15 The Prodigal Or Lost Son

The Role Of Repentance-From-Sin

In Luke 15:17-24, we find the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Perhaps it should be called the Parable of the Lost Son. Jesus explains later that this son was “lost” but then found. (Luke 15:24.)

This parable is about being spiritually dead and lost, coming to your senses, repenting, turning around and going home to your father. The Father-God in the Parable says the son was dead but is now alive again. Thus, this parable also is a message about the steps to be born again.

We are all familiar with the plot. The younger son wasted his inheritance in riotous living (vv 13,30). He came to be in need and “came to himself” (vv 14-17). He first verbalized repentance and then took all the steps of repentance. Jesus explained:

- The Prodigal acknowledged his error: “I have sinned.” (v18).
- The Prodigal no longer believed himself worthy to be called a son (v19).
- The Prodigal decided to go back to the father (vv 18,19). He thereby left the practice of sin (vv 20,21). This decision is a turning around in repentance. (Cf. vv 7,10)
- The Prodigal confesses his sin to the father (vv 20,21).
- The Prodigal seeks to appease his father by offering to be just a servant of the father (vv 19,21).

The Father is overjoyed when the son comes home. (vv 20,22-24.) This parallels Jesus statement that there is joy in heaven among the angels when a sinner “repents” (vv 7,10).
This is all about repentance-from-sin and turning around in obedience and reconciliation. It involves (1) a decision to turn from sin; (2) taking actual steps to turn around; and (3) an effort to appease his father by an offer of servanthood (reconciliation). This is about what it means to be born again. *Faith is never mentioned!*

*Modern Gospel On The Ropes Again*

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is extremely damaging to the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. Why? Because this parable explains what Jesus meant in John 3:3 by being born again:

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. (John 3:3.)

This passage is typically lifted out of context of John chapter three. This way no one ever sees that repentance (from sin) and obedience is part of the steps to be born again. For in the nearby verse of John 3:36, we hear standards comparable to those in the Parable of the Prodigal as a means of being born again. John 3:36 says:

He that continues to obey unto the Son keeps having eternal life, but he that keeps on disobeying the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God continues to remain on him.

(John 3:36.)

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1. This verse has been distorted by those who seek to conform Jesus to the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. Thus, even though the word *apeteutho* has only one meaning in ancient Greek, *to disobey*, they freely change God’s words to say ‘not believe’ in John 3:36. See page 448 et seq.
When Does The Father See The Son?

We see in 3:36 that it is the same message as in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus says the son was dead, repented from sin, turned around in obedience, and became alive again. He was lost but now is found. Jesus in John 3:3 says unless one is born again, one cannot enter heaven. God in John 3:36 says that obeying unto Jesus, which should give life, is cancelled out when we keep on disobeying Him, in which case we will not see life but rather God’s wrath remains on us. The Parable of the Prodigal Son, John 3:3 and 3:36 are the same message about repentance-from-sin, obedience, and being born again.

When Does The Father See The Son?

The Cheap Grace proponents have various strategies to circumvent Jesus’ meaning in this parable. Some wed to cheap grace try to re-envision the conditions of salvation in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. They want to imagine the Father sees the son before the son repents or turns around. Thus, they can still believe salvation occurs totally by mercy of the father without the need to repent from sin or turn from sin to God. For them, the father’s comment that the son is alive again and thus saved is imagined to take place before the son repents from sin or actually turned around and headed home. (In this way, they can insist salvation is by God’s mercy at a point where our faith precedes repentance from sin or obedience.)

However, in the story, the son has already repented in his heart about his sin and turned around to return home when the father first sees him. Then, and only then, does Jesus say the father sees the son afar off and comes running to the son. We cannot change the order of events to satisfy our salvation doctrine. This is the first key part of the actual passage:

(17) But when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread
enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger! (18) I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: (19) I am no more worthy to be called your son: make me as one of thy hired servants. (20) And he arose, and came to his father. But while he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. (21) And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son. (Luke 15:17-21, ASV.)

If Jesus wanted us to believe that the father forgave before the son repented from sin or turned around, Jesus used all the wrong words to do so. To convey that message, all Jesus had to do was cut out verses 18 and 19. Then the return- ing to the father would not necessarily imply any change of heart or direction preceded the prodigal’s return to his father. Then the father running to the son would be without repentance or any period of obedience by the once lost son.

Commentaries Which Obscure Jesus’ “Alive Again” Terminology

Jesus in the second part of the Parable of the Prodigal is going to identify a lost condition that is equal to spiritual death, and a reversal that is called being “alive again.” Jesus says:

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. (22) But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; (23) And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: (24) For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is
found. And they began to be merry. (Luke 15:21-24 KJV)

Clarke’s Commentary

Clarke recognizes that the boy’s “coming to his senses” in verse 17 is repentance. He explains that “repentance is represented [in the Bible] as a restoration to sound sense.” It is quite more than that, but Clarke is identifying Jesus’ symbolism here correctly as meaning repentance.

However, in his commentary, Clarke totally ignores the significant fact the father says this son was “dead, but is alive again.” (Luke 15:24.) For Clarke, this passage has nothing to say about what it means to be “born again.” It says nothing about having been a true son, sinning, becoming dead, and then coming ‘alive again.’ Thus, the most profound part of the passage is ignored. The reason is obvious: Jesus makes the born-again experience contingent on repentance-from-sin and turn-arounds to God. The son’s being “born again” is not linked by Clarke to either contingency because that would contradict the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. This claims faith alone is the sole contingency that would make a son “alive again.” That is, born again. But Jesus says no. Jesus says instead that it is repentance from sin and turning to God in obedience that makes one “alive again”—born again.

Barnes’ Commentary Similarly Downplays ‘Alive Again’

Barnes also must realize verse 24 (“was dead but is alive again”) is the problem verse for the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. Jesus would be saying repentance from sin and turning around to God are the preconditions for being born again.

Thus, Barnes totally downplays the fact the boy is “alive again.” Barnes tries to focus on the word dead instead. He says this can mean either the father “supposed” the son was dead or the son was in fact “dead to virtue.” The reason
Barnes makes these claims is that this young boy never stopped being the son of the father. If one believes in the doctrine of eternal security, then how can a true son by sin become dead? Thus, Barnes suggests the father merely supposed the son was dead. However, that cannot be true. Jesus says the father directly affirms the son had been dead and is now alive again.

Barnes realizes this and provides a second alternative escape to salvage the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. Barnes claims dead means dead to virtue. Barnes makes this suggestion because if you believe in Calvinism and eternal security, we are dead in sins, and we can do nothing absent the regeneration first by God. Yet, as Jesus tells this parable, the dead son in fact comes to his senses. Hence, contrary to many commentators, Jesus says spiritual deadness does not mean one is incapable of ‘coming to your senses’ and repenting in one’s mind and turning around.

Consequently, to eliminate the issue, Barnes prefers to see the son as always remaining spiritually alive but he is dead to virtue. Thus, the death is supposedly not a complete spiritual death, and the born again experience Jesus describes is not the true born again experience which Jesus describes in John chapter three.

But Barnes’ notion misses Jesus’ point. The son is “alive again” which means the son is born again. The son has had a spiritual rebirth. The father says the son was both “dead” and “lost” prior to becoming “alive again.” Thus, the Prodigal must have been spiritually dead, yet capable of repentance from sin and turning around. In fact, this is what Jesus is encouraging anyone dead in trespasses and sins to believe and act upon. It is never too late. You are never too spiritually dead to “come to your senses.” The very hopeful point of Jesus’ message must be obscured by the proponents of the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. They must slavishly protect cheap grace at the expense of the true gospel from the one they call Lord.
Thus, rather than give encouragement to us to turn around while dead in trespasses and sins by “coming to our senses,” the modern gospel fabulists typically discourage any such notion. You are so dead that repentance from sin and turning are only possible if God miraculously quickens you first. So they tell you to wait on the movement of the Spirit. Any other kind of repentance (they will tell you) is fleshly repentance, generated in your own heart’s futile attempt to be right with God.

This effort to obscure Jesus’ meaning (and encouragement) is even more blatant when Barnes downplays the “alive again” language. Barnes says:

Hence, to be restored to “virtue” is said to be restored again to life, Rom 6:13; Rev 3:1; Eph 2:1. It is probable that this latter is the meaning here.

Barnes wants us to think Jesus’ words ‘alive again’ merely mean ‘restored to virtue,’ rather than ‘restored to spiritual life.’ So you see, Barnes has said death does not really mean spiritual death, and life does not really mean spiritual life. Instead, supposedly, death means spiritual defect in virtue and life means living without such defects in virtue.

Why all this torture of Jesus’ words? Barnes’ interpretation is impossible. Jesus says the father says the son was dead and this meant he was lost. This is then contrasted with becoming alive again (born again). This necessarily implies the dead son became saved by means of repentance, turning around from sin and heading home. Hence, death meant spiritual death, and life meant spiritual life. Let’s read Luke 15:32 again which dispels Barnes’ suggestion:

But it was meet to make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. (ASV)

This passage is thus not merely about finding virtue and being ‘restored to (a virtuous) life.’ It is about someone who was lost and dead because they were engaged in riotous
living with prostitutes. Now they are alive again. They are found. They are saved. They are born again (alive again). Now we know the true meaning in John 3:3 regarding what it means to be born again. It depends on taking the same steps as the Prodigal Son took: repentance and turning in obedience back to the Father.

Conclusion

Let’s now chart out the meaning of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. When one lets Jesus’ words explain Jesus’ words, His message is clear. Salvation is the issue. The son was lost but now is found. He is born again. Why? The only changes were he came to his senses, repented of sin, turned around to his father and offered reconciliation. However, these steps in being born again are not taught in the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace. Rather, that gospel insists one goes from lost to found without any repentance from sin or turning in obedience toward God. (See pages 269-270, 514-515.) You are supposedly saved by belief alone. However, Jesus contradicts that — instead sticking a dual condition of repentance and obedient submission into the crevice that separates man from God’s salvation. These actions must occur for reconciliation to take place.2

Hence, when Jesus elsewhere tells us that unless a man is “born again” he shall not “enter the kingdom of heaven” (John 3:3), we know the steps outlined in the Parable of the Prodigal Son are ignored at our peril.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Terms</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tr>
<td>“came to his senses”</td>
<td>Repentance from sin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“dead”</td>
<td>“Lost” (Luke 15:32)</td>
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<tr>
<td>“alive again”</td>
<td>“Found” (saved) (Luke 15:32) and hence ‘born again’</td>
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 TABLE 1. Parable Of The Prodigal Son
Conclusion

However, look at what the commentators wed to the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace (like Barnes) do! They draw you away from realizing the Prodigal was lost. They make you think the Prodigal’s being dead was less than a spiritual death. Then they try to make you think the spiritual birth was less than a spiritual rebirth. The Prodigal’s “alive again” experience was supposedly simply a minor correction to some few virtues that were missing. Frankly, it is frightening to see how little compunction the commentators of greatest repute have when Jesus’ words are at odds with the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace which they prefer.

Thus, it turns out that Jesus’ gospel is not all too surprising. What is really shocking is the extraordinary efforts to rationalize rejection of Jesus’ Gospel from those claiming He is their Lord.

Leader of Second Great Awakening: Charles Finney

2. In a pro-faith alone commentary by Godet, one of the more amazingly bizarre arguments is advanced to deflect this parable. Godet first claims the conversion of the son represents not only repentance, but also “faith,” citing Luke 15:18-20a. (Frédéric Louis Godet, A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke (trans. Edward William Shalders, M. D.) (I. K. Funk & Co., 1881) at 377.) Repentance is then forgotten, and this parable is supposedly all about faith. Yet, faith is actually never mentioned and entirely absent in this parable. Verses 18-20a do not deal with faith. In them, the son simply verbalizes repentance and then returns home. This clearly represents not only repentance but also obedient submission. There is no mention or suggestion of faith. Then Godet repeats again this false claim that reconciliation is faith. This time, however, Godet realizes that he has a dilemma. What he is calling faith is in the story really an action of reconciliation. Thus, rather than accept this as proving the parable is not about faith, Godet changes faith into an act: “Faith is not a thought or desire; it is an act which brings two living beings into personal contact.” Id., at 378. Then, later, this same author bizarrely says “it is easy to understand how “from this parable St. Paul might have extracted the doctrine of justification by faith.” Id. at 381. No! It is the opposite. The puzzle is how anyone could extract justification by faith from a parable that (a) never mentions faith; and (b) emphasizes works of repentance from sin, including turning around and heading back to the father, which makes one go from being “lost” to being “alive again.”
“As soon as I learned what were the unambiguous teachings of the [Westminster] Confession of faith upon these points, ... I repudiated and exposed them. Wherever I found that any class of persons were hidden behind these dogmas, I did not hesitate to demolish them, to the best of my ability. When I came to the [Westminster] Confession of faith and saw the passages that were quoted to sustain these peculiar positions, I was absolutely ashamed of it....[When Gale taught them], I raised objections....What did he mean by faith? Was it merely an intellectual state? Was it merely conviction, or persuasion, that the things in the gospel were true?... Brother Gale had imbibed a set of opinions, both theological and practical, that were a strait jacket to him....A nature sinful in itself, a total inability to accept Christ and obey God...and all the kindred and resultant dogmas of that peculiar school, have been the stumbling block of believers and the ruin of sinners.... Perseverance in faith and obedience ... is ... an unalterable condition of present pardon of past sin, and of present acceptance with God. The penitent soul remains justified no longer than his full-hearted consecration continues. If he falls from his first love into the spirit of self-pleasing, he falls again into bondage to sin..., is condemned, and must repent and do his ‘first work,’ must turn to Christ and renew his faith and love, as a condition of his salvation.” Charles Finney, ordained Presbyterian pastor explaining why he rejected tenets of Presbyterian church, and became a famous revivalist. Memoirs (1876) at 52-53,59-60. See also Systematic Theology (2003 reprint) at 739. With this gospel, Finney led 500,000 people to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior.