The Prodigal Son

[October 1956]
[Montgomery, Ala]

During October 1956, King began a series of sermons at Dexter on the parable of the prodigal son. He incorporates ideas gleaned from Buttrick and J. Wallace Hamilton in this handwritten outline.

I  This is probably the most familiar of all the parables of Jesus. George Mury has said that this parable is "the most divinely tender and the most humanly touching story ever told on earth. This is no exaggeration. No story more instantly touches the nerve of actual life. It is the story of a boy who churned his life into fleshly mess and is condemned by it and is finally saved.

II  Tell the story. As we look at the Prodigal, let us look not as spectators. The Prodigal is a faithful reflection of life everywhere, in every age.

III  The one word that can describe all of this boy's mistakes is the word "illusion.

He was the tragic victim of a threefold illusion.

What is an illusion? It is an image in the mind's eye which has no corresponding existence in reality.

A  The first illusion is his mind was that pleasure is the end of life, that the satisfaction of the senses is the end of existence. This is an old illusion.

(1) The Hedonist

(2) Epicurus

(3) Ecclesiastes

(4) Omar Khayyam

The moving Finger writes and Having wrt, moves on.

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1 A report titled "Travels with the Pastor" in the 17 October 1956 Dexter Echo indicates that King delivered a series of sermons on the prodigal son. This outline may represent King's first sermon of the series.


3 Buttrick, The Parables of Jesus, p 189. "The most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told on our earth," says George Murray. The appraisal is not extravagant. No story more instantly touches the nerve of actual life. The boy who has churned his life into a fleshly mess is condemned by it, and saved. For George Murray's words, see Murray, Jesus and His Parables (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1914), p 163.

4 Luke 15:11–32. In Jesus's parable of the prodigal son, a son takes his share of his father's estate and squanders it on indulgent pleasures. He is still welcomed home after becoming destitute.

5 Hamilton paraphrased Ecclesiastes 2:4–11 in his analysis of the prodigal son, which King underlined in his copy of the sermon. "Away back in antiquity a man wrote it down and got it recorded in the Bible. 'I tried it,' he said. 'I made a business of happiness. I worked hard at the game, surrounded myself with all the pleasures the senses could provide, withheld not my heart from any joy. Then one day I drew a line under it, added it up, and all I got was zero, nothing. All is vanity, a striving after the wind.'" (Horns and Halos in Human Nature, p 31)
Neither tears nor wit can cancel out a line of it!

"A Book of verses underneath the Bough, A jug of wine, a loaf of Bread an Thou!" 

"The saddest people in the world," wrote Winchell, "are those sitting in joints making believe they are having a good time."

This Broadway street of fools.

B. The second illusion was the feeling on the part of the prodigal that he was independent, that he could live life happily outside his father's house and his father's will.

C. He was a victim of the illusion that freedom is license.

"The Fellow Who Stayed at Home"

[October 1956] [Montgomery, Ala.]

King bases the following handwritten outline on J. Wallace Hamilton's sermon, "That Fellow Who Stayed at Home," which deals with the prodigal son's older brother. King removed this chapter from his annotated copy of Hamilton's book, Horns and Halos in Human Nature, and kept the torn pages in the same file folder as this sermon.

In the outline below, King observes that the older brother "failed to realize that he was committing sins as damaging to the soul as the coarser sins of the younger brother."

They began to be merry—that is a fitting climax. The elder brother is a sudden discord, but without him the story would have been untrue to life. The year has its winter storms, the glow of day is followed by the gloom of night.

I. He possessed a sort of unattractive goodness that was deeply repulsive. True he stayed at home, did the chores, kept the rules. He wasted no money nor scarred his soul with dissipation—but he was undesirable nevertheless. He did the right things but in the wrong spirit.

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6 King quotes from Khayyám's Rubáiyát 71 and 12 (pp. 50 and 31). Hamilton also cited these two verses to exemplify "the philosophy of the prodigal" (Horns and Halos in Human Nature, p. 29).

7 King probably refers to journalist Walter Winchell, whose syndicated gossip column "On Broadway" ran in newspapers from 1924 until 1963.

1 Hamilton, Horns and Halos in Human Nature, pp. 163–173. The 17 October 1956 Dexter Echo noted that King was scheduled to preach a sermon series on the prodigal son. This sermon may represent King's second sermon in that series.


3 Hamilton, Horns and Halos in Human Nature, p. 166. "Let us begin with the most obvious fact about him—that, for all his respectability, he illustrates a kind of ungracious, unattractive goodness that is much too common."

True, he stayed at home, did the chores, kept the rules, performed his duty. He sowed no wild...