

HOME AT LAST

Luke 15:20-24

In this pearl of the parables the master Artist portrayed a son who was so eager to indulge in sin, without any restraint or interference, that he despised his home and wanted to get away from it. He was exceedingly anxious to be his own boss, and to do absolutely as he pleased. The farther away from home that he could get the better he thought it would be for him. He obtained his inheritance, took his departure, went into a far country, got on a spending spree, and wasted what had been given to him by indulging in a life of sin. How often the story has been repeated in substance to the sorrow of loving parents and to the grief of a holy God! Think what injury and grief that a soul can bring to those who love him! There isn't any wound like the one which stabs the home and leaves its scar in hearts most dear.

What that father suffered while his son was living riotously in the far country, I do not know. It may be that some father who is listening to me does know. When this young man left home, evidently there wasn't any loud cry of grief. The father's wound was too deep for words.

For some time all was merry with him; money was abundant, so-called friends were numerous, and life was gay. It was not a great while until these conditions were changed -- his money, his so-called friends, and everything worthwhile were gone. He joined or glued himself to a citizen of that country, who sent him out to feed swine. He had refused to stay in his father's home, but he became a swineherd for the citizen to whom he pinned himself. He had refused his father's love, and now he had swine for his companions.

Sin had afflicted this young man with a type of insanity, robbed him of his normal reason, and made him a slave and a fool. 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.

In his poverty, hunger, helplessness, and despair, this young man began to think. He thought of his father's comfortable home, of the liberty which he had acquired and then abused, and of the way he had squandered his resources in riotous living. While thinking of his condition, circumstances, and surroundings, "he came to himself." At last he discovered that he had sinned against his father. He realized the folly of his manner of life, and what a fool he had been in exchanging the comforts of home for the hardships and hunger of the far country. So, he decided to go home.

How did this younger son develop the motivation necessary to make the decision to go home and to carry it into effect? The thing that made him "wise to himself" was the fact that he who had been so self-sufficient, who could not be wrong, and could not fail, suddenly found himself to be ragged, dirty, hungry, friendless, penniless, shelterless, and bedless. Now that the worst had happened, the beautiful fantasies of his conceited, wishful thinking evaporated. He was aware of the stark realism into which he had stumbled foolishly. He was about to understand what had happened. He knew that he was responsible for what had occurred. It is encouraging and commendable that he didn't alibi or blame someone else.

When he reached the point where he was willing to face the facts as they were, he thought clearly, and straight. He recalled the meals that were served to his father's hired ser-

vants in the days of his childhood and youth. They were wholesome, nourishing, and adequate. They satisfied hunger and gave sufficient strength for work. Instantly the contrast between the diet of his father's servants and himself shocked him. This startling recognition of the superior situation of his father's servants to his own quickly changed the prodigal's perspective. He realized that he would be many times better off as a hired servant in his father's house than where he was. He was thoroughly convinced that he must go back home and get right in his relationship with his father.

When he came to his senses and to an awareness of his wretchedness, the young man had the good judgment to turn his steps toward home. He certainly did not return with the same spirit that he had when he left on his pilgrimage into sinful living. He had a different idea of his father than he did when he took his departure from home. He also had quite a different opinion of himself. Experience is an expensive teacher, but some refuse to learn from any other, and scarcely from it.

As the prodigal thought of the home he had left in order to go into sin, and the father whom he had left in sorrow, he became quite humble. His thoughts certainly troubled him. He was ashamed of himself and of what he had done. His previous folly and stupidity had become unbelievable to him. How could he have been so foolish?

Three things troubled him very much. First, there was the embarrassment of facing the folks who had known him in his youth and were acquainted with his proudly ambitious exit from their community. What people think and say exerts a powerful influence in many of life's situations. This is especially so when one has plummeted from the heights of exceptional privilege to the depths of dishonoring want. Chief among those whom he dreaded to meet was his elder brother, who obviously thought that his kid brother lacked both common sense and good character. To face his brother was a terrible thought to contemplate.

The second center from which troubled thoughts arose to harry his homeward journey was his realization that he had hurt his father. At last it was clear to him that he had scorned his father's love. Sin's delusions had created irrepressible conflict between them, and it was all his fault. People were no different basically in those days from what they are now. It is not unusual for girls in their teens to become wiser, according to their own opinions, than their mothers. In most instances boys in their teens are smarter than their fathers, in their own estimation.

Most young people really think they have the judgment and ability to run their own lives. Lacking the experience and observation of their parents, they cannot think as their elders do. Deep within themselves they are aware of their inferiority to their parents in both observation and experience. So, they seek to compensate for their deficiencies by aggressive self-assertion. They are driven to revolt against all who are older than themselves, but their principal targets are their parents. In this realm Satan produces many tragedies.

The third and most devastating thought that troubled the prodigal on the trek home was the utter humiliation he suffered because he had lost face with himself. The pangs of the torturing pain which follow a basic loss of self-respect are agonizing. Not many have sufficient courage to face them. In every way possible they seek to escape. Even though God forgives them, they cannot forgive themselves. When self-respect is wounded, a person is in a crisis.

To get back home, the prodigal had to travel the same distance back to his father that he had traveled away from him. It is always a long way back from the far country of wrong, of shame, or of sin. Many are so frightened by the vast distance that they never start.

The prodigal's mind cleared about many things. At last he acquired the right attitude toward his father. He had considered his father an old fool; his vanity had gilded his adolescent thinking and made it look like wisdom to him. He was sure that he was the most brilliant young genius ever. But when the scales of delusion fell from his eyes, he saw his father and himself in the true light of reality. Whereas his father had been wise, he had been extremely foolish. But this revelation no longer discouraged him. Rather, it gave him strength. To be with his father, to have the benefit of his father's wisdom, the security of his father's authority, and the blessing of his father's approval — these were the things for which he was longing. The thing which he desired supremely was to square himself with his father.

The prodigal had wanted independence and self-glorification, but now he desired dependence and direction. The position of hired servant in his father's household had become a thing far more precious than all the independence he had previously desired. His father would be responsible for him and would tell him what to do. Whatever his father told him to do would be the best thing to be done. Its results would be happily satisfying. As his father's hired servant, he would be successful and have real security.

Realizing that he had wrecked his career and ruined his life, this young man had enough courage to go back home exactly as he was, with the definite purpose of speaking the hardest words in the human language, "I have sinned." Moreover, he was determined to apply for the position of a hired servant of his father, which he considered to be far better than his existing status.

As he trudged along the homeward way, he gave serious consideration to the speech which he intended to make to his father upon his arrival at home. Quite likely he trembled as he thought of the reception he might get when he approached his father. Have you ever tried going back? It is the most difficult thing in life to do honorably. The best of us find it difficult to withdraw a word we have spoken. What a comedown when we have to apologize formally! This young man, who a while ago went away with all the pomp he could muster, was now going back home. What would his boyhood pals think of him? What would his father think of him?

Meanwhile the devoted father was anxiously waiting and watching for the prodigal to return. In fact, he was far more anxious for him to come back than the boy was to return. Daily, and likely several times each day, the father gazed down the road to see if he might catch a glimpse of his boy returning home. This father had never ceased to love his son, and to long for his return. None of us know the love, the faith, and the hopes of our fathers and mothers who will not give us up, however far we wander away. Daily this father looked for the return of his son, and believed that he would come home. He also wondered where his boy was, what he was doing, and what he had become. He never forgot him, never gave up, but kept on waiting and watching for him.

Doubtless as he made his journey home, the prodigal dreaded the moment of reunion with his father, but his fears were wholly unwarranted. As he was approaching home, the father saw him in the distance, recognized him, tried to place himself in the son's position, felt as

much pity for him as the ragged, dirty, and hungry prodigal could have felt for himself, and ran down the road to meet him. That word ran is significant here. It expressed the abandonment of dignity in the longing of the father for his son. In the eyes of the people of the East, it is very undignified for an elderly man to run. Aristotle said, "Great men never run in public." But the sight of this boy coming down the dusty road was too much for his father's composure. Forgetting his dignity, and scorning all trivial social rules, he ran to meet his son.

The father threw his arms around the neck of his son and kissed him, thereby proving that reconciliation and pardon had taken place. The father did not show any trace of resentment or anger. He never bemoaned his personal unhappiness during the absence of his son. He did not display any eruption of outraged goodness. He did not speak a single word of reproof. The conscience-stricken offender did not need scolding; he needed help.

Those who are inclined to be critical would say, "It would have been better to have waited until the boy had made an acknowledgment of his wrongdoing." But it would not have been better. The father knew that his son would make confession best when his head was pillowed on his shoulder. It is hard for some to understand the eagerness of the father to forgive. Under similar circumstances some would say, "I would have let him come to the door. That would have tested his sincerity, and let him know that I do not regard his sin lightly. I would have let him knock a while before I would have answered. That would have tested his sincerity, and let him know that I do not regard his sin lightly. I would have let him knock a while before I would have answered. That would have served to deepen his repentance. If I had been too easy on him, I would have expected him to be tempted to run away again."

X. His Declaration. Verse 21

Fully aware of his terrible sins, and filled with real regret over them, the son declared, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." Conscious of his personal guilt and unworthiness, he knew that he deserved to be punished. Because of his genuine penitence, the young man was not permitted to finish the speech he had prepared and had started to deliver. The father's forgiving grace spared the son his humiliating petition to be received as a hired servant.

After his repentance, return, reconciliation, restoration, and reinstatement, the son was led into the house, and the father called his servants and told them to place a robe upon his back, a ring upon his finger, and shoes on his feet. He also commanded them to kill a fat calf and prepare a great feast for the celebration of the return of his son. From every standpoint the young man received a royal welcome, and there was great rejoicing.

There will be great rejoicing if you, who are unsaved, will acknowledge your sin, repent of it, and receive Christ as your Saviour. As long as you refuse to acknowledge that you are a sinner, to repent of your sin, and to trust Christ as your Saviour, you cannot expect to be saved, blessed, and used by the Lord. Won't you receive Him now? Won't you say with the song writer,

"I've wandered far away from God,
Now I'm coming home;
The paths of sin too long I've trod,
Lord, I'm coming home."