

"HE CAME TO HIMSELF"

"And when he came to Himself." Luke 15-17a.

The younger son in the parable imagined that to be absolutely free to work out his own desires without restraint or hindrance would bring him the highest happiness. His desire might have been expressed in the words, "Let me have my own way, and life will be worth while!" Taking what he had, he went into the far country. Being the hail-fellow-well-met type, with a life of much warmth and promise, he made friends easily. Even though he had a background which could have strengthened him so much for his future, he moved in the wrong circles and indulged in those things which were injurious to him. It was not long until he was penniless and unwanted. His money had been spent, his so-called friends had deserted him, and his manhood had been dissipated, his honor had fled, and his heart was heavy. If anybody had told him in advance how his adventure would turn out, he would have laughed him to scorn. He, like many others, had to learn from bitter experience. He had fled from the dignified work and the love and discipline of a son on his father's farm to beg for loathsome work in the far country. He had squandered his all for rags and shame and misery. He had struck bottom. He had been the victim of his own foolishness. Hunger, loneliness and shame burned in his mind the fact that he had made a bad choice.

This young man had been allowed to have his own way. He had been permitted to test his own philosophy of life. He had proved the fallacy of his own philosophy, the futility of his own plans, and the impotence of his own will. He had his full fling, and when he came to the end of that experience, he saw the folly of his own thinking and planning. He certainly had never expected to come to such a destination and condition as he had reached. There is nothing that one needs to remember in the early days of life more than the fact of "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." Multiplied thousands of ruined lives proclaim the fact that when people are permitted to have their own way, they discover that the exercise of their own wills to this extent brings them to disaster. That was what brought the prodigal to utter bankruptcy and want.

In the far country this young man found himself other than he was made to be. If you have ever broken a limb, you know what a painful thing it is. Likewise, a dislocated life is filled with misery; there is no joy at all in it. This young man thought he had a better way of living than at home with and in obedience to his father. He considered his will to be far superior to that of his father, that his mind was much wiser than his father's, and that to live according to his own preferences and desires would bring him far greater pleasure. So, he took his departure from his father, went into the far country, spent everything that he had, and got in return utter destitution and indescribable misery.

After having attempted to adjust himself to a life that was separated from his father; having tried to content himself on the plane of the physical with a mere animal existence; he at length discovered that there was something within him that required another kind of food, and that it would not die. How foolish he had been in exchanging the house of his father for a hog pen! Surely a man with good judgment would not have exchanged the fellowship and love of a good father for the filth of the far country. His course of sin did not have any reason in it.

In verse seventeen we read that "He came to himself." But, hadn't he been himself? That is what he went into the far country for -- to be himself. That is why he ran away from home. For at home, amid moral codes and discipline, he just could not let go and be himself. Some overly solicitous individual, or preachment, was forever standing in his way. It indeed was to release his long-imprisoned self that he "gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country."

During those months of loose living the young man was sure that he was being himself. He was doing what comes naturally. Many today would agree that he was indeed being himself. They would contend that the more a man throws off religious scruples, and gives way to his fleshly impulses, the more he is being himself.

This philosophy of life has always had, and has today, a host of advocates. In ways both blatant and subtle, we are confronted with this appeal. It is the theme of some of the best-sellers, of many motion pictures, and even of some of our psychiatric counseling. You know the line: Let yourself go; don't be fenced in; stop trying to be religious and moral; yield to your lower instinctive urges----this is the way of peace of mind and of fulfillment.

There are people all about us who look upon godliness as a kind of abnormality. They think of those who have intense spiritual loyalties, and who cling to high moral standards, as being just a little peculiar -- just a bit off balance. The spiritual antecedents of these critics said that Christ was "beside Himself," and that Paul was "mad."

Of course, the great trouble with this general point of view is that Christ Jesus does not agree with it. It is clear from His remarks about the lost son that He considered that a man is truly himself only when he is turning away from waywardness and sin to goodness and to God. According to the Master, the life which the prodigal had been living was actually an abnormal and an unnatural life. While he was "wasting his substance" in the far country, he was not being himself at all, but something else. So long as he was an alien from his father's house and supervision, he was an alien from his real self. Sin had caused him to be beside himself. Infatuated by sin, it had afflicted him with a type of insanity, robbed him of his normal reason, and made him a slave and a fool. Sin is an abnormality, a species of madness. A man who crowds God out of his life is less than normal, even though he may have acquired a number of degrees from education institutions. Many abnormal people have degrees.

Sin is itself an abnormality. The sinner is a man whose life is off-center, or eccentric. His sin involves an inversion of values, as well as the laws of order. It transposes everything: it puts enemies in the place of friends, and friends in the place of enemies; it puts darkness for light, and light for darkness; and it puts evil for good, and good for evil. The godless mind is an unbalanced mind: the sinner is a man who is not himself, his whole self, or his best self; he is beside himself. His mind is not properly adjusted. It is a subjective mind; it thinks of self; it lives for self; it has its own standards; it lives in an imaginary world of its own creation; it lacks the power to be objective. A life apart from God is dislocated, or out of its proper relation. A soul was not meant to live apart from God any more than my hand was designed to perform a given task separated from the direction of my mind.

The prodigal was not himself -- his real self or his whole self -- in what he was doing in the far country. He was expressing only the worst part of his nature. How many men are in every man? We are reasonable today, and petulant tomorrow; generous this week, and stingy the next; and sometimes we go through all these conflicting moods in one day. One of the great philosophers said, "Really, I'm a decent, kindly, lovable soul, but there is another horrid fellow with repulsive ways who sometimes gets into my clothing, uses my name and gets mistaken for me." Of course, some of you would not admit this for the world. You think that you do not have any horns, but that you do have many halos. Certainly you can see this in your neighbors and in others. There is a mixture in them, but not in you. A bad man looks like a good man sometimes -- when his baby is sick and about to die, for instance; and a good man looks like a bad one when he takes your parking place. That is human nature as we actually know it, in ourselves and in our neighbors. And that is what we find in the Bible. From Adam on, it is the story of magnificent devotion and shameful degradation. David wrote hymns for all to sing, but he did not always live as he sang. Solomon wrote proverbs of wisdom, but often chose folly for his bedfellow.

Human nature can be wonderful, and it can be truly terrible. You look at it on some days, in some people, and you see it rise to heights of unbelievable greatness. You see human nature expressed in some ways that makes you proud to belong to such a breed. You look at it on other days, in some people, and it is positively hideous. As Pascal said: "Man is an incomprehensible monster." You wonder how God can put up with him. At the close of his novel, Blood and Sand, Blasco Ibanez described a bull fight in which the bull, after being goaded into madness, turned and caught the matador on his horns, flung him into the air and gored him into bloody insensibility. As the dying matador was carried from the arena, an unearthly roar went up from the crowd, and the author said, "So we listened to the roar of the only beast there is -- humanity." The only beast there is!

Here, then, are the facts about human nature; like them or not, they are the facts. They are written in the Bible, in history, and in the experience of man. How stupid to ignore the facts, to deny the facts, or to try to twist the facts to suit a theory.

In his poverty, hunger, helplessness and despair, we find this young man began to think. No man ever found himself yet until he found his "thinker." Doubtless he thought of his father's comfortable home; of the day when he got his liberty, and how he had abused it; of the way he had squandered his money in riotous living; of the time he had wasted, and how he might have spent it to better advantage in preparation of himself for a life of usefulness; and of those who had gathered around him and praised him, but had then turned their backs on him and deserted him. While thinking of his present surroundings, he came to himself.

The key sentence is the whole story is that "He came to himself." When he came to himself, he found it to be true that adversity is frequently a blessing in disguise. Misfortune often paves the way to success. Our failures often become the stepping-stones to progress and prosperity. The dismal failure of the prodigal gave him time for reflection. Like many others, he had to be stripped and shorn before he really and fully realized what the true purpose of his life was.

When he came to himself, this young man discovered that he had been sinning against his father. When he left home he thought that his father had been sinning against him. Now, he had discovered that he had done wrong in refusing to yield to the will of his father. It is a great day in a person's life when he comes to himself and sees himself as he really is, and not as he had been thinking that he was. In the far country he found himself other than he was made to be. "He came to himself," which means that he was restored to sanity. He saw the folly of his manner of life. He had a complete change in outlook and purpose. At long last, he began to appear in his right mind. He realized what a fool he had been in exchanging the comforts of home for the hardships of the far country. He decided to go home.