

The Elder Brother *Reacts to the Good News*

Good News! Your brother has come home. There was a party going on, but the elder brother was not “feelin it” [sic]. Not everyone was thrilled to see the prodigal come home. This character is not the main character in the story of the Prodigal, but he was the reason the story was told in the first place. He was religious Israel, but (in application) he could be me or he could be you.

1. He had Bad Blood. “He didn’t refer to the prodigal as his brother. When speaking to his father he called him “your son.” Now to be fair, remember Ishmael was Abraham’s son and Isaac was Abraham’s son and there was a great spiritual gap between them. Esau was Isaac’s son and Jacob was Isaac’s son and they too were miles apart spiritually. All Israel, said Paul, is not Israel. The elder brother in the story of the Prodigal son is central to the story of God’s love and grace. Where grace is there is love. There was no love in the elder son’s heart, nor any of the other benchmarks of a believer saved by grace.

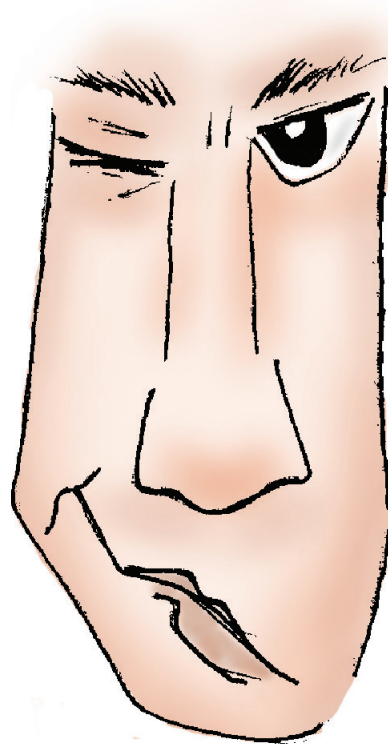
2. He had his inheritance. When the younger came asking for his legacy “now” rather than later, the father gave to “them,” meaning they both received the portion that was theirs. The elder not only still had what he was given, but he enjoyed all the father had while his foolish brother was eating pig slops. In his brother’s coming home he lost nothing. He was rich (materially) but was not satisfied. “Godliness with contentment is great gain.” The elder did not have either.

3. He thought he was a “good boy.” No really good boy thinks he is when we are thinking in the spirit rather than in the flesh. Now, your mother may tell her friends that Johnny is a “good boy,” and he is, by her standard. When little Johnny discovers God’s standard however he may change his mind. There is none good, no not one, except for One. Only God is good. The elder son tells his father “I was a good boy” (paraphrase). Okay, but what does that have to do with the father being kind and gracious to others? The fact is that the elder was not as “good” as he thought. Just like the Rich Young Ruler, who thought that he was good, having kept all the commandments from his youth up, but went away sorrowing. It’s one thing for someone to call us “good,” as in “he was a good man,” and it is another for that man to say he is good. This is not to say we do not seek to always chose and do the good, we should, but while sons (come home) we know our heart is prone to wander.

Some years ago, while doing street work, I saw a clergyman dressed in his priestly attire with pristine white collar turned backward standing in front of his church. I stopped and engaged him in conversation and then got to the point. “We are giving out these tracts,” I said, “that explain to people how to be born again”. He said, “Oh, we don’t believe that here, we are good people.” No light there.

The elder brother basically complained, “I was a good boy, I kept all your rules. Why are you welcoming home this lover of harlots?” As Jesus said to Peter, “What is that to thee, follow thou me.”

4. He thought his Father was not fair. You killed the fatted calf for him. For me you sacrificed not so much as an old goat so I could have a party with my friends. He was basically calling his father unfair and unjust. The truth is the elder son lacked nothing. He was thinking merit not grace because the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit



of God neither understands them because they are spiritually discerned.

5. He was the Grinch. There was a party going on in the father's house. The elder refused to attend or wish his brother well. Salvation means saved. No one deserves to be "more" saved than another. Someone who is pulled from the water and saved from drowning is not likely to resent another drowning soul being pulled up after him. The problem with the elder brother was he was still in the water and did not know it.

Application.

Perhaps you have bumped into the elder brother(s) from time to time that were not happy to see you. Perhaps they have refused to "make merry" or say "AMEN" when you tell the story of coming home. Perhaps we have been tempted to compare our faithful service to another's, or our gifts to what God has given to someone else. Do you remember hearing children complaining? "He got more than I did." Thank God we did not get what we deserved. Perhaps we think in terms of "my friends," (as the elder brother said) or church, or denomination being more faithful, or better than others. God does not want us to be "more faithful," He wants us to be faithful. More faithful is like the disciples asking "who is greatest." Jealousy, envy, pride, malice are colds even a Christian can "catch." When I get the "sniffles" (I am speaking allegorically) I need to remember the pig pen, the rags, the ruin and then the Father's grace. That I was even allowed back in to sit in the pew is remarkable. That I got to tell the story of God's Amazing Grace is wonderful.

The characters in our Lord's stories are sometimes us. We were right up there in the tree with Zachaeus, or we were the blind man by the roadside begging. Sometimes we might even think like a Pharisee and are warned by the Spirit of God to think again. Praise the Lord for His goodness and make merry for once we were lost, once we were dead, once we were in sin, now we are in Him.