

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, September 3, 1989, by the Rev, W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**LUKE 15:13,14,19**

“He squandered his wealth.”

“He began to be in need.”

“He said, ‘I am no longer worthy  
to be called your son.’”

**WASTE, WANT AND WORTHINESS**

The population of our world is now increasing at the rate of 140,000 a day. Every 24 hours a city the size of Albany, New York, and every year a country the size of France is added to earth's teeming humanity. The stork is indeed a busy bird!

And every baby arriving on this planet today must get everything it takes to feed him, clothe him, shelter him and warn him -- tons and tons of it -- from this earth and from nowhere else. This earth is a great pantry which nature has been storing up for millions of years. It is a garden, an orchard, a granary, a meat shop; and every person who comes to live in this world lives off it and takes something out of it.

About 190 years ago, in 1798 to be exact, a gloomy English clergyman named Thomas Robert Malthus wrote a book that frightened people out of their wits. He claimed that the world was producing people faster than it was producing food and material to support them; and he predicted that the world family was gradually moving toward global famine and mass starvation. Fortunately, his conclusions have been disproved. He judged the whole world by the two-by-four farming area of England, and he vastly underestimated the world's resources and man's resourcefulness. Since his time, many things have happened to quiet the fear: the opening up of vast new territories, mass production, refrigeration of food, irrigation, improved methods of plant and animal breeding, and many other things which Malthus certainly did not foresee.

And yet today that old fear is coming back -- the “ghost of Malthus” walks again. By sinful folly man wastes so much, and fails to develop his available resources, with the result that the specter of overpopulation and underproduction is beginning again to haunt us, and questions about the world's waste and the world's want are very much in our minds.

Who would dream of finding the rules of economics in the Bible? And yet, the world's basic problem of bread is foreshadowed in our Lord's most famous parable. A boy squanders his wealth and comes into poverty because he was not worthy of his heritage!

Let us see what the Parable of the Prodigal Son has to say to us on Labor Sunday. The first thing of which it reminds us is this:

1. **Our very existence on this planet involves us in a PARTNERSHIP.** The earth that sustains us is rich, but all its riches must be worked for. God created everything, but He manufactures nothing. He provides bountifully for our needs, but we must take that raw material, and by the application of intelligence and energy, transform it into bread, buildings and substance suitable to our use.

We have all heard the story of the young farmer who took over a new tract of land in the pioneer days, and within a few years transformed it into a model farm. His minister visited him one day, and remarked, "John, it's amazing what God and you have done for this place!", to which John replied, with a twinkle in his eye, "Yes, Pastor, it is, but you should have seen it when God had it all to Himself!"

We cannot escape this partnership between God and man. There is no bread without work. If a person tries to live by unearned bread, if he makes no return of brain or brawn for what he takes out, he sins against his own nature, and helps to bring the world to ruin. That is why gambling in any shape or form is so damnable - the desire to get a buck you didn't work for. And as for those crazy "junkies" who rake in \$10,000 a week in profits on the street corner peddling drugs, they invariably end up in the morgue, gunned down by their own kind.

This was the mistake, the folly and the sin of the prodigal -- he thought that life meant nothing but "a good time." He wanted to live on the acquired capital of the past. That is the first mark of the prodigal mind -- the idea that one can live in the world without work, or on the labor of others. "Give me the goods," the boy said to his father, and went off down the road to spend what somebody else had worked for. And it is not surprising that there came a day when "he began to be in need"; for these two things, waste and want, always go hand in hand.

Some years ago, a book was written entitled The Economic Waste Sin, which pointed out in statistical figures that for every man who labors with mind and body to improve the world, there is another man, a waster, whom he, the worker, must carry as a burden on his back. The author went on to show the cost of crime, the liquor bill, the war debts, and do on. He cited the gamblers, the idlers, the nonproductive criminals who prey upon society, line their pockets with other peoples' money, and live on bread for which they have given no honest work.

I came upon a snatch of doggerel recently which is both amusing and thought-provoking. This is how it goes:

There are a lot of men who creep  
Into the world to eat and sleep,  
And know no reason why they're born  
Save only to consume the corn,  
Devour the cattle, bread and fish,  
And leave behind an empty dish;  
And if their tombstones, when they die,  
Were not to flatter or to lie;  
There's nothing better can be said

Than that they've eaten up their bread,  
Drunk up their drink, and gone to bed!

Life is a partnership, and we must never forget it.

**2. Our very existence here involves us in a STEWARDSHIP as well as a Partnership.**

Stewardship, you know, is no mere dogma of theology, not just something we think about in October and November when we are seeking to raise the church budget for the ensuing year. "The earth is the Lord's," and we are His stewards, accountable to Him for the way we use the earth's resources. Man's linkage to the land is very real, so real indeed that the earth reflects his moods and his sins. When we come to the good earth like the person with "the green thumb" -- to lovingly cooperate with its laws, the earth responds in gladness and abundance. On the other hand, when people live without a sense of stewardship, without appreciation of the gifts of God; when they take the good earth and waste it, they will end up in poverty, for the earth will reflect their sins. Cut down the sheltering forests with irresponsible abandon, and the earth will answer back in roaring floods, as is now happening in Brazil. Plow up the prairie grass lands in ignorance or greediness, and refuse to re-fertilize it, and the earth will answer back in dust bowls, barrenness, and the creeping death of soil erosion. Stewardship is certainly a vital practical issue.

We can never forget the story of Adam. He lost his garden and got a wilderness. And in varying degrees man has been doing that ever since, behaving on this planet not like a steward of its resources, but like a prodigal spendthrift who, having received an inheritance, proceeds recklessly to throw it away. It is an old story, the story of man's sin against the land, and his consequent fight with famine. Think of some of those lands in the Middle East, the cradle of civilization, lands which, in Bible times, were rich, supporting millions of people -- thriving cities and teeming populations. Through centuries of misuse they were drained of their fertility, and men moved out of them, leaving dead cities and desert waste.

We do well to remember what Walter Loudermilk calls "the eleventh Commandment" - "Thou shalt inherit the holy earth as a faithful steward, conserving its resources and productivity from generation to generation. If any shall fail in this stewardship of the land, thy fruitful field shall become sterile stony ground. Thy descendants shall decrease and live in poverty or perish from off the face of the earth."

But I think the final and most urgent word is this:

**3. Our very existence on this planet involves us in a FELLOWSHIP.** The world is a very small place today, and we are linked by a thousand invisible bonds to other people of different nationality, color and customs. And mankind, for far too long, has been living like the prodigal, in the "far country" of ill will and hate, shunning the fellowship of our true home in God.

You realize, don't you, that this has been the most destructive, wasteful century in human history. Unable to live in peace with each other, we went down into the mines, dug out their precious metal, and hurled great chunks of it at each other - To preserve our oil supplies, we burned up millions of tons of it during war -- enough oil to keep our tractors going for a hundred years! To defend our homes, we demolished homes — 13,000,000 in Europe, 17,000,000 in

Asia; we shattered our cities and scattered their people on the roads, homeless and hungry — 30,000,000 refugees. How long can the good earth stand the cost of hate?

Years ago, when a dollar was worth much more than it is today, I came upon a poem entitled “A Salute to a nine-inch gun.” Listen:

Whether your shell hits the target or not,  
Your cost is five hundred dollars a shot;  
You think of noise and flame and power,  
We feed you a hundred barrels of flour  
Each time you roar. Your flame is fed  
With more than two thousand loaves of bread;  
Be silent. Millions of hungry men  
Seek bread to feed their mouths again!

The price of hate comes high. Do you know that at the end of World War II our war debt here in the U.S.A. was 270 billion dollars? You can't even imagine what a figure like that means. If you started counting a hundred a minute, and kept at it night and day, you would have to live more than 5,000 years to even count it! Translated into human terms it was enough money to have provided the needy areas of the world with hospitals, schools, libraries and universities until the year AD 2000. Or think what it would have meant had it been put into farming machinery, seed, fertilizer, irrigation and the reclaiming of deserts and wastelands. How far would the appeal of Communism go if, out in those lands where it gains its converts, it had to compete with a democracy which had learned to love and conquer the world by serving it, as our Lord Jesus Christ has commanded us to do?

The cost of hatred is getting higher. One of our United States Senators figured out what it cost to kill an enemy soldier. In Caesar's war, you could get a good enemy corpse for 75 cents. In Napoleon's war, the price went up to \$3,000; in the Civil War, \$5,000; in World War I, \$21,000; in World War II, \$50,000. And in the Vietnam War it cost a million and a half dollars to kill one of the enemy!

How far is it to famine? We are beginning to feel the fear of it, and in our income tax, the pinch of it, and maybe that is our hope.

There came a great day for the prodigal son. He began to be in want. He began to think straight. “What am I doing here?” he said to himself. “In my father's house, there is enough and to spare. Why should I be in want?” There are two kinds of poverty, natural and artificial; and it finally dawned upon him that his hunger was wholly artificial, and self-made. He was living in a famine which his own folly had produced. It simply did not need to be. “In my father's house, there is enough and to spare.”

A friend of mine, Dr. Jacob Oser, who is a professor of Economics at Utica College, wrote a book some time ago entitled Must Men Starve? The theme of the book is precisely this, that famine in this modern age of sophisticated technology is almost wholly unnecessary. For the first time in human history we now possess the resources and the scientific know-how to banish

famine and world hunger, and to provide all mankind with the necessities of life. To be sure, there are still floods and droughts and land erosion; but most floods can be controlled, swamp lands can be reclaimed, deserts can be irrigated, and top soil can be replaced. There is no lack of land -- 25 million square miles of it tillable, of which we are using less than seven million, and much of that not well.

When the prodigal came back home and decided to cooperate with his father, the father threw open everything he had to him -- the fatted calf, the best robe, shoes for his feet, and a ring for his finger. In a word, everything the father possessed was his when he decided to be a son!

What would happen in the world today if we all learned to love God and live together as His children? Technically the bread problem is already solved. We have the skill if we had the will. It is very significant, I think, that our overseas missionaries have been showing us how to conquer the world by loving it. Do you know that it was a missionary from the United States, William G. Swallen, who planted the first apple seeds in Korea? One hundred years ago the apple was unknown in Korea. Today, apples are a major crop in that great developing nation.

It was a Presbyterian missionary from this country, Dr. Sam Higginbottom, who preached the Gospel and ran a model farm in India for almost forty years and demonstrated that if the people there are poor, it is not because their land is poor. With the use of fertilizer, better breeding of cattle, improved methods of agriculture, the land is rich enough to feed the hungry hordes.

It is not simply a matter of giving people our resources. It is more a matter of assisting them to develop to the utmost their own resources; and that requires love and commitment on our part and on the part of Christians the world over. Much has already been done, but the need is still appalling. Let us pray and work with godly zeal toward the accomplishment of the task. We have so much; others have so little. But the job can be done.

We should all be intimately involved in Christian philanthropic outreach -- in ventures such as "The Heifer Project," where quality livestock are made available to third world countries for breeding purposes, so that healthy herds can be built up for the milk and beef they produce. Make it your business to become informed about "Bread for the World" and "World Vision," for example. Do you know that for \$18.00 a month you can fully support an impoverished child in a third world country through "World Vision"?

Remember — our Lord still says to each one of us -- "Inasmuch as you have done it unto one of the least of these, My brothers, you have done it unto Me" (Matthew 25:40).

Dare we fail Him and yet call ourselves by His Name?

**AMEN.**