

LUKE 15: THE ELDER BROTHER SYNDROME

By David Lee Burris

The Parable in Historical, Cultural, and Passage Context:

- Who is the audience and how would the original hearer have heard this?
- What cultural reference points would the original hearer have known that I miss?
- Does the parable have characters and how are they described?
- Does the parable have an unexpected ending that highlights the point Jesus was trying to make?

The sinners and tax collectors would've related to the story of the younger son, but what about the older son? Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see themselves in the older son and repent of their lack of compassion for the lost.

Even though the Pharisees had access to scripture and the ability to understand it, there was something they lacked. Jesus told them as much in Matthew 9:13 when He quoted Hosea 6:6, scripture the Pharisees would've been familiar with.

Considered exemplary models of Jewish religion, worship, and prayer, the Pharisees were rule-followers that added extra rules just to be safe. But, in all their perceived righteousness they most certainly did not hang out with unclean sinners and along with the zealots - despised tax collectors! In that culture, table fellowship meant acceptance and friendship. Was Jesus endorsing sinners by eating with them? **Read Luke 5:27-30.**

Chapter Context. Jesus spoke three parables in staggered relationship with each other. There's the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and then the parable of the lost son. But Luke doesn't actually separate them and call them three parables. **He seems to call them one parable.** "So, He spoke this parable to them..." After the first parable, then Luke just has the conjunction "or" leading into the second (vs. 8). And then again, he connects the third by simply saying, "Then he said" (vs. 11). **The three parables are really just one large parable, and they are all in response to the Pharisees complaint against Jesus.**

Jesus told this last parable in response to the criticism of the scribes and Pharisees; who up to this point were likely relieved Jesus had not directed judgment toward them! But Jesus' whole story led up to the response of the older son. **Read Luke 15:25. How did Jesus introduce the older son? What had he been doing? How does this compare with how the younger son chose to spend his time (vs. 13)?**

Upon arriving from working in the field the older brother discovered his reckless younger brother had returned. Imagine his excitement. And to top it off, his dad was throwing a party complete with music and dancing. But wait... it gets worse. The fattened calf. Remember the father had already distributed his inheritance to his younger son, which meant everything left belonged to the older son. Restoring the younger son back into the family – especially under that early primogeniture system - would come at a very high cost to the older son. After all that – to top it off - the father even gave his good-for-nothing younger brother *his* fattened calf!

For many years he had worked hard and obeyed and now his father owed him, at the very least, a goat, which wasn't nearly as expensive nor could it feed as much as the fattened calf. He believed all his goodness earned him a seat at the father's table. Yet when he received **the same invitation** as his undeserving brother to join the celebration, he didn't take it.

HISTORY of the ancient Middle East suggests the oldest son would've been responsible to help reconcile wayward children to the father. Moreover, instead of the discipline the prodigal deserved, the father showed his son mercy. It can be very difficult for the obedient older-brother type to even watch someone less deserving receive mercy and when in charge highly unlikely to extend such mercy.

The older brother has a serious **heart condition**. I think Jealousy is only one of many problems the older brother has. Here is a nice list I hope you don't relate to.

- Jealous of the love his father showed his brother.
- Bitter about the years of work unappreciated.
- Angry about the injustice of forgiving his brother after all he had done.
- Ungrateful for all the care and provision his father had been giving him.
- Unsatisfied with his own choices. Probably thinking, "Oi! I should have gone too."

Pulpit Commentary

Verse 25. - **Now his elder son was in the field.** The broad universal interest of the parable here ceases. Whereas the story of the sin & the punishment, the repentance and the restoration, of the prodigal belongs to the Church of the wide world, and has its special message of warning and comfort for thousands and thousands of world workers in every age, **this** division of the story, which tells of the sour discontent of the prodigal's elder brother, was spoken especially to the Pharisees and rulers of the Jews, who were bitterly incensed with Jesus being the Friend of publicans and sinners. They could not bear the thought of sharing the joys of the world to come with men whom they had despised as hopeless sinners here. This second chapter of the great parable has its practical lessons for the every day common life; but its chief interest lay in the striking picture which it drew of that powerful class to whom the teaching of Jesus, in its broad and massive character, was utterly repulsive. Now, while the events just related were taking place, and the lost younger son was being received again into his father's heart and home, the elder, a hard and selfish man, stern, and yet careful of his duties as far as his narrow mind grasped them, was in the field at his work. The rejoicing in the house over the prodigal's return evidently took him by surprise. If he ever thought of that poor wandering brother of his at all, he pictured him to himself as a hopelessly lost and ruined soul. **The Pharisees and rulers could not fail at once to catch the drift of the Master's parable. They too, when the Lord came and gathered in that great harvest of sinners, those first fruits of his mighty work - they too were "in the field" at work with their tithings and observances, making hedge after hedge round the old sacred Hebrew Law, uselessly fretting their lives away in a dull round of meaningless ritual observances. They - the Pharisee party - when they became aware of the great crowds of men, whom they looked on as lost sinners, listening to the famous Teacher, who was showing them how men who had lived their lives too could win eternal life - they, the Pharisees, flamed out with bitter wrath against the bold and daring Preacher of glad tidings to such a worthless crew. In the vivid parable-story these indignant Pharisees and rulers saw themselves clearly imaged.** Luke 15:25

Pulpit Commentary

Verses 29-32. - **Lo, these many years do I serve thee.** Bengel quaintly comments here, "Serous erat." This was the true nature of this later Jewish service of the Eternal. To them the eternal God was simply a Master. They were **slaves** who had a hard and difficult task to perform, and for which they looked for a definite payment. **Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment.** We have here reproduced the spirit, almost the very words, of the well-known answer of the young man in the gospel story, who was no doubt a promising scion of the Pharisee party: "All these things have I kept from my youth up." The same thought was in the mind, too, of him who thus prayed in the temple: "God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are," etc. ([Luke 18:11, 12](#)). **Yet thou never gavest me a kid... All that I have is thine.** Thy brother has the shoes, the ring, the robe, the banquet; thou the **inheritance**, for all that I have is thine. Why grudge to thy brother an hour of the gladness which has been thine these many years? **As soon as this thy son was come,... For this thy brother was dead.** The angry elder son will not even acknowledge the prodigal as **his** brother; with bitter scorn and some disrespect he speaks of him to his father as "thy son." The father throughout the scene is never incensed. He pleads rather than reproaches, and to this insolence he simply retorts, "Thy brother was dead to us, but now - **It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad.**" What was the end of this strange scene? The last words, breathing forgiveness and joy, leave a sweet sense of hope upon the reader that all would yet be well in that divided household, and that the brothers, friends again, would clasp hands before the loving father's eyes. But when Jesus told the parable to the crowds, the story was not yet played out. It depended on the Pharisees and rulers how the scene was to end. What happened at Jerusalem a **few weeks later**, when the Passion-drama was acted, and some **forty years later**, when the city was sacked, tells **us** something of what subsequently happened to the elder son of the Lord's parable. But the end has yet to come. We shall yet see the brothers, Jew and Gentile, clasp hands in loving friendship before the father, when the long-lost elder son comes home. There will be joy then indeed in the presence of the angels of God.

The Older Brother Is An Allegory Of The Prophet Jonah!

Jonah Revisited

The elder brother's attitude reminds me of Jonah. God called Jonah,

"Go the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me." (Jonah 1:2)

Nineveh is the capital of Assyria that has ravaged Palestine, conquered the northern kingdom of Israel and come just short of taking the southern kingdom of Judea, too. The Assyrians are hated and their capital of Nineveh is hated, too.

Jonah goes the opposite direction, as far away from Nineveh as he can, only to be intercepted by a big fish. He finally goes to Nineveh against his will and preaches,

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." (Jonah 3:4-5)

But the Ninevites believe him and repent. They put on sackcloth and mourn. God has compassion and spares them the threatened destruction. But Jonah is angry.

"He prayed to the Lord, 'O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.' But the Lord replied, 'Have you any right to be angry?'" (Jonah 4:2-4).

Jonah is focused on himself and his own satisfaction. A vine grows up and gives shade, but a worm eats it. Jonah is angry again. He is more concerned about his own comfort than his fellow human beings, and God rebukes him for it:

"But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who can't tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:11)

Yes, the older brother -- and many of us modern-day older brothers -- is much like Jonah. Self-absorbed, petulant, more concerned with fairness and justice for ourselves than mercy and compassion towards others. Calloused toward the lost -- they're not our concern. And angry, angry that we aren't in God's spotlight rather than the recently-converted unwashed.

Tim Keller makes this point in *The Prodigal God*. He says:

*“In Act 2, however, the focus is on the elder brother. He is fastidiously obedient to his father and, therefore, by analogy, to the commands of God. He is completely under control and quite self-disciplined. So, we have two sons, one “bad” by conventional standards and one “good,” yet both are alienated from the father. The father has to go out and invite each of them to come into the feast of his love. So, **there is not just one lost son in this parable—there are two.***

*But Act 2 comes to an unthinkable conclusion. Jesus the storyteller deliberately leaves the elder brother in his alienated state. The bad son enters the father’s feast but the good son will not. The lover of prostitutes is saved, but the man of moral rectitude is still lost. **We almost hear the Pharisees gasp as the story ends. It was the complete reversal of everything they had ever been taught.***

Jesus does not simply leave it at that. It gets even more shocking. Why doesn’t the elder brother go in? He himself gives the reason: “Because I’ve never disobeyed you.” The elder brother is losing the father’s love because of his [goodness].”

Older Brother: Pre-Christian Ante-Type to Post-Christian Legalist

Legalism Produces Bitterness

Jesus corrects the Pharisees with His parables. “I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (vs. 7). They are wrong. Jesus is right. Jesus is right because the angels in heaven and even God Himself love it when sinners repent and come to Him. Salvation by grace is better than people who are already righteous staying that way. They should rejoice with Jesus. Notice again how the text puts it, “*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” (vs. 32). And so, if it was “right” to make merry and be glad, then it was *wrong* to be angry about it.

Here we see what legalism does to a person. **It takes away joy.** It makes them a prude and a prig. They cannot rejoice. And eventually they cannot be happy. Everything in life is simply debt, duty, and payment. And this makes life fragile. Everything is always just about to break. Without grace there can be trust and no confidence. And that’s a miserable life to live.

Bitterness is also **soul-endangering**. Precisely because it causes one to be angry at grace, bitterness can make your heart hard. Listen to these other passages from the New Testament:

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. (James 3:14-16) Bitterness is connected to envy and selfishness, and it causes a whole host of other sins to grow. And then Hebrews 12 states:

Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord: looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled...

For you know that afterward, for [Esau] found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears. (Hebrews 12:14-17) There we are told that bitterness can make it impossible to repent, even if you think you want to do what’s right. Make no mistake about it, hard-hearted legalism can send you to Hell.

New DSM – Spiritual Heart Disease – EBS Elder Brother Syndrome

“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, 29 but he replied, ‘All these years *I’ve slaved for you* and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. 30 Yet when *this son of yours* comes back after squandering *your money* on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’

- Listen to what he told his father -
 1. I have "slaved" for you
 2. You never killed even a "young goat" for me to have fun with my friends
 3. You killed a "fattened calf" [greater value] for "*this son of yours*"
 4. Refused to acknowledge the prodigal as his brother - no, he said - "your son"
 5. He had disowned his own brother, yet he boasted of being a slave
 6. He was never given a feast for "his friends" - maybe another "prodigal" here!
 7. At least the prodigal son was open and did his rebellious ways openly
 8. The elder brother was just as rebellious "in his heart"...
 9. He charges that his brother spent his inheritance on "prostitutes" - we do not know that - the word "riotous living" is what the elder brother also wanted - but was too proud and deceitful for anyone to know what his true self wanted
 10. The elder brother had sins himself -
 - unforgiveness
 - pride
 - self-righteousness
 - lack of love
 - dishonest
 - ungrateful
 - unappreciative for all he had
 - jealous
 - angry
 - threw a temper tantrum
 - refused to be in the presence of his brother
 - obviously, held a grudge
 - how about bitterness?
 - critical of his brother
 - judged his brother

How was he any different from the prodigal son?

- He did all at home, not in a far country
- He had no empathy for his father's grief and happiness

If the prodigal son's return made the father happy - that should have been enough for the elder brother to join in the celebration. No, he was too self-centered...

No one shut him out of the house - he shut himself out!

What sins are worse? Outward actions - or inward rebellion?

The Elder-Brother Syndrome – Thoughts of Therapy

This is what we could term “The Elder Brother Syndrome.” It’s why we look at a reprobate “sinner” and recognize his need of Jesus immediately but fail to see the need of the prideful soul sitting in the front pew week after week and year after year. In the book, *The Prodigal God* by Tim Keller, the author claims most people fall into one of these two categories.

The younger-brother types are the ones who are adventurous and risk-taking. They distrust institutions (like government and religion), shake off constraints, and desire to experience all that life has to offer. When they sin, they sin big and bold and everyone knows it. The elder-brother types are the rule-keepers and people-pleasers who work stable, predictable jobs, hold traditional values and are risk-averse. Many faithful church attendees are elder-brother types who tend to see their type as “good” and the other type as “bad.” If only everyone could be more like them, the world would be a better place. But Jesus’ parable reminds us that the **ones who are truly “lost” are the ones who don’t realize their need**. Here are a few characteristics of the elder brother in the parable and how we can make sure we don’t fall into the trap of pride, anger, resentment, and indignation.

1. **He thought because he obeyed the rules, he deserved blessing.**

Have you ever found yourself asking God to heal someone because she deserved it or because she has been faithful for so many years? Have you caught yourself thinking surely you will make it to heaven simply because you go to church every week and you don’t break any rules? We are very much prone to keeping a checklist and treating our salvation like a contract. If we just do enough of the right things, we’ll make it. That’s how the elder brother felt. “All these years I’ve been slaving for you...yet you never gave me even a young goat...” He was mad because he didn’t think he was getting what he deserved for his faithful service. Have you ever felt short-changed by God?

Have you felt that your service has been overlooked and that you deserve a pat on the back? Has your pride puffed you up to the point where you think it's actually possible to earn God's grace and blessing?

2. **His motive was to receive, not to show love to his father.** Perhaps the real reason the elder brother was so angry was because his younger brother had squandered half of their *shared inheritance*. Now that he has been welcomed back into the family, they would both receive a slice from a much smaller pie when their father died. He didn't care about his father any more than his younger brother had when he demanded his *younger child smaller* inheritance while his father was still alive.

So, for us, our relationship with our heavenly Father should center on pleasing Him, loving Him, and growing closer to Him, even if it means we don't get everything we want. If you don't wind up with a "mansion over the hilltop" when you get to heaven and find yourself in a one-room apartment in the new Jerusalem, will you be disappointed? Are you serving God only for the promise of getting a crown or walking on streets of gold? Or do you want to know Him more than you want another breath? Love for Jesus must be our starting point, without loving only to get something, even if that promised something is beneficial to everyone. Our motives must be pure. If you're only serving God so you'll get a better job or He'll bless you financially, then your motives are tainted. Love Jesus for who He is, not what He can give you.

3. **He thought his brother's sinfulness was unforgivable.** The elder brother was indignant that "this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes" was the object of his father's affection and celebration. His father might be willing to forgive, but by golly, he wouldn't! **His standards were higher than his father's. This sin was unforgivable. While the younger brother might be his father's son, he was no longer a brother to him.** How pompous and arrogant!

But Christians do this all the time. They judge and hold past sins against one another. They identify people as “former” this or “ex” that. Instead of offering the clean slate of forgiveness, they hang on to the dirt so they can bring it up again later. If the father, who has been wronged, can forgive, why can’t we? And as I was reminded through a sermon, forgiveness means forgiving yourself, too. If God can bring himself to forgive you, then you can forgive yourself, too. Your standard isn’t higher than God’s!

4. **He resented his father’s joy and refused to share in it.** Think of the long, dark, heartbroken nights this father had spent worrying about his lost son. Think about his disappointment as days turned into months and perhaps years of longing for him to return. And now he is so full of joy that everyone in the household and probably the town came to celebrate with him. And the elder son won’t even come to the party. **He didn’t share his father’s heart.** He didn’t share his joy. **As Christians, our hearts should be broken by the things that break the heart of God.** And they should also be filled with joy by the things that bring joy to the father. That means we need to know Him and what He truly wants.

We need to get on the same page as God and see the world through His eyes. I admit this is not always easy to do. But we’re not on this planet to look out for our own interests. We’re here as His ambassadors to represent Him to a world that is lost and in need of a relationship with Him. If we can’t catch His heart and reflect it, then we don’t know Him as well as we need to.

Pulpit Commentary

Verse 28. - **Therefore came his father out, and entreated him.** The disapprobation of Jesus for Pharisee opinions was very marked, yet here and elsewhere his treatment of them, with a few exceptional cases, was generally very gentle and loving. There was something in their excessive devotion to the letter of the Divine Law, to the holy temple, to the proud traditions of their race, that was admirable. It was a love to God, but a love all marred and blurred. It was a patriotism, but a patriotism utterly mistaken. The elder brother here was a representative of the great and famous sect, both in its fair and repulsive aspect, in its moral severity and correctness, in its harshness and exclusive pride. **The father condescended to entreat this angry elder son; and Jesus longed to win these proud mistaken Pharisees.** Luke 15:28



RELIEF FOR ELDER BROTHER SYNDROME

“It is clear that the hardest conversion to go through is the conversion of the one who stayed home.” –Henri J.M. Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son
New Year’s resolutions are the best aspirations of the morally deficient. What resolutions could there be for those rankled by the moral deficiencies of others?

I was recently preaching on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15), better described as the parable of the prodigal sons’ loving father. For in fact, the hard-working elder son, who never left home and never squandered a penny of the family assets, is spiritually farther from his generous father than is his foolish brother. “You never once gave me a party!” he complains in a jealous rage and then refuses to go in and celebrate his resurrected sibling. He remains outside the father’s house. In Rembrandt’s painting of the scene (pictured here), the younger son is caught in an embrace with the father; the elder son, however, stands stiff, far off, with a dark shadowy abyss between him and the reconciled pair.

PARETO PRINCIPLE APPLIES ALSO @VOLUNTEER WORK.

A busy parent who coordinates volunteers for her congregation asked me after the service: “How does an ‘elder sibling’ get over the resentment that wells up when others refuse to share the load?” She is not alone. We are told that 20 percent of church members do 80 percent of the work. The same can happen at home, at work and even on a sports team. Some people sacrifice while others take advantage of the responsible members’ dedication & sweat and go fishing instead. Self-righteous anger can begin to simmer and boil inside an elder sibling.

Ministers often feel this inner storm, even if they ought not show it. I was a chaplain for a season. I have often felt like a good, reliable elder brother – the indignant one who works hard because the prodigals are off on private adventures. Especially when the community is not flourishing, this frustration is hard to avoid. When you expect all hands on deck and you feel all alone at the helm, it’s depressing and infuriating. Righteousness sows seeds of its own prideful destruction. What can you do to save your loyal but now sick soul?

For the responsible & resentful ...

First, I would suggest we realize it is almost impossible to save such a sorry soul. Especially if our sacrifice has been substantial and the resentment has sunk deep into our identity, we are stuck. It is a spiral of bitterness that is spiritually fatal and there is no human way out. Our only hope is divine aid and grace.

That grace may first move us to a place of humility. For me, some liberation came when I saw myself as the miserable elder brother. The man in the mirror looked angry, which is not the face of the “good” Christian. More significant, however, was when I saw that my mirror reflection resembled the younger son, too. Yes, I’ve been loyal and hard-working, but I’ve also been off to the far country, not rebelling perhaps, but still lost and almost hopeless, dependent on the hospitality of others, and by the grace of God, able to come home. In this sense, I am both prodigal sons, and I can fall before the father and welcome a homecoming party with deep gratitude.

Another idea comes in a beautiful sermon presented by John Vannorsdall entitled “The Elder Son’s Defense.” It’s a creative letter written from the perspective of the elder son, and one of the things the elder son asks is that everyone else take some share of the responsibility for the family business. That will help cure any self-righteous plague. Think of that as a preventative measure.

Elder siblings can set aside their work-ethic in other ways: learn to celebrate milestones with good cheer. If we treat ourselves after work well done, we may not feel resentful in the end because we have savored the joy of accomplishment. We’ve stopped to enjoy the beauty of the harvest - not in an irresponsible way, but certainly in order to enjoy the good gifts of God for the people of God’s family. Finally, as Henri Nouwen’s book on this parable reminds us, our journey should not end at identification with the elder son or the younger son but with the loving father. – *Internet Resource*

