

GOING HOME

Luke 15:17b-19

While he was in the far country, the younger son did not give much thought, if any, to home. His exploration of the far country did not give him satisfaction. When his financial resources were completely exhausted, and he began to be in want, "he came to himself." It seems that some people will never come to themselves until they are down and out. When he awoke, or came to his senses, the young man realized the emptiness of the life he had been living. While in the bitterness of his degradation and destitution, he recalled many fond memories of the happy days which he had spent in his childhood home. His thoughts centered around what he had previously tried to forget. As soon as his memory reasserted itself, he thought of the days he had spent back home, and imagined the same conditions prevailed there as in the days of yore. As he recalled those happy days and delightful experiences, he thought of how foolish he had been in departing therefrom and depriving himself of all the advantages and joys which existed there. He must have been thoroughly disgusted with himself.

Remember that it was his poverty and hunger which brought him to his senses, and opened his eyes so that he could see himself as he really was. It is when a man sees himself clearly that he realizes the folly of his ways. His self-realization brought an end to his self-expression. Just as soon as his understanding was enlightened, his thinking changed toward his father, toward his own past life, toward his life at that particular time, and toward his future. Part of his "right mind" was the memory of better days and better things. Consciousness having returned, his thoughts went back to what he once was. To his personal sorrow, the prodigal had discovered that his expectations had far exceeded his experiences. Actually he had never become naturalized in that far country. He had joined himself to a citizen of that country, but he had not become a citizen thereof. He had never felt at home there.

It dawned upon the young man that he had certainly made a sorry mess of his liberty. At last, he had come to the place where he was ready to trade off his liberty for security -- a job, food to eat, and a comfortable place to sleep. I wonder if you see the full force of that. Whole areas of humanity today are trading liberty for security, and losing both. Why? Berdyaev said, "Men are slaves because freedom is difficult and slavery is easy." In other words, people sink into servitude because they won't face the hard fight to stay free. Someone asked a tramp how he decided directions and made up his mind where he wanted to go. The tramp replied that that was not any problem. He said that when he woke up in the morning he always looked to see which way the wind was blowing and then went along with it. That is what made him a tramp; he went along with the wind, which was the way of least resistance.

There are millions of people in our world for whom freedom has lost its enchantment. They don't want it, not altogether because it is too difficult, but because it has been held too lightly, and because the people who have had it and prided themselves in it have misused it.

IX. His Decision. Verse 18-19

Standing there among the hogs, hungry, ragged, penniless and friendless, having lost his dignity, self-respect, money, courage and hope, the prodigal allowed his memory to carry him back to the home of his earlier and more joyous days. As he visualized the hired servants back there who had more food than they needed, while

he had so little that he was slowly starving, he developed a real case of homesickness. Remembering how the table was loaded with food for his brother and himself, and even for the servants, in contrast with his current hunger for the food which the swine were eating, he decided that he was going to return home. Thinking of his father's servants, who were never without work, food, clothing, rest and sleep, and who were far more happy than he was, he decided that he would abandon his pinching poverty and go home in a spirit of genuine humility.

Widespread in our time is this homesickness, this feeling of unnaturalness and frustration. Never have the hearts of men been so lonely and desolate and frightened with the consciousness that, in spite of our knowledge, we do not have wisdom. So many have missed the way. They have lost the path to life, and somehow, they must make their way back to some things that have almost faded out of their minds.

This dissolute young man did not decide to go back home until he was entirely bankrupt. The tendency is strong in all of us to make God a last resort. We have a way of turning to Him when every other support is gone and we stand helpless and alone. It is "when other helpers fail, and comforts flee" that God gets His opportunity to cleanse, transform, empower, and use the life.

People make God a kind of reserve fund to be drawn upon only when every other resource is exhausted. They conceive of Him as a sort of philanthropic magician whose power is reserved to extricate them when they have gotten past helping themselves. They are like the storm-tossed sailors about whom we read in Psalm 107:27-28, "They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble." During a terrific storm at sea a lady passenger went to the captain and asked him what he thought of the situation. He replied: "It's pretty bad. I think you'd better pray." "Oh," she gasped, "has it come to that?"

I am sure that many of you remember that dramatic and thrilling story of Captain Eddie Rickenbacker and his three companions adrift on those small rubber rafts in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. All these men became very religious during those terrible weeks. Private John Bartek told his mother: "We all got religion. When we got ashore, we wanted to go to church." Lieutenant Whittaker, the co-pilot, wrote: "I was an atheist, but from my companions I learned to pray and saw prayer answered. There are no atheists in rubber rafts amid white-caps and sharks. My entire life has been changed by the events which began October 20, 1942."

God should be more to us than a last resort. He is more than a life belt to be snatched at when we fall overboard. God is indeed "a very present help in trouble," but is that all? Has He no meaning for life except to come to our rescue when we have made a mess of things?

It is a glorious thing when God rescues somebody from a career of waste and sin, but it is still a more wonderful thing when, through the daily companionship of the Holy Spirit, one does not need that type of rescue. When young people receive Christ as their Saviour, yield their hearts and minds to Him, and walk in paths of righteousness, giving the Lord a soul, a life, and a career, that is so much better than having to be rescued from a life of sin.

A man came to Dwight L. Moody once with a tale of moral disaster. After relating the distressing facts, the man said: "Now, Mr. Moody, what would you do if you had gotten into such a situation?" Quick as a flash, Mr. Moody replied: "Man, I would never get into it." You see, Moody was paying tribute to the grace of God which makes the "far country" unnecessary.

Christianity is not simply an ambulance at the foot of the precipice or cliff to pick us up when we fall over. It is rather a guard rail at the top to prevent us from falling in the first place. As thrilling as was this young man's return home, how much better it would have been for him if he had never left home. He lost something by that experience which he never could regain. He carried the effects of his waywardness with him for the rest of his life. The years of prodigality left their mark. They always do. As Hezekiah Butterworth said:

"I walked through the woodland meadows,
Where sweet the thrushes sing;
And I found on a bed of mosses
A bird with a broken wing.
I healed its wound, and each morning
It sang its old sweet strain,
But the bird with the broken pinion
Never soared as high again.

I found a young life broken
By sin's seductive art;
And, touched by Christ-like pity,
I took him to my heart.
He lived with a noble purpose
And struggled not in vain;
But the life that sin had stricken
Never soared as high again."

Nothing is written more indelibly into the history of human experience than that there are certain secondary, punitive consequences of wrongdoing which the forgiveness of God does not, and cannot, erase. God forgives us when we repent. He wholeheartedly welcomes us back into intimate fellowship with Him, but He cannot erase the harm that wrongdoing has done in the far country. Sin damages human personality. It drains off one's influence and hinders his usefulness. Therefore, young people, make your record clean. Let Christ "keep you from falling."

It was the prodigal's hunger that brought him to himself, and opened his eyes so that he could see himself as he really was. He realized the folly of his ways, and saw clearly the cause of his plight. He knew that he was responsible for it. He did not blame his circumstances. He did not think that he had experienced a run of misfortune. He was in want, but it was strictly his own fault.

There are times when people suffer through no fault of their own. Circumstances have just proved too hard for them. Sometimes they suffer through the foolishness or the sinfulness of others. That is bitter enough, but it is far more bitter to suffer and to know that the suffering is the result of your own folly. The prodigal had

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deliberately and wilfully cut himself off from his father and played the fool with his life. Bad living had brought him to his unhappy condition, and he realized that all that had happened was his own fault. Therefore, he resolved that he would go back to his father and make a full confession of his wrongdoing to him. He did not have any intention of self-defense, or attempting to hide his sin, or of excusing it.

It is to the credit of the prodigal that he resolved that he would go immediately to his father and say to him, "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee." That is one of the most difficult sentences human lips can ever utter. It is quite easy to say that all of us are sinners, but it is an entirely different thing to say, "I have sinned."

The prodigal frankly admitted that he was a sinner. His confession, "I have sinned," is interpreted by some today as a rather crude and old-fashioned way of putting it. They think that a man would have to be desperate to use language like that. If they were going to do what the prodigal did, they would express it something like this, "I have been antisocial," or "I'm sorta mixed up," or "I guess I'm a little maladjusted," or "I'm in a stage of immaturity." The prodigal dared to call his behaviour by its real name, which is sin. He came right out with it. His confession was honest, clean-cut and courageous. There wasn't any glossing over, or a futile effort to cover up, but rather the plain and manly admission that he had been living in sin.

In these days there are those who would give the malady less offensive and less incriminating names like misfortune, error, indiscretion, undeveloped judgment and immaturity. What nice, respectable names we give our misdeeds! We are not dishonest; we are shrewd and canny. We are not bad-tempered; we are just righteously indignant. We are not selfish; we are just practical. We are not impure; we are just romantic. We are not prejudiced; we are just sensible. These are just some of the ways that we like to minimize our sins.

The prevalent conception of sin as "antisocial behaviour," or "maladjustment," or "immaturity" was well lampooned in a cartoon. It showed a child swinging a hammer against the shattered remains of an expensive mirror and explaining calmly to an aghast adult observer: "I'm not naughty; I'm neurotic." How slow we are, because it hurts our pride, to come clean and admit that we are sinners!

A sin (whether of the flesh, of the mind, or of the disposition) which is not called a sin, and dealt with as sin, remains. It is not yet out by the roots, and will surely sprout again to plague and to defeat us.

This young man is to be commended for accepting full responsibility for his conduct. He took all the blame. He did not attempt to shift the responsibility for his follies and wrongdoings onto the shoulders of anyone. He did not plead that he was a victim of circumstances. He simply and frankly said, "I have sinned." He did not say, "I've gotten into quite a mess, I know, but it is hardly my fault. You see, my father never understood me, my mother was too strict on me, and my brother was always such an insufferable snob. And besides the church in our community did not attract young people. If the situation had been different, I would have been different. But what else could one expect under the circumstances?" The prodigal had had ample time

to think up a lot of alibis and excuses, which would have been nothing more nor less than lies, but he did not mention a one. And that was highly commendable in him.

There is a strong tendency in people today to rationalize their way out of all responsibility for their guilt. They try to saddle upon others, or upon circumstances, or upon institutions, the responsibility for their misconduct. To save face they blame everybody and everything except themselves. Dr. D. R. Davies said: "The rarest thing in personal moral failure is the realization of one's own responsibility." Will Rogers once said that there have been three periods in American history: the Passing of the Indian, the Passing of the Buffalo, and the Passing of the Buck. And he added that we are living in the third period. There is certainly much evidence to support his claim. We not only try to excuse ourselves, but many want to excuse everybody else.

All of us have the alibi habit in greater or lesser degree. Instead of pointing the indicting finger at ourselves, which is unpleasant, we blame heredity, glandular makeup, environment, handicaps, associates, social pressure, and even God. We construct defense mechanisms rather than make honest admissions. This was illustrated in a splendid fashion by the small boy who reported to his mother: "Mother, Bobby broke a window!" "My, my!" she said; "how did he do it?" "I threw a rock at him and he dodged."

Rare indeed is the student who will say, "I failed the course." The usual way of putting it is, "The teacher failed me." The employee who loses his job does not say, "I was lazy, or uncooperative, or incompetent, or drunk." He will say, "The boss didn't like me and had it in for me." It would be amusing, if it were not so serious, the way in which management and labor blame each other for industrial chaos. "On advice of counsel" neither admits anything. Of course, the one who is talking at the moment is always ninety-nine and forty-four one hundredths percent pure, and has never been known to make a mistake. There is no hope for improvement unless we stop confessing other people's sins and start confessing our own. Only a frank admission of one's personal responsibility for his sin can release God's help and open the way to spiritual and moral recovery. A new day would dawn for our world if more people had the humility and the courage to say, in the words of the spiritual,

"It's me, it's me, it's me, O Lord,
Standin' in the need of prayer."