

## ENTITLED OR DESERVING?

**Today's Text: Lk 15: 11-32**

### **Extracts:**

Then [Jesus] said, "A certain man had *two sons*, and *the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.'* So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. ...Now *his older son was in the field.* And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.' But *he was angry and would not go in.* Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him" [Lk 15: 11-13, 25-28]

*The oil-rich Caribbean state of Trinidad & Tobago (T&T) runs an Unemployment Relief Programme (URP), aimed, among other things, to provide short-term unemployment benefits to unemployed workers over 25 years of age.<sup>1</sup> In a recent review of the scheme, it was discovered that about 2,400 persons over 65 years of age were receiving benefits, some of them along with their pension benefits. In fact, a 107-year-old person (presumably already dead) was still on the programme! The government plans to turn the programme from a welfare to a workfare scheme so as to minimize its abuse.*

*The T&T experience is found wherever people lay claims to what they believe they are entitled to. They will stretch the privilege to get more than they deserve. Yet, when it comes to working for pay, they are among the loudest to complain over their inadequate reward compared to their contribution. Why do we tend to abuse privileges but complain over inadequate reward for our efforts? Are you entitled to all that you currently receive from people and God? Do you in deed deserve them?*

*In this week's Bible story, Jesus tells the parable of two brothers. One claimed his inheritance benefits in advance and squandered them. The other grumbled that he had not been duly compensated for his efforts. What lessons can we all learn from that story? Let us find out from this week's eye-opening study!*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the following sources: "Unemployment Relief Programme (URP)," [http://www.ttconnect.gov.tt/gortt/portal/ttconnect/Bus\\_jobseekerDetail/?WCM\\_GLOBAL\\_CONTEXT=/gortt/wcm/connect/gortt+web+content/TTConnect/Business/Role/AJobSeeker/FindAJob/Unemployment+Relief+Programme+%28URP%29](http://www.ttconnect.gov.tt/gortt/portal/ttconnect/Bus_jobseekerDetail/?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/gortt/wcm/connect/gortt+web+content/TTConnect/Business/Role/AJobSeeker/FindAJob/Unemployment+Relief+Programme+%28URP%29), and Keyon Felmine, "McLeod: Man, 107, employed at URP," <http://guardian.co.tt/?q=node/5833>, Thu., 10 Feb. 2011

## 1. Background: A tale of two selfish brothers

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is familiar to most of us. It tells the story of how a young man offended his father and, as he began to suffer, he came to himself and decided to go back home with a heart of repentance and beg his father to give him a second chance, to serve not as a son but as a hired servant [Lk 15: 11-19]. However, our study this week is going to focus on another aspect of the story, namely, our attitude to privileges and entitlements.

The man had two sons but that was not the only common characteristic that they shared! Here are traits that they have revealed to us about themselves:

### a) *The prodigal son focussed on his entitlements*

Their father was obviously a rich man. One day, the younger son came to him and said, “Father, give me *the portion of goods that falls to me*” [v. 12]. Another way to put his request to his father is, “Give me my entitlements.” *An entitlement is what you do not deserve but you can have it by virtue of a privilege, such as birth, age, citizenship, luck, etc.* The young man did not deserve it because he had not worked for it; or, at least, we are not told in the story that he did. The portion of goods that fell to him could be what would be his inheritance after his father’s death. In that case, he was asking for his inheritance in advance. Was his selfish request not an indirect way of wishing his father dead?

Ordinarily, a privilege is granted to empower those who are disadvantaged to catch up with the rest. It is to provide a level-playing field for all. But what did the prodigal son do with his inheritance? A few days after collecting it, we are told that he “gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” Sooner than later, he became destitute [vv. 13-14].

We are not different from that young man. For example, as we have seen in the Trinidad & Tobago example, some people on welfare get hooked on it and never grow out of their dependency psychosis. Some people who have won millions in lotteries have returned to poverty after squandering all. A good number of the notorious young people featured in gossip magazines are the children of the rich and famous who could not use their accident of birth to enhance their future. Look at the example of the prophet Samuel that God did not allow any of his words to fall to the ground [1 Sam. 3: 19]. Yet, his sons, Joel and Abijah, both judges by virtue of their birth to the great prophet, were rejected by the children of Israel as king because “they took bribes and perverted justice” [1 Sam. 8: 1-5].

The prodigal son saw only his rights to his father's estate but not his responsibilities for the prudent management of his share. *Therefore, an entitlement is a liability unless it empowers us to improve our station in life.*

b) *His brother focussed on his fair share*

The prodigal's older brother gave us a different picture of selfishness when he perceived that he had not received his fair share of the efforts that he had put in. We are told their father "divided *to them* his livelihood" [**Lk 15: 12**]. That suggests that, after their father had given the prodigal son his share of his estate, we assume that the rest (or the bulk of it) would belong to the older son. That could have encouraged him to work harder because he knew that that would be in his future interest. However, in due course, he was to hear from one of his father's servants that his prodigal brother had returned home in shame and shams and their father had received him by feasting him with "the fatted calf" [**vv. 25-27**].

He became very angry. After all, that calf could have been taken from his own share of their father's estate. He refused to go in and his father had to come out to meet him. He complained bitterly to his father, saying, "These many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as *this son of yours* came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him" [**vv. 28-30**].

That is most of us in action! We see our efforts as an investment. Therefore, our reward should be proportional to, if not better than, our contribution. Consequently, we resent it when those we regard as mere consumers (the poor and disadvantaged on welfare benefits) are given enhanced benefits that we regard as taken from our share. Take the example of the labourers in the vineyard [**Matt. 20: 1-16**]. Those who were hired in the morning were paid the same amount as those hired an hour to the end of the day (the eleventh hour), but each was paid as the vineyard owner had agreed with him. Yet, the earlier group complained, saying, "These last men have worked only one hour, and *you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day*" [**v. 12**].

Again, as in the case of his prodigal brother, the older brother concentrated on his own self-interest, masqueraded as agitation for his fair share. Who defines "fair" and for what end? Therefore, those who insist on reward based on contribution are not necessarily any better than those who are helped by privilege or position. Both are looking at reward from the position of entitlement. But do you necessarily deserve what you are entitled to? Let us do more in-depth analysis of the matter.

## 2. Towards a spiritual understanding of entitlements and rewards

Finding an equitable formula for sharing wealth between the haves and have-nots is at the heart of the ideological differences between capitalists and socialists, conservatives and liberals. However, when it comes to questions of salvation, there is no room for ideology because the kingdom of God is not a democracy! As my wife often puts it, truth has only one version and it is God's. He does not need your vote and does not share limelight with any man! So, as we look at the above story from God's perspective, the following points jump at us:

### a) *Your entitlement is not free to its provider!*

The welfare benefits that disadvantaged people get may be free to them but not to the state that provides them. They have to be paid for. For example, Western economies are building up huge deficits largely because of high welfare bills on Medicare and social security. Students recently protested in the UK when the newly elected coalition government cut down on education grants and subsidies, as a way to cut down on deficit spending. The students saw a cut in their entitlements but how would they know where the shoe pinched the state?

In the Bible story under consideration, the possessions that went to the two sons belonged to their father. In addition, think of the emotional costs that he had to endure when his younger son disappeared and wasted his share in prodigal living. Happily, he came to himself, repented and came back to his father [Lk 15: 17-19]. But think of how broken-hearted he was when his older son, instead of rejoicing that his lost younger brother had returned home, worried only about his fair share and equal treatment. What kind of future did such two sons hold for their father's hard-earned legacy?

In like manner, salvation may be free to us because we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, not by works of righteousness [Gal. 2: 16; Eph. 2: 8-9]. But it cost our heavenly Father the death on the cross of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, do you know how much we break God's heart when we claim to be believers and yet squander such a precious free gift by remaining in sin? To do so is to behave like the prodigal son. So, each time you find yourself misusing God's graces to you, such as accident of birth or baptism, natural talents, etc, remind yourself that you are misusing a precious and expensive gift from your Father in heaven. You are squandering His Son's precious blood that was shed for you on Calvary.

### b) *Your effort is not responsible for your success!*

Some of us are also under the mistaken impression that their effort is responsible for their success. So, they tend to see the poor or less privileged as lazy or unwilling to lift themselves out of destitution. But, as the word of God says, “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to men of understanding, nor favour to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all” [Eccl. 9: 11].

God controls time and chance for He does not allow even a sparrow that sells for “a copper coin” to fall to the ground apart from His will [Matt. 10: 29]. God is the one who has given us the power to get wealth but for His purpose [Deut. 8: 18]. No matter how hard people may work, there will always be poor people among us [Jn 12: 8; Deut. 15: 11], no matter how rich a society may be. Therefore, success comes only from God. That is why Paul told the Corinthian church, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” [1 Cor. 3: 6].

c) *Therefore, use your circumstances to glorify God*

Life is not a positive linear curve, where you keep climbing from lower to higher status. Sometimes, we may find ourselves running fast up the ladder of success, no matter how defined. Then, suddenly disaster strikes. A bank failure can reduce our savings in millions into nothing overnight. An earthquake or a hurricane can reduce our mansion into a rubble. An illness can wipe off overnight a lifetime’s savings. An unanticipated sudden loss of political power can reduce us from prince to pauper overnight. At the other end, an accidental stroke of luck, such as a lottery win or inheritance, can turn us overnight from beggar to bourgeois. Therefore, *the question is not what you are or have but what you do with it.*

Paul has given us one of the best illustrations of how to combine privilege with effort. A Roman citizen by birth and a Pharisee by rank, he contributed the most among the apostles to spreading Christianity beyond the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Yet, he saw himself as the “least of the apostles” [1 Cor. 15: 9] and, in fact, “less than the least of all the saints” [Eph. 3: 8]. What was the secret? In his words, “I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content; I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” [Phil. 4: 11-13]. He added, “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” [1 Thes. 5: 18]. Therefore, here are some guiding principles in an effective (spiritual) use of entitlements and efforts/contributions:

- *See entitlements as God’s lifeline to you in a desperate situation.* You are to use it as a means *to empower you to pull out of destitution* because

God's thoughts toward you are of peace, not of evil, to give you a future and a hope [Jer. 29: 11]. Are you on unemployment benefits? Use part of it to upgrade your skills so that you can soon find a better job and be able to help others in need. Are you still living with and on your parents at the age of 30? Think of moving out or sharing in the home bills. Are you a young struggling pastor living on your congregation's meagre contributions? Use additional funds to pay school fees for your poorer members' children instead of buying expensive clothes to catch up with rich pastors you see on television!

- **See effort or contributions as your way of thanking God for the opportunities He has given you in life** because, as the word of God affirms, whatever you give to the poor is a lending to the Lord and He will repay you [Prov. 19: 17]. Do you feel insulted that your contributions in your church are not appreciated? Don't because it is God who measures and rewards contribution. Are you using your privileges to take advantage of the vulnerable in your office or congregation? Don't because God put you there and He alone can pull you down if you misuse it [Ps. 75: 6-7]. Do you worship the material wealth or political power that God has given you? Don't because it is idolatry and the jealous God will not spare His anger against you for such acts [Ex. 20: 5].

Jesus has said, "Freely you have received, freely give" [Matt. 10: 8]. Therefore, you are not entitled or deserving of anything unless what He has given you. Without Him, you can do NOTHING [Jn 15: 5]!

### 3. Conclusion: Jesus is the Judge of what you deserve

The prodigal son recovered from his misuse of an entitlement. He repented and his father took him back. His older brother realized that he had lost nothing by his younger brother's wastefulness because his father assured him, "Son, you are always with me and *all that I have is yours*" [Lk 15: 30]. In both cases, it was their father that decided who deserved what. In like manner, Jesus has said that He did not come from heaven to do His will but that of His Father, "and this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day" [Jn 6: 39-40].

As a citizen, you are entitled to your country's passport but only those who travel abroad deserve and obtain one. In like manner, you become a citizen of heaven when you believe in and accept Christ Jesus as your Lord and Saviour. You become *entitled* to be called sons of God [Jn 1: 12], joint heirs with Christ [Rom. 8: 14-17], and an ambassador for Christ on earth [2 Cor. 5: 20]. However, it is only when you do all that Jesus commands you to do from now till your day of travel (death or rapture) that you *deserve* the passport of salvation to be with Him in His kingdom [Matt. 7: 21- 23].

Choose wisely!