

July 2017

Dear Brethren:

A very warm greeting once again from the Philippines, and special greetings to our young people who are now fellowshiping at Camp Tejas. After Pentecost we all look forward to the soon-coming fall festivals. These are God's Sabbaths that He pronounces as a sign between Him and His people. As God's people, we are trying our best to overcome our mistakes.

There is a question young people often ask themselves as they grow up in the church, and it even occurs to baptized members at times. The question goes basically like this: Why can't I go out into the world, make mistakes, and then later repent and come back to the church? Essentially, they want to know why they cannot enjoy some sins before repenting of them. Now be honest—have you ever asked such a question? If so, what should the answer be?

People in this frame of mind are suffering from the prodigal-son syndrome. It is just how the prodigal son thought in Christ's parable.

Let us now look at the story in Luke 15. There may be some points you have not considered before.

The Parable

"There was once a man who had two sons. The younger one said to him, 'Father, give me my share of property now.' So the man divided his property between his two sons. After a few days the younger son sold his part of the property and left home with the money. He went to a country far away, where he wasted his money in reckless living. He spent everything he had. Then a severe famine spread over that country, and he was left without a thing. So he went to work for one of the citizens of that country, who sent him out to his farm to take care of the pigs. He wished he could fill himself with the bean pods the pigs ate, but no one gave him anything to eat. At last he came to his senses and said, 'All my father's hired workers have more than they can eat, and here I am about to starve! I will get up and go to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired workers."' So he got up and started back to his father.

"He was still a long way from home when his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity and he ran, threw his arms around his son, and kissed him. 'Father,' the son said, 'I have sinned against God and against you. I am no longer fit to be called your son.' But the father called to his servants. 'Hurry!' he said. 'Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. Then go and get the prize calf and kill it, and let us celebrate with a feast! For this son of mine was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found.' And so the feasting began.

"In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him, 'What's going on?' 'Your brother has come back home,' the servant answered, 'and your father has killed the prize calf, because he got him back safe and sound.' The older brother was so angry that he would not go into the house; so his father came out and begged him to come in. But he spoke back to his father, 'Look, all these years I have worked for you like a slave, and I have never disobeyed your orders. What have you given me? Not even a goat for me to have a feast with my friends! But this son of yours wasted all your property on prostitutes, and when he comes back home, you kill the prize calf for him!' (Luke 15:11–30, *Today's English Version*)

Wait a minute! Sounds like the fun-loving younger son got the better part of the deal. Did he not get to have his cake and eat it too? Did he not get to enjoy some big mistakes, suffer a bit for it and then return to a party given in his honor, while the obedient older brother stayed outside sulking? Perhaps you want to be like the prodigal son. A lot of youth unknowingly emulate him. But did the prodigal son really come out ahead in the end? What do you think?

Before we answer the question, let me tell you another story.

There was once a boy named Marito. On his thirteenth birthday, his father took him out to the backyard where there were some fine old fruit trees. There the man gave his son a new hammer and a container of nails of all sizes. There were small finishing nails, medium sized nails—even some large spikes. As they stood before one of the trees, the father said, "Mar, over the next few years, every time you do something you know God does not want you to do, I want you to come out to this tree and drive a nail into the trunk—a small nail for a small sin, and a large nail for a large sin—and every time you correct those mistakes, asking God's forgiveness and making amends as best as you can, pull one of the nails out," to which the boy replied, "Sure, Dad."

Mar was true to his word. Not surprisingly, over the next few years he drove nails of all sizes into the fruit tree. He pulled some out, but for the most part, the nails and spikes

were accumulating. By the spring of his junior year in high school, he noticed that the tree was not flowering and would not produce fruit that year. The trunk of the tree was scarred, full of rusty nails. As a result, sap was running down the trunk, and insects had infested the bark around the damaged areas. The tree had fewer leaves than the others, and it looked like it might not survive the next winter.

Of course, Marito had long understood that the tree was a metaphor for his life and character. So he became determined that he would reverse his direction in a number of areas. As he turned from wrong choices—choices that made him disobey God—he pulled more and more nails out of the tree. Finally, on the day of his graduation from high school, he called his father into the backyard and with the same hammer he had been given, he pulled out yet another big, rusty spike from the tree's trunk.

"Dad," he said, "I did what you told me. I drove the nails in, but I have also been able to pull some out. Lots of them." His father replied, "Marito, you did well to set a different course and to be able to pull out so many nails. I am really proud of you. But look at the trunk of the tree. Scars remain even from the nails that are no longer there. There will be many years in healing, and some damage will always remain in the wood." Marito understood.

The point is this. You can drive all kinds of nails into the tree of your personal life, and then turn and try to pull them out in repentance as best as you can with God's help. And it is very important to remember that upon true repentance, God *will* forgive you and begin the healing process. Indeed, you can always look back to your heavenly Father. Sooner or later you must, or you will forever be lost. But the scars in your life made by the nails and spikes you have driven in will remain even after turning away from those sins. Healing can take many, many years. In some ways, you can never get back to where you were physically before the mistakes were made.

You see, what you do affects you—it changes you. Indeed, some choices affect your whole life—whether for good or for ill. That is why it is always best to choose what God says you need to do in the first place, for all His choices are good choices.

And that takes us back to the prodigal son. I did not quite finish the parable. Let us read the last two verses as the father talked to the son who remained at home:

'My son,' the father answered, 'you are always here with me, and anything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be happy because your brother was dead, but now he is alive; he was lost, but now he has been found' " (vv. 31–32).

Notice that the father told the older brother, "Everything I have is yours." The younger brother's inheritance was gone, and his life was irrevocably changed. There was no

second division of what remained. No flock, no property—nothing. In those days he probably would have had to work for his older brother. And he would have had to live with the scars from his experiences while in the foreign land. What you do changes you and your life—whether for your harm or for your good.

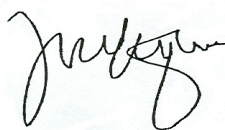
Those who suffer from prodigal-son syndrome make a second mistake as well. They assume that what God has in store for us, physically, is not really the abundant life He promises. But in reality, the instruction God gives in His Word is a great blessing.

Peter and the other apostles were once asked by those who came to realize the enormity of their own guilt in breaking God's Law: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter replied: "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:37–38, *New King James Version*). Our Father in heaven has made it possible for us to be fully forgiven and cleansed of the guilt of our past "mistakes." And this cleansing begins a journey of abundant life that will last through the end of our days in the human flesh, leading ultimately to God's Kingdom. God gives us not only a change of life, but also a change of mind that begins a process of inward transformation. In fact, He is forming Jesus' own character within us.

Our Father in heaven wants to bring us to immortality as children in His Family. When His firstborn, Jesus, said, "I am the Way," He was not kidding. Indeed, Jesus is the only way to life. If you do choose another way for a while, you might find your way back—but there is no guarantee, for many fall by the wayside. And sadly, when some finally do return to God's way of life, they may by that time qualify as "federal disaster areas." But letting God design your life and character from the beginning yields continual blessings.

So choose God's way—abundant physical life today, glorified spiritual life forevermore! Let God design and build you even from your youth.

Your brother in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mario Y. Roque', written in a cursive style.

Mario Y. Roque