirty, noisy swine and how can rational immortal souls more disgrace themselves?

He was so hungry that he longed to eat the food that the pigs ate. Nobody even wanted to give him that. He could not sink any lower. Vs.16.

A sinful state is a state of perpetual dissatisfaction. Husks are food for swine, but not for men. The wealth of the world and the entertainments of sense will serve for bodies but what are these to precious souls? They neither suit their nature, nor satisfy their desires, nor supply their needs. He that takes up with them feeds on wind (Hosea 12:1), feeds on ashes, Isaiah 44:20.

A sinful state is a state which cannot expect relief from any creature. This, in the application of the parable, intimates that those who depart from God cannot be helped by any creature. In vain do we cry to the world and the flesh (those gods which we have served) they have that which will poison a soul, but have nothing to give it which will feed and nourish it.

A sinful state is a state of death: A sinner is not only dead in law, as he is under a sentence of death, but dead in state too, dead in trespasses and sins, destitute of spiritual life: no union with Christ, no spiritual senses exercised, no living to God, and therefore dead. The prodigal in the far country was dead to his father and his family, cut off from them, as a member from the body or a branch from the tree, and therefore dead, and it is his own doing.

Suffering at that low-level of life, the boy finally came to his senses. He remembered how well off he was at home. He was in a state of moral and physical degradation. However, he looked at himself and his condition, and came to his senses, realizing that this behavior was madness. Scholars debate what the phrase "he came to himself means" for it is not

quite clear whether he actually repented of his terrible condition. Some think his heart was broken before God while others think that he simply felt that he was in a mess and needed to get out of it. Others think that the young man didn't even know himself what he was really feeling except to say from his limited feelings he could state that he had sinned before God and before his father.

A sinful state is a lost state: Souls that are separated from God are lost souls, lost as a traveller that is out of his way, and, if infinite mercy prevent not, will soon be lost as a ship that is sunk at sea, lost irrecoverably.

A sinful state is a state of madness and frenzy. This is intimated in that expression (Luke 15:17), when he came to himself, which intimates that he had been beside himself. Madness is said to be in the heart of sinners, Ecclesiastes 9:3. Satan has got possession of the soul and how raging mad was he that was possessed by Legion! Sinners, like those that are mad, destroy themselves with foolish lusts, and yet at the same time deceive themselves with foolish hopes and they are, of all diseased persons, most enemies to their own cure.

But remember that when you hit rock bottom you must make a turn, and start taking steps to get out of it. So the young son wisely then determined to go to his father and ask for forgiveness, as well as asking for a job as a laborer. He did not think that asking for pardon, even if it was granted, was something sufficient to restore him to his previous position at home. The son had condemned himself, even though nobody else, certainly not his father, had yet done so. He would throw himself completely at the mercy of his father.

Note that this state of sin and suffering is regarded as foolishness and madness.

Repentance is considered to be our restoration to good sense.

True repentance is a rising, and coming to God. The next step is then confessing of the fault and folly that we have entered in. In that confession, understanding and acknowledging that we have sinned against Heaven, and before thee, that is God.

In verse 20, the father saw him coming in the distance, put aside his dignity, and ran to meet the returning boy. The father's behavior was motivated by his compassion. He was eager to welcome his son, for he must have known that nothing good would come out of his son's foolish behavior. He would have felt pity when he saw the bedraggled figure of poverty coming toward home.

In verse 21 the son gave his rehearsed speech of repentance, confessing his sins, and asking to become as a servant in the house.

The father did not respond in the way that the son had expected, refused his request to be a servant, and instead made him a full member of the family again. He put the best robe on him, gave him shoes to wear, something that would differentiate him from the servants, and put a ring on his finger. This was probably the family seal. Then the father put on a banquet. One writer interprets:

“Part of the mystery is the mystery of what love is. Love really exists, really thrives, when it is chosen, absent of manipulation, absent of force, absent of a twisted arm, or insistence of the beloved. I think what this says is about God's vulnerability -- and the father is certainly the Lord God in this story. The father is waiting. The father has been humiliated by his son. His heart is breaking still, he refuses to ravish or manipulate the son. He is waiting for the son to come home. We are seeing this God that the Pharisees know nothing about in this story”.

The listening Jews would have seen the significance of the feast, for this feast symbolized the coming kingdom. Repentant sinners would be able to enter the Feast, and this meant they would be admitted into the presence of God and into the kingdom.

The son who was dead, was now alive. The son who was lost was now found, and this was a cause for great joy and merriment. The joy could not be held back, and a party was the only appropriate event. When sinners came to God, Heaven had a celebration.

The contrast that makes the parable a parable now began. The elder brother now came on stage. He had been working in a field. He was hardworking and responsible. He had been obedient and had served his father well, and there was no questioning the fact that he was morally superior to his younger brother in every way. Yet, unlike his father, he had no compassion for his foolish and extravagant brother. This was a wrong and unacceptable attitude to the lost. He was angry that the father had welcomed the profligate son and there was a special feast and merriment at his return.

So he refused to join the merriment because of the shameful conduct of his brother in the far country and the father had to come out to him, not rebuke him, but telling him pointedly that his brother, who was dead, was now alive. His brother, who had been lost, was now found. All this was aimed at bringing some humanity back to his elder son, and to change his spirit to one of compassion, mercy and tenderness.

The lost had to be recovered. Whatever the father possessed belonged to those who had been faithful, who had not transgressed his father's commandments, and had served him faithfully. Those who stayed with the father had had the happiness and joy of his company and his blessing, and all that he had.

So stay with the Father and do not ever be lost even for a little while.

CONCLUSION

Jesus taught the Pharisees and scribes, and explained to the multitude, that the most important thing was repentance and returning to God. Being away from home, and supervision of the father was in reality death. A return home was life.

It was never good to be away from home, for away there was sin, wretchedness, starvation and famine, misery, emptiness, and lack of concern for one's suffering. One could never find true friends away from home. There was no protection away from home. There was no salvation but there was death.

No person of God would therefore want to see sinners left to themselves in misery and death. God regards the quality of compassion as a very important one. Heaven rejoices when people turn to God.

It will be so when Israel turns to their Messiah, and look at Him whom they pierced, repenting and mourning for their action.

True repentance is always a great thing. The Pharisees were wrong to want to exclude anybody from the Kingdom. They should have wanted to save everyone they met, sinning Jew or sinning Gentile.

We too should learn that lesson. Our lives must be dominated by our compassion for the lost. If we have no compassion we too, will be regarded by Jesus in the same way as He regarded the Pharisees. We will be seen as hypocrites and frauds. If we have compassion, we will show it by doing everything we can for the lost, and by bearing fruit.

We must become more like the father. We cannot encourage people to behave like the younger son, but we must realize that we might not be able to stop them from destructive behaviour.

We must however, never put obstacles in the way of those who, having repented of their sins, return to God. If there is no repentance, they are still sinners, and our focus must be on witnessing to them. But if there is repentance, they must be accepted and welcomed. Their former sins must not be held against them, and used to prevent them from returning to God. They are sons of God, and, if they return, it is a sign that the Holy Spirit's work has been effectual.

We must welcome those who have died, and who have been made alive by the work of the Spirit. Our aim must be to encourage all those sinners to repent, and then do all we can to keep them in the family of God.

Compassion must be our watchword. We therefore rejoice with Heaven when a sinner repents and returns to God.