

heritance. He says to his father, “Will you please give me my inheritance now?” Now, that in itself tells you quite a lot about this younger son and his mentality, though there is such a provision under Jewish law. Under Jewish law, there is a provision for this, that if the father so chooses, he may grant to his son a share of the inheritance before his own death.

And so, not many days later, it says here in v13, this younger son, after having received what the father had given to him, leaves home. Notice that the father does not rebuke him. He does not say, “I don’t allow you to do this,” as most fathers probably would say. This gives us an insight into the character of God.

The Son Squanders His Inheritance

The son then, taking the inheritance, departs. Notice, he goes “*into a far country*” [KJV] hoping to be as far away from his father as possible because, of course, as you know, sons like to have their independence. Children want to do their own thing. They do not want to be always under the eyes of the father, and so away they go to find freedom. He does not go to the nearby country; he goes off to a far country, it says. But alas! Easy come, easy go, as the saying goes. The father may have had to work pretty hard to acquire his property, but like so many sons that come from families which are relatively well-to-do,



what they do not earn, they also do not appreciate. And so we find this son going into a far country, squandering all he has. He wastes the whole thing in a very short time. He knows nothing about business management. He knows nothing about how to look after his finances, and presently, he is in a state of bankruptcy.

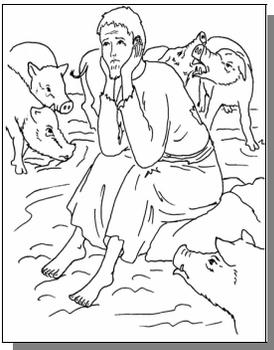
So, by this time, he discovers that in order to keep alive, he has to work for a living. He suddenly discovers that there is a place for work in life. Up to this point, he has been receiving everything by grace. It is all what the father has been giving him. Now, suddenly, he has to work. But it turns out, of course, that he is rather poorly qualified to work. What can he do? A person who does not know how to manage his own life and his own finances is hardly going to be entrusted by anybody with any responsibility. And so, finally, the only responsibility he can acquire is that of feeding some pigs. There he finds himself in the position of being a swineherd, that is, looking after pigs. But, of course,

this is not exactly a high-pay job. He gets so little, he has barely enough to make ends meet. In fact, it is not even enough to make ends meet, so much so that he was glad to eat what the swine were having. While he is in this condition, he begins to think of home.

The Lost Son Comes to His Senses

Sometimes we really have to take a hard knock on our heads to wake us up. It says here that he finally woke up — he came to his senses, “...*he came to himself*” is the expression. Finally, he woke up! At home his father had given him everything, but now notice that v16 says, “*no one gave him anything.*” Away from home, he was nobody, and nobody cared about him. He had turned his back on the one person that had cared for him – his father. There was now no one left to care for him. When we turn our backs upon God, we will soon discover that we have turned our backs upon the one person who ever really cared for us. Out, away from God, there is no one to care for us.

So, he finds himself in this state and he begins to think to himself. In v17 it says, “*when he came to himself*”, he began to realize what his real situation is, what the facts of life really are. “How many of my father’s hired servants have more food than they can handle! And here I am, starving.” He finally comes to the logical conclusion, “*I will arise and go to my father.*”



That is the only place left for him to go, but how is he to go back to his father? He has got his inheritance; he has no more right to return to the father. And so, he works it all out in his mind that he will say, “*Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.*” There is a deep understanding here — he understands he has not only sinned against his father, he has sinned against heaven, against God. “What I have done is not just something wrong against you, but something wrong against God. And now I ask you that you will take me, not as your son — I have

no more right to be your son — but to give me a place among your servants. I do not know that I deserve even to be accepted back as a servant. But if you consider it possible that I could find some place among the servants here, I beg of you to take me back.”

His Father Has Compassion on Him

We find in v20, “*while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him*”, the father has been looking out for him all the time! The father has been looking out of the window. The father has been watching. Suddenly all his despair is gone and he is filled with joy — for there in the distance, he sees this tattered figure in rags, dragging himself wearily across the road! It says here in v20, he “*had compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*” He had compassion! He was “*filled with compassion*”! [NIV] He did not wait; he did not just walk; he ran out to his son. There were no words like, “He should have learnt his lesson! That serves him right!” There is no vindictiveness. No vengeance. The father rushes out and embraces his son.

And the son does exactly what he intended to do. He says, “I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. I am not fit to be your son.” But the father gives him the best garment, puts a ring upon his finger and shoes upon his feet. (It shows that he had not even sandals to wear, he had been walking barefoot by this time.) And even his hunger is satisfied with the best: the fatted calf. And there is great joy.

There Is Another Lost Son

Needless to say, the elder son regards this whole scene with utter disgust. “This lazy fellow was never fit for anything — spoiled brat that he is. He even dared to dishonor father by demanding his inheritance before the father even died! He goes off, fools around, squanders it all, and now comes back a beggar! But what does father do? Instead of putting him among the servants, he makes merry and is rejoicing over him!”



The elder son is utterly disgusted. Why is he feeling this way? Well, unlike the father, this elder son has no compassion at all! He has no feeling that this younger brother has learned his lesson, having been through the worst times and there is no need to make it any worse. There he is in rags, barefooted, half-starved. Do you have to beat him into the ground before he learns his lesson? How much lower can he go? The father sees that it was enough. But not the elder son — for he has no compassion.

V32 concludes the parable where the father says, “...*this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.*” That is why this is called the Parable of the Lost Son. Actually, I would prefer to call it the Parable of Two Lost Sons. One of them is more lost than the other. It is a parable of two lost sons of which only one was found; the other was never saved because he never knew he was lost.

The Bible Is a Book of Lost Sons

Let us now consider the spiritual meaning of this passage. This is something I would like you to take careful note of in your mind, that the whole Bible is actually a history of lost sons. Think carefully on this — the Bible is a book of lost sons. It is always the sons who are getting lost. First of all, Adam got lost, and Adam is called ‘the son of God.’ In Lk 3:38, you will find that Adam is spoken of as a son of God. He owed his existence to God. Adam was a son of God. Adam was lost.

Most of the OT concerns Israel, and Israel is called a ‘son of God’ in quite a number of places, for example, Hos 11:1*f*, which is quoted in Mt 2:15. “*Out of Egypt have I called my son,*” that is when God saved Israel out of Egypt.

The word ‘son’ has a wide meaning in the Bible. There are sons in all different degrees and different standings in relation to God. Some sons are much closer to God than other sons, but they are nonetheless sons. The angels of God are also called ‘sons of God’, for example, in Job 1:6, 2:1 and 38:7. But even the angels got lost. Consider, for example, Jude v6, where it says that “the angels who did not keep their proper station, God dealt with them in judgment, and had them bound in chains in the nether gloom.”

Sonship Is Not Basis of Security

In the churches today, there is a notion that sonship is security. It is very common among Christians today. “What is the basis of my assurance? That I am a son!” There is that platitude which says, “Once a son, always a son.” Sure, once a son, always a son, but what exactly does that mean? It says absolutely nothing of security as far as Scripture is concerned. The Bible is speaking constantly of lost sons. Being a son is no guarantee that you will not be lost. This is the whole point of this Parable of the Lost Son.

Do not build your spiritual security, if you are a Christian, simply on the notion that you are a son, and therefore, you are all right, and therefore, you can do

what you like; you can sin as much as you like, you can depart from God, and still be saved at the end. That is common teaching today in the churches, but I want to tell you on the basis of God's Word, that is heresy! That is not Scriptural teaching. Do not build your spiritual life on something that is not true. It may be very comforting. It may be very assuring, but it is simply not true.

Somebody said to me, "Christians — even though they may turn away from God, they may sin, they may do all kinds of things — they will still be saved!" Well, how do you justify that from the word of God? He said, "Very easy! It is because we are sons of God. And once a son, always a son." Oh, dear me! That notion of security is disastrous. Have you not read the Bible? The Bible is a book about lost sons. Adam was lost; he was a son. Israel was lost; he was a son. Angels were sons of God; they too got lost. And you are going to build your security simply on this statement, "I am a son"?

Sons of God — in a Wide Sense and a Special Sense

Now it is wonderful to be a son of God, I do not deny that for a single moment. It is indeed wonderful to be a son! And we are sons of God in a number of senses. There is a wide sense of the word 'son of God' that Paul speaks about in Acts 17:28 where he quotes one of the Greek poets that "*we are... his offspring.*" God is Father in the wide sense, in the sense in which we, as human beings, owe our existence to him. We owe our existence to our parents, but much more fundamentally, we owe our existence to God; in that sense he is Father, for "*in him we live and move and have our being. We are...his offspring.*" (Acts 17:28)

But there is a much closer sense. Just like in every family, there are some sons which are much closer to the father than other sons. So also, in the spiritual life, there are some sons which are much closer to God than others, who stand in a much closer relationship to the Father. We can be sons in this very special sense: we are sons in the sense of being adopted by God. Paul speaks of the adoption of sons in Rom 8:15: we "*have received the Spirit of adoption*". We are sons also by adoption, through regeneration.

Sonship and Repentance

Now we can see that the Bible uses the word 'son' in a very broad sense. Whatever sense of son we are talking about, you cannot simply stand there and say, "I am secure because I am a son." I am sorry for so many Christians today who have been taught that the kind of life they live does not matter; the quality of

your life does not matter; that whether you are holy or not holy does not matter; whether you sin does not matter.

In fact I asked one of these Christians, “Tell me something. Upon your doctrine, wherever you got your doctrine from, if a Christian commits murder, will he still be saved? Yes or no?” Do you know what his answer was? On the “once saved, always saved” theory, of course, you have to be saved, even if you commit murder; there is nothing you can do not to be saved. I continued, “So, the non-Christian commits, say, a small sin like stealing and he goes to hell. But the Christian can commit murder and still be saved? What kind of doctrine do you teach? Where do you get this from the Bible?”

The error comes from the logical conclusion that once you are a son you are always a son. Well, it is wrong logic because they forgot that you can be a son and still get lost! That is even more tragic than never having been a son at all.

Think about this very, very carefully. The Bible is a book about lost sons; it is tragic. Do you think that this son would have been saved if he had not repented? The parable is about a son who got lost and was saved — not because he was a son — but because he repented. He got saved on the basis of his repentance, not on the basis of his sonship. It would have made not the slightest difference if he had been a son if he had not repented. If he could be saved without repenting, we do not need this parable. The whole point of this parable is that he repented! That is why he was saved.

The Son Who Did Not Repent

But what about the elder son? Do you know what the elder son represents in the Bible? He is also a son. Look at the parables of the Lord Jesus, there are a couple of parables about two sons. The elder son always represents the scribes and the Pharisees, whereas the younger son always represents the



sinner and tax collectors. These are the two main groups of people in Israel: the scribes and the Pharisees on the one hand, the tax collectors and sinners on the other hand; those are the two sons. That is why he said to the Pharisees and scribes, “The tax collectors and sinners will go into the kingdom of God without you. [Mt 21:31] You will be left out. You will be there weeping and gnashing your teeth. But they, because they repent, will enter the kingdom.” Nobody

is saved without repentance. There is no Scriptural teaching that anyone is saved without repentance.

That is why John the Baptist, that great prophet of God, said, “Don’t say to yourselves ‘we are sons of Abraham, sons of God’ for God can raise sons out of these stones. But rather repent! Do not base your confidence on sonship.” But the Jews, like the Christians, based their confidence on sonship: “We are a chosen people. We are chosen, after all, by God.” I mean it is grace, true, but grace can give us a lot of pride, too. “After all, it is on his grace that he chose me, not you. He chose us, not the others.” That is ground for pride.

I want to show you that with such an attitude, you have not yet understood the Biblical teaching of sonship. That is why there in John Chapter 8, the Jews were saying to the Lord Jesus, “But we are sons; we are not born of fornication.” (v41) Sure, they were sons, but the Lord Jesus says, “You are sons of your father, the devil.” (v44) Sons of Abraham who are sons of the devil? Sons of Abraham are sons of promise! The Lord Jesus says, “No, it is by your fruit you have proved that you are nothing but sons of the devil.” That was not to insult them. It was simply a diagnosis of their spiritual condition. So, let us bear this point deeply in mind: that we must not base our confidence on the fact that we have been chosen to be sons.

Let us not be misled by false teaching in these days. I would say that the majority of the teaching in the church today tries to tell you that all you have to do is become a son. To become a son, brothers and sisters, is important. That is the first step. But do not imagine that sonship itself is the basis of certainty. There is no Scriptural foundation for that, because with the privilege comes responsibility. The more you receive, the more God will require from you. Because you are a son, he expects more from you. That is what he said to Israel, “Because you and you only of the peoples of the earth have I known, therefore will I judge you.” [Amos 3:1-2] That is the basis of his judgment.

Now bear this carefully in mind. Always remember this parable is a parable not about lost unbelievers, but it is a parable about lost sons. Try to get this carefully into your mind. In this case, the sons are even referring to the Jewish people, the two aspects of the Jewish people: the scribes and the Pharisees on the one hand, and the publicans, tax collectors and sinners on the other hand.

The Fatherhood of God — Our Loving Creator

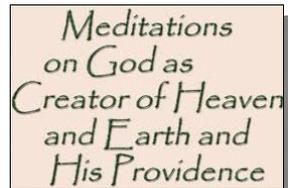
But now, let us notice on the other hand in this parable, the Fatherhood of God.

God is spoken of as Father. We have seen that the word ‘son’ is used in a wide sense, indicating that every person stands in a definite relationship to God. Even the unbeliever stands in a relationship to God. Why? How is that so? It is simply because God created him! He stands in a relationship to God because he owes his existence to God. In that sense he is God’s offspring, as Paul says in Acts 17:28. In that very wide sense of the word, God is also Father to him because he owes his existence to God. That being so, that means everybody is answerable to God. In one sense or another, God is Father to every person. But to us, he is Father in a much closer sense.

The Fatherhood of God — Our Redeemer, Abba Father!

We are sons, as Paul is careful to point out, basically by adoption. We have “*the Spirit of adoption*”. (Rom 8:15) Of course, there is, as John speaks of it, the ‘regeneration’. That is used to speak of sonship in a figurative sense. It must not be taken literally, but spiritually. That is to say, we are sons because we have been made anew by the power of God – “born again”. But Paul prefers to speak about this as the “new creation” that we have become new creatures in Christ, as he says in 2 Cor 5:17.

But seeing that God is Father to us, in one sense or another, and for us as Christians, in a deeper sense than that of a non-Christian, what is our attitude towards God? In what relationship do we stand with him? What is our attitude to him? The teaching of the Lord Jesus emphasizes this point to us very much: the Fatherhood of God. It is a very important point in the teaching of the Lord Jesus. The Bible points out to us — and even in the Lord Jesus’ teaching he points out — that God cares for the non-Christian also. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, he says that God causes the rain to fall upon the evil and the good, the righteous and the unrighteous. He does not make his rain only fall upon Christians. He makes his sunshine to shine upon the non-Christian as well as on the Christian. It is because he, as Father in that wide sense, provides for the needs of all his creation, including even the birds of the air, including the flowers of the field. But how then do we treat God as Father?



Meditations
on God as
Creator of Heaven
and Earth and
His Providence

We, as Christians, stand in a much closer sense to God because we know him not only as Creator, but also as Redeemer. We are bound to him in a kind of two-fold cord of sonship: both as Creator and as Redeemer. We can speak of God as “Abba, Father.” Not just as “Father”, but as “Abba, Father!” Now that

is the distinctive element of the Lord's teaching. "Abba" is what we would say in Mandarin, "Baba." I think I shared with you that in Shanghainese, in fact, we have the saying that is almost exactly like the Aramaic, the Hebrew. We say in Shanghainese, "Ah-ba," which is a very affectionate form of addressing your father. Sometimes you say "Dia-dia" but you also say, "Ah-ba." "Ah-ba" is exactly like the Hebrew, "Abba." "Abba Father!" Maybe Shanghainese originally came from Hebrew, we do not know. Maybe there is something in there. So, we find that there is something very beautiful about this.

Now the non-Christian cannot call God "Abba, Father." He cannot say that because that you can only say when you have the Spirit of God in you. "Abba" expresses an intimate relationship which the non-Christian could never enjoy. He does not have that kind of living relationship with God. He stands in a formal relationship with God, in the sense that God is his Father, in that wide sense of owing his existence to God. But he does not stand in this close intimate relationship that a child who is actually in communication with his father can enjoy. You do not go up to a stranger and say, "Daddy." He would look at you and ask, "Who are you? Why do you call me 'Daddy'? Who gave you the right to say that?" But you can come to your own father and say, "Daddy." He is happy with that. He has no problem because with him you have this intimate relationship.

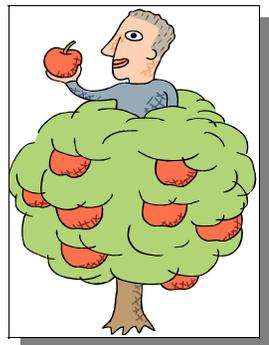
Lost Sons — Wherein Lies Our Sin?

For us, as Chinese people, probably the greatest sin that can be brought against a Chinese person would be to say that he was *'bù xiào'* 不孝 — not respecting his parents. Now if you could say of a child that he is *'xiào'* 孝 — among the Chinese anyway — I mean, that is about the worst thing you can say about any man. That he was a bank robber is not very important, so long as he is *'xiào'*. That is to say, he is still respectful to his parents. He is still loving his parents. You might almost pardon him for robbing the bank if he did it for his father. I mean, I think a Chinese judge would be inclined to be fairly lenient, very compassionate to someone who was actually doing this because of *'xiào'*. Say, his father was very sick and he could not pay the bills and so he robbed the bank. I think the judge — at least a Chinese judge — would be likely to be very merciful if everything was done out of *'xiào'*. Now if you could say to a man that he is *'bù xiào'*, he is a write off! As far as the Chinese are concerned, there is not even a grave to bury him in. He is not fit to be seen under heaven. He is finished.

If we understand this, how is it that we have not yet understood we owe our existence to God much more fundamentally! God is our Father in a much more fundamental sense than our own physical father. Look at creation and think of its origin. Think of the fruits you eat. Incredible! Look at an orange. An orange is packed just perfectly. It is packed in such a way that with this waxy skin outside, it retains its freshness for a very long time. When you peel it open, you find that the segments are bite-size, just the right size to pop into your mouth. You do not have to try and stuff the whole thing in your face. Each segment is just perfect. And the fragrance, the aroma, I mean, no cook can produce this. A chemist may try to duplicate the taste of ‘orange’, but that taste is just nothing like what my Father creates in his heavenly kitchen. One can tell the difference anytime; it may taste something like orange, but you can tell it is synthetic. Ah, but the real thing is perfect in taste and in sweetness! It is not so sweet that your mouth gets gummed up together. Sometimes you eat a sweet and you cannot open your mouth anymore. You chew a toffee and your teeth get stuck together. There is just too much sugar. Too gooey! But an orange is not too sweet; it is just perfectly balanced. That fragrance, that design is just perfect!

Then in God’s creation you have different kinds of everything. For example, an apple is something else. When you bite into an apple — as everyone knows — it cleans your teeth, it massages your gums. Everything is designed with a purpose. Just think about the variety of tastes! Now supposing God only made one kind of fruit, you would say, “What else is there to eat?” And yet, in this world there is a variety of fruits. Each one has its own flavor, its own sweetness, its own delicious taste.

Have you tasted those peaches? Whoa! Fantastic! Many times I eat a peach and the only word to describe it is ‘fantastic’! Each one is different — some are crunchy, some are soft. They do not all have the same texture. Different taste but same texture — well, that could be fairly boring, too. But each one has a different texture: some are crisp, some are soft. It is just so incredibly amazing!



When you eat those fruits, do you think of their origin, where do they come from? Or do you take it for granted? You just pop it in your mouth? If so then, you really do not understand what the joy of life is. It is so wonderful to be a Christian because it is so meaningful. It is just so wonderful. I think not to be a Christian is to live only a fraction of your life. You really cannot enjoy life.

You cannot enjoy the beauty, the design, the purpose, the structure of things. Look at the flower. What useful function does a flower have? We Chinese are very utilitarian. We always think, “What is the practical use of this? If it has no use, forget it! You give me a bunch of flowers; I look at them with disgust. What can I do with flowers? I cannot eat flowers. I cannot make clothing out of flowers. I mean, what do you do with flowers? This is such a waste!” But think for a moment. Look at that flower. Do not just think of its uses. Think of its colors, the varieties, the shapes, the fragrance. Those are things which bring joy and beauty and pleasure. It widens our minds because it shows us aspects of beauty that we have not yet comprehended. Everything has a purpose and a design. God, in his purpose, has a plan for each of these things.

Or look at the number of trees. You know, ever since coming to Canada, I have really come to appreciate trees. It is amazing that I walked through life without ever looking at trees. To me, every tree was the same; it was just one green blob there. That was all it was, until I began to look at trees, and then it dawned on me, that there are just so many kinds of trees! Hundreds of varieties of trees! Each leaf has a different shape, a different design. It turns a different color in autumn. Trees have different functions: some are hardwood and some are softwood. If we only had softwood, we would have problems building houses. The wood even comes in different colors, in different grains. It is amazing!



As the Chinese saying goes, ‘*yǐn shuǐ sī yuán*’ 饮水思源, that is, when you drink the water, think of the origin. Think of it. I think it is truly wonderful to be a Christian. It is really an exciting life, especially when you do what we are taught as Chinese to do: Think back of the origin of these things. I think back of the origin of all this and then I have a heart of worship, of reverence, of ‘*xiào*’ 孝, of piety towards God, and I say, “Thank you, God. Your ways are just so wonderful. You are such a wonderful Father to me. Such is your kindness to me – your graciousness, your goodness!” Ah! It is really wonderful. The more you understand, the more amazing it is.

I have a friend who studied physics. He said the more he studied physics, the more he was filled with awe at the amazing creation of God. He is just filled with devotion. I have another friend who studied medicine. One day he was ecstatic. “It’s truly wonderful! Wonderful — the design of God!” I wondered

what he was talking about. “The knee joint!” Well, I never thought of the knee joint as something wonderful. I do not seem to possess the prettiest pair of knees around the place. It seemed to be just a bony thing sticking out there in front. But he was raving about it, “The design of the knee is amazing! It is fantastic!” Well, up to that point, I had never seen anyone getting excited about knees. But yes, the knee is truly wonderful.

The more you know about God’s creation, the more you understand of its design and purpose, the more exciting it gets. The trouble with us is our ignorance. That is the problem with us. If only we understood more, the wonderful thing about the structure of our brain, the structure of our whole being and purpose, the way all things have been designed — we would have *‘xiào’*, we would worship God, “God, you are truly wonderful!” Now, our parents, we owe them a lot. They have been very kind to us. They have been very gracious to us and we owe them the honor and the respect that is due to them. But how much more we owe it to God who is the Father of all fathers, the parent of all parents! As the Bible says, “He is the Father of all fatherhood.” [c.f. Mal 2:10, Heb 12:9, Eph 4:6]

God, the Exceedingly Compassionate Father

Now, this takes us to the next point in this parable. It is that God is presented as a father who is exceedingly compassionate. As I said last time, we need to correct our understanding of God. We constantly have a concept of God as *‘Shàng Di’* 上帝. In Chinese, *‘Shàng Di’* means God. *‘Shàng Di’* means the Emperor above (*‘Shàng’* means above and *‘Di’* means emperor). We honor God and respect him and fear him as *‘Shàng Di’*, the Emperor that is above all emperors.



We have in Peking [now Beijing] the *‘Tiān Tán’* 天坛 (Temple of Heaven) I visited the *‘Tiān Tán’* in my student days when I was in Peking. I was very impressed with the *‘Tiān Tán’*. It is a beautiful structure. Inside one part of it, there is a building with nothing there except the words *‘Shàng Di’*, God — Emperor of Heaven! As Chinese, we tend to think of the word *‘Di’*, emperor, as some awesome being, filled with power and we do not associate the idea of compassion with the Emperor. But with the Bible, we have to learn to think differently. God is exceedingly compassionate.

Apparently, once a year the Emperor would go to the 'Tiān Tán' and offer up sacrifice to God. It is a really amazing thing that in China, even before the Bible days, there was a concept of one God, 'Shàng Dì', sometimes in the ancient classics spoken of as 'Tiān', exactly as in the Bible. In Matthew, you have the word 'heaven' which actually means 'God'; it is the Hebrew metonym for God. In Chinese, it is the same thing: 'Tiān' refers to God, not just the sky. The further back you go into ancient classics, you will find 'Tiān' is always referring to God. 'móu shì zài rén, chéng shì zài tiān' 谋事在人, 成事在天, i.e., to plan is with man, to accomplish it is with 'Tiān', i.e., with God. It is not with the 'sky', but with 'God'. So, we have quite a clear concept of God in China. The Emperor went to offer up sacrifice to God because he understood that we owe everything to God fundamentally — he understood that! — and that we owe him allegiance. Therefore, there is a sense of God as an awesome Being. Unfortunately, the concept was not so much as 'father' as was 'emperor'. But here we find this word "compassion" in v20. Here I would like to draw your attention to the beauty of the Biblical teaching on compassion.

The New Testament References to Compassion

In the NT, the word translated here as "compassion", for those of you who know some Greek, is 'σπλαγχνίζομαι' (splugchnizomai). And 'σπλαγχνίζομαι' (splugchnizomai) comes from the Greek word 'σπλάγχνον' (splugchnon) which means the inward parts of the body, basically referring to the heart, the liver, the lungs. This was called the 'σπλάγχνον' (splugchnon), the bowels, the inner part of the person. And then, by way of metaphor, it came to mean the deep-seated feelings within you. And so, it means compassion in the sense that God feels for us with his inward being. It expresses the depth of feeling. This word is only used when you want to express deep feeling, not just any kind of feeling. That is the word used here in this parable. The father had compassion, that is, the father had a deep inner sense of empathy, of sympathy, of feeling for this lost but repentant son.

Now this word is used in the NT, very interestingly, with particular reference to the Lord Jesus, except in the parable of the Lost Son:

1. The first time it is used in Mt 9:36 is of the Lord Jesus when he looked upon the crowd of people, and it says, "*He had compassion for them, because they were... like sheep without a shepherd.*" When he looks at us here, you can be sure that the Lord Jesus looks upon us with deep feeling, deep compassion, as people who are in need of a shepherd.

2. The second time it is used is in respect to the feeding of the hungry multitude in the wilderness. When he saw their hunger and their need in the desert place, he had compassion on them. The reason he fed the multitude was not because he wanted to do a miracle. That is often the mistaken notion. The Bible tells us that he fed the 5,000 people because he had compassion on them. He was sorry that they were hungry. You read that in Mt 14:14 & Mt 15:32.
3. The third time we find in the Gospels that the Lord Jesus is said to have compassion was on a leper. It is the kind of person that many people have no time for — ugly people, full of wounds covering their face and their body. Lepers are social outcasts. Nobody wanted to come near them for fear that they would get contaminated. The Lord Jesus looked on the leper and had compassion upon him. That is in Mk 1:41.
4. The fourth time it is said that the Lord Jesus had compassion, this deep inner feeling, was on those two blind men in Mt 20:34. He looked upon these two blind people with compassion. To be blind was to be condemned to be a beggar because in that society you would not be able to find a job. You would have to spend your life being a beggar.
5. The fifth time it says he had compassion on the widow at Nain, this poor widow who had lost her only son. She was going through the streets following the body of her dead son to the burial ground, weeping at having lost her only son. The Lord Jesus came by and looked upon her and had compassion. He felt deeply for her. He stopped the funeral procession and he raised her son. Again he did a miracle, not because he wanted to prove that he can raise people from the dead. Jesus never went around impressing anybody; he never tried to prove anything. He did these things out of compassion. Remember that. He raised her son because he had pity on her. (Lk 7:13)

The Word ‘Compassion’ in Jesus’ Teaching

It is also used in the Lord’s own teaching three times:

1. The first time, in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, in Lk 10:33.
2. The second time is in our parable here in Lk 15:20, where the father had compassion upon that pitiful figure of his son coming back thin, exhausted, dressed in rags, and barefooted. That was his son and the father

had compassion upon him.

3. And the last time is in Mt 18:27, where that servant was not able to pay his debt and the master had compassion and forgave him his debt. However, that servant failed to have compassion upon others.

All this beautiful picture here of the Fatherhood of God, expressing this deep inner compassion, is beautifully exemplified in the life of Christ and in his teaching. “...*Truly, truly, I say to you, the son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the son does likewise.*” (John 5:19) And the words of Lk 6:36, “*Be merciful, ... as your Father (in heaven) is merciful.*” sum up everything for us. Our Father is compassionate. Here then we have seen the beauty of this picture of the sonship of man and the Fatherhood of God.

The Three Parables — Each Has a Complementary Point

With regard to the matter of salvation, we noticed that for the two previous parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, in each case, the coin or the sheep is passive. It is the shepherd who does everything, or it is the woman who does everything. Now here we have an important principle in understanding parables. This is the point that you must bear in mind: each parable presents one point, one fundamental point. Do not take one parable as though it teaches everything there is to say. No! Each parable illustrates one point.

If you only took the Parable of the Lost Sheep, for example, you would come up with the wrong doctrine — and I have to warn you of that — that God does everything and man does nothing in salvation. That is, man is completely passive. He sits there and waits for God to save him. After all, what does the sheep do? The sheep does nothing. It just sits there and does nothing. It waits for God to come and save him. Now if you build a doctrine of salvation on that alone, you will end up in some form of Calvinism: the passivity of man in the face of the activity of God. But you see, those two parables are now complemented more fully with the third parable.

In this Parable of the Lost Son, you will find that, in fact, the father is the one who is inactive. He stays at home and does nothing, apart from looking out for the son. It is the son who does everything; he is the one who repents. He is the one who decides what he is going to say to the father. He is the one who returns to the father.

Now if you build a doctrine of salvation only on this parable, you will also become lopsided because, then, you would say that man does everything and God does nothing. No, you must have all three parables together, then you have the complete picture. I would repeat again that the error of Calvinism rests exactly on this point: the error of only concentrating on the first two parables and neglecting the third parable, the Parable of the Lost Son, so that it says that God does everything and you just do nothing. You just sit back and wait for God to save you. In fact, even your faith is a gift. You do not actually have any faith at all; it is given to you, so that even in faith you are passive. Now that is extremism and that is really incorrect scripturally. The Lord Jesus does not teach this at all.

Repentance — Waking Up to the Spiritual Reality of God’s Love

What the Lord Jesus teaches is that what brings about repentance in the son is the remembrance of the love of the father. In this whole parable, notice it is the son who is the active one, right up to the point that he returns home. Now this is very important to grasp. Once we see that, we also notice that repentance is a state of waking up — waking up to spiritual reality! As we noticed already there in v17, it says, “*he came to himself*”. He woke up!

That is very important. If you do not know God yet, then you are like this prodigal son who is still asleep. You have not come to your senses yet. You have not come to understand spiritual reality. You are still living in a dream. It is time to wake up to the reality of God! Now some people do not wake up until they get a very hard hit. This son did not wake up. He was still living in his unreal world, until he got into the mess that he was in.

You know, this parable is a parable about myself, that was exactly me. I lived in an unreal world. I thought of myself as someone who was really an agnostic or an atheist, whichever one. I hesitated between the two. Philosophically, agnosticism is somewhat more respectable. Atheism is not respectable; it has no philosophical ground to stand on. But I hesitated between those two things. I lived in this unreal world built in my own self, until I ran into this problem that this prodigal son ran into, until I sat one day in a Communist prison camp. And then I woke up! I said, “What am I doing here?” Just like the prodigal son, I said, “What am I doing here? I, who could have been at home with my father and living in this abundant life, am sitting here with the pigs.” That was where I was. I was sitting there in a prison courtyard under the surveillance of a Communist machine gun. And then I woke up! It took that kind of a mess to bring me to my senses. I said to myself, “What am I doing here?” Then I looked up

and I said, “What about God, the God that I don’t believe in?” And then for the first time, I said to myself, “I know what I will say. I will say this to God...” I formulated a prayer in my mind and then I prayed that prayer. I returned! And to my amazement I found that God was so compassionate. The God that I had dealt with so shamefully was so compassionate.

The Sin of the Lost Son — He Turned His Back on His Father

You may not think that you have committed any sins. Look at this prodigal son. When he left his home, did he insult his father? Did he abuse his father? Did he swear at his father? No! Did he steal anything from his father? No! He asked for what was his portion and he got it. It was maybe shameful in a way, cheeky in a way, but it was not illegal. It was not sinful. He broke no laws. How shall we look at this situation then? Was he in any way rude in his behavior to his father? No! So, he did not steal; he did not murder; he did not do anything bad. What was his sin? What did the prodigal son do wrong? Only one thing: he turned his back on his father. That is what he did.

What do you do wrong as a non-Christian? Is your crime that you committed murder? You stole? You robbed a bank? No! It is that you have turned your back upon God. You are ‘*bù xiào*’ 不孝 in the fundamental sense. You have denied God the glory that is his due, the Father of all fathers who is the source of our life. That is the crime. That was my crime. That was what I had done. And perhaps I did commit more than that: I insulted the Christians, I ridiculed the Christians; but I had not called God any names. I had not been stealing; I had not robbed anyone; I had done none of those things. But I had done the worst thing of all: I had turned my back upon God! I had showed him my back and said, “I have no time for you. I’m going this way. Bye-bye.”

But when I turned back to him — I knew that I had no right to talk to him — how great was his compassion! He ran to meet me. There I met with God, of all places, in a Communist prison camp. What an amazing place! I say, I really thank God for the Communists in this sense. If the Communists never came, I never would have become a Christian. You see, everything has a purpose in life, even the Communists. If China never turned Communist, I do not think I would ever have become a Christian.

It took all that to make me wake up to reality. I awoke, came out of sleep, and met with God. I have never quite been able to describe that encounter with God – sitting there in that courtyard — but in that amazing experience in the prison courtyard, I met with God. I spoke with him. I experienced him in a way

that nobody who has not experienced God can understand. There is no way to describe it: God was all around me and my whole being was filled with joy, a joy that I could not understand. There was no logical way I could understand this encounter with God.

There are so much riches in here but I must close, and so I have to make this point very brief. This point is illustrated also from my own experience in the prison camp. It was not until God had so dealt with me, when he brought me so low, low into the gutter, that I was ready to meet with him.

What do you think of this? If this son, while he was sitting there among the pigs, thought to himself, “Well, I am still a son, aren’t I? My name is still Chang, isn’t it? His name is Chang, my name is Chang, then I am still his son! I mean, if I go to a court of law, would he deny that he is my father and I am his son?” Suppose he decided, “I will go back and say, ‘Come on, Dad! After all, you know, I’m Sonny Boy here. You know me, don’t you? I’m a bit dirty now, but hey, my name is still Chang, isn’t it? And your name is Chang, right? You are my Dad. I mean, you can’t deny that. Here’s my birth certificate. See! Here’s the proof!”

Sonship Is Grace — Grace Cannot Be Demanded

It seems to me there are so many Christians who behave like this. They think that one day they are going to come before God in heaven, and say, “Look, this is my baptismal certificate. I was baptized in this church. A very good church that was, Gospel Church in Montreal. It was not a bad place to be. And look at the date there. Certified — there it is! There’s the pastor’s signature. Even if you can’t read it, it sure is the pastor’s signature. It is legal! So, here I am! I’m claiming my salvation. I haven’t been much of a Christian. I grant you that. I mean, I have sinned quite a lot. I did lots nasty things in my time. Maybe my Christian life was not even as good as the non-Christian, I must admit that. But, anyway, here is my baptismal certificate. I am a son and here I am.” So many Christians think that God is going to say, “Oh, hi, Sonny Boy! Since you have your baptismal certificate, then I am your Father. Alright then, you can come back home.” If you think like that, you are going to be in for a shock! We are talking about sonship in this parable. If you base your salvation on a claim to sonship, you are finished! That is no exaggeration!

The lost son in this parable only truly became a son when he knew that he was not fit to be a son. He became a son only for the first time when he knew that he had no right to be a son. It was at that point that he became a son. That is the

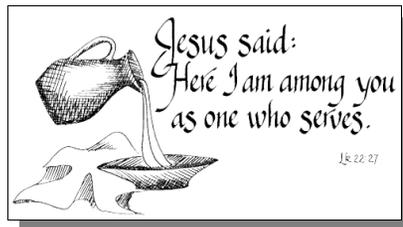
fundamental difference with the older son who was a son and yet not a son. We must grasp deeply and understand deeply. It is only when he said to himself, "I will say to my father, 'I am not fit to be your son. Give me a place among your servants' " that he was ready to receive grace. Nobody is fit to receive grace who thinks that he has a right to grace. Grace is not grace if you can demand it.

Beware of any doctrine or teaching which says that you can demand your salvation on the Day of Judgment; that you have a right to it because you believed on such a day and such a month. Anyone who thinks in that way is going to be in for a shock. The only kind of person who is going to inherit the Kingdom is the poor. "*Blessed are the poor....*" They have no rights. They claim no rights. They come simply as humble poor.

When I come before God on that Day, let me tell you, I would be a fool if I came before God and said, "God, You know I am a pastor. Yeah, I have been preaching the Gospel for many years! I preached in many meetings and many conferences. I mean, all these people know. You call these people here. I mean, there are thousands of people here. You just look at them. They have heard me preaching, right? I am a Christian. Not only so, I am a pastor. So, if anybody has a right to be in the kingdom of God, here I come! Let the angels get their trumpets ready." Huh! I tell you, if I came to God like this, he would have no time for me at all. No time whatsoever!

True Sonship — Servanthood

On that Day when I come before God, I will say, "Lord, I have nothing to present to you. I have no claims. Only be pleased to accept me as your unworthy servant. I have done what I could. My work is very poor. I have tried, though, to do my best in your grace. But with my limitations, that work is poor. Per-



haps, Lord, you will be gracious to receive me among your servants." Now that is the only kind of attitude that God will ever look at. He has no time for the proud, no time for the self-confident. And if you have ever received a doctrine or a teaching that puts you in so-called assurance, which is nothing but complacency, forget it! There is no Biblical foundation for that. This son, as the Lord Jesus tells us, was accepted as he came back to the father, pleading only for a place among the servants. Bear that in mind! Bear that in mind. I pray that we might learn this attitude, for that is the key to this whole parable. If this parable

teaches us anything at all, it is precisely at this point that it is teaching us something. It is not just that the son returned. It is how he returned that mattered. What fundamental change in his attitude had taken place!

That great apostle of the Lord, Paul himself, boasts only in one title, and that is, “slave of Jesus Christ.” He claims no higher distinction than to be among the slaves of Jesus. You know, the hired servants are even in a higher position than slaves. The hired servants had a certain independence; the slaves had none. Paul only would desire to have a place among the slaves of Jesus Christ. He does not boast of sonship; he does not even speak of these things in terms of himself. He says very generally, “Yes, we are sons. We await the adoption of sons, but above all things, I glory in this one thing: the privilege of simply being a servant of Jesus Christ.”

A servant or a slave, when he has done everything, has acquired no honor and no merit. He has done simply what is his job to do. Have you ever seen a servant or a slave come before the master and say, “Here I am! Look at my achievement”? Whatever you have done, no matter how great that achievement, it is nothing more than what you should have done in the first place.

This is what is meant by ‘salvation by grace’. Grace means: I have nothing on which to boast; I have no claim, not even to boast of a sonship that was given to me. The most dangerous thing is to boast about grace, as though grace somehow becomes your right. Let me remind you again, in Scriptural teaching, anything that is of right is not of grace. What you receive ‘by right’, you earn by work. What is of grace is always of grace. If we become sons, we are never sons by right. Even when I am a son, I cannot claim my sonship as a right because it is always grace, and grace is never of right.

Up to that Day, I will stand before God as nothing, but simply a humble repentant sinner saved by grace, coming to God my Father, and saying, “Here I am, joyful to receive of your grace, and continuing to receive.” I have confidence not because I am a son, but because of his compassion. My confidence is not in me, in my position, not even in a position granted to me, but only and always in what he is — my compassionate Father.

But he will not be compassionate to those who are arrogant, to those who are proud, to those who wave their sonship about as though it was something that they could claim by right, or demand by right. These people do not understand sonship. And yet, the church today is full of Christians who say, “Oh, I am assured because I am a son of God.” You live like a son? Behave like a son? And

you will only live and behave like a son when you live and behave as a person who knows that you have no right to sonship, not even a right to be among the hired servants. I wonder if you can understand that.

May God grant that we may come back to the Father day by day. I hope that I practice this every day, so that on that Day, I will come before him in full assurance of faith, the full assurance of faith being in his compassion, compassion to those who are humble and meek. That is the assurance that the Lord Jesus speaks about, "he that comes to me, I will not cast out." (Jn 6:37) That is my assurance, not in the assurance that I am something, that I am a son of God. Never base your assurance on anything but God, or in anyone but God.



End of message.

This is an edited transcription of the message.

The editors accept full responsibility for arrangement and addition of Bible references.

*All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version,
unless otherwise specified.*

Merry
★
Christmas

EXPLANATION OF COVER

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

John 3:16-17 NASV



From the Editor's Desk

To Our Dear Readers:

May the word of God, expressed in this issue of the Oasis, in the Parable of the Lost Son, shows us once again the way back to the Father. May we all wake up to the spiritual reality of God's love especially in this Christmas season.

Warmest wishes for a blessed Christmas and a fruitful New Year!

*From
The Oasis Team*



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