

This morning, let's continue our discussion of the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This is one of the most familiar passages in the New Testament. It has been called the "gospel in the gospel" because it contains a summary of the Good News which Jesus Christ came to proclaim by His life and His teachings. This chapter gives us three wonderful parables on Jesus' concern for the "lost." These are the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the Prodigal Son. Last Sunday we discussed the Parable of the Lost Sheep. This morning, let's look at the third parable, the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Have you ever been in a situation that changed your life or at least your attitude towards life? Sometimes one event, one situation can change things forever. For example, most of you know by now that I am an avid football fan of Clemson University. In 2012, Clemson lost to West Virginia in the Orange Bowl, as a matter of fact as we say back home, they got taken to the wood shed; lost 70-33. Now the game was close up to the second quarter, but one play changed the outcome of the whole game – one lousy play!

Clemson was driving for a go ahead touchdown. They had the ball on the one yard line of West Virginia. Our quarterback handed the ball off to our star running back, and it appeared that he had crossed the goal line and scored a touchdown. But in reality, he had fumbled and a West Virginia player was headed the other way for 99 yards to score a touchdown for them. Talk about a change in momentum; West Virginia's offense caught fire and we could not stop them. Clemson's players got discouraged and made mistake after mistake. One play changed the whole game.

Unfortunately, this also happens in life. The Bible is full of stories of one event changing the life of an individual, such as Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Life; Esau selling his birthright to his younger brother Jacob for a bowl of soup; David defeating Goliath; Jonah in the belly of the big fish; and Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus.

Jesus told a story about how one decision changed the life of one young man in the 15<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Gospel of Luke, verses 11 through 24. This story has been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Parable of the Lost Son, and the Parable of a Father's Love. Let's see what this story has to tell us about making decisions in life.

Read Luke 15:11-24

This is truly one of the best of all short stories ever written in either the Bible or all literature. While the title of the story focuses on the youngest son, the main character is the waiting father who yearned for the return of his wayward child. The story begins with the younger son coming to his father and demanding his share of the inheritance. Like many young people, he

couldn't wait to leave home and be on his own, and get away from his father's authority. A lot of young folks live under the false assumption that once they leave home with all its rules and restrictions then life will be a lot better and easier. Mark Twain once said: "When I was fourteen, my father was so dumb that I could hardly stand to be around the old man. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in just seven years."

The younger son shows total disrespect for his father by asking for his share of the inheritance before his father's death. Despite all this, out of love, the father still gave his son the freedom to choose how he would handle his inheritance. Under Jewish tradition, a less loving father could have had his son stoned to death for such a rebellious attitude. However, real love allows freedom while false love fosters dependence. The young man collects all his belongings and heads for a far country; in other words, he tries to put as much distance as possible between himself and his father's authority. In the far country, he lived it up, wasting all his money on wine, women, and song until he was broke. Like many people, both young and old, who suddenly come into a large sum of money, he spent it all as if there was no tomorrow.

Of course, once his money ran out so did his so-called friends, and more importantly, his food. So, he had to go to work for a local farmer tending his pigs, which for a Jewish lad had to be the worst of all possible jobs since pigs were considered unclean in the Jewish faith. As a matter of fact, the Jewish law stated: "Cursed is he who feeds swine." Now the young man got so hungry that he even considered eating the pigs' slop. And if you have ever slopped pigs, you know how disgusting this can be. To emphasize how lonely and depressing his situation was, Jesus tells us that "no one gave him anything."

In verse 17, the young man had one of those life changing moments that we have all experienced at one time or another. We are told that "he came to his senses." Don't you love that statement; in the mire of the pigpen, "he came to his senses;" in other words, "he saw the light!" He realizes how hopeless his situation was. How many of us have been in a similar situation and come to our senses realizing how helpless we are without God, and that the only way to happiness is to return to our Heavenly Father? No longer deserving to be called his father's son, the young man resolves to leave the far country and return to his father.

The turning point in this young man's life was when he decided to return to his father, to go home. He was not seeking financial assistance; his selfishness was gone. He realized that he had sinned against both God and his father. On his way home, the younger son rehearsed his speech which consisted of four parts: an address – "Father;" a confession – "I have sinned;" a regret – "I am no longer worthy;" and finally a petition – "treat me like one of your hired hands."

The journey home begins with the young man coming to his senses and ends with him going back to his father. This is really an act of repentance. Someone once said: "Repentance means learning to say 'Abba' – Father again, putting one's total trust in the Heavenly Father, returning to the Father's house and to the arms of the Father." This act of returning is an expression of love, for love is the power that reunites the separated.

Now the story shifts to the waiting father. No other image has come closer to describing the loving character of God than the waiting father, peering down the dusty road every day longing for the return of his wayward son, then springing to his feet and running to embrace him. In ancient Israel, it was considered unbecoming – a loss of dignity – for a grown man to run. Yet this father filled with love and compassion set aside all concern for what was proper and ran as fast as he could to his long lost son, showing how much he had been longing for his return.

The boy jumped right into his prepared speech, but before he could get to the part where he wants to return as a servant, his father interrupted him, giving instructions to his servants to bring him the best robe, which represented honor; a ring, which represented power and authority; and sandals, which signified that he was his son and not a servant. By these acts the father publicly announced to the community that he had welcomed his son back home. The father's words summed up the significance of the occasion: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is now found." The relationship with the father had been restored, for the father's love for his child had been there all along!

Now let's focus on the two main characters of this story – the son and his father. The son as the result of several bad decisions finds himself in the pigpen up to his elbows in slop. I don't know if you have ever been in a pigpen, but it is not a good place to be. It can be disgusting, dirty, muddy, not to mention the smell. It can almost make you a vegetarian. That's why when I was growing up, our pigpen was downwind from the house. The Jews considered pigs unclean for good reason.

But as the young man sat there, he "came to his senses." He remembered home where he was loved and cared for. The pigpen had washed away all his pride and arrogance; and as we all know from experience, life has a way of doing that at times. Home never looks as good as when it is remembered from a far country. He realized that his hope, his refuge, and his well-being were found in returning home to his father. By now, you realize that the father in this parable is really God, and that we are the wayward child, the prodigal son or daughter.

As we have all learned from experience, our decisions, actions, and words have consequences that we must live with. And when we are in the pigpen or the doghouse, or up to our elbows in alligators, how we respond will directly impact our life, our well-being, and our future. As I noted earlier, one play destroyed the morale and desire to win for my Clemson team. The

coaches and leaders could not inspire or rekindle the enthusiasm of the players. They were defeated long before the game was over. They had the wrong attitude; they had no motivation or hope. And a lot of times in our daily lives we let one situation, one conversation, one word, or one event steal our hope, enthusiasm, and desire to live.

Every situation in life has two handles; we can take hold of it with the handle of defeat or the handle of faith in God. Each of us has a choice of how we react to the events of everyday life. Chuck Swindoll once noted that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it. Probably the most significant decision we can make each day is our choice of attitude. It is more important than our past, our education, our bank account, our successes or failures, or our job. Attitude either keeps us going or cripples our progress. When our attitude is right, there's no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for us.

High in the Canadian Rockies is a rushing stream called Divide Creek. At one point in its course, the water reaches a large boulder. The water which travels to the right of the boulder rushes down the Kicking Horse River and finally into the Pacific Ocean. The water which travels to the left of the boulder makes its way into the Bow River which empties into two more rivers before reaching the Atlantic Ocean. Once the water divides at that boulder, its ultimate destiny is decided. All of us face decisions daily that will impact our lives. The key is whether we will "come to our senses" and rely on the Lord and walk in faith or will we be like the Prodigal Son and try to make it on our own.

Billy Graham tells about the time that someone gave his son a dollar. The boy brought it to Billy and asked him to keep it for him. But in a few minutes, he came back and said: "Daddy, I had better keep my own dollar." He tucked it in his pocket and went out to play. However, a little later he came back with tears in his eyes, saying: "Daddy, I lost my dollar. Help me find it." How often do we commit our burdens to the Lord and then fail to trust Him by taking matters into our own hands. Then, when we have messed things up, we pray: "Oh, Lord, help me. I'm in trouble."

Just as the Prodigal Son was given a Second Chance, the Bible is full of stories of God giving ordinary men and women just like you and me a second chance at life – Jonah, David, Paul and countless others. There are three key points in all of these stories. First, God is patient, and oh, how some of us try His patience! He is always there waiting for us to come to our senses, to reach out to Him and to accept His love and grace that He freely gives to all. Second, God is forgiving. We need only go to Him and confess our need for help or our sin, and He will cleanse and heal us. And finally, God will renew and strengthen us for the days and tasks ahead.

Listen to one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible from Isaiah 40:29-31: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired and weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint."

As I have said before, the Bible is full of stories like this; where somebody makes a bad decision, says, or does something wrong. In all of these stories, there is a key point; God is always there waiting for us "to come to our senses like the Prodigal Son." Bad decisions are made every day; we receive bad news; things happen to us, but remember God is always there, sitting on the porch, waiting to give us a second chance. The decision is left up to us; do we let one event, one play steal our happiness or do we turn to God and let Him renew us on wings of eagle as Isaiah said? We come to our senses when we hit rock bottom and realize that God is the real source of our hope and recovery from the bad decisions and unfortunate situations in life. May we all come to our senses and return to the Father! Amen