

EXPLANATORY AND PRACTICAL NOTES.

General Statement.

This parable was spoken in the last part of the third year of our Lord's public ministry, three or four months before his death. Like some other chief parables of our Lord, it was, so far as we can distinguish, spoken in Perea. The story is not told in any other gospel. The chapter from which it is taken contains three noble parables—of the lost sheep, of the piece of silver, and of the prodigal son. All three were spoken to the publicans and sinners who "drew near unto him for to hear him," and to the Pharisees and scribes who murmured at his kind reception of the outcast. The remaining eight verses of this chapter continue this parable by the story of the elder son. The moral condition of the lapsed classes, who are supposed to be as careless of God as they are of Mosaic law, temple, and synagogue, which was only hinted at in the bewildered sheep and the lost coin fallen from nobler uses, is now more fully and accurately represented in the degraded son who, in his disgrace, loathes sin and yearns for his father's favor more sincerely than any exemplary son can. The love of God toward the sinful is more faithfully suggested by a human father's eagerness for the return of his wayward and ruined son than by a woman's distress at the loss of a coin or a shepherd's anxiety for a lost sheep. The inexcusable apathy of the rulers toward the lost, which is no more than suggested in the introductory parables, is drawn in this one with striking faithfulness and precision.

Verse 11. A certain man had two sons.

The man represents our Father, the sons two sorts of his children. The whole story should be carefully read. It has gone into literature under the title of "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." Many careful students believe that the emphasis of the story is on the portion that is omitted from this lesson, and that if a title be given to it at all it should be the title of "The Jealous Brother." Another suggestion quite as profound is that it is "The Parable of the Bereaved Father;" it emphasizes our heavenly Father's eagerness to save his lost children and his rejoicing over the saved. All three views should be kept in mind as we proceed with this marvelous story.

12. Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. Really, no portion fell to him. He was the younger son, and would, according to Jewish law, inherit only one third of the patriarchal property, and that only at the death of his father. It was a selfish and unreasonable demand, not justified by the law of the country or its customs. He wanted this special favor for the worst of purposes—criminal indulgence. **He divided unto them his living.**

Which he had no right to do. He could not set aside the responsibilities of life until he died, and he could not properly meet those responsibilities after he had divided his resources between his sons. Furthermore, he does not seem in the strictest sense to have done this. Practically, he merely gave up control of the wayward boy and kept control of the docile and obedient one, for he evidently retained his own authority over the elder son's share. (1) *Selfishness, ingratitude, and a rebellious spirit are at the root of all sin.*

13. Not many days after. He who craves indulgence and sees it within reach can never have patience. The sooner he could rid himself of his father and the synagogue and the Sabbath the better. **The younger son gathered all together, and took his journey.** This sentence might

stand as a concise biography of every selfish soul. **Into a far country.** No matter how disposed he was to engage in "riotous living," he would be restrained so long as he dwelt in Palestine, for, though Gentiles lived in large numbers among the Jews, especially in Galilee and Perea, and though heathen practices were familiar to most of the Jews, and though the Jews themselves by their frequency of divorce and their bad habits had greatly lowered moral standards, there was, nevertheless, a controlling sense of propriety which made a heavy line of demarkation between the Hebrews and other nations. The places to indulge unrestrained in pleasing vice were the hated centers of the pagan religion, and it was to Corinth or Ephesus or Rome or Alexandria that this young man went away. "The far country" represents estrangement from God. **Wasted his substance with riotous living.** He recklessly scattered his opportunities like one of the abandoned ones. There is no such waster as a sinner who wastes time, opportunity, physical vigor, mental power, holy character, neighborly influence.

14. When he had spent all. And that time came soon. The four scenes follow each other quickly: (1) Impatience with restraint; (2) Opportunity to indulge self; (3) Self-indulgence; (4) Want. **A mighty famine.** Famines have been common through all history until the last century or two, and are now frequent in the East. We would have them in our own country were it not for the modern inventions and methods of trade which make every part of civilization dependent on every other part and a diminution of pressure on any single locality; but where, as in the East, in our Lord's time and now, vast populations are packed together, and dependent for food on what they raise, these famines cannot be avoided. This famine stands in the parable for the painful hunger of the soul, the heart craving for divine things. **That land.** The far country,