

September 13, 2020

The Prodigal  
Harry Truman's Demise  
Luke 15:11-32

**Opening words:** Today, I begin a new two-part sermon series called *The Prodigal*. The Parable of the Prodigal Son has also been called The Parable of the Lost Son, The Parable of the Two Brothers, The Parable of the Loving Father, and The Parable of the Forgiving Father. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is the third and final parable in a cycle of three parables on redemption, behind the Parable of the Lost Coin and the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Like all parables, The Parable of the Prodigal Son teaches us a single point, God loves all sinners.

The storyline line is familiar. It is a story about two brothers and their loving father. The younger brother asks for his inheritance prior to his father's death and spends his money recklessly. Prodigal means wastefully. In the end, he returned home and asks for his father's forgiveness. He was guilty of the sins of commission or sins of the flesh. The older brother stayed home and resented his brother's return. He was guilty of the sins of omission or sins of the mind. In this short series, we will look at both kinds of sin. Gospel reading for today, and next week, is Luke 15:11-32. Let me call this message *Harry Truman's Demise*.

**Luke 15:11-32** Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's

have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So, they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup> "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

<sup>28</sup> "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

<sup>31</sup> "'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

Volcano Mount St. Helens erupted on May 18, 1980. It was not a surprise. For two months prior to the massive blast occurred the most deadly and destructive in American history; earthquakes and volcanic activity signaled a major event was underway. Authorities had plenty of time to sound the alarm and warn those living nearby of the looming danger. Yet despite the seriousness of the threat, some people chose to disregard the warnings.

Probably the best known of those who refused to evacuate was Harry Truman. No, not Harry S. Truman (1884-1972) the 33<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States, the former president. Harry R. Truman (1896-1980) owner and caretaker at the Mount St. Helens Lodge at Spirit Lake. He had survived the sinking of his troop ship by a German submarine off the coast of Ireland during World War I, and he was not about to leave just because scientists thought there was danger. Truman told reporters, "I don't have any idea whether it will blow. But I don't believe it to the point that I'm going to pack up." On May 18, 1980, Truman and his lodge were buried beneath 150 feet of mud and debris from the volcanic eruption. His body was never found. So, with that story in mind let me ask you a question.

What killed Harry Truman? Was it the eruption of Mount St. Helens? Was it Harry Truman's arrogance who ignored the warning? To me, the answer is obvious. History will remember him not as a maverick. History will remember him as a fool. Only a fool ignores warnings. With this in mind, let us look at our primary scripture lesson.

We find ourselves today in the Gospel of Luke. It and the sequel of this Gospel, Acts, were written by Luke, a companion of Paul about the year 70. Both Luke and Acts are written to Theophilus, a lover of God. It may have been an individual named Theophilus or a group of individuals who loved God. For our use it does not really matter. The recipients of this letter were originally Gentiles, non-Jews, like us. Personally, I like Luke

for one reason. I like telling stories and Luke is a master storyteller. You would not want to change a single word. Today's story is no exception.

The story begins by introducing the main characters. "There was a man with two sons." Then, he exposes the storyline. "The younger son came to his father and said, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.'" This was a highly unusual request. Even today, the estate is not divided until after the owner's death. The owner needs his estate to cover his own expenses. Yet, the father grants his son, taking money out of his own pocket. According to Old Testament law, Deuteronomy 21:17, the younger son received half of the amount his elder brother would receive in the future. It has been said, "A fool and his money are soon parted." That is the story of the young son. With his cash in hand, he goes out and lives the wild life. I will let you fill in the blanks. It is safe to say the young man had a good time, but then the good time ran out. A famine in the land and the young man had no funds. He looks for employment, but he has few options. He hits rock bottom on the day he found himself longing for the pods the pigs were eating. That is truly rock bottom for a Jew. Then, he has an idea that changes his life. He will swallow his pride and go home to ask his father for a job. His employees are eating. He does just that, but he does not just get a job. He gets a reception. Some call the parable The Parable of the Loving Father, because the father welcomes home his wayward son. The father is remembered for his love. The younger son is remembered for his sins of the flesh. We call sins of the flesh sins of commission.

So why is the story of the younger son important to you and to me? The reason is we are like the younger son in one way and unlike the younger son in another way. We are like the younger son because each one of us is a sinner. That is not my opinion. It is Biblical. Romans 3:23 says, "*All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God.*" That means you and I are sinners and have not lived up to God's high standards. We are unlike the younger son because we have not confessed our sins. Many are in denial about their sinful state.

Several months ago, I was talking to a small group of people. We were talking about nothing important. I tried to spice up a boring day, so I gave everyone a hard time. In the end, I called them all sinners, and everyone laughed. Then, one woman in the group said something I have not forgotten. She said, "Russ, what is the big deal about sin? You just go to confession and keep living."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the great German theologian, called that *cheap grace*. In other words, it is receiving grace without repentance. Please do not take that as an anti-Catholic statement. I believe, she spoke for many in our time. It does not matter if you are Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox. It does not matter if you are a believer or a non-believer, an atheist or an agnostic. It is safe to say **our generation does not take sin seriously**. The question is, why? There are two reasons we do not take sin seriously. Maybe it is not one or the other. Maybe it is a combination of the two. Consider these two options with me.

This is option number one. Maybe we do not take sin seriously because of the news? We are overexposed to the harshness of this world. For years, Kathryn and I watched the news to know what was happening in the world. Several months ago, we broke that habit. I got tired of the biased reporting and the political agenda. Our national news has stopped being news. It has become an editorial. However, I also stopped watching the news because it has become so harsh. The list of nightly reports is not pleasant. There always a story about some violent crime. There is always a report about a sexual offender. There is another murderer, who was going to prison for decades. (Our country seems to have money to put people in prison, but no money to send people to college.) The list goes on, so we turned the news off. You know the truth. In comparison to that list of bad characters, we look good. How easy it is to see the sins in others. How hard it is to identify our own sins. Maybe the news is the problem. That is option number one. I believe there is some truth in that statement. Or maybe, the problem is more.

This is option number two. Maybe we do not take sin seriously because we do not take the church, itself, seriously? You can blame the church's self-inflicted wounds. Why listen to the church about sin if the church is filled with the biggest sinners? You can blame the church, or you can blame society. If you do not believe me than look about how church in portrayed in the media. We are portrayed as weird and out of touch. To them we are comical. So, why listen to the church about sin if the church is not seen as a creditable source? Maybe that is why we hear so much about volunteerism? This is the unspoken. In those community service hours, we are earning our salvation. That is simply wrong. We are saved by grace and by grace alone. After all, we are all sinners. Do you believe our society does not take sin seriously because of option one or option two? Or do you believe our society does not take sin serious because of a combination of the two? Regardless, it clear to me our society does not take sin seriously. Yet, this is equally true.

**God does take sin seriously.** The Greek word sin means "to miss the mark." That means every time we sin; we miss the mark. We often miss the mark because God has set the standard high. God is just and God deserves our obedience. The problem is we are all sinners, so Jesus died on the cross sacrificially for our sins. However, that does not mean we should take our sins lightly. Our sins do damage in five different ways.

- 1. Sins cause separation from God.** Sin, itself, is an offense to God, and God cannot be in the presence of sin. Every time you sin you put distance between you and God.
- 2. Sins are harmful to you.** God expects us to live life at his standard. The sins we commit, in the end, do damage to ourselves.

3. **Sins is harmful to the people in your life.** The people you love the most are forced to live with the consequences of your sins.
4. **Sin are a catalyst for more sin.** The word is compromise. One small sin will lead to greater sins.
5. **Sin is a death sentence to unbelievers.** Romans 6:23 says, "*The wages of sin is death.*" Believers have their sins washed away by the blood of Jesus. Non-believers go to hell because of the sins they have committed.

Those five points came from Christian blogger Derek Hill. Through the eyes of God, sinning is not a small matter. Take this warning seriously. Be like the younger brother, confess your sins and accept your father's love. If you will agree sins are a serious matter say, "**Amen!**" If you have not heard there is a presidential election coming, so I am going to end with a story from another presidential election from the past. It has never been pretty.

In 1884, Grover Cleveland (1837-1908) was running against James G. Blaine (1830-1893) for the presidency of the U.S. Blaine supporters discovered that Cleveland, who was a bachelor at the time, had fathered a son by Mrs. Maria Crofts Halpin, an attractive widow who had been on friendly terms with several politicians. Subsequently, Republicans tried to pin an immorality tag on Democrat Cleveland. The move, however, backfired badly. Rather than deny the story, Cleveland decided to confess and admitted he was the father. The population respected Cleveland for confessing and elected him the twenty-second president of the United States. The story reminds us confession is a good thing.

You have been warned. Only a fool does not accept a warning. Confess your sins! Are you going to be like Harry Randall Truman in Mount St. Helens or are you going to be like the younger brother who confessed and received his father's love? What do you have to confess? If that makes you think say, "**Amen!**"