

Luke 15, 16

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores the relationship between the church and the ages, the ways of the Trinity, and the significance of the prodigal son's return, highlighting the joy of God in receiving sinners back to Himself.

Scripture: Luke 15:4

Topics: "Grace", "Stewardship"

Description

John Nelson Darby expounds on Luke 15 and 16, illustrating the transition from the Jewish dispensation to the grace of God revealed in Christ. He emphasizes that the church exists as a heavenly entity during the suspension of the current age, highlighting God's love and grace towards sinners through the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the prodigal son. Darby explains that while man has failed in stewardship, God's grace allows for redemption and the proper use of earthly goods for heavenly purposes. He contrasts the fate of the rich man and Lazarus to demonstrate that earthly status does not determine one's standing with God, and concludes with a call to be faithful stewards of God's gifts in light of eternity.

Transcript

We have seen the Lord shewing out His own rejection, in grace, followed by an entirely new order of things. The church, brought in subsequently, is not an age, properly so called, but a heavenly episode between the ages. There are three ages spoken of in Scripture: the age before the law; the age under the law; and the millennial age. Christ was "made under the law," and that age is not finished yet. The disciples said to Him, "What shall be the sign of thy coming and of the end of the age?" That was the age when He was there, but when they rejected Him, the age was suspended. As He straitly charged Peter to tell no man He was the Christ, saying, "the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected," etc. Therefore He says to them, "Ye shall not see me, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." We, who form a part of the church of God, and not having anything to do with the earth, are in no sense an age, but are a heavenly people united to Christ above, during the suspension of this age, filling up the gap between the Lord's leaving the Jews, and His return to them again. So in Romans 11 we have the olive tree with some of the branches broken off, and others grafted in. This is the tree with its root in the earth, and consequently it could have nothing directly to do with the church in heaven. Some of the branches were broken off, and some left; but this could never be said of the church, the body united to its head, at the right hand of God. The church, of course, does fill up a certain place and time, but it is during the suspension of the age to which Christ came. Characteristically we belong to that which is above and

beyond anything connected with this world. It is grace that has set us there, and that is not of earth but of heaven.

In chapter 15 we find the Lord rising above Jewish dispensation altogether, to the full display of God's own nature - love - in the gospel. At the close of chapter 14 He takes up the professing system in its responsibility. "Salt is good, but if the salt have lost its savour," it is good for nothing. Thus He shews what man is. Then in chapter 15 come publicans and sinners, and we have the display of what God is. Here God is dealing with lost man, in grace. Sinners, who owned their sins and came to repentance, were those who justified God. "Wisdom is justified of her children." God is vindicated in His ways, whether in the condemnation or salvation of a sinner. The publicans and sinners justified God, being baptized of John, while the Pharisees rejected His counsel against themselves. All that is wanted to justify God is that He should shew Himself; and this is what the Lord now does. He manifests what God is in grace, and this it is which makes the chapter ever so fresh and full to our souls; the heart that has been awakened never tires of such a chapter.

141 Then, in chapter 16, He shews the responsibility of those who are thus dealt with. The earth was given to the children of men, and God looked for fruit. He first dealt with man as to what he ought to have been on the earth, but there was entire failure. Now there comes out another thing, entire grace, which is irrespective of all that man was, and takes an absolutely heavenly character. Divine love is its source, and its character is heavenly. Revealing heaven, it puts man into connection with it; and the people so put must be a heavenly people. Why so? Because this world is all gone wrong; it has fallen from God, and is become the "far country." Hence, its riches are of no value, but a great hindrance, unless used in a heavenly way; and chapter 16 shews how they should be used. Chapter 15 shews the sinner called out by grace; that which follows shews what he, who is called out, is to be as a heavenly man. This world is a scene of evil, and that which attaches to it is now ruin and not blessedness. (See the rich man and Lazarus.) Adam had a place in this world, and Israel had a place in it; but now that is all gone, and grace has come in, lifting those who are the subjects of it into another state of things altogether. Christ is justifying God. His nature being love, it was His joy to manifest grace to sinners. It is not here the joy of those brought back, but God's own joy in bringing the sinner back to Himself. This gives the tone to heaven. "There is joy" above in the poor wretched sinner brought back.

I have no doubt we have, in these three parables, the unfolding of the ways of the Trinity. In the first is shewn the Son, as the Good Shepherd, going after the sheep. In the second, the woman lighting a candle, and searching diligently till she find the piece of silver, we have the painstaking work of the Holy Ghost, lighting up a testimony in this dark world. The third is the Father's reception of the returning sinner, when brought back. In this, the prodigal son, we find the work in the sinner; but in the two previous ones, it is the sovereignty and the activity of grace, which goes out in love to find that which was lost, and brings the sinner back without his having anything to do in it. This persevering energy of love is in the Shepherd Himself - the Good Shepherd cares for the sheep, and gives it no trouble in getting home; He carries it on His shoulders. Herein is seen the perfect grace in which the Lord Jesus has so charged Himself with bearing our every burden, our every trial and difficulty all along the road. Christ is thus the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls. Then mark, in verse 6, the peculiar character of this joy. "He calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." There could not be a more genuine picture, or a fuller expression of a person being happy than this. Joy always speaks out. In the second parable we have the same general principle. The painstaking of the Holy Ghost is shewn in the acting of the woman who sought the lost piece of silver; the piece of silver could have neither

trouble nor joy itself. The difference in the two is, that in the first, the Shepherd bears all the burden; in the second, it is the pains taken in finding the lost piece, proving the woman cared enough for it to take all this trouble to search it out. Thus does God's love act towards us, to bring us out of the dark world to Himself. What a work it is to bring man's heart back to God!

142 "'Twas great to speak a world from nought"

"Twas greater to redeem."

If we look at man, as he is in himself, he could never get back to God. But look at what God is in Himself, and who or what can resist His grace! Still it is the joy of the finder, and not of the thing found: "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep - my piece - that was lost." And in the case of the returning prodigal, who made the feast? Not the young man, but the father, saying to those in the house, "Let us eat and be merry, for this my son was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found." All caught the joy of the Father's heart, the servants, etc., all except the unhappy self-righteous elder brother (the Pharisee, the Jew), to whom the father replied, "It was meet that we should make merry and be glad, for this thy brother was dead and is alive again," etc. It is the joy God has in receiving a sinner back to Himself. In the parable of the prodigal son, by itself, the full glory of grace is not seen, as these three parables set it forth together. The case of the sheep is the Shepherd charging Himself with the whole burden of the sheep; the silver is the painstaking of the Holy Ghost. Before actual departure there was moral departure. When the young man left his father's house, it was but a display of the evil in his heart. He was just as wicked when he asked for his portion of goods, and crossed his father's threshold, as when he ate husks with the swine in the far country; he was doubtless, more miserable then, but his heart was gone before. One man may run farther into riot than another, but if we have turned our backs upon God, we are utterly bad. In this sense there is no difference.

143 The moral evil was just the same with Eve. She gave up God for forbidden fruit. She virtually thought the devil a much better friend to her than God, and took his word instead of God's. Satan is a liar from the beginning, and at the cross the Lord proved this. It cost the Lord His life to prove that God was good. Christ came to contradict the devil's lie, which man believed, and under which the whole world is lying. Grace and truth came by Christ, and at all cost were set up by Him on the cross. Man can do without God, and from the beginning the whole world has been a public lie against God. Who could unriddle it? Look at creation, how it groans under the bondage of corruption. Look at providence - how can I account for the goodness of God when I see an infant writhing with pain? How can I reconcile the two things? The villain prospers - the good man suffers. When I see Christ on the cross, I see what God is. Death came on man by reason of sin. But Christ takes my sin on His own sinless person, bows His head in death upon the cross, and thus sets aside that lie of Satan, "Ye shall not surely die." Thus was God's truth re-established here below in the work and person of the Lord Jesus, and nowhere else. In Him I see holiness, truth, and love, no matter at what cost.

The natural man is just like this prodigal, he spends his substance in the far country, and ruins himself. A man having £5,000 a year, and spending £20,000, will seem very rich for the time; but look at the results. He is a ruined man. The moment man departed from God, he sold himself to Satan, and is spending his soul, his heart, away from God; he even spends what God has given him against God, and when he is thoroughly spent, and has nothing to live on, he begins to be in want. "There arose a mighty famine in that land," and all the world feels that. Every sinner does not go to the same lengths of eating the swine's husks, but all are in the same condition of ruin. Every man has turned his back upon God, though

all have not run to the same excess of riot, nor fallen into the same degradation. The famine never draws back to the Father's house.

144 The prodigal joined himself to a citizen of that country - not his father's country. "He would fain have filled his belly," etc., and "no man gave to him." Satan never gives; that is found where God's love is, who spared not His own Son. When the prodigal thinks of his father's house, the whole work is morally done, though he is not back there yet. He turns, his heart was changed, and thus his whole desire was to get back to his father's house, from whence he had departed. He was not yet in the full liberty of grace, so as to have peace and happiness, and he says to himself, "make me as one of thy hired servants." He is brought to a sense of his guilt; and what was it? feeding with the swine? No, this was the fruit of it; but his guilt was in leaving his father's house, turning away from God. When he came to himself, he desired to return. This was truly a right wish, but the form it took in his mind, from his not yet knowing grace, was a legal one. "I am no more worthy to be called thy son! make me as one of thy hired servants." But the father does not give him time for that. We hear nothing more about hired servants; for when he was "yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion on him, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him." He could not have been a servant with the father's arms round his neck. It would have spoiled the father's feelings, if not the son's.

It was the joy of Him who was receiving back the sinner to Himself; and it is the knowledge of this which gives peace to the soul: nothing else does. If a man does not know love, he does not know God, for God is love. The full revelation of God is what we have in Christ. "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me?" God acts from the joy and delight He has in Himself, in receiving back the sinner, and therefore He does not think of the rags but of the child He has got back again. What right has man to call God in question, when He indulges His own heart in the outflow of love to the sinner? You will never get peace by the mere act of coming back, but by learning the Father's mind about you. Could the prodigal get peace as he was coming back if the father had not met him? No, all along the road he would be questioning, how will he receive me? - will he be angry with me? will he spurn me from his presence? And if he does, what will become of me? "But when he was get a great way off his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, and kissed him." If not so, he would have trembled even to knock at the door.

145 When the father's arms were on the son's neck, was he defiled by the rags? No; and he will not have the son bring rags into the house, but orders the best robe to be brought out of it. God sends His own Son out of heaven, and clothes the sinner; and, thus arrayed, the young man could bring credit to his father's house. And, surely, if we are so clothed with Christ, we shall do credit to God; and, in the ages to come, He will shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us through Christ Jesus.

"Let us eat and be merry." It is not, Let him eat and be merry. Again, he says, "It was meet that we should make merry and be glad." There was but one exception to the delight in the house. The elder brother (the self-righteous person) was angry, and would not go in. God had shewn what He was in Himself, by His Son, in thus receiving the prodigal: and now He would shew what they were in themselves. We know the Pharisees murmured from the beginning, and the elder brother had no communion with his father: for if the father was happy, why was not he happy too? "He was angry, and would not go in." If such a vile person as the publican gets in, this makes my righteousness go for nothing! It is truly so; for where God's happiness is, there self-righteousness cannot come. If God is good to the sinner, what avails my righteousness? He had no sympathy with his father. He ought to have said, "My father is happy, so I must be." There should have been communion in the joy. "Thy brother is back." That ought to have rung on his

heart, but no.

Then see the perfect patience of God's grace: the father goes out and entreats him. And do we not, all through the Acts, see God entreating the Jews to be reconciled, although they had crucified His Son? So Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 2:15, 16, says that the Jews filled up the measure of their sins by forbidding the apostles to speak to the Gentiles, that they might be saved. It is all selfishness in the elder son. "Thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends." To which the father replies, "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine." The oracles of God, the covenants, the promises, God gave to the Jews; but He will not give up the right to shew His grace to sinners, because of the self-righteous selfishness of the Jews, or of any one else.

146 Chapter 16. "There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him, that he had wasted his goods." Man, generally, is God's steward: and in another sense and in another way, Israel was God's steward, put into God's vineyard, and entrusted with law, promises, covenants, worship, etc. But in all, Israel was found to have wasted His goods. Man, looked at as a steward, has been found to be entirely unfaithful. Now, what is to be done? God appears, and in the sovereignty of His grace, turns that which man has abused on the earth, into a means of heavenly fruit. The things of this world being in the hands of man he is not to be using them for the present enjoyment of this world, which is altogether apart from God, but with a view to the future. We are not to seek to possess the things now, but, by the right use of these things, to make a provision for other times. "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness," etc. It is better to turn all into a friend for another day than to have money now. Man here is gone to destruction. Therefore now man is a steward out of place. "Give an account of thy stewardship, for thou mayest be no longer steward." He is discharged from stewardship - has lost his place, but not the things of which he has the administration. Here is something far better than the alchemy which would turn all into gold. For this is grace, turning even gold itself, that vile thing which enslaves men's hearts, into a means of shewing love and getting riches for heaven.

To Israel, God is saying, You have failed in the stewardship; therefore now I am going to put you out. In chapter 15 the elder brother, the Jew, would not go in; and here, in chapter 16, God is putting the Jew out of the stewardship. With Adam, all is over; but we have a title in grace to use, in a heavenly way, that to which we have no title at all as man. "If, therefore, ye have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" "If ye have not been faithful in that which is another man's, who shall give you that which is your own?" Our own things are the heavenly things; the earthly things are another's; and if you do not use your title in grace in devoting in love these earthly temporal goods, which are not your own, how can God trust you with the spiritual things which are "your own"? Our own things are all the glories of Christ - all that is Christ's is ours, for "we are not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold," etc. We were bought with a price, it is true, not with money, but "with the precious blood of Christ," etc. God has not given us eternal life in order that we might be getting money. "No man can serve two masters," and if you want to be rich, you cannot be seeking to serve God. We may have to do our duty in this world, but it is never our duty to serve mammon and desire riches.

147 Now He goes on to shew that there are these everlasting habitations, when the grand results will appear of what has been done here. The old thing is fleeting away, and the new coming in. The Jew, who refused to come to the feast, is loosening the law, while rejecting grace. See chapter 14:18, 19.

Verse 19. "A certain rich man, clothed in purple," etc. The thought here is Jewish, and the great principle is that all God's dealings, as to the distributive justice on the earth, were no longer in force, and that now He

only deals in grace. He draws aside the veil to shew the result in another world. The rich man had his good things here - he belonged to the earth, and the basket and the store belonged to him - his treasure was on earth, and his heart there too. But look into the other world and see the result - "torment." The good things have changed now. "The rich man died and was buried; and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torment." "And there was a certain beggar, named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, etc . . . and the beggar died." Was he buried? Not a word about it, for he belonged not to the earth. "He was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." He who had the "evil things" down here, "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom." He who have the "evil things" down here, was carried to the best place in heaven. Then mark, it was not the affliction, sores, etc., of Lazarus made him righteous, any more than the riches of the rich man made him unrighteous. God having done with the earthly things, no earthly circumstances are a mark of God's present favour, or the reverse: though, no doubt, God's dealings with Lazarus were the means of bringing down his pride, breaking the will, etc., and so preparing him for the place He was going to take him to.

148 Verse 31. "If they hear not Moses and the prophets," etc. Here this solemn truth comes out, that even the resurrection of Christ will not convince them; for if they refuse to hear God's word as they have it, they will not hear the testimony of God, even though one rose from the dead; and we know they did not.

This chapter 16 is to let in the light of another world upon God's ways and dealings in this. The whole world is bankrupt before God; so that man is now trading with another's goods. When man rejected Christ he was turned out of his stewardship. This is man's position. We should therefore, dispose of everything now, in reference to the world to come, according to this permission in grace revealed in chapter 16, to use the things of which we have the administration. If we are serving mammon, we shall not get the blessing of serving God, in the sense of God's gifts; for it is retributive justice here, in a sense. If you are not faithful in another man's, who will give you that which is your own? If you have not been faithful to the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches? If you are loving money, you cannot have your heart filled with Christ. We are not to be "slothful in business," but "fervent in spirit, serving the Lord"; and for this He opens heaven to us. Not as He said to Abraham, "Unto a land that I will shew thee." He has shewn heaven unto us, having opened it to us in grace. It is the revelation of grace that gives power over earthly things. May the Lord keep before us a living Christ, as our light for guidance and salvation to walk and trust in!

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