

The Older Son
Luke 15:22-32

Today, we will continue with our study of this blessed parable given to us by the Lord Jesus about a struggle that has taken place within a family. We first studied about a foolish young man who had made some poor choices and had followed a path of reckless behavior, behavior that had taken him into sufferings that he had not counted on and that he then desperately needed to find some relief from.

Then here next, the focus of the parable turned to reveal the response by an older brother as he observed the manner with which *his* father received the foolish younger brother back into the family.

Over the years, as I have considered this parable and heard messages preached about it, I confess that as it regards the response and the behavior of this older brother, I have not taken the time needed to fully grasp the understanding that God would desire for me to have about this part of the story.

And ashamedly, I also confess that in the times that I have studied this portion about the older brother, I have to some measure, inwardly identified with some of his emotion and his rationale.

And perhaps, if truth be known, you also might have quietly identified with the response of this older brother.

Assuming that to be true, let's take these next few minutes and ask God to reveal to us why our hearts really ought to be ashamed of our identification with this older brother's response. And let's ask that our Lord help us to know the more Godly response that we ought to have.

Turn again with me to these words given to us here in Luke chapter 15 beginning in verse 22. Recalling as we begin, that the younger brother had some time earlier foolishly demanded and had received his full inheritance from his father. He then moved to a faraway land where he squandered all of His money in prodigal living.

Having nothing left, the young man found himself having to work in a pigsty tending to pigs and starving. After suffering for a while, the young man came to his senses and with a repentant heart decided to return and ask his father to forgive him. Which his father graciously did, restoring the young man to a position of full sonship in the family and giving him a great celebration. In verse 22 we read,

²² . . .the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

²⁵ "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'

²⁸ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him,

²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.

³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' " (Luke 15:22-32)

Let's again remind ourselves about who each of the people within this parable represent. First, the prodigal son is representative of all the many of us who go astray in life, often before we ever really come to know and receive Christ as our Savior.

But also, this young man represents those of us who go astray sometimes long after we have been saved, sometimes you and me, those times when we find ourselves caught up in one form of grievous sin or another, addictions, adultery, anger, depression.

And while we are caught up in those webs and those entanglements, our response will be very much like this young man, openly rejecting Christ and His Lordship, finding ourselves far away from any relationship with Him.

My thoughts also right now go to two of my friends who, I believe both know Christ as Savior but are right now really struggling, having made choices that have taken them far away from the comfort of a loving relationship with Christ. They both, especially one of them, suffers daily within the pigsty consequences they have chosen.

The second person in this parable is the father. He represents God, our heavenly Father.

The third person in this parable is the older brother, the one who dutifully stayed at home, serving his father faithfully, never asking for and never receiving, at least in his perspective, special favors from his father.

This older son represents people like the Scribes and the Pharisees, and again, ashamedly, he represents people like you and me, the long-time, faithful church-goers, conservative thinking people who seldom get caught up in really openly visible sin. We serve dutifully and we are hesitant to ask for favors beyond simple, ordinary things.

And let me again point out that all three of these parables that we have been studying recently are directed especially towards you and me, the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and now here, the Parable of the Lost Son. We who identify with this older brother are the Scribes and the Pharisees, the ones who perceive themselves to always remain faithful to the church and to all that the church demands.

We sit comfortably within the confines of our church relationship and look out at all the many errant souls, their lives "heading downhill like a snowball that's headed for Hades".

And it is not as if we are just being overly judgmental. Our discernments are often very accurate. Those errant souls truly are doing exactly what we see. And they truly are experiencing a harvest from the bad seeds they have sown.

This older brother's assessment of his younger brother's behavior was, to a great extent, very accurate. He said,

³⁰ . . . this son of yours . . . devoured your property with prostitutes, (Luke 15:30)

Being able to discern right from wrong seems to be a natural ability within most all of us, and that is especially so for those of us who have received the Holy Spirit in salvation. We are able to quickly discern good from evil.

But our gift of discernment was not intended to lead us to have a judgmental spirit, to simply cast stones at, or about, the errant ones. Rather our gift of discernment was given so that we might see their sinful ways and to extend God's grace and mercy to them.

But unfortunately, that was not the course this older brother chose to take. And that is also not the usual course the Scribes and the Pharisees took as they observed the sinners and the tax-gathers around them.

Consider for a moment, Jesus' original purpose in giving these parables. In speaking about seeking to find the lost sheep, and searching for the lost coin, and now here, the errant prodigal son, Jesus was responding to a complaint by the Scribes and Pharisees about why He received sinners and ate with them. Verse 2,

² And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them." (Luke 15:2)

These three parables were an explanation of why Jesus DID receive and eat with the sinners.

But also, here, as He brings forward the behavior of the older son, Jesus is pointing out to the Scribes and Pharisees why they DID NOT receive sinners and eat with them.

Let me say all of this again and remind us that we, long-time, bible-believing churchgoers really often do fit into the position and attitude taken by these Scribes and Pharisees and also this older brother.

We might not so much struggle with the open and obvious sins that some of our neighbors and family members do. And we might not run away from God

ourselves. We may instead remain faithfully in our church pews, but doing something that, in God's view, is just as wrong. We sit quietly and cast condemning and judgmental thoughts at the ones who do.

Instead of understanding and accepting that God has given these words to us for our own benefit, we very often, just sit quietly in our pew and wish that another particular person, that "wayward one" that comes into our minds, was here to hear this message. And we are probably right in those thoughts, but we must also be listening to the words of Jesus for our own personal conviction and benefit.

Again, as those Scribes and the Pharisees stood by suspiciously and condemned Jesus for receiving and eating with the sinners and tax-gathers, Jesus wanted them to see themselves in the behavior of this older brother. And maybe, perhaps, some did, but sadly, I fear that most did not.

This particular parable is so full and complete in its purpose and meaning. As Jesus is always able to do, He fits us all into these words. Here, He not only urges us on to recognize and to minister to those who are obviously in need, the lost sheep and the lost sons. But here He also urges us to recognize and to minister to the needs of our own souls and to the souls of others near to us, our fellow long-time church-going servants whose needs are more inward and cleverly hidden.

And these words go straight to the heart of what Christianity is really about. It's about a right relationship with God as our Father through faith. If we get that wrong, everything else will also go wrong. And it seems that the older brother got that part wrong.

The relationship that God our Father wants us to have with Him is given so clearly to us in the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew chapter 22 where He said,

³⁷ ... "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the great and first commandment.
(Matthew 22:37-38)

But here in verse 29, we see what was taking place in this older brother's heart. He said to his father, "For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours. And yet you have never given me a young goat, that I might be merry with my friends."

His words speak outwardly of an inward resentment. And they show a relationship to his father that is not one of a loving son to a father, but rather of a relationship that is more distant, more like that of a servant to a master.

He said to his father, "Look! For so many years I have been serving you." That word, "serving" is what a servant or a slave does. This is not the identity of a loving son, but that of a servant.

Then he said, "And I have never neglected a command of yours. "How does he see his father? He sees his father as an issuer of commands, as a "master" giving commands, and himself as a servant or a slave showing obedience.

That is not the way that a father wants his children to relate to him. That is a distortion of Christianity and it is not the way intended for a Christian life. God tells us in Acts 17:25,

²⁵ . . . he (God) is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. (Acts 17:25)

It dishonors God to treat him as a master in need of slave labor. What honors God is not slave labor, but the childlike love and faith of a son or a daughter.

When Jesus came to be among us, He didn't come and hang out a "help-wanted" sign. He instead came and hung out a "help-available" sign. Jesus is receiving and eating with sinners because he is a physician with a cure, not because he is an employer with a labor shortage.

The Pharisees and scribes couldn't see that because they themselves had a completely different mindset, one just like the older son who said, "For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours."

Again, as I said at the beginning of our study today that we need to test ourselves about our attitude of heart. Do we inwardly agree, at least to some extent, with the complaint being made by this older brother?

If we do, then we also may still be thinking in the old way of master and slave and works. Not the Christian way of Father and child and faith.

The question here is not whether the son really has kept all the commandments. The question is whether the Father wants us to think of Him as being our commanding master and we His slave.

And yes, the Apostle Paul did often use the term "bondslave to Christ". But the context is not the one that the older brother took and not the one the Scribes and the Pharisees took. In Christ, we are sons of God, and joint heirs with Christ. And we dare not let ourselves slip into a wrong belief about our relationship with God the Father.

He is not a "commander" who issues orders to His slave. If we ever allow such belief to enter into our relationship with Him, our whole relationship will get distorted.

We will not only lose our oneness with Him, we will become, as these Scribes and Pharisees and this older brother, completely alienated from Him and also from those who need us to minister to them, the sinners and tax-gathers.

Let me repeat that again! Thinking wrongly like this about our relationship with God really will alienate us, both from Him and from the ones who need us most. It actually makes us angry and resentful when mercy and grace are being shown to some of them.

Instead of rejoicing with the Father about the lost son being found and the dead son being alive again, we pout about our own "superior merits" being overlooked, and we spew forth words of blame.

Notice in verse 30, he said, "When this son of yours came . . ." not "When my lost brother came home . . .", but "This son of yours . . ." Those words have an ominous ring to them.

When we are relating to God as a slave to a Master on the basis of our hard work, instead of a child to Father on the basis of trust and grace, we will find ourselves blaming God for the mess-ups in the world. Our whole pattern of thinking and feeling will keep us from grasping the tender love of His grace and mercy.

In Philippians chapter 2, we are lovingly encouraged to do the things we do in a joyful response to the loving and merciful grace that God has shown to us.

There He tells us,

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or disputing, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, ¹⁶ holding fast to the word of life. (Philippians 2:14-16)

May I give us one more thought before we close our study for today, and the Lord willing, we'll talk about it even more in our next study. In verse 31, the father told his older son,

³¹ . . . 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' " (Luke 15:31-32)

This was true. The younger son had already taken his portion of the inheritance that would be divided when the father died, leaving everything that was left to be the property of the older son.

But the real message to us in those words is that we, you and I, who have become "sons of God" through our salvation and our adoption into the family of God, we do inherit all that the Kingdom of God has within it. It is ours!

Living here in this depraved world keeps our vision clouded and unable to fully grasp the divine position that we already occupy as "sons of God". Listen to these words given in Ephesians chapter 2,

⁴ . . . because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

This is us folks, you and me, right now! Right at this moment! In our salvation, we are "true sons of God". And even while we yet remain here in this life we already have for our use and our enjoyment all that our Lord has to offer. And as mysterious as it may sound, we really are already seated right there with Him in the "Heavenly Places", reserving a place for us when we breathe our last here in this life and go to be with Him in heaven.

This older son was so busy being caught up in the living of this life in this world that he was too blind to realize what he already had.

And dear Christian, that is a warning to you and to me. We who are in Christ must rise above the entanglements of this world and the blindness it produces in us. And we must open our eyes to see the blessings that we already have to enjoy as sons of the living God. We already have at our fingertips the indescribable blessings that heaven has to offer.

Listen to these words given by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter chapter 1 that describes this so well for us.

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. ⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, ⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:3-9)

We'll stop here for the day and, the Lord willing, we will return to it next week, because the very face of God is being revealed to us within the response of this loving father. And we need to take one more opportunity to look closely into His loving face.

I'll close with these words from 1 John 3,

¹ Behold, what manner of love the Father has given unto us, that we should be called the sons of God. (1 John 3:1)

Pray with me.