

THE PRODIGAL SON

Luke 15

This lesson follows easily upon the lesson of the great supper. Simply review the parable as a preparation for this lesson.

Doctrinal Points

The Lord always is ready to forgive.

The truths of the Word are our spiritual riches.

As we lose truth, we lose our faith.

When we are unforgiving toward others, the Lord's forgiveness cannot reach us.

Notes for Parents

The lesson in our chapter for today is a very beautiful one of the Lord's love and forgiveness. The scribes and Pharisees had found fault with Him because He received publicans and sinners. A publican was a Jew who collected taxes for the Roman conquerors; so the Pharisees despised him. In another place the Lord told the Pharisees: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick."

In our chapter the Lord answered His enemies with three parables. They all teach the same lesson, but each in a different way. Every one of us starts out in life with a "flock of sheep," that is, the innocent, trustful, loving states of a little child; but as we get a little older and our natural selfishness begins to assert itself, we are liable to let these heavenly feelings slip away from us one by one. Each one may become a "lost sheep." And when we are still children, each one of us acquires "ten pieces of silver," that is, truths which teach us what is right and wrong, especially the ten commandments. But again, when we find that one of the commandments forbids something we want very much to do, we hide

the commandment away in the back of our mind. We let the dust of worldly reasoning cover it up. We have lost one of our bright “silver coins.”

Finally, when we grow up, we want to take the talents and faculties which our heavenly Father has given us and use them to get as much pleasure as possible for ourselves. So we may leave our heavenly Father’s home and go far away from Him where we may have our own way. We may even fall as low as the prodigal son did, and live for the satisfaction of our physical desires, which in symbol language are called “swine,” and feed on “husks,” the kind of thoughts which these lowest desires enjoy. But our heavenly Father has not really left us. Deep down inside somewhere we have a memory of Him and of the safe, happy home where we lived in our childhood. The Lord lives in that memory and is always trying to awaken it.

The chapter says of the prodigal son, “And when he came to himself . . .” To imagine that we can do without the Lord and win happiness by following our own selfish way is insanity. We “come to ourselves” when we realize this. But we have to do something about it. The prodigal son did not lie there among the swine and wish for his father to come and take care of him again. He arose and went back step by step over the long road home, wanting only to be a servant where he had once been served. We sometimes forget this part of the parable. The Lord is always ready to forgive, but we must go back to Him. We must change our bad habits, our bad thoughts, our selfish feelings, and get back into a state in which we behave like a child of God.

Primary

Emphasize our need of acknowledging our faults, being sorry, and trying to do better. Again the little ones can be introduced to some of the spiritual meaning. Stress the difference between the father and the elder son in the parable.

What fault in the Pharisees did the Lord rebuke in the parable of the great supper?

Whom did the man in that parable first invite to his table?

Why did they not come?

Whom did he invite then?

What does this parable teach us?

The Pharisees would not learn this lesson. They still thought they were better than anyone else. So when they were hunting for faults in the Lord, they said He received sinners and ate with them. And then the Lord tried to show them that the sinners who were sorry for their misdeeds and wanted to do better pleased Him more than all the people who thought they were so good that they did not need to learn anything from Him. He told them three parables.

In the third parable what did the younger son do?

What happened to him?

What did he decide to do?

How did his father receive him?

How did the elder son feel?

You see, the older brother in the parable was like the Pharisees. The younger son was like every one of us, because we all do wrong things. And the father in the parable was like the Lord, who is always ready to forgive us when we acknowledge our faults and try to do better.

Junior

The Juniors can easily understand the general lesson of the three parables in this chapter. The teacher may suggest ways in which they in their school and play environment may be tempted to behave like the Pharisees, and also ways in which they themselves may be like the prodigal son. The emphasis should be on the necessity of recognizing our spiritual condition and retracing our steps before the Lord's forgiveness can come to us.

Who were the Pharisees?

What was their great fault?

How did they regard other people?

In our last lesson what parable did the Lord tell them?

Who were first invited to the supper?

Why did they not come?

Who did eat the supper?

There are three parables in our lesson for today.

What is similar about all three?

In the first parable what was lost?

What was lost in the second?

What was lost in the third?

The Lord spoke these three parables to the scribes and Pharisees. Read the first two verses of the chapter. The publicans were those who collected taxes from the Jews—their own people—for the Roman rulers; so they were despised by their fellow men. The apostle Matthew had been a publican (Matthew 9:9). The scribes, or the more learned ones who were called lawyers, were those who studied, copied, and taught the Old Testament Scriptures and all the additional regulations which their leaders had made up. They despised the Samaritans and all people of other nations. But the publicans and often the “sinners” were their own people. The scribes and Pharisees looked down upon them also, but only because they were not just like themselves. We know that today there are people of many different nations in our own country—people with different colors of skin, different religions, different customs—and that people are brought up with many different ideas of what is right and wrong, and that people also differ in the degree to which they live up to what they believe to be right. Because we are all naturally selfish, it is easy for us to take it for granted that we are right and that everyone who is different from us must have something wrong with him. It is hard for us to change this feeling even after we have learned better, but we must try hard to make this change, and even when thought and reason and experience have proved to us that in any particular matter we really are right and the other person wrong, we must not think of ourselves as better than he. We are like the scribes and Pharisees when we draw back from someone who has done wrong, and will not forgive him or help him to do better.

This is not the way in which the Lord treats us. The Lord sees to it that each of us has from babyhood an inheritance from Him which makes it possible for us, if we choose, to see and overcome

little by little the selfish thoughts and feelings which are natural to us. If we lose one of these good feelings that He has given us to keep—as the one sheep wandered away from the flock—He tries to help us find it and bring it back. If we forget some truth we have been taught, He helps us to search our minds until it comes to light again; this is symbolized by the piece of silver that was lost. And we may even do worse than this. We may do so many wrong things that we get very far away from the good life we ought to live. Then we are like the prodigal son in the third parable.

Prodigal means “wasteful.” The inheritance which the son wasted pictures all our talents and opportunities which our heavenly Father gives us freely. When we want to do as we please with our lives, we are like the prodigal son leaving his father and going to a far country and wasting his inheritance. We may even get to as low a state as he did. We know what we mean when we say certain people live like pigs. But if we recognize how wrong we have been, and turn back ready to serve the Lord, He will forgive us and restore us to our true place as His children.

What complaint did the elder brother make?

What did his father tell him?

The elder brother lived an outwardly good life, but he was hard and unforgiving like the scribes and Pharisees. Read what the Lord said about them in Matthew 23:23.

Intermediate

The correspondences in the three parables will interest this class. In addition to those given in the pupils' notes, point out that it is the man—representing the intellect—which suffers the loss when the sheep is missing, and the woman—representing the affections—who has lost the coin. Tie this in with the third excuse in the last lesson and remind them of the meaning of the widow in the story of the widow of Nain. The teacher should have appropriate illustrations to give of all three kinds of loss.

The general lesson taught in all three of the parables in our lesson for today is that no matter how far one may wander from the

Lord, if he sincerely repents and turns to the Lord for help, the Lord will forgive, restore, and bless him. They also teach that, far from despising and turning from those who do wrong, we should seek them out with loving effort to restore and help them.

The three parables picture how we may go astray on one or another of the three planes of life: will, thought, and act. The lost sheep pictures one of our good affections, such as the innocent trust we had when we were little. Without it our whole flock of affections must wander in the wilderness without a leader. For this innocent trust is the very heart of all goodness. This is what the Lord means when He says: “Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”

The ten pieces of silver stand for the truths which the Lord has given us to guide our lives, especially the ten commandments. If we lose one, if we drift into neglect of any one of them, the loss is felt through every part of our life. The “house” we must “sweep” is our character, overlaid with the dust of worldly ideas and practices, and the “candle”—or more correctly the “lamp”—which gives us light for our search is the Word. “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”

The prodigal or wasteful son is the person who does not want to be directed by the Lord in his actions. He takes his “inheritance”—all his talents and opportunities—and goes into a “far country”—a state of life far from the Lord—and wastes his substance in riotous living. Such a life leads directly to “feeding swine,” that is, to indulgence in gross sensual evils, which is the same as living like an animal. It is really insanity, for the thing which distinguishes man from animals is his possession of a spiritual nature capable of knowing and loving the Lord. So the parable says, “And when he came to himself, he said . . . I will arise and go to my father.” No matter how low we have fallen, when we “come to ourselves” and, lifting up our thoughts to the Lord, go back to Him with sincere and humble repentance, we shall find Him coming out to meet us more than halfway. Only the elder brother, who is a picture of the self-righteous Pharisees, fails to rejoice in the restoration of the

repentant sinner.

Verse 10 troubles some people because they think it implies that it is better to sin and repent than not to sin at all, but this, of course, is not true. The Lord's attitude toward the people who do right is shown in the father's words to his elder son: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine." Only we must guard against self-righteousness and hardness of heart.

Basic Correspondences

- lost coin = a lost truth
 - our inheritance = all our abilities and opportunities
 - swine = affections for sensual things
 - lost sheep = a lost good affection
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Senior

Stress the difference between evil and sin and the three planes in which spiritual loss may be suffered. Deal more fully with the third parable, pointing out that the cause of the prodigal son's disaster was his desire to go his own way. The teacher may know of particular books, movies or television shows which the young people have seen which may be pointed to as "husks," lacking in spiritual nourishment. Speak of the elder son and tie him in with the first two verses of the chapter.

The three parables in our lesson for today form a wonderful series. The scribes and Pharisees, in their pride and self-righteousness, had criticized the Lord for associating with publicans and sinners. The Lord answered them with these three parables, teaching them the same lesson which He spoke plainly in Matthew 9:12-13: "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. . . . I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

There are three ways in which we may commit sin: in heart, in mind, and in act. And sin is always the loss of something valuable which we have possessed. Swedenborg makes a distinction between evil and sin. [See AC 8925.] Evil is committing wrong unwittingly and unintentionally, as we all do again and again. Sin is doing what we know to be wrong or what we ought to know to be wrong, if

we had thought about the truths which had been given us. So in these parables the lost sheep symbolizes some innocent affection we have possessed but have ceased to feel, the piece of silver stands for some truth we have known but have allowed to slip into the dusty recesses of our minds, and the prodigal or wasteful son is a picture of our efforts to do as we please in our outward life.

In this last parable the father represents the Lord, and the inheritance from Him is all our individual abilities and opportunities. The Lord does not withhold this inheritance from us when we choose to go our own way. He gives it to us to use freely as we like. He leaves us in full control of our abilities, our possessions, our strength, and our time, even when He sees that our free choice will be to go into a “far country”—far from our true spiritual home—and waste our substance. The Lord forces no one to remain in His house. This is because He wants us to be happy, and no one can be forced into happiness. We have to choose it freely. If we see early in life that there is no real happiness except in unselfish love and service—the qualities which are the Lord’s—and choose the good life from the beginning, we can be spared much hard experience and suffering. But many prefer to try the other way, which looks so promising. Some even reach the state in which the prodigal son found himself before he learned his lesson.

Swine represent selfish, sensual affections or desires. The husks which feed them picture the superficial ideas which men accept instead of true spiritual nourishment when they think only of the worldly side of living. Many of the books and plays of today are such husks. They seem to give us something to think about and sometimes they look as if they might contain truth, but actually they are empty shells; there is no nourishing goodness in them.

A very little reason will show us that lasting happiness is not found in such things. To ignore the existence of God and of spiritual values is insanity. So the Lord says of the prodigal son, “And when he came to himself, he said . . .” That is, when he had suffered enough so that he could not help seeing that he had made the wrong choice, his mind was opened again toward the Lord,

and he said, “I will arise and go to my father.” It is never easy for us to admit that we have done wrong, and it is still harder to recognize that we must correct our ways before we can regain our position in our Father’s house. Like the prodigal son, we have to rise and retrace our steps with the intention of serving instead of being served. One of the lessons of this parable is that the doctrine of “faith alone”—which was one of the outgrowths of the Protestant Reformation—is unsound. This doctrine teaches that the Lord by His death on the cross paid all the penalty for the sins of mankind and that if a person—no matter how evil his life has been—will even at his last moment acknowledge that Christ died for him and throw himself on the divine mercy, his sins will be washed away in a moment. Fortunately all through the centuries many Protestants, although they nominally accepted this doctrine, did not let it actually affect their lives; that is, they lived as if they believed that it was necessary to live good lives in order to be saved. But others have used it as a loophole hoping to escape from the consequences of their lifelong sins. We are told in the parable that the father saw his son coming “while he was yet a long way off,” and went out to meet him. The Lord does give us every possible help and encouragement as soon as He sees that our intention to reform is sincere.

We easily see in the story of the elder son the lesson the Lord was trying to teach the scribes and Pharisees. It is not enough to keep the letter of the law. We must try to be like our heavenly Father in our hearts and minds, knowing that we all do wrong and constantly are in need of His forgiveness, and so ready to rejoice with the angels in the return of any prodigal to our common spiritual home.

Adult

Perhaps the best discussion topic for this class grows out of the quotation from NJHD following their notes. The weak and selfish idea that the Lord is so loving that He will forgive us whenever we ask Him, whatever our life has been and without any real change on our part, has done much harm in our modern world. The prodigal son had to take the long journey back before his

father could meet him, even though the father saw him coming “while he was yet a long way off.”

Again we have the scribes and Pharisees contrasted with the publicans and sinners. The publicans and sinners “drew near unto him . . . for to hear him,” and the Pharisees and scribes murmured. The intent of the three parables which follow is to show the nature of the Lord’s love, in that it goes forth to all alike with desire to draw them to Him, examining each man to see wherein he has strayed, and seeking by all means to recall and restore what has been lost. In each parable it is made clear that if we will but recognize our departure from the Lord and try to reform, He can save us. The three parables picture this truth on the three planes of life.

In the first parable it is a sheep which is lost, representing loss of one of the innocent affections with which the Lord has endowed us. All our other affections suffer from the loss of the one—they are left in the wilderness, and the Lord Himself, the good shepherd, is pictured as following the lost sheep, finding it, laying it upon His shoulders, and bringing it back with rejoicing. Perhaps this “lost sheep” is the simple trust in the Lord which we had as little children but have lost in the course of acquiring worldly wisdom. The Lord leaves nothing undone to restore this trust. He shows us again and again in our lives that He is caring for us, by opening our way before us, smoothing out difficulties and dangers which we had feared, and delivering us from evils into which we might have fallen. And when the trust is restored, we are conscious of a sphere of relief and joy. The angels “perceive nothing more delightful and happy than to remove evils from a man, and lead him to heaven” (AC 5992). We are told that “to carry on the shoulder” denotes to preserve with all the power of the divine love, and that the “‘sheep that was lost and was found’ denotes the good within the man who repents” (AC 9836⁶).

The parable of the lost piece of silver pictures the loss of some truth which we have known, its loss through failure to live according to it, and the need of searching for it with the light of truth from the Word and sweeping our mental house, that is, examining

ourselves thoroughly and rejecting the false ideas which have obscured the truth (AE 675¹⁰). Perhaps it is the truth that the real life is the eternal life and that death is an orderly step which opens the gate to that life. Little children accept this teaching readily and have no fear of death, but as they grow older, they are likely to slip into the prevalent attitude toward death, to shake their heads when some friend dies and say, “It seems strange that this should have come to him; it is hard to understand these things.” This is the accumulated dust of worldly ideas and points of view. We need to sweep the house and find our piece of silver. Again there is great rejoicing. The familiar saying, “We never miss the water till the well runs dry” might well be interpreted according to correspondence. It is true that we do not appreciate the goods and truths which the Lord gives us until we have felt real need of them, and sometimes it may be necessary for us to lose them altogether in order to awaken in us this sense of need. Even in our everyday life there is more rejoicing over the restoration of something we have lost than over the possession of many treasures.

The third parable deals more directly with sins of external conduct. The father, of course, is the Lord. The inheritance which the son wishes to have for himself is the goods and truths which come to us from the Lord. When one becomes tired of looking to the Lord for guidance and wishes to lead himself, he is like the prodigal son. Very soon he goes into a far country—far from the Lord—and wastes his inheritance in riotous living. When our good affections and the knowledge we have of the truth are looked upon as our own, the “substance” is gone out of them, for it is the Lord’s life in them which makes them good and true. “As the branch can not bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” (John 15:4) When we look to ourselves for light, we soon adopt worldly standards and come to live for worldly pleasures and satisfactions, and may even descend to “feeding swine”—gratifying the mere lusts of the body. Then famine comes. For man is a spiritual being and can never be satisfied while his spiritual nature is starved. In the parable the prodigal

son is brought by this condition to realize his own fault and to determine to confess it and go back to right living under his father's command. So sometimes when we are willful, the Lord must permit us to suffer the penalties which belong to our evil ways, in order that we may see their true nature and be brought back to Him. When we come into a state of genuine repentance, the Lord's love comes out to meet us with forgiveness and rejoicing, restoring us to our place, clothing us again in the garments of true thoughts, and giving us a new love of doing good, represented by the fatted calf.

The elder son who remained at home represented the Pharisees, and pictures the Pharisee in us. When we live an outwardly correct life, doing the good works which community sentiment requires of us—as the elder son was “in the fields”—but are cold and critical toward those who have transgressed the external laws which we keep, and refuse to welcome them when they repent or even to believe in the possibility of their repentance or in the justice of forgiveness for them, then we are like the elder brother, for the Lord's love is not in our hearts and our good conduct is a mere hypocritical shell. See AC 9391⁶ and AE 279⁶.

The lesson in all three parables is that of the necessity of recognizing and repenting of our evils, and of the Lord's tender mercy and forgiveness which helps us all along the way and can make our sins as though they had never been. The elder brother of the parable, like the Pharisees, was not conscious of any fault in himself. As long as one is in that state, there is no possibility of his progressing into a spiritual state of life, no matter how carefully he may keep the letter of the law. The Lord's forgiving spirit is pressing upon us all the time, but it can gain no entrance until we see our need of being forgiven. And our confession must be more than a mere recognition that no man is perfect. We must see definite evils in ourselves and try to correct them. We must miss the particular “lost sheep” and the particular “silver coin,” and we must, like the prodigal son, arise and go to our Father—lift our thoughts out of their worldly grooves and seek the Lord in His Word and ask to be

helped to do right again. Each time we do this, we shall find the Lord's love waiting for us and experience the heavenly joy which is with the angels over one sinner that repenteth.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 279⁶: “By ‘the prodigal son’ those who are prodigal of spiritual riches, which are the knowledges of truth and good, are meant; ‘his returning to his father, and his confession that he was not worthy to be called his son,’ signifies penitence of heart and humiliation; ‘the first robe with which he was clothed,’ signifies general and primary truths; ‘the ring on the hand’ signifies the conjunction of truth and good in the internal or spiritual man; ‘the shoes on the feet’ signify the same in the external or natural man, and both signify regeneration; ‘the fatted calf’ signifies the good of love and charity; and ‘to eat and be glad’ signifies consociation and heavenly joy.”

The New Jerusalem and Its Heavenly Doctrine, nn. 159-161: “He who would be saved must confess his sins, and do the work of repentance. *To confess sins*, is to know evils, to see them in one's self, to acknowledge them, to make himself guilty, and to condemn himself on account of them. When this is done before God, it is the confession of sins. *To do the work of repentance*, is to desist from sins after he has confessed them, and from a humble heart has made supplication for remission, and to live a new life according to the precepts of charity and faith.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- J. To whom was the parable of the great supper spoken? *Pharisees*
P. Who were the Pharisees? *strict religious sect*
J. Why did the Lord find fault with them? *their pride*
P. In the parable what guests were first invited? *friends*
P. What excuses did they give? *field, oxen, wife*
J. What did these excuses show? *selfish thoughtlessness*
P. Who were the guests who ate the supper? *poor, maimed, halt, blind*
J. In our chapter today who came to hear the Lord? *tax collectors, sinners*
J. What did the Pharisees and scribes say? *murmured against Him*
P. How many parables did the Lord tell them? *three*
P. What was similar about all these parables? *something lost, then found*
P. In the first parable what was lost? *sheep*
P. What was lost in the second? *coin*

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- P. What was lost in the third? *son*
- J. What does *prodigal* mean? *wasteful*
- J. What did the younger son waste? *money*
- P. Where did he go? *far country*
- P. What happened to him? *he became poor and hungry*
- P. What did he decide to do? *go home and serve his father*
- J. How did his father receive him? *joyfully*
- J. How did his elder brother feel about this? *he was jealous*
- J. What did the father answer? *all I have is yours*
- I. What are pictured by the lost sheep and the lost coin? *lost affection, lost thought*
- S. What is the inheritance which the prodigal son wasted? *all our abilities*
- S. What is pictured by his arising and going back to his father? *humbling self, correcting ways, trying again*