

Listen to a Picture

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In Atlanta, Georgia, I was walking down a street a few years ago and noticed that one of the art galleries was having an exhibit with the theme, “Listen to a Picture.” They are trying in the South to recover some of the rich culture that has been lost in the past few decades. There has been a decline there in the love and appreciation for some of the finer things in this life. Since I felt that my culture had worn a bit thin in places, I went by to listen to the pictures.

I discovered that there are two extreme schools of artists and art critics. There is the old-fashioned and there is the modern school. The old-fashioned school is mild; the modern is wild. The old-fashioned school believes in art being photographic. The modern one believes in its being surrealistic, and they include the impressionist and expressionist schools. Or, if you want to put it like this: There is the old-fashioned, the concrete; and there is the modern, the abstract.

Honestly, I found out that I have no real appreciation of modern art. They can print a picture of Whistler’s mother, and it can look like a dish of wilted artichokes. In fact, that’s the way it did look. She wasn’t even sitting in the chair; she was off her rocker – and so was the artist, from my point of view. But if you appreciate that kind of art, fine.

The Lord’s Art

May I say to you that our Lord drew pictures. Some think that the pictures He drew belong to the old-fashioned school – photographic. There are others who think that the pictures He drew belong to the modern school – the abstract. I do not know which side you want to take. The only thing I’m concerned about is to look at one of His pictures. He didn’t paint with a brush. He painted with words. The only record we have of His writing, you will recall, was when He wrote on the sand, and careless feet passing over it rubbed it out shortly afterward. But His word pictures have survived the years and are still colorful and alive.

Dr. Luke is the one who majors in the pictures our Lord painted, for Dr. Luke, a medical doctor and a scientist, was also an artist. He himself had an appreciation for the finer things. He records all the songs of Christmas, and he’s the one who gives us some of our Lord’s glorious parables which the other Gospel writers omit.

A Closer Look

Look now at one of His pictures. This picture is the one that has been called by men “The Prodigal Son.” Actually, it’s not a single picture, but it’s really one of three pictures. Dr. Luke says, “He spake this parable unto them,” and He didn’t stop with one, He gave three. There is the picture of the lost sheep, the picture of the lost coin, and the picture of the lost son. And they’re all in one frame because they are one parable. This is what is known as a triptych. Many of you folk who can go back quite a few years will remember that you used to have in the parlor three pictures in one frame called the triptych. When I used to visit my aunt, I remember seeing a picture like that which she kept in the attic (that’s where she used to make me sleep when the house filled up with relatives). I always looked at that picture because it was very interesting. It was really three scenes depicting the prodigal son in one frame.

Now in this picture which our Lord gives us, we have the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. And they all belong together. They really constitute one picture. However, we are going to look at just one third of it. This is actually a talking picture and a moving picture; and it is a triptych, if you please.

And he said, A certain man had two sons. (Luke 15:11)

Immediately, our Lord begins to put the background on the canvas. I see a lovely home (because this will represent the home of the Father, the Heavenly Father), and it's a glorious home. It's a home that has all of the comforts, all of the joys, and all of the love that ever went into a home, for it is the heavenly home. In that home there is the "certain" man who is God the Father. This Father had two sons. He has more sons than that, but these are representatives, you see. One of these boys is called the elder and the other is called the younger. We see that palatial home, and out in front there stands the Father and the two sons.

Now let's watch our Lord add some more to the picture for us.

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. (Luke 15:12, 13)

Here in this lovely home, a home in which there was everything in the world that the heart of man could want – love, joy, fellowship, comforts – this younger boy did a very strange thing. He had grown tired of the discipline. He wanted to stretch his wings. He wanted the excitement and glamour of another country, a new world. I do not know why that is true, but to you and me the grass in the next pasture always looks greener. The boy looked out from home and said, "If I could only get away off yonder on my own, it'd be wonderful." He didn't like it at home. He fell out with his father, lost fellowship with him, and said, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." So the father divided his estate between them, and the boy left with his pockets full of money – money that he had not worked for. He had done nothing to earn it. Every bit that came to him was what his father had given to him. He had not gotten it by his ability nor by his labor. He had money in his pocket because he had a very generous father. And so the boy started out for the far country.

Now our scene shifts, and we must put in another picture here, the picture of the far country. You can paint it any way you want to. May I say to you that you can paint it in lurid colors, as many have attempted to do. And I do not think it's over exaggerated to paint it that way. This boy knew what it was to have what the world calls a good time. He made all of the nightclubs; he knew café society. He had money, and when you've got money, fair-weather friends flock to you. And believe me, he had fair-weather friends. For a time he lived it up. He enjoyed the pleasures of sin for a season there in the far country. Our Lord did not put in any detail of what the son did, but we can well imagine some of the things.

In Trouble

However, there did come a day after he had lived it up, that he reached into his pocket and there was not anything left. Not only was he in a very bad way financially, but the whole country was in a bad way. You see, that land in which he thought the grass was greener was now experiencing famine. The grass had now dried up. And this boy didn't know what to do. If you want to know the truth, he was afraid to go home. He should not be afraid, but he was afraid to go home. Now he was desperate. He was so desperate that he was going to do something that no Jewish man would ever have done unless he had hit the bottom. This boy hit the bottom.

He couldn't get a job. He went around to see some of his fair-weather friends and said, "Bill, do you remember how you used to come to the banquets I gave and the dinners, and that I always picked up the check? I paid for the liquor, and I paid for the girls. Do you remember that? Now I'm in a bad way. I wonder if you couldn't tide me over, or maybe you could give me a job." The fair-weather friend said, "I'm sorry. You say you've lost all your money? Well, that's too bad. I'm not interested in you anymore. My secretary will show you the door." And the boy found, after going from place to place, that he didn't have any real friends in the far country.

Finally he ended up by going out to the edge of town. Out there was a man who was raising pigs, and you could tell it a mile away. The boy went over to him and said, "I'd like to have a job." The man said, "Well, I can't pay you. You know we're having a lot of difficulty, but if you can beat the pigs to it, you can eat here at least." That's exactly the point to which he had sunk.

When our Lord said that this man "would fain have filled his belly with the pods [swill] that the swine did eat," every Israelite – both Pharisees and publicans who were listening to Him that day – winced, because a Hebrew couldn't go any lower than that. The Mosaic law had shut him off from having anything to do with swine, and to stoop to the level of going down and living with them was horrifying. That is the picture. And it's a black picture. You see that this boy had hit the very bottom.

Somebody is immediately going to say, "Well, this was the fellow who was a sinner and he is going to get saved." No, I'm sorry to tell you that such is not the picture that is given to us here. This is not the picture of a sinner who gets saved. May I say to you, and say it very carefully, that when this boy was living at home with the father and was in fellowship with him, he was a son – there was never any question about that. When this boy got to the far country and was out there throwing his money around, he was still a son. That is never questioned. And when this boy hit the bottom and was out there with the pigs – if you had been a half-mile away looking over there, I don't think you could have distinguished him from a pig – he was not a pig. He was a son. In this story that our Lord told, there is never any question as to whether the boy was a son or not. He was a son all the time.

The Gospel

Somebody says, "Then this is not the gospel." Yes, it is the gospel also. And I will hang on to that application for the very simple reason that an evangelist in southern Oklahoma many years ago used this parable to present the gospel. People said he imitated Billy Sunday, but since I had never heard of Billy Sunday, it didn't make any difference to me. He was a little short fellow, holding services under a brush arbor. The thing that interested us boys was the fact he could jump as high as the pulpit. He'd just stand flat right there and up he'd go – a little short fellow. We'd sit out there and watch him, and the next day we'd practice to see if we could jump that high. May I say to you that one night he preached on the prodigal son, and that was the night I went forward, acknowledging my sins. Don't tell me the gospel is not here. It *is* here.

However, let's understand what the parable is primarily about. It reveals the heart of a Father who will not only save a sinner but take back a son, and our Lord painted the son into the picture right down in the pigpen. Now, friend, you can't get any farther down than this young man was. Back in the first century in Jerusalem, speaking to both Pharisees and publicans, there was no use trying to describe somebody lower than this boy. In their eyes nobody could be lower. From where he was, any direction was up. He was on the bottom.

Now will you notice:

And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his 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. (Luke 15:15, 16)

Maybe you thought a moment ago I was exaggerating when I said his fair-weather friends wouldn't help him. Our Lord made it very clear when He said, "No man gave unto him." Why is it today that Christians sometimes get the impression that the man of the world is really his friend when he's trying to lead him into sin and lead him away from God! Well, believers do get that impression. This boy got that impression also. He was being led away from home and from his father, farther and farther away. And he thought these folks were his friends.

Now we don't have any letters that he wrote back to some of his friends at home. But if we had one, I think that it would have said, "Hey, you ought to come over here! There are some real people over here where I am. They know how to really live. I'm having a fantastic time. You ought to come over." But, may I say to you, the day came when he found out these were not his friends. "No man gave unto him."

Now that's the black part of the picture, and I think it's about time for us to see some of the bright colors our Lord painted into the picture. Our Lord always put down a black background, and then He added the bright colors in the foreground of the picture. Have you ever noted that God paints that way? I don't know whether it is abstract or concrete art, but that is His technique all the way through the Bible. He has put the blood of Christ over the blackness of man's sin. In the epistle to the Romans, He puts down a background that is as black as ink on which He writes in glowing colors the story of justification by faith. You can always tell when it's God painting because He paints like that. And men are beginning to learn that.

Out on my freeway, which is the oldest one in this area (I do feel as if it's *my* freeway after paying taxes – I know *part* of it belongs to me), they originally put up signs having a white background and black letters, and there are a few of the old signs left out there at certain places. But that's not the best way to do it. They're now using a dark background and white letters. It took man a long time to learn that, but that's the way to paint. That's the way God paints.

And so on the dark background of this boy's sin – down in the pigpen, out of fellowship with his father, having left home in a huff, mad at his father – our Lord begins to brush on the bright colors.

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger. (Luke 15:17)

Repentance

He came to himself. Sin does an awful thing to us. It makes us see the world wrong. It makes us see ourselves in the wrong light, and it makes us see the pleasures of this world in the wrong perspective. We just don't see right when we are in sin. This boy, when he was at home, looked out yonder at the far country – it all looked so good. The grass was green and the fun was keen, but now he came to himself.

And the first thing he did was to reason a little. He began to use his intelligence. He said, "You know, I'm a son of my father, and here I am in a far country. I'm down here in a pigpen with pigs, and back in my father's home the *servants* are better off than I am, and I'm his son."

When he began to think like that, he began to make sense. And this fellow now acts like he's intelligent:

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's 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. (Luke 15:17-19)

This is the decision of the man. After he did a little intelligent thinking about it, he said to himself, *The thing I'm going to do is get out of here and go to my father. And when I get to my father, I'm going to tell him I've been wrong. I know my father has not been wrong. I have been wrong. I'm going to say that I have sinned against heaven and before him. I'm no more worthy to be called his son. If he'd just let me come back home and be a servant, I'd be lots better off than here in the pigpen.* So he arose and came to his father.

Now we get to a really bright picture, the brightest one of all. It is the picture of that lovely home we were telling you about. Oh, it's a beautiful home. It's the father's house. The Lord Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many abiding places." This is the house that it pictures. The house is there in the background, and I see a father looking out the window. He has been looking out the window every day since his boy left. And do you know why he's been looking out the window? He knew that one day that boy would be trudging down the road coming home.

Somebody asks, "Do you believe that if you're once saved you're always saved?" Yes. Somebody asks, "Do you believe that a Christian can get into sin?" Yes. "Can a Christian stay in sin?" No. Because in the Father's house the Father is watching, and He says, "All my sons are coming home. My sons don't like pigpens because they do not have the nature of a pig. They have the nature of a son. They have *My* nature, and they won't be happy except in the Father's house. The only place in the world they'll love is the Father's house. And every one of *My* sons who goes out to the far country and gets into a pigpen – regardless of how dirty he gets or how low he sinks – if he's *My* son, one day he'll say, 'I'll arise, and I'll go to my Father.' " And the reason he will say this is because the Man who lives in the big house is his Father. Up until now, after at least 6,000 years of recorded human history, there never yet has been a human "pig" who has said, "I will arise and go to my Father's house." Never, never. Pigs love it down there in the pigpen. They don't want to go to the Father's house. The only one who wants to go to the Father's house is a son. And one day the son will say, "I will arise and I will go to my Father."

Now the son in our story started home.

And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him. (Luke 15:20)

Maybe you thought a moment ago that I was exaggerating when I said that this father had been looking out the window every day, but he had. And now as he saw his starving and hurting son coming, he ran and said to his servant, "Go down to the tree and cut me about a half dozen hickory limbs. I'm going to switch this boy within an inch of his life." Is that the way your Bible reads? Well, mine doesn't either. It ought to read that way. Under the Mosaic law a father had a perfect right to bring a disobedient son before the elders and have him stoned to death. This

father had a perfect right to say, “This boy took my name and my money, and he squandered it. He disgraced my name. I’ll whip him within an inch of his life.” He had a right to do this. But instead, his father did something amazing.

Grace

When our Lord got to this part of the parable, and when He brushed this bright color on the canvas, it caused all of those who were present to blink their eyes. They said, “We can’t believe that. It’s bad enough to see that boy hit the bottom and go down yonder with the pigs, but it’s worse for the father to take him back home without punishing him. That’s the thing that we don’t like. He ought to be severely punished.” Will you notice what the father did. Let me read it accurately now:

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. (Luke 15:20)

I have tried for years to get a satisfactory picture of this scene. Although I have collected several, there is only one that I really like. In most of the pictures the boy looks pretty decent, but the one I like shows him in rags, and you can almost smell him – oh, that pig smell! There stands the boy, and the father goes and puts his arms around him and kisses him. And will you notice what happened: “And the son said unto him, Father.” Isn’t that wonderful? “*Father!*” Regardless if he is a boy who is dirty and smells like a pig – though he ought not to – that one is his *father*.

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. (Luke 15:21)

He had memorized this little speech, you see. He had been repeating the thing he had planned in the far country. I think he repeated that little speech over and over all the way home. I think every step of the way he said to himself, *When I get home, I’m going to say to 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.*

He started to say it all to his father but got only as far as, “I am no more worthy to be called thy son,” when he was interrupted.

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. (Luke 15:22-24)

And, as Dr. George Gill used to say, “It says that they *began* to be merry, and it doesn’t say they ever stopped.” They just kept right on. This boy found that the place where he could really have a good time was in his father’s house.

My friend, if you really want to have a ball, you can’t do it in the far country. If you’re God’s child, you can’t sin and find happiness. You may even go to the pigpen, but, my friend, you can never enjoy it. If you’re a child of the Father, there will come a day when you are going to say, “I will arise and go to my Father,” and you will go. And when you go, you will confess to Him.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

That's the way a sinning child gets back into the fellowship of the Father's house. In fact, the only way back is by confession.

Have you ever noted the things the father says he's going to do for his son? He says, "Get a robe." Now a robe was clean clothing that went over him after he'd been washed. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Our Lord washes us. The One who girded Himself with a towel is the One who will wash one of His sons who comes back to Him. We have to be cleansed when we have been to the far country. And that robe is the robe of the righteousness of Christ that covers the believer after he is cleansed.

The ring is the insignia of the full-grown son, with all rights pertaining thereto. He is brought back into his original position. Nothing is taken from him. He is restored to his place in his father's house. The older brother – if you'll follow the parable through – complained about that very thing. He felt his brother ought not to be brought back, but the father brought him right back where he belonged.

And then he says, "We're going to kill the fatted calf." There has to be a sacrifice. All of this is made possible because Jesus Christ about two thousand years ago died to save us from sin. And, my friend, today He lives to keep us saved.

Right now, Christ is at God's right hand, still girded with the towel of service for one of His own who gets soiled feet or soiled hands by being in the far country.

However, let me repeat, don't think you can rush back into the Father's house and have fellowship with Him without first getting clean. There are a lot of Christians who think they can do this, but they are doing nothing in the world but presuming. They have this grand assumption, and they're saying things that are not true. They're not having fellowship with God until they confess their sins. When we confess to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We have to come as the prodigal son came. "Father, I have sinned, and I'm no longer worthy to be called Your son. Make me a hired servant." And the Father will say, "I'd never make you a hired servant. You're My son. I'll cleanse you, I'll forgive you, I'll bring you back into the place of fellowship and usefulness."

A son is a son forever.