

## Another Look at the Prodigal Son: The Elder Brother Approach

Lk. 15:25-32      1/24/21

Last Sunday we began taking a look at Jesus' well-known parable of the Prodigal Son. Do you remember why he told this story? Jesus told the parable in response to criticism by the Pharisees and scribes that he was hanging out too much with tax collectors and other sinners. We focused on the first part of the parable, in which the younger of two sons grabs his inheritance, runs away from his family, and blows it all in "dissolute" living, which (you'll remember) may or may not have involved cat juggling! Then he "comes to himself," repents, and returns home, planning to throw himself on the mercy of his father. His father, rather than being angry, embraces him and throws a huge party in celebration of his return!

The obvious, incredible lesson is that God is waiting for any of us to return home no matter how far we've wandered from him, just like those tax collectors and other sinners that Jesus hung out with. That in itself would make a wonderful parable, but there's more to this story. Remember- there were two sons!

*<sup>25</sup>"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and*

sound.’<sup>28</sup> Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him.<sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends.’<sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’<sup>31</sup> Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’<sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’” (Luke 15:25-32)

If the first part of the parable was about the “sinners” in Jesus’ audience, the second part is clearly aimed at the Pharisees and scribes! And they don’t come out looking too good, do they? And we may be more like them than we’d like to think. Look at the story a little more closely.

The elder son missed the reunion and beginning of the celebration for the return of his brother, because he was out in the field working. Of course, he was! He was the dutiful son! He asks a slave for the reason for all the hubbub. The slave accurately reports that it is in celebration of the return of his brother. That’s when things go off the rails. “*Then he became angry and refused to go in.*” (Luke 15:28a) This tells us something important about the heart of the elder brother.

The Father goes out to plead with him to join the party, but the elder brother refuses. He says that he has worked like a slave for his father for years, never disobeying him, and yet his father has never even thrown a small party for him. “How is it possibly fair that you are throwing a great feast for ‘this son of yours’ who disrespected you and squandered your wealth?” he demands.

The elder brother is seething with hurt, anger, jealousy, and resentment. We can understand that to some degree. After all, he had worked hard for years, always the obedient son. The problem is that his resentment keeps him from rejoicing at the return of his lost brother. Tim Keller, in his book, The Prodigal God, sees the parable as contrasting two approaches to finding a fulfilling life. The first, represented by the younger brother, attempts to find fulfillment in the pleasures of life- sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Many people today seek to find a good life through those kinds of things, including some of us. But although they may seem promising, they inevitably fail to deliver the fulfilling life they promise. That’s what the younger son discovers. I think most churches (and most Christians) can understand that warning pretty easily.

But the elder brother takes a different approach. He attempts to find a fulfilling life through moral conformity, through doing the right thing. And that’s what he did, faithfully honoring his father year after year, and

avoiding the vices that consumed his younger brother. What's wrong with that, you might ask?

In a "Calvin and Hobbes" comic strip, six year-old Calvin and his stuffed animal tiger, Hobbes, are careening down a snowy hill on their sled, when Calvin says, "I'm getting nervous about Christmas."

Hobbes: You're worried that you haven't been good?

Calvin: That's just the question. It's all relative. What's Santa's definition?

How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't killed anybody.

That's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any

wars... Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get

lots of presents?

Hobbes: Maybe good is more than the absence of bad.

Calvin: See, that's what's worries me. OK. Assuming I can get an

overnight letter to the North Pole, what would you charge to write me a

glowing character reference?

Hobbes: Oh, no! I'm not going to perjure myself for you! My record's

clean!

I like Hobbes' observation: "Maybe good is more than the absence of bad." Bill Watterson, the creator of "Calvin and Hobbes," is making the same point that Jesus made about the elder brother. He appears to have

been doing all the right things and avoiding the bad things, but inside, he's a moral disaster, filled with rage and envy and resentment toward his younger brother, and toward his father. Perhaps he believed that he needed to earn his father's love through his hard work, and his father's embrace of his prodigal brother suggested that was done in vain. Or, maybe he believed in karma, that his good deeds should result in reward for him in the here and now. So he's naturally angry that his life is not playing out according to the rules! But karma is very different from what Jesus teaches. Jesus teaches that we should do the right thing, behave in a way that honors our Father, because of our love for him, expecting nothing in return.

19<sup>th</sup> century Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, told the story of a good king with great power. One of his poor subjects grew an enormous carrot and brought it to the king. He said, "This is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my respect for you." The king was touched by his offer, took the carrot, and said, "You are a good steward of the earth. I want to give you a plot of land that I own, so you can garden it, too!" The gardener went home, rejoicing.

A nobleman at the king's court overheard this exchange, and said to himself, "If that is what you get for a carrot, what if I gave the king

something better?” So the next day he brought a beautiful black stallion to the king. He bowed low, and said, “My king, I breed horses, and this is the greatest horse I will ever own. I want to present it to you as a token of my respect for you.” But the king discerned his heart, and simply said, “Thank you,” took the horse and dismissed the nobleman.

The nobleman was perplexed, so the king explained, “That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse.”

It appears that the elder brother was working hard for himself, not really out of love for his father. In Jesus’ parable, it’s easy to forget the fact that both brothers are lost. The younger brother’s “lostness” is easy to see. But the elder brother’s “lostness” is harder to spot, perhaps because it is closer to our own lostness. Presbyterians are often like the older brother- hardworking, honest, moral people, good citizens who do their duty, right? And, we can begin to believe that our righteous living makes us morally superior to others- you know, to *those* people. And, we can become irked when we’re not properly recognized for our efforts, and over time, we can become bitter with others, and even with the God who hasn’t done the right thing by rewarding our goodness!

Fortunately, the story reminds us that God loves both younger brothers and elder brothers! Remember, that although the father runs out to meet the younger brother when he returns, he also goes out to plead

with the elder brother. He is seeking a right relationship with both of them, one based on love and compassion. But Jesus sees special dangers in being the elder brother. Unlike the younger brother, who acknowledged his predicament, the elder brother doesn't know that he is lost, and until he comes to that realization, reconciliation with his father (and with his brother) is impossible. Jesus hoped the elder brother-Pharisees would repent and embrace him, and a few did, but most did not. They believed they were good enough without him.

Churches have the reputation of being filled with elder brothers (or sisters, like the "Church Lady!") I'm not sure that is any more true of us than any other organization, but that's our reputation. The parable invites us to examine our own hearts. We're all lost and need God to find and save us. Are you more like the younger brother or the older one? Where do you need God to work on your heart and save you from yourself?

Next week we'll finish our series on this parable. If both the elder and younger brother approaches to finding a fulfilling life don't work, what are we left with? We'll talk about that next week!