

Bethel

Pulpit

The Prodigal's Welcome

Sermon Number 490

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 27th November, 2016**

Text: *“And he began to be in want” (Luke 15. 14).*

This is one of the best-known passages in the whole Word of God. We have the lost sheep, and then the lost coin, and then the lost son, and through mercy all of them were found. The Lord began to teach this after people had complained, “This Man receiveth sinners.” Well, He does, and He graciously explained it. He delights to receive sinners.

“Sinners are freely welcome still
To Christ, the sinner's Friend.”

This third parable is usually known as the parable of the prodigal son. It is one of the parables of the Lord Jesus. When we were children at day school, when we were very small, we were taught this: a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. That is not a bad description: an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Of course, there are many of these parables that the Lord Jesus taught: the pearl of great price, the treasure that was hidden, the good fish and the bad fish, the good Samaritan – so we might go on and on.

Now beloved friends, I do not find it easy to speak from the parables. I have pondered the parables for many, many years, and one thing I am sure of is this: that there is one vital point taught in the parable, and that is the point that should concern us. How much harm has been done when people try to make every detail mean something. For instance, this parable of the prodigal son. The Arminians say, Well, the father did not go to meet him till he had come halfway back himself. The Socinians, who deny the Godhead of Christ and His atoning work, say, Well, the prodigal did not need any mediator. He did not need any precious blood. He went straight back to the father and the father did it just by an act of his kindness. So you can go on and on – the false interpretations when people mishandle a parable. And not to weary you on this subject – though I do think it important for those of you who read the Word of God and study the Word of God, but not to weary you – one of the most terrible was the use that was made by the Roman Catholic church in persecution and also by the Church

of England in persecuting the Puritans, in the parable of the marriage feast, “Compel them to come in” – the ground for religious persecution of those who turned away from the Established Church.

So leaving all that, in each parable there is one vital lesson. Mind you, bits and pieces here and there are important to bring out the meaning of the parable, and it is clear that here and there we can see some beautiful truth. Some of you have loved to sing of that “ring that denotes His unchangeable love,” but so long as you do not build a doctrine on it.

Now what is the vital truth of this parable? The loving welcome that a gracious God gives to a returning sinner, the gracious welcome that the Lord give to a returning sinner.

“Returning prodigals shall find,
Though they are base, their Father’s kind.”

So bringing this subject before you of the prodigal son, very simply I want to bring before you four things, to speak of four things. First, the want; second, the realisation of it; third, the resolve and the return; and fourth, the loving welcome.

So *the want*. “He began to be in want.” That is where most real religion begins. Now I do say *most real religion*, because sometimes harm has been caused by setting down such a rigid order of experience. Now there will be certain things which must be known, which will be known by divine teaching, but there have been some people and the first thing they ever knew: they were aroused with a sense of the Lord’s wonderful love to them. But all these other things came in. They felt what unworthy sinners they were. They felt the value of the love, how they needed it, how they needed a Saviour.

But usually when the new birth begins, when the work of grace takes place, or if you want to put it like this, when a sinner is savingly converted from death to life, it is this: they begin to be in want. There is a divine change. There is something happening. They cannot be satisfied as they once were. There is something they need. Sometimes they are not sure what is happening. They certainly could not write it down and say, This is the work of grace; this is the new birth. But they know there has been a change. They can say, “One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see.” And it is this: they begin to *be* in want and they begin to *feel* their

want. They cannot really be happy. They cannot really be satisfied. The things they once loved, they do not attract them any more. The things that once delighted them, they do not delight them any longer. So it was with the poor prodigal. That was the real beginning of his gracious concern. "He began to be in want."

"A certain man had two sons: and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living." So the prodigal son was not in want then. He was not disturbed. He was happy. He was content. He had all that he wanted. He had all that his father could give. He had to prove when he was awakened,

"These can never satisfy;
Give me Christ, or else I die."

"He divided unto them his living." He had everything. He had the world before him. He had wealth; he had happiness; he had friends. And he thought that he had attained; he thought that he had arrived. That is you and me by nature in a greater or lesser sense. We are satisfied with our little lives. We are happy with what we have. It is earthly things. With some it is more evil things; with others it is more lawful things; but we are satisfied with them. The prodigal thought he had a wonderful tomorrow before him. He thought he had a wonderful future before him, prosperity. He thought he was a happy man. He had to learn that lesson:

"Learning, pleasure, wealth, and fame,
All cry out, 'It is not here.'"

He had to be brought to be in want.

When we were young we had our things, our pleasures, our concerns, and we were happy, and we were a bit like the famous Augustine. We did want to be right for eternity, but, "Not yet, Lord; not yet." I wonder if some of you young ones are there. You know what we preach is true; you cannot deny it. You feel it in your concerns. You know one day you must die, and that you need to be born again. You know it is the one thing needful. But in your heart of hearts, it is, "Not yet, Lord." I will wait till I am older. But, "Sometimes short's the warning." How many who have begun like that, when they have come to older age, their conscience is seared. A man not too long ago said he so knew the doctrines of grace, he

so knew what the working of the Spirit of God was, that he could make himself right for heaven in five minutes. He dropped dead reading his Sunday newspaper. He never had his five minutes.

O but this prodigal son, he is the happiest man on earth – so he thinks. In one sense he is the unhappiest man on earth. He saw what was in his father's house. He despised it. "He divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country." He wanted to get away from his religion. He wanted to get away from his father's house, and he did get away, and he was going to be wonderfully satisfied there, but he was not. He journeyed "into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living." It was soon gone. We read of it in the Book of Proverbs, just like that flickering candle, but it soon goes snap out (Prov. 24. 20). It was soon gone.

"And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want." His pleasure had come to an end. "And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him." What had happened to all his wonderful friends he had had, all this happiness, these parties, this riotous living? Where are they now when he is in trouble, and he has spent all? They are no longer his friends.

"He began to be in want." "No man gave unto him." "He would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat." If the Lord is dealing with you, you young ones, you older ones, in love and mercy, all these pleasures of the world, you will find them no better than the husks that the swine did eat. "He began to be in want." Well, perhaps at first he did not know what he wanted. Perhaps at first he was sad. Perhaps he thought he had to do something better. Perhaps he thought his friends would come back. But "he began to be in want." That is the place that the Lord brings a sinner whom He has determined to save. He cannot be satisfied with himself. He cannot be satisfied with anything in the world. He cannot be satisfied even with the best the world can give.

Now then, what about those of you here who have never begun yet to feel that you are in want? Now all I can say is to warn you and say how solemn is your condition. Your great need is to repent. "Thine's alas! a lost condition," and only the Lord can awaken you out of it. Now may He do so

in love and mercy. We are in want, whether we feel it or not. We want a Saviour. We want forgiveness. We want to be right. We want to be ready. We are sinners. We are just like the prodigal. We have that in us: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” That is what the prodigal did. He turned to his own way.

Now perhaps some of you young ones are saying, Why do we call him the *prodigal*? When I was small, I found it hard to pronounce. I thought, Whatever does *prodigal* mean? It just means someone who is careless and unconcerned and wasting his living. The prodigal son. And we are all these prodigal sons by nature. But this was grace. You know what it is. Cowper was accounted one of the greatest poets. He wrote some wonderful things. But he never wrote a truer thing than this feelingly:

“But now I find an aching void
The world can never fill.”

That is what the poor prodigal had. He had an aching void the world can never fill. There was something empty inside him. Well, literally he was dying through hunger. He was perishing through hunger.

“And he began to be in want.” Now it is *the realisation* of it. He was awakened. He came to the realisation of it. He was brought to think about the condition he was in. We do not have this realisation by nature. We know we are dying sinners. We know there is a judgment day appointed, and really even when we begin to feel we are in want, there is not the full realisation of it. Then you see, through the mercy of God, the realisation came upon him, and he saw the foolishness of his ways. He realised that. His eyes were opened to see it. He realised, to use his own word, that he was perishing. He realised that, and he realised that he could do no good in this far country. He realised that. He realised that all these things were only the husks that the swine did eat. He realised they could not satisfy his hunger. He knew he was lost in a foreign land.

But there was another realisation. “When he came to himself.” That is the work of the Spirit of God. That is a realisation – may you have it, may I have it – there was “bread enough and to spare” in his father’s house. That is a wonderful revelation to those who are perishing through hunger, those who are brought to feel how great their want, how great their need. There is “bread enough and to spare” in the Father’s house. This is the glory of the gospel. This is the gospel’s full provision. And in one word

it is this: it can satisfy. It can do all that the needy sinner requires. “Bread enough and to spare” in the father’s house, “and I perish with hunger!” O the two opposites – a poor, perishing sinner and a rich, almighty Saviour, a willing, almighty Saviour!

So we come to *the resolve*: “I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.” There were two things in this resolve. One was, there was something that drove him, and that was a realisation of his great want, that he was perishing through hunger. There is something that drives the sinner, but then there was something that drew him, something that attracted him, and that was the wonderful plenty in the father’s house.

So that resolve: “I will arise.” It is a solemn thing when people make resolves – graciously, I mean – and they never walk them out. Now do beware of that. Perhaps not so much in salvation, but how many have resolved that if the Lord ever blesses them, they will go and tell the Lord’s people and be baptized, and they have never walked out that resolve. Watch it if you do not walk out that resolve. That beautiful hymn that used to be so popular, *The Resolve*:

“I can but perish if I go;
I am resolved to try;
For, if I stay away, I know
I must for ever die.
“But if I die, with mercy sought,
When I the King have tried,
This were to die (delightful thought!)
As sinner never died.”

O the sinner’s resolve!

And then this *returning*. You see what real repentance is. Real repentance is not just being sorry. It is not just the realisation you are in want. But it is that returning. And he returned on mercy’s ground. He had no hope at all apart from the ground of mercy. He felt he was completely undeserving. He had that great sense of his complete unworthiness. He said, “I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.” That was the resolve and that was the return under a complete sense of unworthiness.

"Not worthy, Lord, we must confess,
That we of children's bread should taste,
Yet, trusting in Thy righteousness,
We venture to the gospel feast."

So you see him venturing, a sinner feeling his unworthiness, feeling his want, feeling his hunger, but believing that there is bread enough and to spare in the father's house. That great question of Genesis 24: "Tell me, I pray thee: is there room in thy father's house" for me? What a question!

"Lord, in Thy house I read there's room,
And, venturing hard, behold I come;
But can there, tell me, can there be
Amongst Thy children room for me?"

Of course, some of you have had to speak that language concerning the gospel church here on earth. "Tell me, I pray thee: is there room" for such an one as me? And then, "Come in, thou blessed of the Lord." That is what the prodigal found. O but, "Tell me, I pray thee: is there room" for one so sinful, one so unworthy? Is there room in the Father's house for me? What a beautiful word it is – *the Father's house!* The Lord Jesus took up the very same term. He said, "In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also."

And then finally, you see *the loving welcome*. There is the want, and the realisation, and the resolve, and then that loving welcome. This is all of grace from first to last. It is a loving welcome into the Father's house on earth, and then at last, a loving welcome into the Father's house above. We cannot help lovingly, sadly, feelingly, thinking of dear John Stevens [an aged church member who had recently passed away], now received into the Father's house above for ever.

"Through mercy we taste the invisible feast,
The bread of the kingdom, the wine of the blest!
Who grants us to know His drawings below
Will endless salvation and glory bestow."

The loving welcome!

Have you ever noticed the difference between what the prodigal said he was going to say, and what he actually did say? He said, "I will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." But when you read it, when he arrived, he said, "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." But he never got as far as saying, "Make me one of thy hired servants." Do you know the reason why? Because his father interrupted him immediately. "The father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry." If the son was so happy with that loving welcome, all of grace, which he received, it seemed that his dear father was more happy.

But you have it right through Scripture, that loving welcome. You do not hear that the father said one word of rebuke, one word about all the things he had done, one word about all the way he had been treated. It was mercy, forgiveness, grace, salvation, heaven. O the wonders of free grace in that loving welcome, that –

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To Christ, the sinner's Friend."

I think you know the little story about the poor widow woman. She had a son and she loved him so dearly, but he treated her disgracefully. He left home, and his behaviour was awful. She never heard anything about him for years. He was a cause of sorrow to her, and she prayed for her prodigal son. One day she received a message. He was sorry. He was coming home. He would love to see his mother again. But after the dreadful way he had behaved, was it possible that she would even be willing to see him, let alone forgive him? He said at a certain time his train would be going past the house where she lived, and would she put a white handkerchief out on the line if he was welcome. You know the end of the story. There was every handkerchief in the house, there were even sheets and blankets! There was everything there! She was overwhelmed. She could not welcome him enough.

This is really what salvation is. So we have the want, and the realisation of it, and the resolve, and then that loving welcome, and then life eternal.