

## LESSONS FROM THE ELDER BROTHER

### Luke 15:25-32

THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON is a parable of grace. It is the definitive parable of grace. It is about the God who scandalously bestows favor on the unworthy and undeserving. Yet this famous parable of Jesus is often misunderstood, because we focus too much on the prodigal son. The true star of this story is the loving father, not the prodigal son. The prodigal son is significant only to the degree that he highlights and spotlights the grace of God. In that regard, the elder brother is just as important as the prodigal son – maybe more.

The key to unlock the parable is found in the occasion in which Jesus spoke it. **Luke 15:1-2** reports: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man received sinners and eats with them.’” The scribes and Pharisees were considered righteous, because they did not associate with tax collectors and sinners. Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them made it clear to the religious leaders which side he was on. Jesus will show they are not only wrong about him, they are also wrong about God. The Lord’s response consists of three parables.

- **Verses 4-7 records the parable of the lost sheep.**
- **Verses 8-10 record the parable of the lost silver.**
- **Verses 11-32 record the parable of the lost son.**

These three parables make the same point: Lost people matter to God. This is the point of all three parables. But this third story says more and says it better. The three parables share a general outline: LOST. FOUND. CELEBRATE. In the first two parables, the joyful celebration is the climatic end of the story. In this third parable, the celebration of the prodigal son’s return is interrupted when the father discovers the elder brother is missing from the party. The parable ends without us knowing if the elder brother joined the celebration or not. Jesus leaves us hanging, because the parable is not about the elder brother. It is about the scribes and Pharisees who grumbled against Jesus. It is about all those who are guilty of what **Philip Yancey** called, “ungrace” – the opposite of grace. The father’s conversation with the elder brother is God’s message to every Christian and every church: Don’t miss the party! Do not let anger, pride, or error cause you to miss the party.

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### **I. DO NOT LET ANGER CAUSE YOU TO MISS THE PARTY.**

Verse 11 states: “There was a man who had two sons.” The father is the central figure of the parable. After the parable begins, the spotlight focuses on the prodigal son. Yet the father remains the star of the story. The father welcoming the prodigal home is the high point of the story. But the high point is not the main point. The point is the elder’s brother’s angry response to the father welcoming the prodigal home. The elder brother was angry with his father. But the father was not angry with the elder brother.

### **A. THE ELDER BROTHER WAS ANGRY WITH HIS FATHER.**

Verses 25-28 says: “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 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.’ But he was angry and refused to go in.” As the elder brother returned from working in the field, he heard professional musicians and saw choreographed dancing in the distance. This was no impromptu get-together. This was a lavish banquet. He asked a servant the occasion of the party. The servant told him his brother had come home from the far country. And the father killed the fattened calf to celebrate the prodigal’s safe return. The elder brother should have said, “Why did no one call me from the field to tell me my brother was home?” Instead, he was angry and refused to go in. The elder brother was not angry with the prodigal for coming home. I’m sure he expected it, sooner or later. He was angry with the father for joyfully receiving and restoring his wayward son. It did not matter to him that his brother was “safe and sound.” The prodigal’s own actions put him in danger and at risk. The father had apparently overlooked the prodigal’s transgressions. This angered the elder brother. And he refused to join the party. This is as dishonorable as the prodigal son demanding his inheritance. It was the elder brother’s duty to cohost this party. Yet he angrily refused to go in.

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### **B. THE FATHER WAS NOT ANGRY WITH THE EDER BROTHER.**

When the father heard that the elder brother refused to join the party, he did not say, “So what! He can stay out there! Let’s keep partying.” He could have ordered the elder brother to come in immediately. But he did not do that. You cannot make someone party! Verse 28 says, “His father came out and entreated him.” The father’s initiative to seek out the elder brother is the parallel with the rest of the chapter. In the first parable, the shepherd searches for the lost sheep until he finds it. In the second parable, the woman searches the house until she finds the coin she lost. But when the prodigal son went to the far country, the father did not search for him. He patiently awaited the prodigal’s return. Yet when the elder brother refused to join the celebration, the father did not wait for him to “come to himself.” The father went out to find the elder brother and pleaded with him to join the party. The elder brother was just as lost as the prodigal son. He was not in the far country. Yet he was separated from the father and needed to be restored. The fact that you have never travelled to the far country does not mean things are right between you and the father.

- You can be home but separated from the Father.
- You can be moral but unredeemed.
- You can be religious but lost.
- You can be in church but unsaved.
- You can be an inside-outsider.

In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

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## **II. DO NOT LET PRIDE CAUSE YOU TO MISS THE PARTY.**

Verse 28-29 says, “His father came out and entreated him, 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.” Three words reveal the elder brother’s heart: “I, me, my.” The elder brother was consumed with pride. He did not get caught up with prostitutes in the far country, like his younger brother. But he was in an illicit affair with himself. In this sense, the elder brother was really the “little brother.” The smallest package in the world is a person wrapped up in himself. His pride was put on display three ways.

### **A. SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS.**

In verse 29, the elder brother says, “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.” This is the testimony of one who is religious but lost. The elder brother viewed serving the father as slavery. He did the right thing with the wrong attitude. God is not just looking at what you do, he is looking at why you do it. I remember times when my father would come home from work and ask me to get him a soda and paper from the store. I had an attitude about it. Yet I did it anyway. But on one occasion, my dad saw my attitude and said, “Never mind. If you do it for me with that attitude, I’d rather you not do it.”

The elder brother served the father self-righteously. He claimed, “I never disobeyed your command.” The elder brother did not do what the prodigal son did. But that did not mean he had never done wrong. He was so focused on his brother’s mistakes that he could not see his own. What child can honestly say that he or she has never disobeyed? Yet this is what the elder brother claimed. It is the self-righteousness of the respectable sinner. But no one has always obeyed God. **Psalm 130:3** says, “If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” ANSWER: No one! The only one who has never disobeyed is the one who told this parable. The elder brother was not righteous. He was only a different kind of sinner. Listen to him say, “You never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.” The elder brother served for a reward, not out of relationship. And he thought he deserved more than he received. This is the blinding effect of pride. But you do not want God to give you what you really deserve.

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## B. BITTERNESS.

In verse 29 he says, “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.” The elder brother’s bitterness is revealed in three words: “these many years...” This boy went off on his dad. But it was not a momentary fit of passion. It was the expression of longstanding bitterness. He was not just angry because of the father’s response to the prodigal’s return. He had been angry with his father for many years.

There are people who have a strained relationship with God because they will not let go of “these many years.” They are in bondage to something that happened yesterday. They will not let the past be the past. It seems the elder brother has an issue with the prodigal son. But his problem is with the father. This is how bitterness works. It is not about what someone said or has done to you. It is about your attitude toward God. Many years ago, I drove to work listening to a young adult give her Christian testimony. The more I listened, the angrier I became. Why was my family story not like that? Why was my ministry path not like that? Why were efforts at obedience not rewarded like that? As I sat in my car questioning God, the Lord answered with a question, “Have I been faithful?” My pain turned into praise, because God had been faithful through it all. **Lamentations 3:31-34** says, “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

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## C. A LACK OF COMPASSION.

In verse 30, the elder brother says to his father, “But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!” The elder brother would not acknowledge the prodigal as his brother. He called him, “This son of yours.” He disowned his brother, who wasted the father’s money on prostitutes. I always wonder how the elder brother would know what the prodigal was doing in the far country. But I guess bad news travels fast. Maybe the whole community heard about the scandalous activities of the son of this prominent family who ran away from home. When he returned, the father should have turned him away. Or he should have kept his return low-key. But he threw a party. The elder brother could not understand it, because he had no compassion for his erring brother. In spite of his father’s entreaty and explanation that his brother was a changed man, the elder brother had no mercy. He knew about religion. He did not know about redemption. **Galatians 6:1** says, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.” Spiritual people respond to a fallen brother with restoration, not amputation. Christians are to be compassionate, as we consider ourselves. It is the prodigal this time. But it could be you the next time! God forbid that you go to heaven’s t bank to withdraw mercy only to be told you have insufficient funds, because you have not been merciful to others.

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### III. DO NOT LET ERROR CAUSE YOU TO MISS THE PARTY.

The prodigal son had a great awakening about his father in the far country. The elder brother never had a great awakening. He did not leave the father's house. Yet he misunderstood the father's heart. His erroneous view of the father's cause him to miss the party. There are two truths every respectable sinner needs to understand about God.

#### A. YOU MATTER TO GOD.

In verse 31, the father said, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." The elder brother's tirade dishonored his father and disowned his brother. Yet the father responded to his anger with affection, addressing him as "Son." After being entreated, the elder brother was still angry with his father. After being insulted, the father is still not angry with the elder brother. This is the scandalous grace of God from a different perspective. We are on the side of the prodigal. We want God to judge the self-righteous. But God loves the elder brother just as much as he loves the prodigal son. The father explains how much the elder brother mattered to him by affirming his presence and his property.

First, the father said, "Son, you are always with me." More important than partying with his friends, he had the presence of his father. The father had never forsaken the elder brother. Unlike the prodigal son, the elder brother had never forsaken the father. Yet he was with him and not with him, at the same time. His body was home, but his heart was somewhere else. The prodigal son received a great blessing, when he returned from the far country. But the elder brother experienced a greater blessing, because he never left home for the far country. This is the wonderful truth the respectable sinner easily misunderstands. There is nothing better than being with the Father. **Psalm 84:10** says, "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to dwell in the tents of wickedness."

Likewise, the father said, "All that I have is yours." This was literally and legally true. When the prodigal son requested his inheritance, the father executed his will. Verse 12 says, "And he divided his property between them." The elder brother complained that the father had not given him the minimum. In reality, everything the father owned belonged to the son. The elder brother was working for himself as much as the Father. And he lost nothing because of his brother's return. Just because God is blessing someone else does not mean he has forgotten you. If you are in Christ, all that the father has is yours! **Ephesians 1:3** says: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."

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#### B. LOST PEOPLE MATTER TO GOD.

In verses 32, the father said, "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found." The elder brother deemed it wrong that the father threw a party for the returning prodigal. The father deemed it natural and

necessary to celebrate. His lost son had been restored. His dead son had been resurrected. It is only right to celebrate and be glad!

This is the punchline of **Luke 15**. The religious leaders ask: "If Jesus really knows God, why is he partying with sinful people?" Jesus answers: "If you know God, why haven't you joined the party?" **Luke 15:7** records the point of THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." **Luke 15:10** records the point of THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." But the point of the parable of the prodigal son is in the parable itself. In verse 23-24, the father said to the servants: "And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." In verse 32, the father said to the elder brother, "It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."

The parable ends with a cliffhanger. Did the elder join the party or not? Jesus does not tell us, because it is not about the elder brother. It is about the scribes and Pharisees who heard these words fall from the lips of Jesus. It is about all who suffer from the "Elder Brother Syndrome." We must purge the spirit of the elder brother from the church if we are to reach this world for Christ. The heart of God celebrates every time one prodigal comes home to him from the far country. Join the party!

**I read about a man who came up with an ingenious way to pass the final exam of his college level logic class that was known for its difficult tests. To help them on the test, the professor told them they could bring as much information to the exam that they could fit on a piece of notebook paper. And so most of the students crammed as many facts as possible onto their 8 ½ by 11 inch sheet of paper. But this one student walked into class, put a piece of notebook paper on the floor, and had an advanced logic student stand on the paper. And the advanced logic student told him everything he needed to know. This student was the only one to receive an "A."**