

The Elder Brother

Luke 15:25-32

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In our text today, we are actually in the middle of a story. So I'm going to read our text and then go back and set the context.

Beginning in Luke 15:25, it says, "Now his older son was in the field." Remember that the father had two sons. The younger son had taken his inheritance, gone to a far country and wasted his inheritance on riotous living. So now we have the elder son, who was in the field. "And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing." It was music intended for dancing.

Verse 26, "So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.'" So you would think that the older brother would rejoice and be glad, but notice his response.

Verse 28, "But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him." His father begged him to come in and celebrate. "So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came...' he doesn't say, "my brother" "...who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.'" You can hear the anger in the elder's brother's words.

Verse 31, "And he said to him, 'Son...' or "my dear child" "...you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.'" These are very touching words of the father.

Why was this story or parable given by Jesus at this time? Back up to verses 1-3. "Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him..." that is, "Jesus" "...to hear Him." These were the ones who had "ears to hear" (Luke 14:35). These were the tax collectors who were hated and despised. The Jews considered them the scum of the earth. And the sinners were just secular Jews who did not regard God; they were very worldly and ungodly. But they were coming to hear Jesus.

First I'll just "spill the beans" here and now: the older brother pictures the Pharisees and the scribes. Note their response to Jesus. Verse 2, "And the Pharisees and scribes complained..." or "murmured" "...saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them.'" That is exactly what was bothering the older brother; that the father had received the sinful, younger brother and was throwing a big party for him. So the older brother was angry and upset.

Verse 3, “So He spoke this parable to them, saying...” Actually, Jesus spoke three parables to them.

The first parable was about a shepherd, who had 100 sheep. He lost one of the sheep, so he put the 99 in a fold for safety and went out that night looking for the lost sheep. When he found it, he put it on his shoulders and rejoiced—take note of that. When you find what was lost, you rejoice. He celebrated and came home. He invited all his family and friends to come over for a big party and celebration.

So this parable was directed toward the attitude of the Pharisees and scribes. They murmured against Jesus, because He “receives sinners and eats with them.” Their attitude was wrong; they didn’t have the heart of God.

The second parable was of a woman. So we move from a shepherd to a woman in these parables. This woman had 10 silver coins, but she lost one. You think, Well, it’s no big deal; she’s still got nine left. But it said that she “[lit] a lamp” and “swept the house” until she found that one, lost coin.

And when you find what you’ve lost, you’re glad. If you lose your keys or some money and then you find it, you say, “Praise the Lord! I’ve found what I lost!” You celebrate.

So the woman called her “friends and neighbors” and said, “Rejoice with me...” or “Let’s have a party!” “...for I have found the piece which I lost.”

A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. The word “parabole” means “to lay alongside.” So Jesus lays these stories alongside spiritual truths. And by these two parables, Jesus is showing that the attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes were wrong, because when you find what was lost, you should be glad and rejoice. “There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7). So if we have the heart of God, we rejoice over that which is lost and is then found.

The third parable is that of the prodigal son. The text says that the man had “two sons,” verse 11. The younger son came to his father and basically said, “Father, give me my inheritance right now! I don’t want to wait until you die. I want it now! I want to leave and do what I want to do!” So the father gave him his inheritance, which would be one-third of all the property and wealth. The son liquidated it and went into a far-away country and wasted his inheritance on riotous living. Then a famine came in this far-away place, so he was in want. He joined himself to a citizen of that country, who sent him out to feed the pigs.

So here is this Jewish boy in the pig pen feeding pigs. He couldn’t get any lower than that. But he finally came to his senses. He said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!” (Luke 15:17). The pigs wouldn’t even share with him; they were pigs. So he said that he would return to his father and tell his father that he had sinned. “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” (Luke 15:18-19).

When the father saw the son coming back, and he was a great way off, the father ran to him. The father in this parable is God. And what a picture of God! He ran to his rebellious son. And it says that he threw his arms around his son, “fell on his neck and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). He repeatedly smothered his son with kisses. He told his servants to put the best robe on his son, a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet, kill the fatted calf and rejoice.

Now we come to our text, starting in verse 24, which says, “This my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.” You find the lost sheep, you party. You find the lost coin, you party. You find the lost son, you party. So everybody is celebrating—except for one person, the older brother. It was the older brother, verse 25, who stayed on the farm working hard outwardly.

Outwardly the elder son looked like the ideal son. If you were to interview the father, he would say, “Yeah, that rebellious son went off and wasted all our money, but I love that he’s come back. But look at my son out working in the field! He’s a good boy! He’s upright. Isn’t he a hard worker? He’s so obedient. Look at how good that boy is!”

But it’s one thing to see on the outside and another thing to know what’s in the heart. God sees the heart. This is one of the most heart-searching facets of this parable. If it doesn’t convict you, something’s wrong!

I think there’s a little bit of the older brother in every one of us. At least there have been periods of time when we had the older-brother syndrome. We get mad at God because He doesn’t do for us what we want Him to do. And we get mad at others or are unforgiving toward them or a family member. We won’t go to the family-member gatherings; we stand outside, the family begs us to come in, but we won’t go in. We’re unforgiving and carry a grudge. This is so real and applicable to our lives today.

So Jesus gave them this story, verses 25-32, about the elder brother. And I want to break down this text into four sections. The first section is verses 25-28 where we see the angry, older brother. There were two sons: the younger son was the prodigal, who wasted his money on riotous living, and the elder son, who stayed home and worked in the fields. The fact that he was in the fields indicates that he was hard working and responsible.

Verse 25, “As he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.” The Greek construction of this statement indicates that it was a big party. There was a band, music and dancing. It wasn’t people sitting around having a barbecue; they were really partying and celebrating.

“So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.” This literally meant that he drilled the servant for information. He was eager to know what was going on. “And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him...’ that is, “the younger brother” “...safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.”

Then you’d think the older brother would say, “Praise God! My brother’s come home! Why

didn't you send someone to the field to call me? I would have rushed home!" No. "But he was angry and would not go in."

This is a challenging segment of the parable to preach on, because it doesn't flow in a logical order; it's a story that goes back and forth. But this is foundational: you can put sin into two categories. There are open, action sins and there are hidden, attitude sins. There are sins of the flesh—the younger son with his prodigal living—and there are sins of the spirit or attitude sins of the heart—the older brother. But the older brother, who was working every day, looked so compliant, so hard working, so obedient, was just as much a sinner as the younger brother.

We always focus on the prodigal, the younger son, who actually was a very sinful son. But he repented, came back, was forgiven and there was restoration. Whenever there is repentance, there is forgiveness and restoration. That's so very important.

So there are selfish sins and sins of stubbornness. There are sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit. The younger son was a scandalous sinner, and the older son was a sanctimonious sinner or a religious, sinful person.

God looks on the heart. Jesus said that "Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). And Matthew 5:22 says, "Whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment." Try driving the freeways of Southern California and not killing somebody in your heart! It's difficult.

God is looking at your heart right now. You may fool other people when you go to church, sing the songs, serve the Lord. But there's something in your heart that isn't right.

The older brother was in the father's home, but he didn't have the father's heart. Before this episode if you had asked the father about his sons, he would have said, "Yes; my prodigal son is rebellious and needs prayer. But, man, this older son is a good boy!" That was until he opened his mouth when his brother came home. Then all the poison, the bitterness and contempt he had for his brother and his father spilled out!

So everyone was partying—except the older brother. Isn't it a bummer when everyone is having a good time—except you? Have you ever been at a family event where the whole family is there having a good time, but you're just bummed out? That's because you're mad at that person, mad at this person. "Why did they get the new job?! Why did they get such a great husband?! I don't even have a husband! I wish I had that husband!" We get mad and bitter and become lonely and isolated. Instead of building bridges, we build walls, and we're unforgiving. We're so religious but we're lost.

These Pharisees and scribes needed salvation. They were showing no grace, because they had not experienced grace. They were unforgiving, because they had never been forgiven. If you've been forgiven, you should be forgiving. If you've experienced grace, you should be gracious. If God has been merciful to you, you should be merciful to others.

It's so sad that this older brother "was angry and would not go in," verse 28. The contrast is interesting; the younger son was outside the home and is now inside, while the older son was inside the home and is now outside. The older son was angry, because he was not getting his way. It starts with anger. And we need to be careful that we don't become angry toward God.

Remember that in the parable, the father represents God. And a lot of the older son's anger and vindictiveness was toward his father, because his father was forgiving, generous and lavishly blessed the younger son after he had done all these horrible things. The older son felt that it was unjust or not fair.

Where it says that the older brother "was angry and would not go in," it literally means that he was "boiling with anger." So picture a pot that is boiling; it is seething, bubbling and then it boils over. That's the older brother's anger. He would not forgive his brother. He basically was saying, "This is not fair! I kept the rules! I did what is right! And the father throws a party for him but not for me?! The father gives him the fattened calf but not me?!" He was jealous, angry and "boiling over" with hostility toward his brother.

Have you ever felt that God has not been fair with you? "Why does that bad person have all these good things, yet I'm a good person..." your commentary on yourself "...and nothing good's happening to me?! I'm mad at God right now!"

Have you ever had someone call you and say, "Hey, I can't believe what happened! Someone gave me a brand, new car!" Between clenched teeth you say, "Praise the Lord." Then you say, "God! What's the deal?! I go to church more than they do! I read my Bible more than they do! I'm more spiritual! I'm a better person! Why do they get a new car?! Why do they get to go on this vacation?! Why aren't you blessing me?!" And they get angry toward others.

So this older brother's anger and stubbornness of heart was keeping him from the party. He had no joy. He would not go in to the party.

How about you? Are you refusing to go in to the party? To thank God for what He has done in other people's lives? For the grace and mercy He has shown to others?

Now we move to the pleading, seeking father, in verse 28. It is a beautiful picture of God the Father. "Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him." The father earnestly begged him to come in. The father could have sent a servant out to the older brother and ordered him to come in; he had the authority to do that. "Go tell my son to get in here and change his frowning face, to put on a new face and be glad!" But the father didn't force his older son to do that. Instead, he "pleaded with him." He basically said that it was the right thing to do.

A lot of times we just read this and don't really understand it. In the eastern culture, this was humbling for the father to do. For the father to go outside and have to plead with his son to come in was very degrading, very humbling.

This is a picture of God. This is a picture of how God bends over backwards in love,

compassion and mercy and is kind to sinners. He loves the older son just as much as he loves the younger, rebellious son. He is seeking to bring them back. The father didn't go searching for the younger son, but he ran to him when he saw him. And now the father is actually going out to the older son. He could have just written him off. The father humbled himself to run to the returning, prodigal son. Now he graciously and lovingly goes out to plead earnestly with his older son. The Father's great love is seen in this father reaching out to his older son. God's heart is broken when we grow bitter, hard and unforgiving toward Him and others.

The father was not angry with his older son; his older son was angry with the father. The son didn't have the father's heart. When your heart becomes angry or upset with God, you say, "God, this isn't fair! This isn't right! God, why did you let this happen?!"

One of the things I pray for is that we as a church don't grow bitter in the hard things of life but we grow better. I pray we don't grow hardened toward God or others. Rather that we would grow softer. Pray to ask God to soften your heart. "God, help me to have your heart to feel what you feel." Living with the Father in the Father's house we should have the Father's heart for scandalous or sanctimonious sinners. We should love the sinner but hate the sin.

Now we move to the third section, verses 29-30. This is the heart of the passage. This is part of the parable of the prodigal son. The older brother is now all upset, because when his younger brother came home, the father forgave him and threw a big party for him.

So we see the complaint of the older brother. And this is the first time in the story where we have the old brother's recorded words. It isn't telling us what he was doing; it's telling us what he was saying. And the Bible says, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). Whatever is in your heart comes out of your mouth.

Verse 29, "So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo.'" This is rude. And degrading. He should have said, "Father." It's like saying, "Look!" "These many years I have been serving you" meaning that he slaved for his father.

Here's another thought. The younger son was in the far away country and said that he was going to go back to his father and was not worthy to be called his son. He wanted to be a servant in his father's house. The older son, who was home the whole time and worked hard, was now outside the home in anger and bitterness and said to his father that he had slaved for his father many years.

He said, "I never transgressed your commandment at any time." Really? Talk about self-righteous! "And yet you never gave me..." notice all the personal pronouns "...a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends." I chuckle at this, because many commentaries said they doubted he had any friends. Who would want to be around him? "But as soon as this son of yours came ..." he wouldn't even acknowledge him as his own brother "...who has devoured your livelihood with harlots..." nowhere in the story does it say that the younger brother got involved with prostitutes. It might have been a hidden agenda of the older son. It might have

been what he would have liked to do instead of working in the fields. "...you killed the fatted calf for him."

You hear the poison coming out of his mouth. You hear how bitter his heart is. He was angry. I would summarize everything the older brother had in his heart as contempt. He had contempt for his father and contempt for his brother. And he was self-righteous; "I have been [slaving for] you, and I never transgressed your commandment." He saw no sin, no disobedience in his life. He was blind to his own condition. The younger son "came to himself" and saw how sinful he was. What a gift that was for him! But his older, self-righteous brother didn't see his own sinful heart.

The older son was also ungrateful; "You never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends." He was bitter and ungrateful. He was basically saying to his father, "You are unfair, because I kept the rules! This isn't right!"

Many believers today get the same attitude toward God. "It's not fair! I've been a good Christian! I've followed your commands!" Again, a self-righteous attitude. "Why don't I have a husband or wife?! Why don't I have children?! Why don't I have good health?! Why don't I have that perfect job?! Why don't I have that ministry?! Why don't I have that beautiful house to live in?!" We get upset and angry with God.

He was unloving toward his brother. He called him "this son of yours" instead of "my brother."

And sadly, the older brother was unforgiving, verse 30. "You killed the fatted calf for him." There was no mention of joy that the younger brother had been forgiven and restored. He didn't have a heart of forgiveness.

The older brother actually was wanting justice and not grace or mercy. You don't want God to give you justice. If you say, "God, I deserve..." watch out! Because we all deserve hell. You say, "Not me, preacher boy! Speak for yourself! You don't know how good I am. You don't know how awesome I am! I've served God for many years!"

We all deserve hell. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23). So we don't want justice; we want grace and mercy.

So this older brother is now on the outside, who was once on the inside, because of pride, anger and self-righteousness that had consumed his heart. It made him miss the party. If you haven't repented and come to Jesus Christ, if you haven't been thankful for His forgiveness, you're missing the party.

The last section of our text is verses 31-32. The father now answers his older son. If I was the father, I would have just said, "Get lost! Just leave! I don't want you at the party!" Aren't you glad I'm not the father? "And he said to him, 'Son...'" That word "son" in the Greek could be translated "my darling child." The father is speaking in endearing terms. "You are always with me." It's as if the father was saying, "You wanted a calf for your party? You wanted me to give

you a goat, so you could have a good time with your friends? You have me. You've always had me. Isn't my presence enough?"

The son was saying to his father that his father was not enough for him; he wanted his father's things. The older son's heart was no different than the younger son's heart.

The father said, "And all that I have is yours." The older son's values were wrong. His priorities were wrong. He had the fellowship of his father. And in reality, all that the father had was his son's. When the younger son took off with his inheritance, everything that was left would belong to the older son.

Verse 32, "It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother..." the older brother said "this son of yours," but the father said "your brother" "...was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

This is an interesting response of the father, and we have the choice of the older brother. The son said to the father, in verse 29, "You never gave me a young goat." And the father said, "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours." The older brother said, "this son of yours," and the father said "your brother."

This story ends without telling us how the older son responded. Have you ever watched a good movie that ends abruptly? "I want to see them get married! I want to see them have kids! I want to see the end of the story! What happened afterwards?!"

This is our story, because we are to be the ones who see ourselves in this story. So the story just stops at this point, and there is no reference as to what happened to the older brother. Did he ever go in to the party? Did he ever forgive his father? Did he ever forgive his brother? It doesn't say.

These parables are both windows through which we see God and mirrors in which we see ourselves. So through the window of this parable, we see a loving, compassionate, forgiving, gracious and kind God. If we turn to Him, He comes running to us. If we turn to Him in humble repentance, He forgives us and restores us.

We see God through the window of the parable today as having love and compassion for the lost. That's the heart of God and is saying to us that should be our hearts; we should be loving those who need the Gospel and reaching out to them.

Perhaps you see yourself in the mirror of the parable today. Who do you liken yourself to? Are you the younger, prodigal son, who went to a far country and wasted his life on riotous living, came to yourself, repented and was forgiven, and you're in the party right now, enjoying the forgiveness of your sins? Or are you the older brother, who outwardly looks good, plays by all the rules, goes to church, is a good person, but there is bitterness, anger and unforgiveness in your heart—even toward God—and toward others? God sees your heart.

There are sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit. If you are pointing your finger at the son who had the sins of the flesh, the younger son, but not pointing your finger at your own heart—if some of that older brother is alive and well in your heart, may God show it to you. You've been angry at God, angry at others, unforgiving toward someone. Maybe it is toward someone in your own family. You say, "It's not fair! Why do they get all the good things?!" You need to get your heart right with God.

Jesus came to forgive sinners. I'm glad. He came "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). But if you're dead, you can be alive, and if you're lost, you can be found.