

## LESSON 11

### The Parable Of The Two Sons

By J.R. Graves

I PLACE the Parable of The Two Sons before that of “The Elder and Younger Brothers,” since the true interpretation of this is a quite satisfactory exposition of the latter, which seems to follow it in natural topical order.

#### PARABLE

“But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first and said, Son, go work to-day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not; but afterward he repented and went. And he came to the second and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir, and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first. Jesus saith unto them, Verily, I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not; but the publicans and the harlots believed him; and ye, when ye had seen it, repented not afterward, that ye might believe him,” Matt. 21:28-32.

This is the briefest of all the parables of Chris, all of it being condensed into two simple statements with one correct answer. Brief as it is, it is a historical-prophetical parable, and has

a purely national application. Its primary sense needs no comment to elucidate it. The Jews, to whom it was addressed, answered it correctly, although they had an indefinite impression, as at other times, that they thereby condemned themselves.

In its deeper and broader meaning, I think the son who was called, and promised to work, but refused, represents the Jews as a nation. This nation, as we have seen, God called His “son,” His “first-born.”

God did twice specifically call His son, Israel, to enter His service: once by Moses, before they entered Canaan (Deut. 30), and again by Joshua.

“And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. And the people answered and said, God forbid that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; for the Lord our God, He it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way wherein we went, and among all the people through whom we passed; and the Lord drave out from before us all the people, even the Amorites which dwelt in the land; therefore will we also serve the Lord, for He is our God,” Josh. 24:15-18.

Let the reader read the whole chapter.

To both calls Israel said, “I will go,” but went not.

Limiting the vineyard service to the gospel dispensation, the Jewish nation was specifically called of God, by John the Baptist and Christ and the apostles, to enter His service; and the crowds that at first thronged the Jordan and received baptism at the hands of John, and the still larger numbers baptized by the seventy evangelists during their ministry, and the thousands that gladly received the word at Pentecost and in the second great revival that followed (Acts 4.), seemed to be the answer of the Jews, “We will go;” but still they went not; and for now eighteen hundred years they still persistently refuse to enter the vineyard. If anyone who reads this knows of one Jewish church in America, I should like to be informed of the fact.

On the refusal of the Jews to obey this call, the apostles turned away from them, leaving them in disobedience to await their sad and awful punishment, and made the call upon the other son, the Gentiles:

“And the next Sabbath day came almost the whole city together to hear the word of God. But when the Jews saw the multitudes they were filled with envy, and spake against those things which were spoken by Paul, contradicting and blaspheming. Then Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, said, It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you; but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting\* life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles,” Acts 13:44-46.

The cruel treatment they at first received seemed to be their answer, "We will not go into the vineyard." But age after age this second son has been repenting, and more and more fully entering the vineyard of service.

The prophecy of this parable is the encouraging part of it to all the friends of missions. The son repented and went, from which we know that the fullness of the Gentiles will be brought in. We also learn that the son who promised and went not will not enter the vineyard during the continuance of the gospel dispensation.

### **THE IMPORTANT FACTS WE LEARN FROM THIS PARABLE**

1. The son that at first refused to go afterwards repented and went, from which we learn, most encouraging to the friends of missions, that, despite all the opposition and discouraging obstacles, nevertheless the fullness of the Gentiles will be brought into the service of God.

2. That the Jews are not, in any considerable number, to be converted to Christianity by the preaching of the gospel, or by any human means, during this present dispensation or before Christ comes. The first called, they will be the last to accept of Christ as their Saviour and Redeemer; but then not by missionary effort, but, as Paul was, by a personal appearing of Christ. Paul declares, with respect to himself, that he was one born out of due time - a premature birth - born before the rest of his nation, and yet in the

same way as his nation, that is to be born in a day – *i.e.* by the personal appearing of Christ at His second advent.

3. We learn that the Jews, as a race or people, will not be converted, or accept Christ as their Saviour and Redeemer, until after Christ's Second Advent. Until then the elder brother (see Parable of the Prodigal Son) will remain without, and this son, referring to the same nation, will refuse to come in.

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## **THE ELDER AND YOUNGER BROTHERS**

THE Saviour closed His rebuke of the scribes and Pharisees, who murmured because He received sinners and ate with them, with this parable. It is introductory to His teachings concerning "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" - *i.e.* that the Gentiles are to be made fellow-heirs with the Jews in all the privileges and blessings of the gospel dispensation, and their final restoration to their forfeited heirship in the kingdom of God's dear Son.

### **PARABLE**

"And He said, A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to be in want. And he went and

joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into the fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him. 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. 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; and bring hither the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and be merry: for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry and would not go in. Therefore came his father out and entreated him. And he answering, said to his father, Lo these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment, and yet thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with

my friends; but as soon as this thy son was come which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad; for this was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found,” Luke 15:11-32.

**The principal features to be interpreted in this parable are:**

1. The elder brother.
2. The younger son.
3. His voluntary alienation and self-banishment from his father’s house.
4. His reckless prodigality.
5. The utter degradation and ruin to which he brought him.
6. His reflections and resolution.
7. His return and reception by his father and the servants.
8. The unbrotherly conduct of the elder brother.

The superficial sense or application of this parable, which the Jews seeing could see, and hearing could hear, was that a son, however unfilial, and even though ruined by his own extreme sinfulness, was still a son, and dear to his father; and his recovery should be sought and considered just cause of rejoicing; and from this fact they could see that a son of Abraham, though deep sunk in sin and degradation, as they regarded “the publicans and sinners” of their own nation to be, were still the objects of God’s compassionate

love, and should not be despised by them; and that even Roman publicans, being members of the human family and God's creatures, were not altogether beyond His compassionate and loving favour, and, should they turn unto Him, they would be accepted. This lesson, notwithstanding the obdurate prejudices that blinded their eyes and deafened their ears, could see, although its deeper and broader sense they could neither perceive nor understand.

**The general interpretations are two:**

1. That by this younger and prodigal son Christ intended to represent the sinner of that and of every age, who, instigated by his own innate depravity of heart, alienates himself from God by his own wickedness and plunges himself into utter degradation, at length, convicted of his own extreme sinfulness, and fully awakened to a sense of his utter ruin, arises and returns to the God from whom he had departed.

His being seen by his father a long way off, and being met, pardoned and received as a son by his father, indeed most beautifully and touchingly represents the freeness of God's love and His abounding grace extended to every penitent sinner who seeks His face and favour; and the joy of the servant falls in very naturally.

This interpretation appears complete so long as the elder brother and his conduct are wholly ignored, and he certainly is



quite as important a personage in the parable as the younger son.<sup>1</sup> But so soon as the question is asked, whom does the elder brother represent? Insuperable difficulties arise, two or three of which only I notice here.

If the younger son represents sinners, the elder brother, who was ever with the father, certainly represents Christians. But who ever heard of Christians becoming offended because God extended His pardoning grace and love to a poor, self-ruined sinner, and refusing to rejoice over the conversion of the most wicked prodigal, and refuse to own him as a fellow-heir with God's children? But then these Christians were not always with the Father as sons, but were each of them once the children of wrath, even as others. Again, this prodigal, as Major Whittle, the great revivalist, expressed it, was not so much influenced to return through unfeigned repentance as by an empty stomach and a longing for the abundance of food which his father's servants enjoyed, and one of which he was willing to be, so that his appetite might be satisfied.

Still another difficulty: The prodigal son in the midst of his wanton riotings, and even while in filth and rags he was feeding the swine as he was before he left his father's house which can in no sense be predicated of an unregenerate sinner.

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<sup>1</sup> This parable is generally spoken of as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," as though the younger son is the main or only feature in the narrative. This is misleading. I have denominated it as "The Parable of the Elder and Younger Brothers," which introduces the brothers as equally important persons.

This so plausible and universal interpretation breaks down under the weight of any one of these difficulties, and the -

Second interpretation is at once resorted to, and certainly with but little examination: viz., that the prodigal son is intended to represent a backslidden Christian – a son of God by regeneration, who, awakened from his self-alienated and degraded condition, arises and turns himself to

“Seek an injured Father’s face,”

and a place, at least, among the servants in his Father’s house and at his Father’s table. All the parts of the parable fall in naturally and beautifully with this theory until the question again arises, Whom does the elder brother represent who is so offended by the return and reinstatement of his younger brother in the family, and refuses to recognize him as a brother or take any part in the rejoicing? He certainly cannot represent Christians; for who ever heard of old church-members - Christians - becoming offended at the reclamation of a backslidden brother, or refusing to rejoice with exceeding great joy, when such an one, however far he may have wandered from his God and from duty, returned with every manifestation of godly sorrow and humble penitence of heart, and confessed all his sin? Who, I say, ever heard of Christians becoming offended at the return of such a “prodigal son” and refusing to rejoice over him, and opposing his being reinstated as a son and heir among them? They universally rejoice with

exceeding great joy. This interpretation, like the former one, although so long accepted as true, must be abandoned as untenable.

The question then arises, “What, then, is the fuller and deeper meaning of this parable, which those scribes and Pharisees to whom it was addressed did not fully perceive or understand?”

With our “pass-key” in hand - viz., that this, as many of the other parables, contains “the mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven,” that is, that the Gentiles are to be made fellow-heirs with the Jews in the full enjoyment of the blessings of the Kingdom of Christ we boldly approach to open the door of the deeper, fuller meaning.

The elder son unquestionably represents the Jewish nation. Of this we need be in no doubt with God’s word before us. God expressly said to Moses, “Thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, my first-born,” (Ex. 4:22.) This first-born nation is, then, the elder son, begotten by God when He made the covenant with Abraham, and called out of Egypt under the leadership of Moses, as it is written, “When Israel was a child then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt,” (Hosea 2:1.)

This elder brother Israel, as a nation, has nominally “ever been with God as His ‘peculiar people’” and chosen nation, and of them He could truly say, “All that I have is thine,” for to the Jews pertained “the adoption, the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises.” (Rom. 9:4.)

The Gentiles were of a common parentage with the Jews, being the descendants of Noah, and originally members of the

same family, and participants of the same blessing - the true knowledge of God. But they sadly and voluntarily departed from God, and the extreme depth of sinfulness and moral degradation into which they fell can be learned from Paul's letter to the Romans (chapter 1:21-32):

“Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature more than the Creator, Who is blessed forever. Amen. For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of women, burned in their lust, one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient; being filled with unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God,

despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, to parents, without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.”

The first awakening of the Gentiles, and the first step of their return, and the first token of God’s loving favour, was at Caesarea, in the house of Cornelius; and the first note of joy ever heard in the household over this event was heard in the Church at Jerusalem, where Peter announced the gladness to them: “When they heard these things they held their peace and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life,” (Acts 11:18).

From the prophecy of this parable we learn that the Gentiles are ultimately to come to the light and love of Him who will be the “glory of His people Israel,” as it is written: “And the Gentiles shall come to Thy light, and kings to the brightness of Thy rising,” (Isaiah 60:3).

This returning of this prodigal son commenced, as I have said, the day the gospel was preached in the house of Cornelius, and from that day the elder brother has been offended; and as the feasting and joy have been going on in the family, the elder brother has been standing without, refusing to come in and refusing to acknowledge the prodigal as his brother, and even charging the father with lack of equity and positive injustice in being willing to reinstate the squanderer of his parental estate and the disgracer of

the family name, and he is still standing without, and still the halls of the old mansion are resounding with louder and still louder shouts of joy over him who was lost but now is found, and these glad shouts will go on and on, with increasing gladness, until the very fullness of the Gentiles shall have been brought in.

“The morning light is breaking;  
The darkness disappears;  
The sons of earth are waking  
To penitential tears:

Each breeze that sweeps the ocean  
Brings tidings from afar  
Of **nations** in commotion,  
Prepared for Zion’s war.

See **heathen nations** bending  
Before the God we love,  
And thousand hearts ascending  
In gratitude above;

While sinners, now confessing,  
The gospel call **obey**,  
And seek the Saviour’s blessing -  
A nation in a day.

Blest river of salvation,  
Pursue thy onward way;  
Flow thou **to every nation**,  
Nor in thy richness stay:

Stay not till all the lowly  
Triumphant reach their home;  
Stay not till all the holy  
Proclaim, ‘The Lord is come.’”