

The Fathers Plea | Luke 15:25-32

This famous story doesn't end with the father embracing his younger prodigal son; it ends with the father pleading with his 'obedient' elder son. The gospel is not only good news for really bad people; it is also good news for pretty 'good' people! It's just that 'good' people generally find it harder to see their need for grace.

The younger son was working in a foreign field before he decided to head home. The older son is in his father's field when he decides to head home. There are a number of parallels between the two sons in the story because Jesus wants the 'good' people to see that they're more like the 'bad' people than they think. As the older son approaches the house he hears music & dancing. The music would have included the mandolin & flute, but it's the drumbeat the older son would have heard first as he walked home after a day's work. The fact the son could hear the dancing indicates the party was in full swing. The natural thing for any son would be to enter the banquet hall & respond to welcoming cheers. They would have been awaiting his arrival to the party. However this son *suspiciously* asks one of the servants what's going on. As one writer puts it; *"He asked for the reason for the banquet as though the family had no right to set up such a banquet in his absence, whereas he should have entered the hall & shared the joy of those who were rejoicing."*

There is uneasiness in the older son's questioning. The music & dancing arouse suspicion in his mind... The servant then replies to his questions. ***'Your brother has come home, 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.*** The older son was raging to the point he refused to go in. The older son's anger burned as he heard 1. His brother who had disgraced the family has dared show his face again. 2. His father rewarded his return by killing the fattened calf & throwing a big party. (Everything left was part of his inheritance; therefore the banquet came at his expense). 3. His younger brother has been received back into the family by the father, & he has not been consulted about any of this. The Greek word translated ***"angry"*** here denotes an explosive rage. He was infuriated. It's a good thing the father got to the prodigal son before his older brother did. He would have told him to clear off & that he was not welcome at the family home ever again.

There are a few other things we need to know to get the full weight of what's happening here. We're told the older son was so mad he refused to go in. This is another one of those shocking moments for those hearing this story for the first time. The shock of this public action is beyond comparison in our own culture. In Israel & other Middle Eastern countries respect for ones father is virtually never withheld. A rabbinic saying goes as follows: *"It is better for a man that he should be cast into a fiery furnace rather than that he should put his fellow to shame in public."* The older son not only shamed his fellow but his father.

Not only in public either but at a formal banquet in front of those his father knew & loved best. One Middle Eastern writer says:

"[In his refusal to enter,] the older son demonstrated maliciousness of character & meanness. He has no love for his brother & no appropriate respect for his father. His position in this regard is equivalent to the grumbling of the scribes & Pharisees against the Christ for his acceptance of sinners." (Ibn al-Tayyib)

The older son showed a severe lack of love for his brother & father in this moment of rage. For all his years of obedient service (as he saw it) he lacked the most important thing – love for his father & mercy towards his brother. Likewise for all their years of slavish obedience to the Law the scribes & Pharisees lacked love for God & people.

In Luke 11:42 while eating with Pharisees (Take note: Jesus ate with Pharisees too, so it wasn't that he chose others over them). Jesus said; ***"But woe to you Pharisees! For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These things you ought to have done, without neglecting the others."*** All their years of slavish obedience had not produced love in them & as we know love for God & people is what the whole law hangs on. Hosea 6:6 says; ***"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice."*** By his angry outburst this son exposed his unloving heart just as the scribes & Pharisees exposed theirs by grumbling against Jesus over his acceptance of sinners.

We're not told how the news of the older son's refusal reached the father in the banquet hall. Jesus didn't need to tell that bit. The people listening would have been familiar with the fact such news passed almost instantaneously across a courtyard of a family home like this. In seconds the entire party knows of the public crisis forced on the father by the shameful act of his older son. The music & dancing suddenly stops, the banquet is brought to a standstill as an awkward silence fills the air. Everyone is now awaiting the father's response.

We need to understand this insult cuts more deeply than the younger sons because of the public setting. The two brothers, in different ways, bring shame on the father. We also need to understand that a Middle Eastern father at this time would normally order slaves to take hold of the disobedient son right away & drag him off to a side room & lock him up. An unhappy father would then proceed with the banquet. After the guests had gone the son would then be flogged. This is what he deserved, & again this is what the first listeners would have expected.

Surprisingly then the second part of verse 28 says; ***"His father came out and entreated him."*** Again the father ignores the cultural rules & this time goes out to meet his older son. In a very real sense the same story is being repeated again, only this time it's the elder brother on stage... Note that on both occasions it is the son that breaks fellowship with the father, yet on both occasions it is the father who seeks reconciliation. Again the father humbles himself for the sake of a son. He leaves the seated guests & goes

out to his older son. A hundred or more people are completely stunned by this. For the second time in the same day the father exposes himself to public shame in order to win a son back. In his actions the father is expressing the same costly love for the older son as he did for the younger. In front of his guests & servants he pleads with him to come in. This was unheard of. One translation says ***“His father came out and begged him”*** NLT. He is prepared to do whatever it takes to reconcile. Again we see the watermark of the cross appearing in this parable...

How does the older son respond? Verses 29-30 tell us; ***“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. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes; you killed the fattened calf for him!”*** Just as the older son’s lack of love is exposed by his actions in verse 28; so is his heart exposed by his words here in verses 29-30. He feels he is entitled to something because he is thinking like a slave not a son. Note that his attitude in 28 is I, I, me, I, my!

The elder son’s recital of his service showed what high regard he had for his own obedience. He thought of himself as more worthy because of his outward performance. All he wanted was credit where credit was due (not to mention penance where penance was due). As Mark Twain once said; *“He was a ‘good man’ in the worst sense of the word.”* But was he as righteous as he thought? I mean he accused his brother of squandering his inheritance on prostitutes. That’s not very nice, saying that kind of thing in front of everyone! Clearly he didn’t know if this was true or not, because if he had heard about the pig’s story he would have surely shared that info instead...

He prided himself on keeping commands but maybe he’d been committing adultery in his heart during all his years of impressive outward obedience. After all didn’t Jesus say elsewhere in Matt 12:34; ***“For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”*** And out of this elder son’s mouth came evil thoughts of sexual immorality, coveting, lies, wickedness, envy, slander & pride. Jesus said in Mark 7:23 ***“All these things come from within, and they defile a person.”*** So who is the lost son now? Who needs to repent now? Who needs grace now; the tax collectors & sinners or the Pharisees & scribes?

In reality the prodigal son’s elder brother is one of the most spiritually ugly people in the entire Bible. The only thing he knew how to celebrate was his own self-righteousness... He was also cliquy; he only wanted to party with his little friendship group - ***“you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends”*** he said. Cliquy-ness is another sign you’re part of the elder brotherhood... He was a lot like the Pharisees, outwardly appearing good, but inwardly hardhearted. The scribes & Pharisees thought of themselves as model children who obeyed their Father better than anyone – the father’s favourites. They were the elite clique, too good... for everyone else... Yet for these very reasons their joyless & arrogant

hearts were far from God's & therefore cold towards others. Because they did not see their own need for grace they had no grace to give anyone else. Their whole lives one big hypocritical contradiction.

Is there a part of you that wants to list reasons why you deserve to be more blessed & favoured than others? Do you think you are entitled to something because you 'stayed on the farm'? Are you part of the elder brotherhood begrudging & envying younger brothers & sisters who receive grace from our Father? Is your heart constantly comparing yourself with others? Your honest answer to such questions reveals whether or not you are controlled by grace or entitlement. Grace is able to celebrate God's goodness to others, entitlement cant... Let's not forget that grace is unearned kindness & undeserved favour. It's not something any of us are entitled to or owed. It's the free grace of God which has been freely lavished on us. Even if we never receive another thing from God we have already received abundantly more than we deserve... Grace, It's not logical, it's not earned; it's free & unpredictable. He can bestow it as he pleases to whom he pleases... For he is the God of all grace (1 Peter 5:10)! Our role is to join the celebration, not to huff outside.

A heart truly impacted by grace has no need to compare in the sense we're thinking about. It does not add up what others have been given or deserve in comparison to us. Grace blows all of that entitlement thinking out of the water. Grace liberates us from all that to love God & others freely. Grace is a whole new way of thinking & living. Grace rejoices when another is favoured by God (no matter who they are or what they've done) because it's a reminder to us of God's underserved favour on our own life. We all love the idea of grace when it's coming our way, but how good are we at extending it to others? If we're going to be a church that receives prodigals like the father then we need to murder the elder brother tendencies in our hearts so we're free to celebrate grace, even when it embraces the people we like least.

Thank God that this story finishes by offering the same invitation to elder brothers as it does younger brothers. It reveals that the father shows the same costly love for both types of sinner... The love of God the father, comes in self-emptying humiliation to all in the person of Jesus. That's the big point. But Jesus purposely cuts the story short with the father still pleading with his older son; ***"Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found."*** The older son had failed to call his father by his title, thereby insulting him in front of everyone. But the father continues to show patient & costly love towards his hardhearted son. Again like Jesus ***"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return"*** (1 Pet 2:23). Instead he called him ***"son"*** or as one translation puts it ***"beloved son"***. He reminded him he is still part of the family.

This son had no reason at all to feel hard done by. The same favour shown to the younger son has been his to enjoy all along & he could enter the party & enjoy the feast as much as his younger brother if he

wanted... Likewise our Father says to us; *"Son (daughter), you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."* We are sons & daughters not slaves & servants – all that the father has is ours. The elder son was thinking like a slave... Galatians 4:6 says; ***"And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God"*** (cf. Rom 8:14-17)! When we grasp this it liberates us from a begrudging attitude to celebrate the return of every prodigal! To celebrate the work of underserved kindness in the lives of others as well as our own! As the father said it's the fitting thing to do, to extend the same grace to others that we ourselves have been shown. We lose nothing by doing so, but we bring the father great joy by joining his grace party.

Kenneth Bailey summarises Jesus' message powerfully when he writes;

*"You accuse me of welcoming sinners & eating with them. You are correct. This is precisely what I do. But I do not do it at night behind the door. Rather in broad daylight & before assembled guests, I search out sinners that I might by any means convince them to come & eat with me. But my dear friends, do you not understand that this costly offer of love is made for outcasts & "incasts", for runaways & stay-at-homes, for prodigals & older sons... for the sinners & the Pharisees, for tax collectors & for scribes? In the parable, the actions of the father in the courtyard are my actions. You are the older son. Costly love was offered to the prodigal. Even more costly love is offered to the older son. In spite of your hostility to me & my actions, I love you & urge you to sit & eat with me. When I sit & eat with sinners, we are not celebrating their sin but my costly love. That same costly love is now offered to you. My banquet table is spread. If you accept, then the banquet is an occasion for even greater joy. I seek not only them but also you! Come! Be reconciled to your brother! Accept the love I offer! I know you are offended at my table fellowship with sinners. But **do you understand**, my dear friends, that **if I do not sit & eat with sinners, then I cannot sit & eat with you!**"*

So the story abruptly stops. It does not end. It stops. Jesus has creatively placed himself & the scribes & Pharisees on stage. Only they can finish the story now, by their response to Christ's grace towards them. What about you? How does the story end in your life?