

LIFE AT THE START

Luke 15:11-13b

This exquisite, familiar, popular and famous parable is quite unique to Luke's Gospel and unequalled in all literature. From a literary standpoint this parable, spoken by the matchless story-teller, Christ Jesus, is one of the most beautiful, as well as one of the most touching and pathetic, accounts ever written. In giving utterance to this, the pearl of parables, which is undoubtedly one of the most universally known stories recorded in the Word of God, Christ proved Himself to be both the matchless teacher and an unrivaled artist. In it He painted a marvelous panorama, portraying the entire history of mankind. The master artist skillfully used every shade of man's emotions and feelings as colors to portray clearly not only the heart of every sinner in his fallen condition, but to reveal in its majesty the very heart of God, showing His amazing pity, compassion and love toward fallen and erring humanity.

This parable is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, short story ever written. George Murray called it "the most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told on earth." President Theodore Roosevelt said that the simple story of this immortal adventurer, who is usually called the prodigal son, moved and stirred his soul more than any other language that he had ever read. Of this parable Dr. Halford E. Luccock said: "Judged either by its literary form or by the importance of its spiritual truth, it holds an unrivaled place, not only in the Bible, but in the world's literature."

This matchless and unforgettable story deals with the basic human problem -- the problem of a man's relationship with God. All of us were made for God, and there is no peace, or real release from our guilt, frustrations and fears until we are reconciled to God; until we have been able to say: "'Tis done, the great transaction's done; I am my Lord's and He is mine."

This simple, terse, tender and luminous story deals with one of the most important experiences of life -- the teaching and training of children in the home. From the home, which is the very cornerstone of civilization, stems peace, progress and perpetuity. Home! What a hallowed word! How full of enchantment, and how dear to the heart! The very word touches every fiber of the soul, and strikes every chord of the heart. What tender associations are linked with it! What pleasing images and deep emotions it awakens! It calls up the fondest and most cherished memories of life, and opens in our nature the purest, deepest and richest well of precious thoughts and feelings. The home in which a boy or a girl is reared has more to do with his or her after-life than anything else. The house in which he or she is reared does not have a lot to do with the formation of his or her character. Far more than a house is needed to make a home for a boy or a girl. Parents make the home what it is, and they largely determine what their child shall become.

In preaching from this interesting and inexhaustible parable, I want to be intensely practical. I want to come just as close to your hearts and lives as I possibly can, and especially to those of you who are young. After all, life is a great adventure. None of us have any choice respecting the port from which we sail, but each of us determines the haven into which he shall drop anchor at last.

In the opening of this story we catch a glimpse of a beautiful home in which there was practically everything that the hearts of its occupants could wish. Doubtless the father in that home was a man of nobility, wisdom and kindness. There must have been in him a remarkable blending of strength and tenderness. He was wonderfully blessed in having two sons. As a loving and devoted father, he observed his sons as they grew into manhood. He watched their progress, and noted in what ways they were alike, as well as those in which they were different.

During the remainder of this service, we shall devote our attention to the younger of the two sons, and I sincerely hope that each of us will learn some of the valuable lessons which his conduct sets forth.

I. His Dissatisfaction. Verse 12.

As Christ portrayed him, this young man was a faithful reflection of life everywhere and in every age. He was a seeker after something. Aren't we all? We are all akin to the prodigal, this far at least. A great and restless hunger is in the heart of man, a nameless discontent that will not let him be. William Blake illustrated one of his poems with the picture of a little man standing at the foot of a ladder that reached up above him and disappeared into the clouds. With his arms outstretched and his head thrown back, the little man is crying, "I want, I want." It is utterly useless for us to rail against this discontent in the heart of man, or try with Buddha to quiet or suppress it. What does the little man, with his arms outstretched and his head thrown back, want? He may not know. Often he doesn't know what he wants, nor why he wants it. Often he misinterprets his deepest longings and seeks fulfilment in strange paths. This is why there is so much disappointment and unhappiness and downright frustration in the world. We are wanting something bigger or better than most of us are getting. We are made for something which is higher than we are reaching.

II. His Desire. Verse 12.

The day came when this younger son reached that age when he thought he knew more and better than his father. Who is there among us that has not come to or passed through that stage? Haven't you really thought that you know more than either or both of your parents? Of course, there is a vast difference between thinking that you know something and actually knowing it.

This younger son chafed under the restraints of the parental relation. He had grown tired of the restraints of home. To him home was irksome and boring. He wanted independence. He found the restraints of his father's house galling to him. He thought he would be more free and happy in the big world beyond the hills. He longed to see the sights and to enjoy the pleasures which he had heard existed over the hills and far away. He was intoxicated with the lure of sights unseen and of experiences untried. He lusted for the unindulged. He wanted to get out on his own, to have his own way, to live his own life, and to do as he pleased.

It is entirely possible that some of his unscrupulous companions had poured into his ears the bewitching story of the enchanting world about which he had not known. No doubt that somebody had told him that "a young man with a little money can command anything." He was bent on being independent and having a career. He wanted to see the world. He wanted to have his fling, so he rebelled against the authority which would have kept him in the right path, as so many young people are doing in these days, to their own detriment and loss. It was his desire to break away from his father and to live as he pleased which was the very essence of sin. Little did he realize that the freedom for which he yearned would lead him to comparative slavery. When he rebelled against everything for which his home stood, little did he realize what the consequences would be. Some children leave home because of the entrance of a stepmother or a stepfather. Some children leave home because they have received cruel treatment. Others leave home because they do not think there is an opportunity for them in the localities in which their homes are situated. Still others leave home simply because they want the freedom to do as they please, which most frequently means to do wickedly. A former mayor of New York City in an autobiographical article wrote that he left his home in Ireland because he wanted to sin as he pleased.

III. His Demand. Verse 12a.

Like every normal boy, this young fellow wanted money before he knew either the value of it or how to spend it. Knowing that his father was a man of considerable means, and that in due time, at the death of his father, his possessions would be divided between his brother and himself, he decided that he would request him to let him have his share of the estate immediately. He thought that, if he could get his share of the estate immediately, he could make both a fortune and a name for himself. That would enable him to be his own master, and also be free from all authority and interference.

With him self came first. After self became the center of his life, to him nothing else mattered. This young man had a false conception of what life really is, and it was very evident in his eager desire to get away from home and all of its influences. And in this he was not by himself. Today many young people have the notion that they are being cheated -- that there is something wonderful out in the world to which they have a right, and which they are missing. Many children who are reared in Christian homes think that the unrighteous and the worldlings are having all the fun and all the good times. Thinking that life at home is hum-drum, they long for adventure. They crave excitement and a gay time. They want to have their fling. They firmly believe in the philosophy of self-expression. They want to live their lives in their own way, so number one on their hit parade is "Don't Fence Me In." Young friend, do not be too anxious about leaving the love which is manifested in your home. There will come a time when you will become aware of your need of it. Besides, you will not always have the opportunity to enjoy it. Stay as close to it as you can, and make just as much of it as you can.

Sheer self-will, such as this young man expressed can work great mischief in any life. Many boys and girls have gone forth from Christian homes to live very sin-

ful lives. It is a solemn thought, and yet quite true, that not any of us can absolutely guarantee the integrity of another's life. Sooner or later every person comes up against that subtle power of selfhood, that royal and yet terrible power of choice. It is not wise to conclude that because you have been reared in a good Christian home that you will be immune from the solicitations of evil and the seductions of passion.

For some time this young man had thought about leaving home and going out into the big world on his own. He was a prodigal in thought and spirit long before he became one in deed or action. Just after the far country was in his heart long before the dust of the far country was on his feet. Leaving home is not necessarily a matter of geography, for it is often only a matter of the mind. There are many who are in a far country mentally, who are yet physically within the walls of their own homes or houses. In the mind of this young man was the thought that his father stood between him and something that he desired supremely, and which he believed would be better for him than the things it was possible for him to have in the house and under the influence of his father. He decided that he was going to leave home.

Before he took his departure this young man expressed an instinctive sense of the right of inheritance. Inasmuch as he was the son of his father, he instinctively concluded that his father was under a certain obligation to him, and that he had a perfect right to a share of his father's property without waiting for it. Even though he recognized that he had a right to expect something from his father, he totally ignored the fact that he had any obligation to his father, or that his father had any right to expect anything of his son.

Determined to acquire his share of his father's estate, this son mustered enough courage to approach his father and demand possession of that to which he believed he was the heir. He said: "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." For this astonishing request the father was not prepared. Although our Lord did not tell us whether or not he did so, it is entirely possible that he tried to reason with his son and to talk him out of his plans. Of course, both the father and the son knew that the Mosaic law recognized the right of the first-born to inherit a double portion of his father's estate (Deuteronomy 21:17). According to this law, the elder son would receive two-thirds and the younger would receive one-third. Naturally, the father knew what would most likely happen if he gave his son in advance all that would eventually go to him, and let him use it as he pleased before he learned the value of money or how to use it wisely.

Reluctantly, and against his better judgment, the father acceded to the expressed wish of his son. Christ said: "And he divided unto them his living." Each son received his rightful share of the inheritance. In somewhat the same fashion, God frequently grants us the freedom to do as we please, even when He knows full well that what we are going to do will be injurious to us. Many others, like this younger son, have wrecked their whole careers through the folly of insisting upon exercising their independence before they are prepared and qualified to do so.

Knowing that his son was immature, emotionally unstable, and incompetent to handle money wisely, the father realized that he was taking a great risk in placing so much into such irresponsible hands. In all probability the experienced and devoted father accurately plotted the course of events in advance. Most likely, after he had become reconciled to the inevitability of his son's departure from home, the father tried to fill him in on some things which he had neglected to discuss with him. I am confident that he availed himself of the opportunity to offer him urgent words of good counsel. But, realizing that his son would just have to learn the hard way, he granted him the freedom of going and of learning for himself.

It was unfortunate that this young man had joined that great number whom Satan had deceived by getting them to think that the pleasures of sin offer real and abiding satisfaction. He has deceived many in our day to the extent that they have dismissed sin from their vocabulary and their reasoning. But this scripture lesson certainly gives to those who have eyes to see an excellent panorama of sin -- how it operates, what it does, and how it may be overcome.

God's Word says "Not many days after the younger son gathered all together." What was he doing in these few days while he was getting ready to leave? He was dreaming a strange and wild dream. He was thinking of that far country and what it held for him. His imagination had gone prodigal before he did. In his dreams he had pictured the far country before he arrived there.

Not all our dreams can be trusted. Dreams are not solid things. There's a dreaming in which the picture in the mind does not correspond with reality. We imagine things to be so when they aren't so.

What was perhaps the most weird auction sale in history was held in Washington, D.C., in 1926. By special act of Congress 150,000 old patent models of odd inventions were declared obsolete and put up for public sale. They had accumulated in the United States Patent Office since 1800. Some of them had passed under the hand of Thomas Jefferson when he served as Patent Commissioner. A quiet, thoughtful man present at the sale said that as he looked over the curious conglomeration of sticks, wheels, glued wood and iron contraptions, the first thought in his mind was, "How fertile is the imagination of man!" One by one these inventions went under the hammer. Some were clever, some were clumsy, some were amusing -- there was an automatic bedbug crusher, and an illuminated cat to scare away mice! One woman had invented a gadget which enabled a mother to churn the butter and rock the baby in one operation. There was a device to prevent snoring.

Now, to some people, the sale of 150,000 old patent models would mean 150,000 laughs. But the quiet, thoughtful man who watched the hammer fall and heard the auctioneer's "Going, going, gone!" said he couldn't laugh. He knew that he was looking at 150,000 broken dreams. He was thinking of the long days and nights of tedious toil, of the people who first imagined and dreamed, then made, and then vainly waited for the child of their brain to bring them fortune. Some died in poverty, still trying to market their inventions. He was thinking of the thousands of people dreaming dreams that would never come true, and he wrote it up in a poignant story under the title, "The Shattered Dreams of a Century."

This world is full of shattered dreams of people imagining vain things; of economic illusions, political utopias, philosophical imaginings; of ideas in the mind that have no hope of coming true. Vividly sketched against a background of divine reality is this unforgettable story of a young man dreaming a dream that could never come true, holding in his mind a pleasing image that had no substance of reality. It is an old dream, as old as the Garden of Eden with its luscious forbidden fruit so pleasing to the eye.

IV. His Departure. Verse 13b.

As soon as possible, the young man turned his share of the property into portable form, ostensibly into hard cash, and prepared for his departure from home in quest of self-realization, fully determined that he was not going to permit anybody to prevent him from going anywhere he desired and doing anything he pleased.

As the time drew near for him to say goodbye, it is quite likely that a farewell reception was planned. Neighbors and friends most likely gathered at the home and they had a glorious time, on into the late hour of the night. He was to leave bright and early the next morning. If his mother was still living, you may be sure that there were two in that household who did not sleep that night. You know what two they were. Every father and mother know what two they were. That was a new experience in that home. Son was leaving home, and going out among strangers. The mother gave him her kiss and love -- a mother's best blessing. The father didn't say as much as the mother, but he, too, was bowed with grief. He put his hand on his son's shoulder and said, "My boy, remember what mother has said. Remember the advice she gave you. When you get away from home remember there are many pitfalls, and son, I want you to watch out about the crowd you run with, and about your associations. Remember the gamblers will rob you of everything. Don't go with the crowd that drinks. Look out for bad, immoral women." Proudly he took his inheritance and made his way out from the home. As I visualize him taking his inheritance and going out into the great world to meet the responsibilities of life on his own, I am wondering what you, as a young person, would have today if you gathered up all the moral and spiritual substance which your home has bequeathed to you. I am wondering what moral and spiritual substance you parents are giving in your homes today. I hope it would not be like a case I read about the other day.

A man who loved boys made it his business to go to various prisons and talk to the young men who were incarcerated in them. A mother asked the man if he would visit a certain prison in a certain state before he returned. He told her that he would. She said, "If you go to that prison, here is a package I want you to give to my son. He is in that prison." And she gave him the name of her son. The man took the package and when he came to that prison he found the young man and said, "Young man, I have a package for you. It is from your mother. She asked me to give it to you."

The young man took the package, opened it, and in it was a picture of his mother, and a letter. He looked at it and said, "Did she give you this package with this

picture and letter for me?" "Yes," said the man, "What did she say?" "She told me to tell you that she loved you." The young man then tied up the package and handed it back to him and said, "Take it back to her and tell her, it is too late." "What is the matter?" asked the man. "If my mother had loved me at the right time," said the young man, "and had given me the right kind of training, I would not be here. She taught me to gamble and drink in her own home. Over a gambling table in a drunken spree I shot a man and now I am here. Take this package back to her and tell her that her message came too late."

Listen, friends, much that we do is too late. What parents do for and with their children in their homes will determine largely what those children will do when they go away from those homes. What a child gets in the home forms the background of his or her life. Your child is either getting the moral and spiritual culture that will strengthen him or her, or else he or she is getting a worldly infiltration that will becloud the conscience and weaken the will.