

Sermon for Sunday, May 22, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"WHEN YOUR MAIN COURSE IS CROW"

St. Luke 15:11-24

Text: "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

St. Luke 15:19a

A few days ago, our bus was traveling in the mountainous area near Galilee. It was rugged country, but the people who lived there had worked hard to reclaim the land from the rocks. The sides of the mountains were carefully terraced with the rocks picked out of the soil. Still, there were little areas that could not be reclaimed and often the rocks were too numerous to remove them all. Someone in the group commented, "Until now I never could completely understand the parable Jesus told about the seed that fell on the path, and some on the rocky soil, and some among the weeds and some on the good ground. Now it is obvious what he meant." That observation brought home again to me something about the parables of Jesus. They were always taken from real life. They always spoke directly to the listeners in terms that they could understand - in terms that came from their own lives. And so it is with us. Somehow we realize that Jesus is not really talking about a merchantman buying a pearl, or sowers going out to sow, or two men standing in the temple praying. No, He is talking about us. And as we read these parables of Jesus, we find ourselves being pulled into the center of them, becoming the central figures in a little drama of intense reality because we know he is talking about us. And as we look at the parables of Jesus, they suddenly become a mirror in which we see our own lives sharply reflected.

This is particularly true of the parable of the prodigal son. If we don't see ourselves as the star of the play, we have missed the point. Since it is obviously a story about you and me, with both of us playing the leading role of the prodigal, let's spend a few minutes this morning looking at the story to see what we can learn about ourselves.

One of the first things we discover in the story is that the prodigal misunderstands the nature of freedom. He is a privileged person in the home of a wealthy father. He has servants to wait upon him and he lacks for nothing. Yet, something is wrong. He is not happy. And what is his problem? Well, his problem is his father. Father has put restrictions on him. No matter which way he turns, he keeps tripping over the rules his father puts on him. Father says, "You must do this and you must do that." Father says, "You must not do that thing and you must not do this thing". And, like most boys, he kept wondering when he could ever be his own man, his own boss. How is a person ever to develop his own life, become a person in his own right if he keeps falling over the rules and regulations of an old man who doesn't know what the score is?

So, the son chaffed under the restrictions of his father and longed for the day when he would be his own man; when he could live his life in freedom and do as he pleased. When he could stand it no longer, he flared up at his father, "I can't stand this constant training. I want to be my own man, stand on my own two feet, do what I want to do. I want to be free of all your restrictions and rules and regulations. They get in my way. I want to be free to do what I want to do."

So it was that one day he said to his father, "Give me my inheritance and let me go." And with his money in his pocket, he set out, lighthearted and free. Now he was his own man, accountable to no one, and he could do as he pleased. When he arrived in a far country that appealed to him, he began to live in style, doing all the things he had always wanted to do. He lived in a fine home, dressed in elegant clothes, ate at the finest places. He gave parties, drank as much as he liked,

stayed out as late as he pleased, did whatever his passions desired. And, like a sponge soaking up water, his desires and lusts and passions kept soaking up his life and his money. So it was one morning he woke up to find that his bank account was overdrawn, his rent was past due and he had nothing. His so-called friends were no longer interested in him and he was starving to death. In sheer desperation he took the only job he could find, a menial task of keeping pigs for some wealthy farmer.

Out there in the field with the pigs he made a startling discovery. He discovered he was not free after all. No, he was the slave of his needs, the servant of his circumstances. He didn't want to be where he was or what he was, but he had no alternative. No, he was not free after all for his circumstances were his master. Looking back on those last few months he made another discovery. He had never been free. No, he had been the servant of his desires, the slave of his passions. He had been the prisoner of his own desire for freedom. And as he realized that, another discovery began to dawn on him. The restrictions of his father had not been to keep him from being free, but to make him truly free. All the time he had thought freedom was doing as one pleased, only to awaken in the chains of his own making. No, freedom was something far different. Real freedom lay in rising above one's passions and lusts and desires and wants. Real freedom lay in mastering one's self rather than in being mastered by self.

Does that make sense to you? It is not real freedom to observe no limits, have no rules, know no reverence. For example, a person may feel free to experiment with drugs, only to awake to the realization that he is no longer free. Drugs have become his master and he has become the slave of his freedom. So with God's laws. When we ignore them and violate them, we are not being free. We are rather selling our freedom for a dreadful spiritual captivity to the worst that is in us. Our freedom becomes our undoing. And the person who, for example, takes the freedom to violate the moral laws awakens to find himself in a pig sty of broken and degraded character. Jesus once said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Yes, God's laws for us are designed to give us real freedom - to set us free so that we never become captives to the lowest, the vilest, the worst that is in us.

So the first thing we learn from this parable is that the prodigal misunderstands the nature of true freedom. It wasn't what he thought at all. The second thing we can learn from the parable is that the prodigal misunderstands the nature of what he has. There in the far country he lived in a glorious style. He bought what he pleased, spent what he liked, lived as he wished. But never once did he stop to remember that all he had came from his father. Never once did it cross his mind that without his father he would have none of these things. The whole point, I think, is this: he used what he had without reference to his father. But - and this is the point - as he uses what he has this way, without thinking of who gave it to him - it becomes his undoing. See how it worked! He filled his house with furniture his closets with clothes, his garage with cars, his refrigerator with six-paks. That didn't satisfy. So he joined the country club, the racquet club, the luncheon club, but that didn't meet his need either. So he took trips, he gave parties, and he tried to keep busy, spending more and more to meet his needs, but still something was missing.

Life doesn't work very well that way, does it? Life has to have more meaning than that. When we spend what we have without reference to the Father - when we spend what we have without remembering where it came from, we always end up with something missing. When we spend what we have without trying to please the Father, we end up not even pleasing ourselves. So a man can have the finest the world has to offer and at the same time not really have a thing.

The third thing I would call to our attention is this: the prodigal found himself in a far country. Isn't it true that doing your own thing without reference to anyone else always lands you in a far country? Because he had not cared about anyone, there was no one to care about him. His actions had led him far from his father and he couldn't see the light burning in the window. No, he was in a far country.

Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever feel you are living among strangers, lonely and cut-off, and that no one really cares? Many people feel that way today. And it is so often because we are living our lives without reference to anyone else and loneliness is always the result. Suddenly we want people to love us and care about us, we want God to do something about our problem. But we are in a far country, reaping the fruits of the way we have lived.

The fourth thing I would remind us of is this: the prodigal had already spent his inheritance. It was forever gone. It is true that his father took him back in, but the father said to the elder brother, "all I have is yours." No, something was irretrievably gone. The father had already given the prodigal what was his and what was left belonged to his brother. Nothing could change that. It is true that the elder brother turns out to have some characteristics we don't admire too much. It is true that he exhibits some small and mean attitudes. But it is also true he had not forfeited his inheritance. I think we need to remember that. If we are tempted to be prodigal, if we live like the rebellious son, the Father will always welcome us home, but something is irretrievably gone and nothing can change that.

Then notice finally that the prodigal went home only when he realized he was at the end of his own road. Out there in the field with the pigs, as hunger gnawed at him, the prodigal realized he had reached the end of his road. It had been such a promising road, all downhill, broad and smooth. But now it had led him to disaster and despair, dead-ending in the pig sty. In the realization that he had reached the end, he turned his steps homeward again. He was no longer worthy of the Father's love and he knew that. Now his main dish would have to be crow and he would say to his father, "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." Realizing that was part of reaching the end of his own road.

I suspect that a lot of us are at the end of our road this morning. Are you? Are you in some far country, hungry for love, hungry for someone to care? Has the road you've been traveling carried you where you really wanted to go or has it dead-ended in a place you never wanted to be? If your life isn't what you want, you can return to the Father. We are no longer worthy of the Father's love - we know that. But if you want to come home - just as you are - the Bible tells us the Father is already waiting. You see, the father still loved the prodigal, and God still loves you.