

Sabbath School.

BIBLE LESSONS.

Third Quarter.

STUDIES IN LUKE'S GOSPEL.

Lesson V. August 3. Luke 15: 11-24.

THE PRODIGAL SON.

GOLDEN TEXT.

"Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee."—Luke 15: 18.

EXPLANATORY.

I. THE TWO SONS.—Ver. 11. And He (Jesus) said to the same audience to whom He had spoken the other parables (Ver. 1). A certain man had two sons. The householder represents our heavenly Father. The two sons undoubtedly represent the two classes whose presence led to the discourse; the scribes and Pharisees (the elder son), and the publicans and sinners (the younger son). In the course of history the difference between the two was fully represented by the Jews and Gentiles. But the parable did not directly apply to the Jews and Gentiles as such.

NOTE. That God is the Father of all men, for He has created them in His own image. That by this parable Jesus taught that the publicans and sinners, Samaritans and Gentiles, were the brethren of the scribes and Pharisees, and they should have been treated as brethren.

II. THE WANDERING.—FIRST STAGE.—A SELF-WILLED HEART ATTRACTED FROM HOME. 12. And the younger of them. A type of all sinners, but especially of all who have yielded to the temptations of youth. Father, give me the portion of goods (property) that falleth to me.

WHAT DOES THIS REQUEST MEAN, when we come to give it its spiritual significance? It is the expression of man's desire to be independent of God, to be a god to himself (Gen. 3: 5). Two things impel him to set this: the air of the paternal home oppresses him, he feels the constraint of his father's presence; then the world attracts him, he hopes to enjoy himself.

THE REQUEST SHOWS: (1) selfishness; (2) ingratitude; (3) self-will; (4) a determination to do wrong; (5) undutifulness; (6) narrow vision, for if he had looked forward he would have seen the dreadful consequences. And he divided up to them his living; i.e. the property from which he lived. This compliance sets forth our free will as allowed by God. He shall discover, and if need be, by most painful proof, that the free will freedom is from God; that to depart from Him is not to throw off the yoke, but to exchange a light yoke for a heavy one, and one gracious Master for a thousand imperious tyrants and lords.

GOD HAS BESTOWED UPON MEN HIS LIFE, and He has given them spirits and faculties, made after His own image, conscience, reason, talents, memory powers, capacities of blessedness, His Word, His home, His love, His care, and worldly blessings beyond measure.

SECOND STAGE.—LIVING HIS FATHER'S AND HOME.—Not many days after. But not immediately. There is a hint of the development of sin. Independence of God comes first; departure from God follows. The younger son gathered all together. By this gathering together of all, and departing, he manifested the collecting on man's part, of all his energies and powers, with the deliberate determination of getting, through their help, all the gratification he can out of the world.

THIRD STAGE.—IN THE FAR COUNTRY OF SIN. And took his journey into a far country. In order to be far away from the restraints and interference of his father. The far country is forgetfulness of God. The far country is being far from God in character, in motives, in feelings, in works, in sympathy.

III. THE CONSEQUENCES.—FIRST CONSEQUENCE.—LOTTERY PLEASURE. There was a certain amount of intense pleasure at first—the cheer and warmth which comes from the flames when first approached, and before they are near enough to burn.

SECOND CONSEQUENCE.—A WASTED LIVING. And there wasted his substance (his property) with riotous living. Sin wastes the body, wastes health, wastes the soul. That is wasting which falls of the true use for which it was made. The sinner's substance—his faculties, and his opportunities of doing good and being good, his blessings, God's promises and love, the influence of the Holy Spirit—is wasted.

THIRD CONSEQUENCE.—A FAMINE OF THE SOUL. 14. And when he spent all. This seems to have happened very soon; the enjoyment of sin is brief. When sinful pleasure ceases to give delight, we have spent all that we can spend in that "far country." What remains is not current there. There arose a mighty famine in that land. The liberty of self-enjoyment is not unlimited, as the sinners would fain think; it has limits of two kinds: the one pertaining to the individual himself, such as satiety, remorse, the feeling of destitution and abjectness resulting from vice (when he had spent all); the other arising from certain unfavorable untoward circumstances, here represented by the famine which occurs at this crisis; that is, domestic or public calamities which complete the subduing of the heart which has been already overwhelmed, and, further, the absence of all divine consolation. And he began to be in want. The soul has many hungers and thirsts, and the nobler the soul the more of these hungers and the more intense the hunger. And the world, with its riches and pleasures, can never satisfy the soul. This is a sign of its divine nature and greatness.

FOURTH CONSEQUENCE.—THE SLAVERY OF SIN. 15. And he went and joined himself. Literally "glued himself to," fastened himself upon, he was in effect a slave to that country, either men hopelessly corrupt and worldly, or perhaps the powers of evil in the world, that in this far-off land, the prodigal, with all his banquets and his lavishes, has not gained a single friend. But how shall we understand his joining himself to the citizen of that far country? The sinner sells himself to the world; he engages the powers of evil in the world. Our Lord gives us a hint here of that awful mystery in the downward progress of souls, by which he who begins by using the world to be a servant to minister to his pleasures, submits in the end to a reversal of the relationship between them, so that the world uses him as its drudge, and sin as its slave.

The sinner is a slave because (1) he cannot do right freely, being constrained to act contrary to his reason and conscience. He is a slave to his bad habits. For example, a drunkard, longing to be free, but going straight to his cups. (2) He cannot do wrong freely, because his conscience and moral nature, the Holy Spirit, the Bible, God's providence, are opposed to him, and must be. (3) He is compelled, contrary to his will, to suffer the consequences of his sins. (4) He is far from his home, from his father, from his true life, hungry, perishing, and does not know the way back alone. But God finds him, and brings him back.

a time for feasting. Merry. The feast indicates the joy of a forgiving God over a forgiven man, and the joy of a forgiven man in a forgiving God.

16. And he would fain: he was glad to, he was only happy to. The "Asks that the swine did eat" are now familiarly known to be the pods of the *Crotalaria villosa* of Linnaeus, the kharub (or carob) of the natives. That the swine did eat. He who would not feed the swine on oak-leaves, petitions in hunger for husks of swine. No man gave unto him. The friends he had made by sin deserted him in his need. They always do.

IV. THE RETURN. FIRST STEP.—CONSCIOUSNESS OF SIN AND WANT. 17. And when he came to himself. The phrase is wonderfully suggestive. He had been living to a self which was not his true self. The first step in his repentance is to wake as out of an evil dream, and to be conscious of his better nature.

SECOND STEP.—A CONSCIOUSNESS OF BETTER THINGS. The Holy Spirit convinces men of righteousness as well as of sin (John 16: 9, 10), gives them the knowledge and assurance of the possibility of a better life. He said, How many hired servants of my father's are openly the lowest, meanest, and least cared for people in his father's employments. Have bread enough and to spare. Even these have enough to eat—not the higher joys and blessings of children and heirs, but the peace and comfort which belong to their lowest nature. And I (his son, a member of his family), perish with hunger. Literally, am destroying myself. He really destroys himself who remains in want away from the abundance of his father's table.

THIRD STEP.—REPENTANCE. 18. I will arise. He resolves with all his heart to change his course of life. Good resolutions are not so vain as some would make them out. We shall never do better unless we make up our minds to do better. And go to my father. Against whom he had sinned, but who was his father still. God is our Father in one sense, however unworthy we are to be His children. There is none else to whom the sinner can go. He must go home. And will say unto his father, I have sinned. Why, it may be asked, does he not confess his fault? Because he is still living in the midst of them. Against heaven. Against the authority and the principles of heaven, against goodness and Providence, and God. And before thee. The consciousness of one's great sin makes us feel the burden and grief of all past sins.

19. And am no more worthy, etc. Genuine penitence always feels its unworthiness. Make me as one, etc. He does not give up his sensibility, but asks only the treatment given to a hireling, for he does not even deserve that.

FOURTH STEP.—FORSAKING SIN AND RETURNING TO HIS FATHER. CONVERSION. 20. And he arose and came to his father. Towards, not to. He did not come to his father, his father came out to him. The actual setting-out on the homeward journey is the turning point in the prodigal's life. Note two suggestive facts in the prodigal's experience: (1) The joy and peace, the father's kiss, ring, robe, etc., are not instantly conferred, but are a way to be travelled first; often in actual experience it is a long and weary one. (2) Though the prodigal brings nothing good with him, neither does he bring anything evil. He forsakes all in turning his back on the far country. When he says yet a great way off. In the story of the parable we must think of the wanderer as coming back weary, footsore, hungry, and in rage. And he is yet "a great way off," not as yet near the home of peace, the light of the Father's countenance. His father sees him. There is a delicate and beautiful implication of the father's unfeigned tenderness. His heart yearned over his prodigal, and his waiting eye caught the most distant possible glimpse of him.

And runs. The return of the sinner is expressed by the word going, but God's coming to the sinner by running. God makes greater haste to the sinner than the sinner does to God. Kissed him. There comes to him the joy of all joys; the love of the father finds him, and he is conscious of the love.

FIFTH STEP.—CONFESSION. 21. And the son said unto him, Father... am no more worthy to be called thy son. Here was the acknowledgment of his father's goodness and righteousness. But he did not add, Make me as one of thy hired servants (ver. 10). Why? His father put out him on his confession. He was so ready to receive his son that the moment he saw him repentant and ready to receive him he hastened to express his welcome. Confession of sin is essential. He that confesseth and forsaketh shall have mercy (Prov. 28: 13).

IV. THE WELCOME HOME. 22. But the father said. When the far-away wanderer came back to his early home he found six things; he found a father, a home, a welcome, a ring, a feast, and a song. There is a spiritual meaning hidden under each of the gifts which the rejecting father bestowed. Bring forth the best robe. The robe was not mere clothing, but a long and richly embroidered vestment, such as are kept in store for the guests. The robe was presented to honored guests. The "best robe" may easily signify the righteousness of God imparted to one who had been half-dressed in filthy rags. Put a ring on his hand. The ring was doubtless the father's signet-ring, which invested him with equality for the time being. Shoes on his feet. In those days servants and slaves wore no shoes, and were thus distinguished from the members of the family.

23. The fatted calf. The double article of the original emphasizes the reference to the well-known fatted calf, that stood in the stall, ready for the appropriate festive occasion. The proper time has come, and the family must be gathered at the festive board. It is pre-eminently

lin work for a little time. The prudent dressmaker had always been afraid these younger ones would spoil it.

"But I'd rather spoil cross-stitch than some other things," said the minister's wife to herself, earnestly.

"Oh, aren't these pansies just sweet?" "Oh, look at my lilies!" "Do let's have some needles and wool and get to work," cried half a dozen at once.

"You haven't given me any pattern," said Lilly Saunders, presently, while the rest threaded needles expectantly.

"Nor me," said Sallie, stepping up.

"Never mind about the pattern," said Mrs. Bell, carelessly. "I don't seem to see it just this minute. Here is one that Carrie Myers did. You can look at that for a pattern."

"But, Mrs. Bell," cried the three girls in perplexity, "there are mistakes in hers!"

"Oh, yes! some mistakes, probably. But it will be near enough."

"We don't want to copy mistakes!" cried Nella Mills. She spoke sharply—very sharply for a Christian.

"No?"

"Mrs. Bell drew out the word sweetly, with a rising inflection. There was meaning in the steady brows she bent on Nella, but she said nothing beyond that exasperating little monosyllable.

"Why, of course not!" they cried in chorus. "What's a pattern for but to follow? What makes you talk so funny—when you're always so strict about doing things exactly?"

"Oh, well," said Mrs. Bell, mildly, "maybe it's been a little too strict, but I don't suppose it's well to be too strait-laced about anything. Aim to do as near right as other folks—that will do well enough."

"Nice looking sofa cushions we'd have on that principle!" cried the girls, in amazement. "We shouldn't get any nearer if we looked at the real, right pattern, but when it comes to following Carrie Myers' work, or anybody else's, I don't care whose it is, why, Mrs. Bell, you know yourself we shouldn't get it half as near right as theirs was!"

"Oh!" cried Lilly, with dawning intelligence, about lottories—"Mrs. Bell!" said Carrie, explosively, "and dancing."

"We didn't think," said all the girls together.

"I didn't know but you thought being a Christian was easier than doing fancy work!"

"You can't get along without looking at the pattern in cross-stitch!" said Nella thoughtfully.

"Nor cross-bearing either, Nella," said Mrs. Bell, softly, drawing the flushed cheek down to hers.

"Nor cross-bearing either!" repeated Nella, slowly.

Mrs. Bell went back to her work and the girls to theirs. This thing was done in a corner, and the mission circle was no wiser for the little object lesson.

But Nella and Sallie will be better Christians all their days for learning to look at Jesus, the true Pattern, instead of His imperfect followers.—Anna F. Barnham, in Advance.

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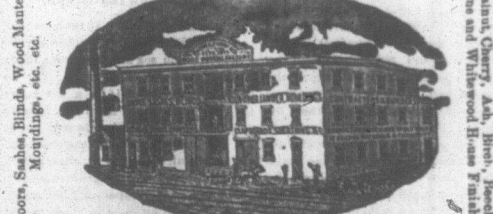
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