

THE PARABLE OF THE ELDER BROTHER

Luke 15:25-32

It is surprising how little study has been given to this elder brother. People generally think of him as one who did quite well in contrast with his younger brother. A study of the elder brother should be profitable to us because many of us are so much like him. His counterpart can be seen in every church.

While the reception for the prodigal was in progress, the elder brother was busy with his duties in the field. When he came home, this riot of happy revelry burst upon him as a complete surprise. He had returned in time for the activities of the latter part of the reception, but he refused to participate in them.

I. The Virtues Of The Elder Brother.

At the outset and in fairness to the elder brother, let us recognize that he possessed a number of commendable traits of character which were conspicuously absent in his younger brother. One of the great mysteries of life is why brothers can be such opposites. The impelling compulsions that dominate human personalities are mysterious. Side by side the orange tree and the fatal hemlock grow and bear their fruit. One is a tree of life, and the other a tree of death. Each thrusts its roots into the same soil and lifts its branches into the same air. One selects the elements that make it a benediction; the other chooses the poisons that make it deadly. It is in this connection that human choice, insight, understanding, and responsibilities have their critical crossroads.

The elder brother was an obedient and dutiful son. He did not run away from home and cause his father to have sleepless nights and anxious days, but he remained at home and performed his duties faithfully. He was industrious and thrifty. He was not a spendthrift like his brother. He did not take his share of the inheritance, and, as we say, "blow it." He maintained high moral standards, and never disgraced the family name. His outward life was above reproach. His attitude toward sin was highly commendable, and we need more of that same attitude in our day.

II. The Weaknesses Of The Elder Brother.

In spite of all his virtues, this man had some very serious and glaring faults of which he seemed to be entirely unaware.

These brothers were two different types of sinners. The sins of the younger were those of passion, and the sins of the elder were those of disposition. The one who left home was simply yielding, as multitudes like him yield now, to the coarser sins of the flesh. The one who stayed at home yielded to the more subtle sins of the spirit, which are some easier to conceal and often worse in their consequences. His were the sins of envy, bad temper, self-centeredness, and social callousness. Great guilt is attached to both the sins of passion and the sins of disposition, even though many magnify the former and minimize the latter.

It would be difficult to overstate the gravity of the sins of the disposition and the damage which they do. They take away peace of mind, introduce discord into our homes, and cause strife in our churches.

Some are not guilty of riotous living, but have such bad dispositions that it is difficult to live with them. They are the ones for whom the little girl was praying, when she said, "Oh, Lord, make all bad people good, and make all good people nice." The urge to do wrong is within us all, and, if it does not break out in one form, it will break out in another. As Paul said, "When I would do good, evil is present with me." Christ hated the sins of the disposition. His most scathing denunciations were directed against the sins of the temper and spirit.

1. The elder brother was suspicious.

You can detect the tones of displeasure and suspicion in the words: "And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant." When he was informed as to what was taking place, he displayed the attitude of aloofness, the readiness to be offended, and the spirit of touchiness.

Are you entirely free of suspicion? Do you have a critical spirit? Are you easily offended?

2. The elder brother was sullen.

When he asked one of the servants what all of the commotion was about, he was told that his brother had come back and that his father had given him a wonderful welcome because he had returned safe and sound. One might have expected him to say, "How wonderful! Our prayers have been answered. My brother has returned. How glad I am!" Instead of that he was possessed with a terrible spirit of jealousy. "He was angry, and would not go in." His attitude was, "I am going to stay outside. I am not going to have anything to do with this whole affair." Have you ever reacted like that? Have you ever known anyone else to react in such a way?

Oh, the havoc this terrible thing called jealousy causes in our lives and in our service for God! Jealousy distorts the reason, stifles the flow of joy and feeds its victim on misery. If jealousy takes possession of us, it will starve out all joy and peace and power from the life. Unfortunately jealousy exists in many hearts. What would you have done, if you had been in the place of the elder brother? Would you have stayed outside sulking, or would you have joined the party?

This celebration made the elder brother angry. Why was he angry? It was not because his prodigal brother had done him any harm. His anger was born of envy. He was envious. Therefore, there wasn't any joy in this occasion for him. All the music was discord because it was not played in his honor alone. The feast was altogether unpalatable because it was not prepared solely for himself. He was possessed of that hideous demon of envy, therefore any honor done to another was a galling dishonor to himself.

Envy is the child of hate. It has no connection whatsoever with love. We never envy those whom we truly love. "Love envieth not." Envy is that fiendish spirit that makes one feel uncomfortable when the ability or attainment, or character of another is praised.

It is that hellish serpent that stings us when we hear of the prosperity of a rival.

3. The elder brother was slavish.

As you listen to his statement, "Lo, these many years have I slaved for thee," you can scarcely doubt that while he had been doing the right thing, he had been doing it from the wrong motive and in the wrong way. It is entirely possible to work for God in an improper spirit or the wrong way.

The elder brother was irritated and grieved because his service had not received the recompense which he had expected. How tragic is this elder brother attitude toward Christian service: to be busy in the work of the Lord, but instead of doing it out of pleasure and delight because it is God's work, to do it as a slave! Really, the elder brother was serving himself instead of his father.

4. The elder brother was self-righteous.

"Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." How quick he was to tell his father that he had not transgressed his commandments at any time! One wonders if that were really true? But, even if it were, does it not savour of a "holier-than-thou" spirit? It is very easy to slip into that attitude and to say in rather a pious way, "I'm better than other Christians." With words poisoned with malice he upbraided his father, branded his brother, and bragged on himself. "I have never transgressed."

His righteousness was of the negative variety. He said he had not done any evil, but had he done any good? He thought he was so much better than his brother. He had not squandered any portion of the inheritance in the far country. He had not left his father mourning. He was the sort of man who never made a mistake in his life, in his own estimation. Listen to him! How superior he is! And how supremely satisfied with self! He had never visited the far country. He had never sowed any wild oats. He had not marred and scarred himself by years of dissipation. He had remained thoroughly decent, and he was proud of it. He overestimated his importance and consequently dwelt upon his model behavior to such a degree that any attention shown to another was interpreted by him as a slight upon himself; while the one who received such attentions was despised as altogether unworthy of consideration.

These qualities are always attendant upon conceit. The Pharisees "trusted in themselves, that they were righteous, and despised others;" and when the Lord showed favor to the publicans and sinners, they felt as if He had insulted them. A person who is always thinking of his own excellences takes offence where and when none is meant. One's appreciation of another is by him interpreted as a depreciation of himself.

"Neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment." There is a superior air of self-satisfaction about the words. There is neither respect, nor consideration, nor filial piety in his heart as he utters those words. It is so easy to be kept out of numerous

blessings by a self-righteous attitude.

Are you satisfied with yourself? If so, you are out of fellowship with God. Also, you may observe that a person who is satisfied with himself is likely to be dissatisfied with everyone else. He is almost sure to be out of harmony with what is going on about him.

5. The elder brother was selfish.

"And yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." He was absolutely full of himself; and that, perhaps, is the chief characteristic of a carnal Christian. It is the self-life predominating, instead of the Holy Spirit being in control.

What does selfishness lead to? Three things. First, it puts out the eyes, so that men see nothing. Second, it closes up the heart, so that men feel nothing. Third, it ties fast the hands, so that men do nothing. All of these it did with this elder brother. He did not see the condition of his brother, the bigness of his father's heart, the compassion of his father's love, nor the gracious fortune of his own position. He felt nothing because his heart was closed. He did not feel his own kinship to his brother, any responsibility for his brother's encouragement and safe-keeping, nor the appeal of his father's love. And the result of it was that he did nothing. Selfishness does for one today exactly what it did for that elder brother.

6. The elder brother was self-centered.

"And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends" (Luke 15:29). In this verse alone we find the capital "I" three times. He was always talking about himself, calling attention to "Number One," wanting to be in the center of the picture, relating every conversation back again to himself, and, of course, wanting appreciation.

Are these things true of us? Are we always wanting to be in the center of the picture? Are we always talking of ourselves, of our affairs, and of our achievements? Are we self-centered, self-assertive, self-opinionated? This is certainly not the way our Lord expects us to live.

Listen to the elder brother! How self-centered he was! It is "I, I, I, me, me, me," all the time. The self-righteous and self-centered person always thinks about how others ought to honor him, and not how he can help others. And a conceited person is always censorious.

7. The elder brother was self-pitying.

"Thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends." What a sorry spectacle he makes! He had not grown up emotionally. He acted just like a baby. His brother was in the center of things, getting all the attention. It was for him the

fatted calf had been killed. He was the one who wore the ring and the robe and the shoes. That was entirely too much for the elder brother, so he was filled with a horrible self-pity.

Self-pity destroys one's sense of values. "Thou never gavest me a kid," was his complaint; to which the answer of the father was, "All that I have is thine." The elder brother placed more value upon a triviality which he did not possess than upon all the wealth that was his.

How often is our sense of values in danger of being destroyed in Christian service and fellowship! Some are not given a part on the program, or asked to speak, or appointed on a committee when they think they ought to be asked. We are passed over and somebody else is chosen in the place of us. Somebody sits in our pew. The minister failed to call on me to do so and so. Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So gave me a strange look.

Self-pity destroys our happiness. "And he was angry, and would not go in." It was a great day of rejoicing in that household that had been oppressed with anxiety for so long. Self-pity destroys fellowship. He would not call him "my brother," because he was blinded by the tears of self-pity. He was just like a baby; and it is possible for us to act in this way, and if we do, we simply manifest spiritual immaturity. It is apparent to all except ourselves that we are spiritual dwarfs.

Self-pity destroys one's usefulness. "Therefore came his father out, and intreated him." Oh, these pouting people who have to be entreated before they will work! They have been upset, their feathers have been ruffled, they have climbed up the miff-tree, and some people would have you spend and waste a lot of time in trying to pacify them, to smooth their ruffled feathers, to try to get them to come down out of the miff-tree and to come back on the job for the Lord, I can find a much better way to spend the time which the Lord gives to me.

That elder brother was completely out of sympathy with his father. Not only did he fail to share his father's concern over his brother, but he questioned his father's actions. He did not agree with what his father had done. He did not think it was lawful for his father to give his younger brother such a wonderful welcome. He questioned the wisdom of his father, the ways of his father, and the will of his father. Maybe you are doing the same with your Heavenly Father.

8. The elder brother was sarcastic.

"But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou has killed for him the fatted calf" (Luke 15:30). He referred to his brother as "thy son," and not as "my brother." It was as if he was saying, "I'm not associated with him. He is thy son, but he is not my brother." He was so ready to condemn his brother. He condemned him instead of having concern for him. He imagined that his brother had gotten the best of the bargain. He thought of what benefit it is to serve the father if those who serve him least get the most. Visualize the

curl on his lip as he sneered, "This is thy son." Thus he wronged the father by accusing him of injustice. Because his own pride was wounded he wronged his brother. He hurt his father, he wounded his brother, but the heaviest blow fell upon himself. He would not go in, but remained outside, nursing his sense of wrong, justifying himself, and growing hotter and hotter as he thought how badly, how unkindly and how unjustly he had been treated.

III. Conclusion.

1. Think of your Privilege.

You are my son. Have you meditated on the wonderful fact that you are a child of God? We should be ashamed of our inconsistency in allowing the carnal things we have mentioned to remain any longer in our lives.

2. Think of your Position.

"Thou art ever with me." This is true of us. We are at this very moment seated with Christ in heavenly places. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." Think of your position, Christian! How unworthy for one in such a position to be carnal!

3. Think of your Possessions.

"All that I have is thine." The cure for carnality is to become Spirit-filled and Christ-possessed. Our Heavenly Father can be trusted to give us all the grace we need, all the opportunities that we can use, and all the blessing and power with which we can be entrusted.