

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #5: LIFE LESSONS FROM THE PRODIGAL SON

By John Temples

Here is a series of mottoes that perhaps summarize our culture over several centuries:

- 1700s--"Give me liberty or give me death."
- 1800s--"Give me liberty."
- 1900s & 2000s--"Give me."

This "it's all about me" phenomenon is even reflected in the magazines we read:

- 1950s--LIFE
- 1960s--PEOPLE
- 1970s--US
- 1980s--SELF

Indeed, our modern culture might be called the "give me" age. Margaret Halsey wrote an article in the April 17, 1978 issue of Newsweek entitled "What's Wrong With 'Me, Me, Me.'" She said the religion of many today is "the Cult of I." This "religion," she says, teaches that within each one of us is some kind of Inner Wonderfulness, just waiting to blossom into beauty when it is freed from the restraints of basic civility and courtesy. Its goal is self-glorification instead of self-esteem. And to its adherents, truth is found not in the Bible but in ourselves.

This cult of "self," however, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, a character in one of Jesus's parables is the forerunner of the "give me" generation. I'm talking about the prodigal (wasteful) son. You can read the parable in Luke 15:11-32. You're familiar with the story: a son of a prosperous man asked that his inheritance be given him early. He then left home and began living it up; but afterward, he fell on hard times. Eventually, he went back home and asked for forgiveness.

Luke 15:12 reads, "[The younger son] said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of good that falls to me.'" Did you catch the prodigal son's demand? It was "give me."

THE PRODIGAL SON WAS A "GIVE ME" PERSON

What kind of person is this? Note:

First, a “give me” person is a self-centered person. His favorite pronoun was “ME.” He showed no consideration of others. You get the impression that he thought his father should be grateful that he (the son) had consented to live with him as long as he had.

Second, a “give me” person is a restless and dissatisfied person. The boy was not happy at home; he longed to be free of his father’s restraint. He coveted his father’s wealth.

Third, a “give me” person is an arrogant, rude, and demanding person. This impatient son did not say “please give me,” or “try me with a little”; it was just the abrupt “give me.” Ms Halsey says in the Newsweek article, “The false idea is that inside every human being...there is a glorious, talented and overwhelmingly attractive personality. This personality--so runs the erroneous belief--will be revealed in all its splendor if the individual just forgets about courtesy, cooperativeness and consideration for others and proceeds to do exactly what he or she feels like doing.”

Fourth, a “give me” person is a worldly person. Luke 15:13 tells us how this boy spent his inheritance: “Not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.” He set aside none of his substance for God or for others; verse 14 says “he spent ALL.” He ended up feeding hogs to stay alive.

The moral: don’t be a “give me” person like so many. If you are, you will be:

- A self-centered, egotistical person
- A restless and dissatisfied person
- An arrogant, “world-owes-me-a-living” person
- A worldly, materialistic person
- A disappointed person

BUT THERE’S MORE....

This son changed. He changed his mind and his life. He had to go through a lot of heartache first; he had made a real mess of his life. But Jesus says, “he came to himself” (verse 17). He repented and went home.

Verses 18 and 19 are beautiful: “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.’” Did you catch it? His new plea is “make me.”

In verse 12, his cry was “GIVE ME.” In verse 19, it was “MAKE ME.” He changed from a “give me” person into a “make me” person.

WHAT KIND OF PERSON IS A “MAKE ME” PERSON?

Essentially the complete opposite of a “give me” person.

First, a “make me” person is a satisfied person. This young man was at this point willing and anxious to go home, remain there, and take whatever his father was willing to give. The covetousness, restlessness, and discontent were gone.

Second, a “make me” person is a spiritually minded person. He said, “I have sinned against heaven and against you.” He has seen and experienced the best the world has to offer and has come up empty. He now has his priorities straight. He is cured of worldliness.

Third, a “make me” person is a humble person. “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Only at this point was he in a fit state to be blessed and welcomed back by the father.

Fourth, a “make me” person is a useful person. “Let me be one of your servants.”

This young man is now a grateful, humble, God-centered, other-people-oriented, be-of-service-directed individual. And what led to this transformation from a “give me” person to a “make me” person? His remembrance of the goodness, love, and generosity of his father. Of course, the “father” in this parable is God. In fact, the father is the real central character in the parable.

THIS “GIVE ME/MAKE ME” TRANSFORMATION CAN BE SEEN IN OTHER BIBLE PERSONALITIES

Simon Peter at first was not of much use to the Lord. One of his initial responses to the Lord was “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). But later, when he was sinking in the sea, his cry was “Lord, save me” (Matthew 14:30). He was then ready to submit fully to Christ and be useful to Him.

Isaiah exhibited a similar change of attitude when he saw a vision of God seated on His throne, recorded in Isaiah 6. Upon seeing God’s glory, he cried, “Woe is me” (verse 5). But after the cleansing touch of an angel, and upon hearing God’s plea for messengers, he said, “Here am I! Send me” (verse 8).

We are not really ready to be used and blessed by God as long as our attitude is “give me” or “depart from me” or “woe is me.” But when we become “make me/save me/send me” people, we are fit to receive God’s richest blessings. --John Temples