

The Two Sons and Their Father: Meditations on the Parable of the Prodigal Son

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Luke 15:11-31; Romans 11:25-32

Ok let's start with a Bible knowledge question: You all know this story, but without looking at your Bibles, can you remember the audience for this story? To whom is Jesus speaking as he tells this story? The answer is back in Luke 15:1-2. Here's the scene: Jesus is teaching and there's a crowd of eager listeners all around him. As we look at the crowd we realize that most of them are tax collectors and sinners. All the miscreants and ne'er-do-wells and outcasts are crowding close to Jesus, hanging on his every word. We also see some Pharisees there, but they're not really part of the crowd. They are standing on the outskirts. They don't want to join the mass. They are standing at a distance and grumbling about the company Jesus keeps: "This man welcomes sinners and eat with them!" So there are the sinners close to Jesus and the Pharisees on the fringes.

You can probably see already how the audience for the parable mirrors the characters in Jesus' story. The sinners correspond to the younger son in the parable; they're the ones close to the father, inside the house and enjoying the party food. The Scribes and the Pharisees correspond to the older son, standing at a distance, questioning and refusing to join in.

In his book on this parable, Tim Keller makes an astute observation about these two sons and these two groups. He says that each of them represent a different way that people try to live their lives. These two sons represent two different ways that people try to find happiness or fulfillment in the world. The younger son represents the path of self-discovery. The older son represents the path of moral conformity. Some people try to forge their way in life by putting aside their short term individual goals and fitting in to societies expectations. Happiness is achieved by following the rules and doing your duty and being a good citizen. The older son does this in spades. He's a member of the Rotary Club and a Boy Scout leader. That's the path of moral conformity. Other people however, say "No, you're your way in life by following your own dreams and staying true to your heart no matter what the people around you say." To your own self be true! You are the captain of your ship! That's the younger son. He drives around with a 'question authority' sticker on his bumper. That's the path of self-discovery.

Keller points out that not only do these two groups of people have different ideas of how to make your way in the world, they both have different ideas of what's wrong with the world. The moral conformists say: "You know what's wrong with the world? It's all those immoral people who do whatever they want and don't follow the rules!" The self-discovery people meanwhile say: "Do you know what's wrong with this world? It's all those bigots who think they have all the answers and who want to impose their views and morals on everyone. They hate freedom!" I think Keller has something here. These are recognizable types of people and still today in our world, the lines in our social cultural debates are drawn up between these two groups. The older and younger brothers are still staring each other down.

The revolutionary thing about this parable is that Jesus effectively tells them they're both wrong. In the case of the younger son, the error is obvious. In the story, even the younger son knows that his strategy for living is a failure. He tries to follow his heart down the road to self-discovery and finds that his heart is a lousy guide. He followed his heart down the road of self-discovery and he discovered that his heart steered him into self-destruction. The human heart is not a great compass. The needle of the heart jumps wildly; it's all over the place. If you simply follow your heart you will be in trouble.

But the wonder and scandal of this story is that the Father loves the self-discovery people. Their heart may steer them all over the place, but the Father's heart is always turned toward them. The father in the parable sees his son while he is a long way off, almost like he's been looking and hoping for his son to come home. The father in this parable throws his arms around his boy, almost like he's been dreaming about holding his son again.

Is that how God sees all the rebel self-discoverers of today too? All those revelers at the burning man festival? All the flower children blissing out at Woodstock? All those teenagers in Eastown with the tattoos and piercings and the raccoon eyeliner? Is his heart turned towards them? Does he long to embrace them, and invite

them in to his house for a meal? If so, it's no wonder that verses one and two show the tax collectors and sinners flocking to Jesus, surrounding him, hanging on his every word, letting his words turn their wandering hearts to home.

The Older Son

I think the older son is much more complicated than his younger brother. With junior, what you see is what you get. It's all right there. The older son is much more complex. He has a clean façade, but there is some stuff going on beneath the surface. Using the categories that Keller suggested, the older son is the one who chooses the way of moral excellence. He chooses to work hard, do his duty, obey his father's orders and live as a decent moral citizen. But that's only a surface thing. On the surface, he is the good son who loves his father. But this incident with his brother pierces that surface and shows us that his motivations are complicated.

Why has the older son chosen the road of moral excellence? Is it because he loves his dad and he is filled with gratitude for his father's kindness to him? Is it because he loves being with his dad out in the fields? Listen to what he says to his father when he comes to meet him: "All these years I've been slaving for you." Slaving for you? Is that what living and working with your father has been? A barren duty. A burden? You didn't do it for love? There was no joy in doing your father's work? Why were you doing it then? "And all this time you never gave me so much as a goat" Aaah! Now we see why you did it. It was for the stuff, not the love. You wanted the goat. You wanted the goods that your father had, his power, his fields. You're in this for the rewards program.

In the end, you see that beneath the do good surface, the motives of the older son are no different than his younger brother, he's just more subtle and self-deceived about it. The younger brother wants his share of the inheritance and he comes right out and asks for it. The older brother wants his father's stuff too, but he's going to get it by slaving for it so that at the end he will get an even bigger chunk than his foolish brother who took his share early and wasted it. Both men want the stuff. Both men want to push their father out of the way and become master.

Elisabeth Elliot tells a made up Jesus story that illustrates the heart of the older son. One day Jesus told his disciples, "I'd like you all to carry a stone for me. All the disciples did what Jesus asked and picked up a stone to carry. Peter, being a practical sort, picked up the smallest stone he could find to make it easy on himself. Then Jesus said follow me, and all the disciples set out. They walked all morning and when they came to a pasture Jesus bid them take out their stones for lunch. Then Jesus waved his hand over their stones and turned them into bread. Each disciple's stone became their lunch. Peter's lunch was over in two bites. After supper Jesus asked them to pick up another stone and follow, Peter said to himself, "Aha! I see how this works! And he picked up the biggest boulder he could find. A huge rock. It just about killed him, but he lugged that thing all afternoon while the other disciples watched in admiration. At dinner time they came to a river. Jesus told them to stop here, but instead of turning their stones into dinner, Jesus said: "Everyone throw your stone into the river." And for dinner he gave them all a little fish he had in his pack. Everyone got the same amount. Peter looked at him dumfounded. But Lord I don't get it! Look what a big rock I'm carrying! Jesus sighed, "Peter," he said, "Tell me. Just who were you carrying that stone for?"

Of the two types of people out there, who are we? Are we self-discovery people or are we moral excellence people? Well, you're all here in church on Sunday night, most of you for the second time. What does that tell us? You are moral excellence people. You are older brothers. You work hard for the church. You are good citizens. You carry really big rocks.

Who are you carrying that rock for? Are you working really hard on that committee for God's glory or for some other more complicated reason? When I work hard on a sermon, am I doing that for God's glory and the joy of service, or for some other more complicated, more self-centered reason? Is my work for the Lord a joyful act of love and thanksgiving, or am I slaving for a reward? What's under the surface? Not easy to answer sometimes. Sometimes there's more bitterness and pride boiling in us than we care to admit. We elder brothers need as much grace as our younger sibling. We're lost too. It's just that we're slower to admit it.

But our Father loves us too. We may be proud and reserved. But Our Father comes to meet us too, he pleads with us, and he offers us the same grace. He offers us the same joyful place at his side. Our Father comes to us and says, "That's a big rock you're carrying. Why don't you put it down and come on in and dance with

us?” We’re not great dancers we older brothers. Our brother went to the dances. We stayed home and worked. I wonder if we’ll put down our rocks and join Him.

The Father

The father is the hero of this story. He responds to both his sons with grace and wisdom. He says just the right thing to the self-discovery son and to the moral excellence son. His grace to the younger son is well known and celebrated. He gives him a hug and a party. He kills the fatted calf. He places the best robe on his boy and if it’s the best robe it’s probably his own. He puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. This is just the right response. The boy feels like he doesn’t deserve a place in the household, the father shows him that he is still part of the family.

The elder son has different issues. It’s not that he feels like he doesn’t deserve to be called a son; in fact, his problem is just the opposite. He thinks he has earned everything. He thinks he deserves his father’s love and the inheritance of the son because of all his hard work and dedication. He’s running on the hamster wheel of achievement. But his dad comes to him and says, “Son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.” It addresses exactly the two insecurities of the older boy. The older son thinks he needs to earn his father’s love? The Father says, “No! Son! You are always with me. You have always been my boy. From the moment you came to this earth. Before you were able to do anything, I called you by name and you were mine.” The older son thinks he needs to earn his inheritance? The father says, “No! Son! Everything I have is yours. It’s all yours. I give it to you freely.”

Don’t you get the impression that if the older son would accept it, the Father would throw his arms around him, just like he did his younger son? Somehow I don’t imagine the older son was much of a hugger, I see him has more of a nod and a handshake kind of guy. But the father’s pleading words are so full of warmth, it’s hard not to feel his desire to take the boy in his arms.

It makes me wonder if that’s how Jesus ultimately felt about the Pharisees. They’re the older brother in this parable, remember. They’re the ones standing at a distance shaking their head at the grace Jesus offers to the tax collectors and sinners crowded around him. It’s often pointed out that Jesus tells this parable as a rebuke to them, but it’s more than a rebuke, it’s an invitation, isn’t it? Jesus isn’t just tweaking the Pharisees; he’s pleading with them. “Guys, stop the snarking and the grumbling! The Kingdom of heaven is here. You are always with me and everything I have is yours! Join the party I beg you!”

Just two chapters earlier, when Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, this is what he said about the city full of older brothers, the city that would kill him: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often I have desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her children under her wing, but you were not willing.” That’s what’s in Jesus heart. The Pharisees may be Jesus’ enemies and he may shoot some really harsh words at them sometimes. Brood of vipers! Hypocrites! But as they stand there scowling, Jesus doesn’t just see them as enemies. Somehow he looks at them as the Father’s beloved children, children that the Father longs to embrace. Such is our Father’s heart.

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