

The Prodigal Pig

...these people
honor me with their
lips, but their hearts
are far from me...

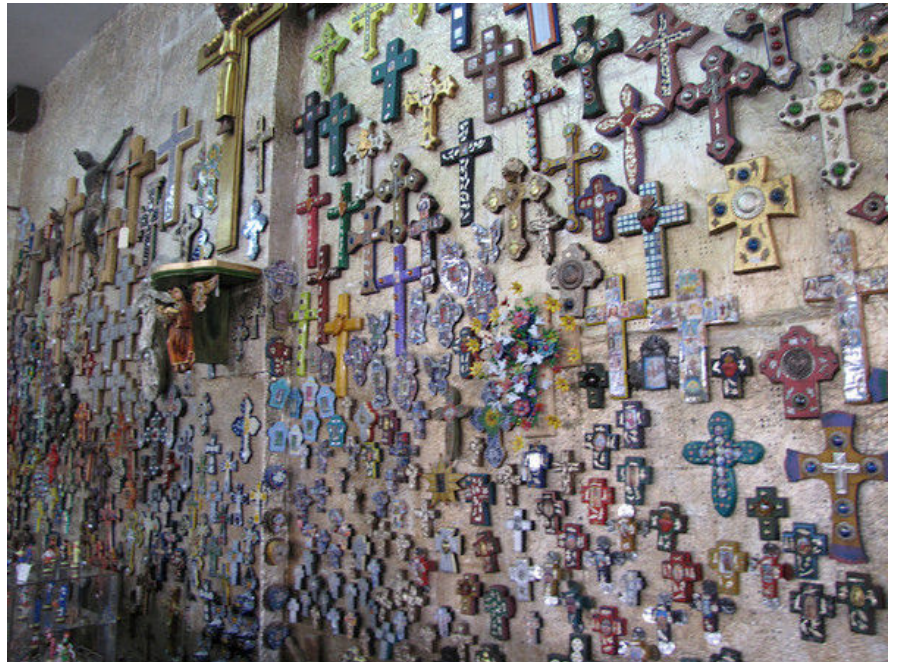
Matthew 15 - the religious leaders
criticize Jesus' disciples
Luke 15 - the prodigal pig



About this time in Jerusalem every year, there is a street carnival, a parade where people bring small crosses and place them beside one of the mighty walls of the city.

They do this as an act of sacrifice and worship, signifying the verse in the Bible where it says we are to 'take up our Cross daily and follow Jesus.'

And on the way to the festival, there are all these street vendors selling all manner of crosses for people to purchase and use as their act of worship.



The variety of crosses range from the most elaborate made from gold and silver, through to the cheapest made out of sticks of wood tied together with used fishing line.

Don't get me wrong, these cheap crosses look really nice, it's just that it costs next to nothing to purchase one.

Even cheaper still, if you make it yourself.

One of these vendors can be heard shouting, 'Cheap Crosses, Cheap Crosses. Get your cheap Cross here!'

What's more interesting, that literally nobody buys the more expensive Crosses made from gold or silver.

And the man selling the cheap Crosses is literally run off his feet.

Sometimes *we* can be like that too.

We give God only one dollar out of ten,

...one day out of seven,

...although occasionally we might offer a more expensive sacrifice.

But generally, the formula many people live by today, is:

**Just enough salvation to make us feel safe.
Just enough sacrifice to make us feel justified.**

And to be honest, this attitude is one of the most familiar conditions Jesus finds within the religious hearts of humanity.

2000 years ago, and even today.

Can we turn in our Bibles to Matthew chapter 15, and I will explain what I mean.

Verse 1: One day some Pharisees and Lawyers came from Jerusalem to question Jesus about His disciples who were not obeying some of their religious traditions.

To briefly explain, Pharisees served in a few different positions within 1st Century Judaism.

Sometimes they were part of political parties and uprisings,

...other times they were leaders and rulers in the religious synagogues,

...while at other times they were closely linked to the lawyers who upheld the justice and standards of society.

And so here - we have some Pharisees and Lawyers coming to question Jesus.

There is also a key in verse one, as to their function, as it says they *came from Jerusalem*.

We are tempted to simply read over this location, and think nothing of it.

However, if we go back to the last chapter, 14 of Matthew, we find that Jesus is in *Gennesaret*.

Gennesaret and Jerusalem are almost 100 kilometres apart!

The fact that the Pharisees and Lawyers *came from Jerusalem* is significant,

...as it begins to weave into the Gospel the uneasy opposition towards Jesus that comes from the very heart of religious Israel and Jerusalem.

Right from the very Temple that God intended to usher His kingdom, salvation and the Rule of God upon the earth.

Instead, they are questioning and plotting the death of the very one who alone can bring life,

... and in verse 7 we have the reply of Jesus.

7 you hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you:

8 "these people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. 9 they worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men." 10 ¶ Jesus called the crowd to him and said, "listen and understand.

Our Lord is calling again to *us* - today. He is calling, and He is saying, 'Listen and understand.'

Because once we have listened. *Really* listened.

It is then that we will *understand*.

And once we have understood,

...our eyes will be opened to a whole new realm of spiritual treasures and lessons within the Word of God, the Bible.

Common stories and parables within the Bible will take on *new* meanings.

Let's just look at perhaps the most common and well known parable in the Bible, that of The Prodigal Son.

I think another perhaps even better name for this parable could be The Prodigal Pig.

You know the story,

...of the son of a wealthy man,

...who wanted his inheritance before his father died,

...and then he took it and squandered it on enjoying the temporary pleasures of this world.

The Bible tells us, that when he got to the end of his rope,

...the Prodigal Son found himself living in a pig-sty and even wanting to eat their slop.

And at this point, I can again hear Jesus saying from Matthew 15:7, 'Come, listen and understand'.

Because just like there was a deeper truth in Matthew 15:1 where the religious authorities came from Jerusalem,

...so here - in the parable of the Prodigal Son, God wants us to go deeper, to *really* listen and *really* understand.

The Bible is like that.

It's just what the prophet Isaiah said in the book after his name,

...in chapter 28 verse 10, that we *learn* from God - level upon level, precept upon precept.

And as we read and re-read the Bible - God speaks in *fresh* and new ways,

...that we *never* exhaust this vast treasure chest of riches and insights to life.

Let's turn to the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11.

After taking his inheritance and squandering it all, verse 15 tells us that he took a job feeding the pigs, and became so hungry that even the pig slop looked appealing to eat.

You see, again - this is a verse that contains so much truth, that Jesus would call to us and say, 'Come, listen and *really* understand!'

Because this verse also has a direct link to our story of the Cheap Crosses...

...of the Pharisees and Lawyers who questioned Jesus, to whom he said they follow God with their lips, but in their hearts are far away.

And one of the keys to unlock this understanding, is found in the most unlikely of objects.

In relation to the Prodigal Son, what character or object do you think has an importance that is often over-looked or not realised?

That's right.

The pig!

The *Prodigal* Pig!

There is a deep significance and lesson found in the temptation the Prodigal Son had in wanting to eat the same food as the pigs.

The meaning of this proverb wasn't *just* that the Prodigal was *working* with pigs, but that symbolically he had *become* one!

On the *outside* he was a Jew, but on the *inside* he was far from the Father.

This point of the parable is so vital,

... that it was especially deplorable and disgusting to the Jews and those who heard Jesus speak this parable 2000 years ago...

...just as much as it is today,

So much so, that even the children's story of the 'Three little Pigs' is also seen as offensive to some devout Jews today.

I'd really like to encourage you to make notes in your Bibles,

... to write down important words and concepts,

...to have a glossary of words,

... and to underline or highlight important verses and passages.

Because - if we aren't familiar with the culture and customs of 1st century Israel,

...we are *missing* out of some key principles and understandings of this parable.

Let me briefly explain:

The Torah is the first five books of the Old Testament and are considered to be *the books of law and living* for the devout Jew.

Within the Torah, pigs are classified as non-Kosher, meaning they are not-clean and cannot be eaten, as commanded in Deuteronomy 14:8.

However, if we are to learn some deeper spiritual truths from this prohibition,

...we need to ask ourselves -

...*Why* are they *not* clean and *why* are they not to be eaten by the Jews?



Well, for any animal to be perfectly clean for Jews, (according to Deuteronomy 14,

...it must have Cloven Hooves,

...and must also regurgitate it's food - as cows and sheep do.

These *two traits* are vitally important, *first* on a purely physical level for those living in the often arid countryside of 1st century Judaism.

At that time, cloven or split hooves were the desired method of travel, upon camels -

...as it allowed the camels to travel anywhere and grip any surface.

The ability to chew the cud



and regurgitate food is also vitally important in places where there isn't a lot of food,

...and every possible molecule of moisture and goodness needs to be able to be easily digested by those who can chew the cud.

The *spiritual* reason for animals to be considered clean if they 'chew the cud'...

... is because this is seen to represent a person who listens to God's laws,

...feeds upon them, and then bring them back to feed upon time and time again.

The reason for cloven hooves,

...is that it represents the *parting in two* of the Red Sea as the Israelites fled from Egyptian slavery,

...it represents *the two slabs containing the Ten Commandments*,

...and it represents God who walks between the animal sacrifices offered on the temple altar. (Gen 15:17)

The pig, while having cloven hooves,

...does *not* 'chew its cud', making it unclean - as it only has *one* of the two traits necessary -

...and only the trait that is *outward* and can be seen easily.

If you see a pig lying down - it seems to spread out its legs and hooves for all to see.

So, here it is - displaying its apparent holiness in a bold and arrogant fashion, and yet it does *not* chew the cud.

It is the only animal in the world who has cloven hooves, but does not chew the cud.

In other words, the pig pretends that it seeks after God by its cloven hooves,

...yet it does not have the *other* requirement of chewing the cud and feeding time and time again on God's laws.

Pigs represent hypocrisy, arrogance, pride and deception -

...of those who on the *outside* display their godliness but on the *inside* are far from following God.

Exactly like the religious leaders who came to Jesus in Matthew 15:8,

...and evoked the response from Jesus - saying that - with their lips they praise me (on the outside, like cloven hooves),

...but in their hearts they are far away...

... (they do not chew the cud or feed time and time again on the Word of God).

And exactly what the Prodigal Son had become.

Because most Westerners read the parable, and think the description of the Prodigal being with the pigs is literal.

However, the religious Jews would understand that it is a parable within a parable.

Literally a deeper truth that can only be found when we listen (really listen) and understand (really understand).

It's not that the Prodigal was cleaning the pig sty or feeding the pigs,
...but he had begun to *identified* with the pigs,

because he had begun to *think* what it must be like to be a pig, to eat like they do - to experience life as they do.

And the lesson here, that those who heard this parable for the first time, it that we need to look in our own hearts, and see if we are at risk from becoming what the Prodigal was also at risk of becoming.

Because to be honest, at times it's difficult to tell *what* our own hearts desires are.

But, it's important that we *do* know.

2 Corinthians 13:5 says to 'examine yourselves to see if your are in the faith, test yourself to see if it is real.

Booklets of today's Bible message are freely available after the service today, and are a word for word printout of this message.

There is a very helpful Bible Workshop to help us apply what we have learnt - directly to our lives and situation.

It doesn't just contain Bible Verses, but real life application and situations that affect your life, your relationship with God and with those you love and mix.

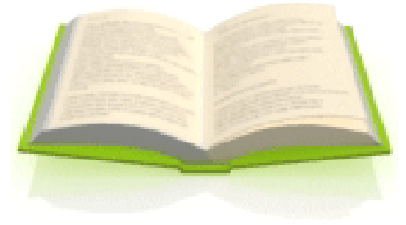
It is intended to help us search our hearts and draw closer to the Father.

Communion is *also* intended as a time that we search our hearts.

Tuesday

Read:

Look up these Bible references and meditate upon them. Highlight or underline any verses or words (in your Bible) that speak to you.



Matthew 15:1 to 8.

Luke 15:11 to 31

Wednesday

Discover the Word:



In Matthew 15: 1-2, top religious leaders from Jerusalem oppose Jesus by criticizing His disciples.

What is their complaint, and what does it suggest about Jesus?

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How does Jesus respond to their accusation? (Read Matthew 15:3-20).

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Thursday

Applying the Word:



Reflecting upon Matthew 15:1-2, are there religious practices in your life that are in danger of becoming outward, empty forms? Explain what they are and why.

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2. Reflecting on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-31), how does this parable motivate you to believe in the possibility of new or fresh changes in your relationship to others and to God?

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3. Just for fun (and the new understanding you might have about why pigs were given such a degrading image in Judaism), write down what animal might represent you, and why.

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