

THE ELDER BROTHER

Luke 15:25-31

This parable portrays a young man who got tired of the restraints of life at home. Longing for sights unseen and experiences untried, he requested his father to divide his estate and give to him the portion that he would eventually inherit. Reluctantly the father granted his request. It is significant that the record says, "He divided unto them his living." The elder brother remained at home like a dutiful son and left the father in possession of his share of the estate.

With his inheritance in portable form, the younger brother went forth to be independent, to do as he pleased, and to make a fortune for himself. In due time his resources were completely exhausted and all of his associates deserted him. In desperation he accepted employment as a swineherd. Heartsick, home-sick, friendless and penniless, he sat down to think. Ere long, he decided to go back home and confess his sin. Meanwhile, his father was waiting and watching for him to return. He was far more anxious for him to come back than the boy was to return. When the father saw the prodigal in the distance, he recognized him, had compassion on him, ran to him, threw his arms around his neck and kissed him. He led him into the house, called his servants and bade them place a robe upon his back, put a ring upon his finger and shoes upon his feet. From every standpoint the young man received a royal welcome.

At the time of his brother's reappearance, and while all of this was going on, the elder brother was busy with his duties in the field. He had not been informed of what had transpired. When he came home, this riot of happy revelry burst upon him as a complete surprise. He only returned in time for the aftermath of the reception, the music and the dancing. It was a day of great rejoicing in the household that had been oppressed with anxiety. The anxiety which for so long had shown itself on the father's face had vanished. The gloom on the faces of the servants had given way to gladness. But there was one who refused to share in the general joy over the prodigal's return.

A study of this elder brother will be profitable to us. He is an accurate picture of many church members. His counterpart can be seen in every church.

I. He was suspicious.

"And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant." Luke 15:26.

He "asked what these things meant." You can catch the tone of criticism and suspicion in the words. What does this mean? There is the attitude of aloofness, the readiness to be offended, the spirit of touchiness in this man, as he draws near to the house.

Are you entirely free from the suspicious spirit? Do you have that critical spirit? Are you easily offended?

II. He was sullen.

"And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and entreated him." Luke 15:28.

When he asked one of the servants what it all meant, 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'm going to stay outside. I'm 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! 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.

This elder brother was sulky. He acted like a pouting child. He wanted to be coaxed and made over. He wanted to occupy the center of the stage, and resorted to sulking in order to gain it. He would rather sulk than sing over the return of his brother. He was jealous because of the love his father was bestowing on his younger brother. He was jealous because of the enjoyment of the household over the return of the prodigal. He was jealous because of the feasting. Jealousy distorts the reason, stifles the flow of joy, and feeds its victim on misery.

III. He was slavish.

"Lo, these many years have I slaved for thee." As you listen to those words, you can scarcely doubt that while he had been doing the right thing, he had been doing it in the wrong way. And it is possible to work for God in the wrong way, and to serve Him in the improper spirit. While he has been bringing profit to his father all that time, there has been a calculating spirit as to how much he ought to have, and a suggestion behind it all that things had not turned out as he expected.

He was irritated and grieved because his service had not received recompense. 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.

IV. He 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 was 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.

V. He 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.

VI. He 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.

VII. He 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.

VIII. He was sarcastic.

"But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast 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 is it to serve the father if those who serve him least get the most. Visualize the curl on his lip as he sneered, "This 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.

In the tender, loving, gracious and wooing words of the father, as recorded in verse 31, we have the cure for carnality and the way into victory and fulness of blessing. What did the father say? He said, "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine."

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.