

Luke 15:11-32
The Prodigal Son
or
How to Respond when Good Things Happen to Bad People

Part 3, The Elder Son
Luke 15:25-32

It seems like sinners can be assigned to one of two categories. Some sinners are blatant and unabashed about their sin. They don't care who knows or who cares. They are self-indulgent, prideful, and totally unconcerned about others. They have no shame. They think of themselves first. The members of the other group are more subtle. They are careful. They try to cover their sins with justification. They maintain an appearance that belies their true character. It is important to them that other people notice that they are being good. But ultimately, they too are prideful and self-centered.

Of the two, I think the first kind of sinner is more easily persuaded of the extent of their depravity and the ultimate consequences of their sin. After all, they are honest with themselves. They know who they are. Those in the second group can often be so self-deceived that they truly believe they *are* good people, all the while they are making their way, self-righteously, toward hell.

In the parable we have been studying, the younger brother is an example of the first group of sinners. He was unafraid to demand what he insisted was his, despite the fact that he defied both social custom and common decency. He made no qualms about his choices. He was public in his display of disobedience. He rode out of town in broad daylight.

And God eventually dealt with him accordingly.

“²⁸And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, ²⁹being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; ³²and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them” (Romans 1:28-32).

Many would think that because the elder brother remained home and obeyed his father, he was the good son. After all, he made all the outward shows of obedience. But instead, as we will see, his heart was even more hardened than that of his rebellious younger brother. He was an example of the second group of sinners. Seeming to be righteous and obedient, he was instead a wicked hypocrite, just like the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking and to whom He was directing each of the three parables.

As Jesus told the story, those Pharisees had been aghast at the behavior of the younger son and ashamed at the indulgent response of the father. They had approved of the disaster that befell the rebellious young

man, but then mumbled their disapproval when the father welcomed him home. Now, as the final character entered the story, the Pharisees waited to see how the story would resolve itself.

An Unfeeling Response

As Jesus continued the story, the “older son was in the field” (v. 25). The older son had been working diligently. He was out working, not goofing off, not slacking. He was about his father’s business. He had been out on some part of the property probably supervising servants doing the manual labor involved in keeping up a large estate. It was probably getting dark when he came back home. He was undoubtedly hungry, tired, hot, and dripping with sweat as he made his way home.

“When he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing” (v. 25). He heard sounds of a celebration, but could not think of an occasion for one. People had been arriving all day after the father had put out the word that the entire village was invited to a feast to rejoice over his son who had returned home. The fatted calf was roasting on a spit, and musicians had been hired to enliven the celebration. People shouted as they danced. The elder brother had to be astonished at the sights and sounds.

That he must have been a good distance away and therefore missed all the preparations, again gave evidence as to the size of the estate owned by the father and the relative wealth of the family. All the talk of the village since the boy’s return had not made it to the distant area where the elder brother worked. He had not heard the hustle and bustle of preparations. He was entirely unaware of what had occurred. He must have been a long way off indeed.

It is interesting to reflect that the father had not sent word to the elder brother of his son’s return. One might think a servant would have been speedily sent to announce the good news and invite the elder brother home to help with preparations for the village celebration. Obviously there had been much to do and, even with the help of servants and slaves, the elder brother’s presence would have lent much to the event. Why had the father not informed his oldest son of the return of the young rebel?

The obvious answer is that the father knew in advance what his oldest son’s response would be. The father knew that his son would not approve of the welcome the rebellious boy received. His father knew that the elder brother had done nothing to stop or dissuade his young son from his foolish actions. The elder brother had watched his younger brother fall into sin and done nothing to stop it. Perhaps the elder brother realized that he would profit from his younger brother’s foolishness. After all, when the younger brother took his half of the inheritance at that moment any further increase in the family’s wealth would fall entirely to the elder brother without needing to be divided. His younger brother’s foolishness was a financial windfall of the elder brother. The father knew the heart of his oldest son, and that was why he was not eager to tell him of the return of the prodigal. The father wanted a celebration, and the elder brother was not going to improve the surroundings by his presence.

As the elder brother approached the house, “he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be” (v.26). This was perhaps one of the young boys not actively at work in the preparations or serving of the party. All of the older servants and slaves were working at the party, cooking food and meeting the needs of an entire village of guests. But one can imagine a young child, not

yet old enough to contribute, hanging about the celebration eyes wide open to the sights and sounds. That he approached a servant, in itself, says something about the elder brother's character. Why did he not just rush into the house to see what all the excitement was about? After all, it was clearly good news of some kind. He clearly wanted to reserve judgment until *he* had a reason to rejoice. He wanted to hear what the news was first; that his father was rejoicing was not sufficient.

The servant must have been excited and considered himself fortunate to be the one to reveal the reason for the joyous celebration. The elder brother was a person of respect in the family, second only to the father himself. The young boy likely bowed his head and lowered his tone as he spoke. He said "your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound" (v. 27). Yet, there must have been excitement in his voice, for he had probably never seen a scene like this in his young life.

The elder brother ought to have rejoiced at the restoration of his younger sibling. After all, he was out nothing by his return. The family wealth had already been divided. He had nothing to lose. Perhaps even with the young man's return, family honor could be restored in the village. Ugly rumors could be put to rest. Gossip could stop. All could be as it was. Surely the elder brother had seen the heartbreak of his father and would know how deep his joy would be at the return of his younger son. Those were the thoughts he might have had if he had not been so wicked.

The word 'received' proved the stumbling block. That his brother was safe and sound mattered little. That he had been reconciled to his father was the key issue. There was no sense of relief at his brother's safe return. The elder brother's indignation was entirely about the fact that his rebellious younger sibling had been welcomed back into the family. He had not been punished. He had not been shamed. He had simply been forgiven.

The servant must have been astonished at the response of the elder brother. After all, the elder brother had always been the obedient one. He had always been submissive. He had always been supportive. Now "he became angry and was not willing to go in" (v. 28). His true feelings began to show. His behavior and submission had always been outward, not inward. His actions had not been a true reflection of his heart.

There had been a veneer of obedience, but it masked an evil heart. His argument was not with his younger brother, but with his father. He would not go in. He would not be a part of the reconciliation. He refused to support the actions of his father. He no doubt took the attitude that this expensive celebration would cut into his future inheritance. He had no understanding of unmerited forgiveness. He must have viewed his father in the same way that the Pharisees had been thinking of Jesus that prompted these stories, "this man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2). The Pharisees in the audience must have nodded in agreement. Finally, they must have thought, here was a character in the story with whom they could relate.

Like the Pharisees, the elder brother had no interest in either the welfare of his younger brother or the joy of his father. He was concerned entirely about himself. The elder brother was the epitome of self-righteousness. He was a legalist. He had followed the law and deserved what he received. He

believed he was good and morally sound. His brother was not, and yet he was receiving the same reward. The elder brother could not understand this. The parallel between the elder brother and the Pharisees to whom Jesus was speaking was obvious. ²⁷“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. ²⁸So you, too, outwardly appear righteous to men, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.” (Matthew 23:27-28).

An Arrogant Confrontation

Joy is the theme of Luke 15. The shepherd rejoiced over the finding of his lost sheep and celebrated with his friends and neighbors. The woman who rejoiced over finding her lost coin and celebrated in the same way. Now the father had seen his lost son return and had thrown a party for the entire village. Only the bitter elder brother refused to rejoice.

Like the Pharisees, the elder brother had spent years trying to look respectable. Like the Pharisees, all his efforts had seemed to come to nothing when his younger brother was forgiven so freely. The Pharisees had spent hundreds of years developing rules and rituals to make themselves appear righteous before God and simply could not believe that Jesus would welcome tax collectors and prostitutes simply because they asked for forgiveness. So, too, the elder brother could simply not conceive of his father’s offering reconciliation to his rebellious younger brother simply because he came home.

The father could have simply ignored his pouting eldest son and continued to enjoy the celebration and rejoice in the return of his young boy. He could have sent a servant out to command the elder brother to come in. Instead, he did neither. Leaving his guests to enjoy the party without him, he took it upon himself to reconcile himself to his oldest son. He took the first step. He refused to be offended. With a heavy sigh of disappointment (but probably not of surprise), he “came out and began pleading with him” (v. 28). In Jewish culture, fathers do not plead, they command. But not this father. Again we see the father, like Christ, seeking out a sinner, “for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

The elder brother did not even give his father a chance to explain. He simply blurted out in frustration “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends” (v. 29). He spoke disrespectfully; he did not address his father by his title, but rather ‘look’ as if he were rebuking an unruly child. It is worthwhile to compare the two brother’s hearts. The younger brother approached his father with “father, I have sinned (v. 18). The elder brother said “look, for many years I have been serving you” (v. 29).

To overemphasize his point, he exaggerated by saying “I have been serving” (v. 29). He used the word *douleuo*, which literally means a slave. That was his attitude. He had not obeyed his father from respect or filial piety, but because he had to. It was now clear that he had merely been waiting for his father to die as well. He had wanted exactly what his younger brother had wanted; he had simply chosen a different way to go about getting it. That showed his heart.

To argue that he “never disobeyed your orders” (v. 29) was another exaggeration. He sounded like the rich, young ruler who told Jesus “‘all these I have kept,’ the young man said. ‘What do I still lack?’” (Matthew 19:20). His claim to have never neglected a command showed his self-righteousness. He was indeed one of the ‘ninety-nine’ who did not think they needed repentance (Luke 15:7).

Had he really kept all of his father’s commands? Had he truly never disobeyed? Like the Pharisees, the elder brother had deceived himself into thinking he was righteous. This self-deception is one of Satan’s greatest weapons. People begin to think that what they believe is actually true, when in fact what is true is true, whether we believe it or not. In the gospels we read of many people coming to faith in Christ. Some of them are named, others are not. But it is curious that of the many dozens, perhaps hundreds, that are recorded as coming to faith in Christ, only one Pharisee, Nicodemus, is among them.

And really, did his father really need his labor anyway? The father had a vast estate and servants to spare? Did he truly need the work of his younger son? Was the elder brother so indispensable that his father could not run the estate without his help? Of course not. So, too, the Pharisees seemed to think they merited God’s favor by following the rules and rituals of the Law. It is important to remember that God does not need our obedience.

A third exaggeration was his complaint that “you never gave me even a young goat” (v. 29). This was clearly untrue; his father had already set aside two-thirds of the estate for him according to Mosaic Law. Plus, the elder brother had whatever wealth the estate had accrued since the departure of his younger brother. He had actually profited by his brother’s leaving. Furthermore, he had full use (usufruct) of all the possessions of the estate. He did not yet own it, but he could use it for his own benefit.

Like the Pharisees, the elder brother had created in his mind a sense of having sacrificed altruistically for someone who had proved themselves ungrateful. But the father had done nothing wrong. His love for and compassion towards his rebellious younger child had taken nothing away from the elder. It was not a zero sum game where love had to be subtracted from one to be given to the other. The father could, and did, love both. The elder brother lost nothing through his father’s compassion toward the prodigal.

But that was not how the elder brother saw things. He not only refused to see his younger sibling, he refused to even acknowledge him, “this son of yours” (v. 30) was the best he could manage in his anger. “This son of yours”, not my brother. He refused to acknowledge the relationship. Remember that he had not yet even seen his brother or allowed him to speak. He was unwilling to even give his younger brother a chance to be forgiven.

Then the elder brother began to point out the worst, again with exaggeration. He accused the rebellious son of having “squandered your property” (v. 30). He had not devoured the wealth of the estate. Though it had come at a cost, the younger son had simply received his inheritance. That he had spent it foolishly was not the elder brother’s concern. The loss of the young brother’s wealth had no effect on him. He was not out anything. But that was not the only accusation.

As if to make things as bad as possible, the elder brother said that the money had been spent “with prostitutes” (v. 30). While that may, in fact, have been true, this was simply slander. The elder brother had no way of knowing how the young son had spent his time. Perhaps rumors had reached the village, but the elder brother had no way of knowing if the younger brother had returned rich or poor; a prince or a pauper. Self-righteous people can always be counted on to put things in the most negative possible light. This can be a measure of our heart as well. Do we tend to view things (and people) in the most, or least, generous way?

An Irrefutable Explanation

The father just listened. He did not interrupt his eldest son. He did not cut him off with a slap of the face of speaking so rudely to him. Instead, the father was equally tender to the elder brother. He began “my son” (v. 31). Every other time in this passage Luke uses the word *huios* for the word translated son. In this instance, the word used, *teknon* literally means child. He was not being condescending, the father was being as tender as he could.

He reminded his eldest that “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours” (v.31). Even a goat of a celebration with his friends. That had never been withheld. It had always been there of the asking. “But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (v. 32). Notice that the father began with “this brother of yours” (v. 32). The father insisted on restoring the family relationship. His younger son had returned and the family was whole again. There was no answer to this. It was irrefutable.

The elder brother was the key figure in the story. We must remember that Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, but there are lessons of us as well. The elder brother was the very picture of self-righteousness. We must beware of being the elder brother and resenting the grace given to others. We must remember our own sin. We must consider what our lives would be without the grace of God. Nothing ought to give a believer more joy than the conversion of another. That is the theme of all three parables. The joy of God and the conversion of sinners. It ought to be our joy as well.

The parable ends with this. There is no mention of the elder brother’s response. There is no mention of whether or not the elder brother repented of *his* wicked heart. Perhaps that was as Jesus wanted. After all, he was speaking to Pharisees and His plea was for them to repent, for them to renounce their self-righteousness. We can only pray that some of them were listening.

Takeaways

May we praise God for the grace and mercy given us, and rejoice when it is given to others as well.