Chapter 6

Taking Responsibility

The Parable of the Lost Son
{Matthew 15:11-24}
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One Main Thing

God is always ready to be in a relationship with the person who will take responsibility.

Introduction

We usually refer to it as the Parable of the Lost (or Prodigal) Son, even though it may be more about the son who never left home in the first place. Luke 15 features two parables about the way people should react when that which was lost has been found, and a third story about the way in which the Pharisees of Jesus' day reacted when sinners were being converted. In any event, there are also valuable lessons to be learned from the younger son who purposefully left. The story of his demise and return helps us better understand what it looks like to take responsibility.

Setting

Jesus sets up a scenario in the parable that while unusual, was not completely unheard of in that day. The younger son in this wealthy family wants to leave home and asks for his inheritance immediately. While the father was under no obligation to divide up his estate right away, he grants the son's request (v.12). Since this was the younger of the two sons making the request, he would receive one third of the estate while his older brother would be entitled to eventually receive two-thirds.

Interpretation

Several powerful words and phrases are used in verses 13–15 to describe the way in which the young man destroys his life. He journeys into a distant country and squanders (scatter, strew, waste) his estate with loose living (riotous, foolish). After he spends everything, he is completely unprepared for the severe famine that occurs. As a result, he begins to be impoverished (destitute). His desperate circumstances result in his taking the only job he can find: feeding pigs. A Jew feeding pigs? A bad day and a bad life for sure! He is out of relationship with his father, and he needs to wake up.

Application

While Jesus sets up an extreme scenario, it is not uncommon to see a young person today decide to leave home to get out of his parents' house. Sometimes leaving home also results in leaving God. But the parable is about so much more than leaving. It is also about coming home. The crossroads question that Jesus has been leading His audience to throughout Luke 15 is, "What happens next when a person who has been out of relationship with God returns?"

Jesus also teaches about taking responsibility—a prerequisite to returning. In the video message, we used the analogy of having a flat tire to help us understand the urgency associated with taking responsibility. In other words, when one of the tires on my car is flat, fixing it always becomes a dominant priority. For the person who will be successful at taking responsibility, the lost son helps illustrate that three things must happen.

I must see change as being necessary.

On the day this lesson is being written, a professional athlete is very much in the news, because his life is crashing down around him. He appears to have an addiction problem, but he

seems to be blind to it and in denial. He's been arrested. There have been accusations of domestic violence. He's been cut by the team that had been paying him piles of money. His parents can't seem to get through to him, and now his agent has cut ties with him. The young man probably hasn't hit rock bottom yet, but it can't be far away.

In our parable, it takes hitting rock bottom for the lost son to see his need to change. In verse 16, he gets so hungry that he becomes the Jew who wants to eat pig food! That's a rock bottom day for any self-respecting Jew! But then the verse also says, "and no one was giving anything to him." The owner of those pigs seems to be taking better care of his pigs than he is of his employee.

But then from the bottom of the pig pen, verse 17 says that the lost son "came to his senses." He finally awakens to the idea that his life didn't have to be the way that it had become. He realizes that his father's hired men have it much better than he does in that dirty pig pen. The people that work for his father always have plenty to eat. Our young man finally sees that a change is necessary.

I must take ownership of the problem—no matter whose fault it is.

The second key to taking responsibility is to take ownership of the problem. The lost son takes ownership in verses 17–18 of the text. He begins planning his return home, and he determines that he will use three powerful words when he meets his father. Verse 18 tells us that his confession will include the statement, "I have sinned..." We struggle with that one sometimes, don't we?

And did you notice the second part of this key step? It's the idea of taking ownership even when there may be the temptation to find someone else or something else to blame. The young man is in the pig pen, and he takes ownership of his bleak reality. Think about some of the places he could have attempted to place blame:

- His father—Why didn't my dad try to protect me from me? Why did he give me all of that money, especially if he knew I wasn't ready for it? Surely some of this must be his fault!

- The people who helped him waste his money—I had a lot of so-called friends when I was rolling in money. Surely they must take some blame for helping me waste it!

- The severe famine—That famine has to be partly to blame. Things never would have

gotten this bad had there not been a famine!

- The people who still had money but wouldn't help him when he was down and out—If those folks had just given me a meal or two, it never would have been this bad!

- The guy who hired him to feed pigs—It sure seems like he could have taken a little bit better care of me than he did!

In taking responsibility, the lost son didn't try to play the blame game. The question for us is, do we blame or do we take responsibility?

I must determine to live obediently.

A plan never makes a positive difference until it is put into action. Verses 20–21 of the text reveal that the lost son came home and humbled himself before his father. He confessed his sin. He expressed that he was unworthy to be called a son. He determined to obediently return, no matter what that might look like when he got back home. How much less regret would we have if our priority could always be to live obediently?

The lost son made a purposeful decision to walk away. A loving God has blessed us with the freedom

of choice, and sometimes we make unwise choices. What God wants, though, is obedient living. Jesus paints a powerful picture of our God when He depicts God the Father as watching for and running to greet that returning son. He welcomes His son back, not as a hired hand, but as a son. And the celebration begins (verses 22–24)!

Conclusion

Is there a "flat tire" in your life today that has either stranded you spiritually or perhaps is preventing you from reaching your potential? If so, do you have the courage to take responsibility for it? If you do and if you will, you can know that God the Father is anxiously waiting to welcome you with open arms! God is always ready to be in a relationship with the person who will take responsibility.

Discussion

1. Explain why a Jew feeding pigs would be such a "rock bottom" event.

2. Who are some of the people that the lost son could have chosen to blame?

3. Why do we often have so much trouble saying out loud, "I have sinned"?

4. In the video message we talked about some spiritual flat tires. Are there more specific names we could put on the spiritual "flat tires" that plague us most in the twenty-first century?

5. What do we learn about God from this parable, and how should that knowledge help us be more successful with taking responsibility?