

The Negotiator

Luke 15:17-19

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Success often leads to pride, but have you ever considered that failure can lead to pride? Many people hit rock bottom and, rather than fall upon the mercy of God or others, continue to pridefully look for ways to get themselves out of the situation, save face, and restore their dignity. But that's not the spirit Jesus wants from sinners who realize they are at rock bottom in their sin and desire to come to Him. As He continues the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus reminds us that the posture we bring to Him matters just as much as the fact that we come at all.

Just a few months ago, the Greyhound Bus system—the largest provider of intercity bus transportation in America—marked the anniversary of a very important program they launched decades ago.

They call it “Home Free,” and that's because Greyhound offers free tickets to anywhere in the country for individuals between the ages of 12 and 21 who qualify.

Although these individuals come from all kinds of backgrounds and they are scattered around the country for all kinds of reasons, these young people all have one thing in common, one thing that qualifies them for a free ticket: they are all runaways who want to go home.

For years now, Greyhound has partnered with The National Runaway Safeline and they've been giving free tickets to prodigals who want to return home.

I have read that in the last 20 years, 18,000 runaways have been delivered back home on a Greyhound bus.

Adapted from PRNewswire.com, “Greyhound Providing Free Bus Tickets Home” (December 20, 2022)

In ***Luke's gospel at chapter 15***, Jesus is telling a story—a parable—about a runaway.

We met him in our last study where he decided he'd rather leave home with whatever cash he could pull together than stay home and wait for his father to die and receive his full inheritance.

So, he literally cashes out the value of his portion of the inheritance, more than likely at a greatly reduced rate. This is a fire sale; he doesn't care, he's tired of dreaming about life out there on his own. He wants no rules, no restrictions, no curfew, no accountability. "Just give me the cash, and I'm gone."

And with that, he leaves town.

It happened so fast that his family and his community would have been stunned and then angry; it'll take months for the gossip to settle down.

Were he living today, the prodigal's favorite song out there on the highway of freedom would have been "I Did it My Way," because he certainly did.

But look where it led him. Singing "My Way" has landed him in a pig pen.

But still, he's so defiant in his rebellion that instead of appealing to Jewish benevolence for help, which was active in the first century, instead of asking for a free ticket home, he pleads with a wealthy Gentile for a job.

And not just any Gentile: a pig raising, hog farming Gentile; a hog farmer who evidently didn't pay him enough to feed himself which reduced him to begging.

Then you have the added dilemma of a famine sweeping through this Gentile country; frankly, everybody's hungry and nobody has anything to spare, and we're told at the end of **verse 16**, where we left off our study: "**and no one gave him anything.**"

He is now abandoned by everyone, ironically, just as he had abandoned everyone earlier.

Jesus is painting the ultimate portrait of defilement and degradation and depravity and despair.

But don't miss it: Jesus isn't just describing this runaway; He's describing the path of sinners. He's describing the prodigal heart.

The apostle Paul wrote that the unbelieving world is **alienated from God the Father, with blinded hearts and without hope (Ephesians 4:18)**.

It might look like they're having a party—the time of their lives; but don't be fooled, the music and the buzz are attempts to drown out the feelings of guilt and emptiness.

Now we're not told here in this parable how long the prodigal's party lasted.

What Jesus does tell us is that the music finally stops, so to speak; the prodigal's friends have vanished, and he is now starving to death.

Adapted from John MacArthur, A Tale of Two Sons (Thomas Nelson, 2008), p. 69

This is what sin does:

- it promises, but it doesn't produce;
- it promises satisfaction, but it only increases the appetite;
- it promises happiness but only increases the hunger for more.

Now, while the prodigal is effectively trashing his life, what's his father been doing all this time? Evidently, based on the clues provided:

- He's continuing on with life;
- He's still farming and raising cattle;
- He still has a fatted calf available, which was a sign of significant wealth;
- He's still working with his older son;
- He's chosen not to chase after his prodigal son, even though the evidence suggests they know what the son is doing and more than likely where he's living;
- But even though he's not chasing after him, he has not disowned him; you can be sure he has not stopped praying for him; he has not forgotten him;
- But you can also be sure he has not gotten over the pain of his son's cruel demand which had sent a clear message: he wished his father was dead.

One author wrote of a friend who pastors a congregation in the Middle East made up of primarily converted Jewish people. One day, an older man—a doctor, respected in the church and community—came to see the pastor, and in great anguish said, “My son wants me to die.” When asked what happened, he relayed the story that his son wanted his inheritance now; he was tired of waiting for his father to die. And three months later, this father, a physician in good health, died. His wife said, “My husband actually died the night our son demanded his inheritance.”

Kenneth E. Bailey, Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes (Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), p. 162

This is exactly what the prodigal had done; it was shameful; it was heartless; it was selfish; it was cruel and defiant.

This father has every reason to disown his son, perform that Jewish ceremonial burial service, customary in that day for someone who had abandoned his family, and then never speak his name in public or private again.

But this father, even though he's been physically and emotionally and financially abandoned, is evidently keeping one ear to the ground and one eye on the horizon.

Now let's pick it up where we left off; in fact, let's get a running start at verse 14:

“And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!’”

Luke 15:14-17

In other words, he has a flash of insight, perhaps at this point he's finally sober; he's run out of options; he's filthy and hungry.

As he pours out some more slop for these happy pigs, he ***came to himself***, your translation might read, “***he came to his senses.***”

It's as if he wakes up and he says to himself; “What in the world am I doing here? These pigs have it better off than me!”

Chuck Swindoll wrote on this text; remorse for his rebellion did not move him; regret for his sinfulness did not rattle his conscience; the humiliation of tending swine did not trigger his Jewish heritage; it was the realization that pigs were enjoying a superior lifestyle to his own, which sparked this moment of clarity.

Charles R. Swindoll, [Insights on Luke](#) (Zondervan, 2012), p. 384

So, what happens next?

Often we skate through a passage and come up with, not heresy, but a superficial meaning.

Without looking at your text, let me tell you what we typically think happens next. This prodigal son ends up in the pig pen, so to speak. And there he comes to his senses and wonderfully repents. He realizes that he's sinned in so many ways, he can't wait to get back home to reconcile with his beloved father.

So, he runs home only to be met by his father, who is running toward him. They have this wonderful reunion, and the son is restored.

Now most of that is correct. But where it is incorrect—which I’m going to point out—leads us to end up giving both the prodigal and the father an equal amount of praise.

We’re impressed by the prodigal because he humbled himself to return home. Think of all he’s learned; it takes a big man to admit he was wrong, even offering to become a servant to his father.

And the father, he’s praised as well because of how he graciously responds to his son’s return home.

But that’s not what Jesus is describing here.

First of all, the word for repentance never shows up in his moment of clarity. Even though the prodigal is going to admit he’s sinned against his father, he’s not asking for restoration and reconciliation.

What he’s about to do is concoct a plan in his mind. He’s starving, he realizes the pigs are happier than he is, which leads him to work out a plan—a speech that just might soften his father’s heart, soften it enough to give him a job.

Let me tell you what’s really happening: at this point, the runaway is going to become a negotiator; he’s going to negotiate his return on his terms and according to his plans.

Look again, he says to himself in verse 18:

“I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.””

Luke 15:18b

No doubt the Pharisees picked up on the rather generic language he uses, they wouldn’t have been impressed at all. They might realize that Jesus is quoting Pharaoh, who used the same expression after the 8th plague when he said to Moses, “I have sinned against God and against you.” (***Exodus 10:16***)

David E. Garland, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 627

All he’s saying is what he knows Moses wants to hear him say in order to stop the plague of locusts and all the trouble that’s come upon Egypt.

This is the same expression from the prodigal.

He’s saying what he knows his father wants to hear.

Look again at what this young man is saying to himself as he works on this speech; ***go back to verse 17:***

“How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.””

Luke 15:17b-19a

By the way, all of that is simply stating the facts. He did sin and he has indeed legally forfeited the right of sonship.

But he’s only rather generically admitting his sin and the fact that he’s lost his status; but here’s where he’s going, “Father, should I starve to death and be without any hope for the future?”

One author wrote, He’s merely trying to “get sympathy from his father.”

Ibid, p. 626

It might be helpful to understand what’s missing in his speech.

By the way, before I do that, maybe as a parent you’re doing what we used to do when our children needed to apologize to their brother or sister.

They would typically say, “I’m sorry.” And we’d ask them, “What are you sorry about?” “Well, I’m sorry for doing that?” “For doing what?” And we’d make them spell it out.

We all know that the sinful heart wants to sidestep genuine confession by admitting *to as little as possible and generalizing as much as possible.*”

In this prodigal’s speech he’s working on out there in the pig pen:

- he’s not planning to confess any remorse for the shame he’s brought on his family;
- he’s not going to mention any of the pain he’s caused his father;
- he’s not going to mention the selfishness and heartlessness of his demand while the father was still living;
- he’s not going to voice any regret that he lost all the money in wickedness and immorality;
- and above all, did you notice: he’s not even asking for forgiveness.

It’s as generic as: “Hey, Dad I did some bad things; I’m disinherited now, so here’s what I want you to do for me now.”

And we know that because of where he's going with his request, this is where he's heading in his negotiation; here's the real desire in his heart in the last part of **verse 19**:

““Treat me as one of your hired servants.””

Luke 15:19b

And you might think, but wait, this sounds like is true humility to me; he wants to become a servant and do whatever menial tasks his father assigns him, so long as he can get something to eat.

You might circle the word **“hired”** in your text. It appears in **verse 17** in reference to his father's **hired servants**; it appears again in **verse 19**, where he plans to ask his father to **make him one of his hired servants**.

The word is not the typical word for servant or slave, because they weren't hired; this is referring to hired servants, the word for servant refers to hired craftsmen.

You might write into the margin of your Bible the words “skilled craftsmen.”

These were villagers who were skilled in their trade, who worked on the father's estate and were paid a salary for what they did.

The same word form is used by the apostle Paul in reference to paying elders a **double salary for faithful preaching (1 Timothy 5:17)**.

So, if you strip away the platitudes and manipulation, this young man is basically making another demand: “Look, that pig farmer didn't pay me enough to eat and I'm worth more than that, so put me on your payroll.”

In fact, his words here in **verse 19 betray that attitude, notice he says:**

““Treat me as one of your hired servants.””

Luke 15:19b

He's not even asking! Do this for me.

Treat me can be understood to mean “fashion me, produce of me, make this out of me”; in other words, “make me a skilled craftsman.”

Some historians believe he's implying that his father pay for an apprenticeship so that he can learn a new trade.

Listen, his negotiation speech is nothing all that different than his earlier demand in verse 12: “Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.”

And now, he not interested in restoring his relationship with his father; he's attempting to negotiate his father's influence and money to start him on a new career.

Now we know from biblical history that skilled craftsmen did not live on the estate where they worked; they had no personal connection with the owner of the estate; they typically lived in a nearby village.

Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross & the Prodigal* (IVP Books, 2005), p. 61

Kenneth Bailey, who spent his life teaching in the Middle East, spent decades studying the culture surrounding the Scriptures; in fact, he wrote an entire commentary on this parable. Bailey wrote that according to the custom of this generation, the prodigal was asking the father to set him up to earn his own income, while he lived in the village, apart from his father and family; there he could maintain his pride and regain his independence; and as a hired craftsman, he would be able to pay back the money he lost. In other words, he has crafted a plan to save himself.

Bailey, *Poet and Peasant*, p. 177

This wasn't repentance or reconciliation, this was a resolution; he says to himself here in verse 18: "I will arise, I will go, I will say to my father." In other words, *I will negotiate a settlement that will suit my needs on my terms.*

You see, the prodigal is still thinking that this is about the money.

And if he can get back to civilization, get back to a decent lifestyle and a good paying job, he can pay his father back. Who knows, he can earn his way back into his father's good standing with his head held high.

That isn't salvation. That's religion. That's the life of a Pharisee.

Jesus is delivering the news that heaven doesn't rejoice because a sinner figures out a way to pay God back, to put his life back together. Heaven rejoices over every sinner who repents.

Sinners who recognize they'll never put their life back together. They have nothing to offer God but dirt and grime and filth and corruption. Broken pieces.

Jesus isn't giving this parable to highlight the prodigal's repentance; He's giving this parable to highlight the Father's forgiveness; the spotlight isn't on the prodigal's guilt; the spotlight is on the Father's grace.

We're not being led by Jesus here to say, "What a guy" but "What a God!"

This won't be until he traveled home and witnessed the actions of his father that he shortens his speech; he never does get out of his mouth the words, "Give me a paying job." He stops where he should stop.

He realizes he has nothing to offer his father after all but look what his father is offering to him.

That, beloved, is salvation.

So here he comes; he might not be riding a greyhound, he might be riding a gray mule, maybe he's too poor for even that now. Most likely, he'd be walking the entire way home, covered with gray dust and dirt.

He's going home with a plan to save face; he's going home for food, he's going for financial help; but he's about to discover the unlimited treasure of his father's forgiveness.

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