

INTERNATIONAL S. S. LESSON.

Sunday, May 8.

The Prodigal Son, Luke xv. 11-24.

GOLDEN TEXT, v. 18.—I will arise, and go to my father, and say unto him, — Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee.

Commit 21-24.

INTRODUCTION AND CONNECTION.

Our present lesson follows the last in immediate connection; and while it may be understood to teach, in the main, the same lesson—the yearning of the Father's heart over the erring—His gracious welcome, and overflowing joy at their return—yet there seems a greater breadth of meaning in this parable than in the others. Hence it has been applied in a number of different ways, nearly all of which seem to be more or less in accordance with its plain teaching, yet not all equally satisfactory.

There is always danger of straining the meaning of a parable too far, and making out of it more than it was ever intended to teach. As a rule, that interpretation which is best suited to the persons to whom it was spoken, is the safest and most satisfactory.

LESSON NOTES.

(11.) *A certain man had two sons.* To understand this parable aright, we must keep in mind the *two classes* who were before our Lord when it was spoken. One class represented the *holy* of the nation—the law-keepers, the law teachers, the law-enforcers. The others represented the opposite class—the “sinners” of the nation. We say *represented*, for the Scribes and Pharisees were far from being all they seemed, but, representatively, those were their respective positions as they stood before Christ.

(12.) *And the youngest of them said, &c.* This disposition to have their own way, to run into idolatry and excess, had always characterized the Jews; and yet, there had always been some who held by the law, and preserved the forms of divine worship. God had always kept some true witnesses, and such, *representatively*, were the Scribes and Pharisees, for Christ cautioned His followers to *observe and do* what they commanded, but to be careful how they copied their works—(Matt. xxiii. 2). These, then, stand in the parable as the *elder son*,—the others as the *younger son*. *And he divided to him his living*—his patrimony. God does not cut off the willful—those who are dissatisfied with Him and His ways with no portion. He gives them prolonged life, health, talents, enterprise, and worldly possessions, often in great abundance. Nor does He force them into obedience; but leaves them as free to wander from Him as it is possible to be, under law—that is, they may sin, but they may not escape the consequences of sin. If they wish to test the value of their own notions of freedom, they are allowed to do so—within such limits.

(13.) *And not many days after.* These words are mournfully true. It is not many days after God removes the restraints under which He has held men, before they turn from Him, and go their own ways into a far country. Oh, how awfully far from God is the country of Sin! None but God Himself can truly tell the immeasurable distance! *Wasted his substance.* Every moment spent in sin is so much *wasted substance*. Every Bible student must elaborate this terrible thought for himself; and in doing so, he will find that it will expand into tremendous proportions. Instead of economizing his substance, health, appetites, endowments—physical, mental, and spiritual,—time, money, and influence, they are *all*—WASTED. How? *In riotous living!*

(14.) *And when he had spent all*—that is, all his available resources for riotous enjoyment—*there arose a mighty famine.* Ah! who shall picture the famine of a human soul that has rioted in sin, until even sin has lost its power to satisfy? *He began to be in want*—began truly to realize his position. Hunger, and thirst, and cold, and nakedness, homelessness and utter destitution were upon him, and his resources were *all wasted*. In this forlorn state he looks about for something to do to better his condition.

(15, 16.) *So he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields, to feed swine.* Hitherto he had *serv'd himself*—had had a

good time, as some would say; now, he turns himself openly and undisguisedly to serve Satan; and he gave him employment—*feeding swine*. To the mind of a Jew, no more repulsive picture could be drawn than this. *And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks*—(empty pulsed-pods, used sometimes in the East as food for cattle and swine, and, in times of great distress, by extremely destitute people) *that the swine did eat, but no man gave unto him*—gave him anything better—(Rom. vi. 28—first clause).

(17-19.) *And when he came to himself*—not that he had not had his reason, but his judgment had been perverted. It is no wonder that such destitution and such degrading service brought him to his senses. Once, because his father would have restrained him, he thought him a tyrant, and his home a place of bondage; now, by the very stress of his misery, he is brought to think very differently of both. Now, he recognizes the tender love and generous kindness of that father. Now, he recognizes his own folly and sin, and cries out in bitterness of heart—*How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!* When one realizes he is *perishing*, he is no longer making up his mind to escape if possible; when the sinner *believes* it, he is not long in fleeing to Christ. Hence, we are not surprised at hearing the prodigal say, *I will arise, and go to my father*. But it is not merely to go, and, if possible, be taken in—he has a confession to make (Rom. x. 10.) *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.* Only take me back, forgive me, let me be near thee, and I will not ask or expect the name of son. If I may be only as a *servant* with thee, I will be more than content.

(20.) *And he arose, and came to his father.* But when he was yet a great way off his father saw him, and had compassion, &c. &c. Such is the compassion and love of God. It outruns the returning sinner's greatest haste, and anticipates his most earnest confessions.

(21, 22.) *Father, I have sinned, &c.* The father saw the sincerity of his son; and, without waiting for *all* he had thought to say, he called for the best robe to be put on him, a ring to be placed upon his hand, and shoes upon his feet; (slaves went barefoot;) and thus, he received the threefold symbols of dignity, honor, and freedom. He was neither to be a servant, nor as a *servant* in his father's house; but a child restored to all the privileges of sonship.

(23, 24.) *And brought hither the fatted calf, kept for festive occasions, and kill it, and let us (the father and his household) eat and be merry, for thus my son was dead, and is alive again, he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.* The father rejoiced and his household rejoiced with him. *There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.*

SUGGESTED THOUGHTS.

The Scribes and Pharisees had said, *this man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.* In three successive parables Jesus meets the charge, and accepts it as true; thus turning it to His own glory and praise, and to the shame and dishonor of His accusers.

The tender love and compassion of God are nowhere more richly exemplified than in these parables. It is because men *are sinners*, that He follows them, seeks them, waits for them, and welcomes them with such overflowing joy when they turn from sin to Himself.

They that be whole need not a physician. Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

QUESTION SUMMARY.

(For the Children.)

(11, 12.) How many sons had the father in this parable? What did the youngest ask his father to do? Did his father do it? (13.) What use did his son make of his inheritance? Who are represented by the *younger son*? All who disobey God and run into sin. How did this son *waste his substance*? (14.) What happened when he had spent all he had? What is a famine? (15.) What did the poor prodigal do then? Did the Jews consider that a great degradation? (16.) Did the prodigal son get very hungry? What would he have been willing to eat? Did any one give him food? (17.) When he came to himself,—that is, realized his awful condition—what did he say? (18.) Where did he say he would go? What did he say he would tell

his father? (19.) What more was he going to tell him? Did he think it would be better to be a *servant* at home than not to be there at all? (20.) Did he do as he had thought he would? Who saw him coming? Had he got very near when his father saw him? Did his father just *happen* to see him, or was he looking out for him? Have not you gone a great way from God, into the *far country of Sin*? Is God looking out for you, all the time? What is He saying to you? (Matt. xi. 28.) What did the prodigal's father do? Will God be as glad if ever you come back to Him? (21.) Did the son say all he had intended to say? Why not? Because his father did not wait for him to say it? (22.) What did the father tell his servants to put on him? (23.) What next were they to do? (24.) Why did he make this great feast? What did the father say about his son? If you come to God, can he say the same about you? Will you not, then, if you are *dead and lost* in sin, do like the prodigal; and come back, believing that God loves you, and is waiting to receive you?

TOTAL ABSTINENCE AND CHRISTIAN LOVE.

Christians of every name! to you this appeal is made. Not to the drunkard to persuade him to become sober, but to the temperate man, that he may be induced to relinquish a small indulgence for the good of others. As followers of Him “who went about doing good,” you are ready to take up your cross and follow Him whithersoever He summons you. And you believe, also, that He *does* summon you to every act and every sacrifice which the welfare of your fellow-men demands. You are convinced that any gratification ought to be relinquished, which, even if harmless to yourselves, is pernicious to others, especially if it leads them into sin, and impedes the work of the gospel. To you, on the ground of Christian obligation, the cause of total abstinence appeals.

Many admit: “Total abstinence is necessary for the *drunkard*, but why should *we*, who have never been intemperate, deprive ourselves of a moderate indulgence, which to us has never proved dangerous?” In reply—think—suppose that none abstained entirely from alcoholic beverages but drunkards. Would not such abstinence at once become a badge by which such persons would be known? Would not the abstainer, whenever he refused the cup, publish his shame? Would not such refusal testify: “The power of evil habit is so strong within me that I must resist the very first impulse, lest I be overcome. The animal nature has gained in me such power over the moral, that if once I drink, it will be beyond my control.” Would many be willing to give such an account of themselves to every one in whose company they might be thrown? Is it not a trial too great to impose on a poor inebriate longing to break away, and regain, if possible, the position he has lost? Would he not avoid such a stigma by flattering himself that he would be able to allow himself a slight indulgence without being again drawn into excess? But does not *all* experience prove that is all but morally impossible?

The remedy is obvious. Let total abstinence be practised by multitudes who never were suspected of excess, then will their unblemished character convert abstinence from a badge of disgrace to the sign of an honorable confederation, and many a poor inebriate, whom shame would otherwise have kept aloof, will be encouraged to take shelter in the only asylum which can offer him safety. And it cannot be admitted that he who keeps within the limits of moderation in no sense encourages another to go farther than himself. Were all constitutional and acquired tendencies exactly similar in all persons, this might be the case. But it is far otherwise. And he who, by encouraging with example to a

slight indulgence, arouses the dormant propensity of another, cannot escape responsibility for the consequences. He cannot justly plead that his moderation has had no influence in leading the other to excess. If we act or speak as though the indulgence gave us pleasure, unattended with peril, can we be so likely to influence those who are in jeopardy as if we ourselves wholly abstained? Does not our very sobriety afford an additional sanction to those who imitate us? Who would relinquish the privilege of “converting the sinner from the error of his way” from any personal indulgence or to avoid singularity?—*Newman Hall*

LITTLE THINGS.

As an encouragement to faithfulness in attending to little things, the *Sunday School Times* remarks: “How little can the shrewdest of us tell which of our doings are to have the largest influence upon our future lives or to open to us the broadest ways of usefulness! Mr. Alexander Strahan, the London publisher, who has begun to write a series of personal reminiscences in the English magazine, the *Day of Rest*, tells us how he happened to think of the late Dr. Norman Macleod for the editorship of his magazine *Good Words*, when that famous periodical was as yet but a possibility. While bearing the selection of his editor in mind, Mr. Strahan happened to light upon a report, in an Edinburgh newspaper, of a chat by Dr. Macleod upon “Cock Robin,” and other nursery ballads, which the good doctor had held with the children of an Ayrshire school, after examination.” “I was so struck with the mingled wit and wisdom of the words,” says Mr. Strahan, “with the broad humanity as well as the rich humor of the speaker, that I at once said to myself, ‘Here is the very man, if I can buy him.’ And out of this little talk on nursery ballads, thus grew Dr. Macleod's engagements as editor of the most widely circulated magazine in Christendom. After all, it is not for us to presume to say, without any possibility of mistake, what are our most important doings, or those most likely to affect our future usefulness to the great world about us. If we do our duty, whether we are directing the councils of a nation, or telling nursery stories to a group of little listeners, God will take care of the rest.”

HINTS TO THOSE VISITING THE SICK.

Enter and leave the room quietly. Carry a cheerful face and speak cheerful words. If the sickness is serious, do not fall into gay and careless talk in the attempt to be cheerful. Don't ask questions, and thus oblige the invalid to talk. Talk about something outside, and not about the disease of the patient. Tell the news, but not the list of the sick and dying. If possible, carry something to please the eye and relieve the monotony of the sick room—a flower, or even a picture which you can loan for a few days. Highly perfumed flowers, however, should never be carried into the sick room. Some little simple delicacy to tempt the appetite may be well bestowed. Stay only a few minutes at the longest, unless you can be of some help.

— It is stated that during the year of famine in Ireland, the people there consumed over \$50,000,000 in whisky. In view of this fact the *National Baptist* says: “It is not the landlords or the land laws that keep Ireland down, it is whisky, ignorance and superstition.”