

What the Prodigal Did NOT Say

A fresh look at a well-known parable reveals insights into the nature of true repentance—and how we can sabotage that process before it even begins.

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants’”” (Lk. 15:17-19).



The parable of the prodigal son is a beautiful story of rebellion, repentance, and redemption. The progression of the young man from arrogant rebel to chastened son has been the basis of countless sermons urging people to appreciate the mercy of God and the role of repentance in finding it.

The key to the young man’s turn-around is seen in his self-reflection while sitting in the pig pen. “He came to himself” marks the eureka moment when all his past mistakes came into sharp focus and he finally realized why his life was such a mess. More importantly, he also came to understand what he needed to do to make things right with those he had wronged. “I will get up and go” was the first gigantic step toward reconciliation, without which his life would never improve.

The lecture this young man gave himself—and the resolution that grew out of it—is a model for all of us who have struggled with sin in our lives. But it is also helpful to consider what the prodigal son did *not* say as he evaluated his circumstances.

For example, he did not say, “I’m a victim! Everyone is out to get me!” He could have blamed his father (“He’s never done anything for me!”), his older brother (“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for that intolerable Pharisee!”), his employer (“The working conditions here are pure slavery!”), or his party friends (“I thought they cared about me.”). All such blame-shifting, of course, would have been a disingenuous attempt to avoid the truth: He had made some seriously bad decisions of his own that landed him in this gutter. He had no one to blame but himself.

The ultimate in blame-shifting would have been for him to charge God with wrong: “Why did God allow this to happen to me?” It is amazing how often people will live their lives with reckless abandon, then when the bill comes due turn on God in righteous fury for letting their lives go to ruin. This young man had the honesty of heart to recognize that it was his own rebellion against God, not God’s indifference, that led to his troubles.

Finally, the young man did not scream, “Somebody’s gonna pay for this!” When we respond to adversity with bitterness and anger, lashing out against anybody and everybody who gets in our way, we only make things worse for ourselves, and drag down a lot of other people with us. Even if some mistreatment has contributed to our pain, taking out our frustrations on the world only pours gasoline on the flames. It intensifies the suffering, not heals it.

The fact that this young man did not resort to any of these excuses speaks to the authenticity of his repentance. He took full responsibility for his condition and for the changes that he needed to make to get his life back on track.

There was one thing, however, that the prodigal son could not foresee: The unqualified love his father showered upon him when he returned. Heart-felt repentance is essential, but it is helpless without a God who is eager to take us back into His embrace.

— David King