



THE EXHORTER

“And with many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation.” Acts 2:40

The Palmer Road church of Christ, Westland, Mi. (prchurchofchrist.org)

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Luke 15:18 "I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against Heaven, and in your sight.'"

I love the prodigal son story. I have a whole collection of books just on this parable. I have a Jump Start book that is a collection of writings about this. I remember many years ago, I was just a puppy, sitting in awe of the preaching of Robert Jackson. I asked him how many sermons he had on the prodigal son. He told me "probably more than 30 different sermons." At the time I was amazed that anyone could find that much there. Now, all these years later, I'm amazed that he only had 30 sermons on this and not more.

Our verse today comes from the depths of sorrow. The prodigal is at the bottom of the barrel. Money spent. Friends gone. Hope disappearing. No one to help. No future in sight. This is the feeling when the consequences start catching up with someone. It's when a person stares at some legal papers that say divorce. It's when a person is sitting in the police station and he is looking at serving several years in prison. The world has caved in. The options are few. The careless living and the indifference to God's word has caught up with him. The years of drugs, drinking and smoking have become x-rays, MRIs and serious health issues that won't go away. The years of being selfish, rude and demanding has left him alone and friendless. The years of not watching his money has caught up with him and now he is old, sick and broke. The reality of poor choices eventually catches up.

In the Lord's parable, the prodigal comes to a decision. It's our verse. He determines to return home. It's his only course of action and it's the only hope that he has. There is no one left but family. And, at last, he must finally turn to them, because there simply isn't anyone else to help.

Going home is what the prodigal decided to do. That's a hard choice to make. It's humbling. It's scary. It's full of regrets, remorse and painful failure. "I will get up and go to my father," are not happy words, but desperate words.

Going home for the prodigal and going home for us carries a lot of pain and fear.

First, he didn't know if he would be welcomed. The people he hurt the most was family. Now he was returning and he had no way of making up for the damage he caused. He came home nearly crawling and with the clothes on his back. He couldn't repay his father. He couldn't undue the damage he caused to the family name.

And, such is the nature of sin. So often we hurt the people who care the most about us. Our family and our church are the ones who love us and accept us and our sins damage them the most.

(OVER)

Second, he was willing to put himself in a position that would offer an olive branch of peace. He was willing to be a servant. Make me as one of your hired men. The hired men do not eat with the family. The hired men do not sleep in the house. The hired men are still working while the family is resting. The family would be enjoying pleasant conversations, but the hired men would be working. They are not included in those conversations. The hired men sleep in barns and small quarters set up for them. Most hired men dream of moving out of that position. This broken son, dreamed of being in that position. At least, he thought, he'd have food. He'd have a place to sleep. He had occasions to see the family.

Coming home with demands, is not really coming home. Coming home and pointing the finger of blame on others is not really coming home. Coming home and not recognizing the damage that you caused is not really coming home. Some come home, but they are not broken, sorry or apologetic. Their return causes more pain. Nothing has changed. They return to take more from the family.

Third, he was willing to give it a chance. It could turn ugly. It could be the father would react like the older brother did. It could be that he would be out on the streets again. But he had hope. He had reason to believe that there was goodness within his father. He had seen how his father treated servants. They had a good thing going. The father was kind, generous and benevolent to servants.

Now, with these thoughts, remain two final ideas:

First, I wonder how many prodigals are wanting to come home but they are afraid. They've messed up. There is an addiction. There is a child. There is a criminal record. There is no money. There is no job. There is no residence. They've made a mess, a real mess. Like the prodigal, they are out of options and out of hope. They want to come home. They want to come home to a real family and they want to come back to a church family. But they are afraid. They fear stares, frowns, the questions, the rejection, the "what are you doing here?" Deep inside, they want to worship on Sunday. They want to come back to the Lord. They may be among the withdrawn. They may have left saying things that they now regret. They want to come, but they are scared.

Second, I wonder if we, as families and as congregations, leave an impression and a love upon the prodigals that they remember. Do we open doors to them? Do we truly welcome them back? Do we allow them back, even after we have been hurt? Do we allow them back when all they have is "I'm sorry for what I've done."

Coming home is hard. We preach that side of things often. The other side is where the father stood. He was looking. He was hoping. He came running. That's the spirit that we must carry in our hearts. I expect that first night home, sleeping in his old bed, the prodigal couldn't imagine how wonderful things were. The father was better than he even remembered. He wasn't a servant. He was a son. He wasn't in the barn, he was in the house. He didn't eat left overs, he had a feast. It was better than he dreamed.

I long for the time when our prodigals experience that among us. Loved. Forgiven. Accepted. Hugs. Not the third degree. Not feeling like they are suspended or on probation. Not watched to see if one is going to mess up again. Not suspicious. Not doubting. In the house, with a full belly, sleeping in his own bed. He sure didn't deserve that, but the father wouldn't have it any other way.

Oh to be like Thee, blessed Redeemer...may we be like that father!

Roger Shouse (used by Permission)
