

The Prodigal Son Re-visited  
Luke 15:11-32

Jesus was known for his storytelling, and parables are usually one such way of telling stories. A parable is a short story which is intended to teach or illustrate some spiritual truth. Parables are small but powerful, and this is demonstrated by their familiarity. Few of us, I imagine, could explain the structure of the Epistle to the Romans, or understand the meaning of the symbols in the book of Revelation. But everyone recognizes the story of the prodigal son, even people who have never set foot in a church. It's only twenty-two verses long, yet it's one of the best-known tales ever told. And there's a reason for that. Like all of Jesus' parables, it contains pure, condensed wisdom – about God, about ourselves, about life. It's simple, and yet profound at the same time.

This parable, however, on the face of it, is scandalous because the younger, undeserving brother, is embraced and celebrated, but the older brother, the 'deserving brother,' is left unreconciled to the father.

Today I want to revisit this parable and have a closer look at what it means to be an older brother type in the context of this parable.

Personality Types:

16 personality types:

This was created in the 1940s by **Katherine Briggs** and her daughter **Isabel Myers** and is based on **Carl Jung's theory of personality types**.

The goal was to help people better understand themselves and select occupations aligned with their personality strengths and weaknesses.

**The MBTI Personality** indicates different personality types based on identification with character preference. When combined, 16 different personality types are identified. The four-preferences scale are:

- Extravert/Introvert (E/I)
- Sensing/Intuition (S/I)
- Thinking/Feeling (T/F)
- Judging/Perceiving (J/P)
- Understanding lostness for religious types
- **Younger brother – Impulsive, Spontaneous, Focused on the present, Outgoing**
- **Older brother – Sharp, theoretical, logical, critical, judgemental**

When the older brother really understands the father, he wants no part of him or his feast.

1. He was very religious
2. Went to church every week
3. Memorized every verse in Sunday School
4. 'Served God' all his life

5. Did all the right things

Yet he was completely lost and does not know it.

We can know things about people by what they say - "**All these years I have slaved for you and never disobeyed.**"

1. Not happily
2. Not joyfully
3. Not heartily
4. Bitter

The older son is lost because of his good behavior, his righteousness. It is not his sin that keeps him out but his 'righteousness' - (Like the Pharisees) As can imagine, this confused Jesus' audience, especially the Pharisees. It may also be shocking and confusing to you as well.

But why is he lost? It would seem that both brothers wanted the fathers' wealth - but not the father. The younger brother got what he wanted by leaving home and breaking the moral rules. But in the end, the older brother also wanted to selfishly control his fathers' wealth. He was unhappy with the way the father was using his possessions:

1. the robe
2. the ring
3. the fatted calf
4. the party

The younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, but the older brother got control by staying at home and being good. And so he felt that now he had the right to tell his father what to do with the possessions because he had obeyed faithfully.

It would seem that both brothers were trying to be their own saviour:

1. The younger brother was his own saviour by breaking all the laws and being bad – He wanted his inheritance to explore the world.
2. The older brother was his own savior by keeping all the laws and being good.

You know, there is a difference between a religious person and a Christ follower. The religious person obeys God to try get control over God and things from God, but the Christ follower, the Christian, obeys God just to get God, to love God, and to please God with all their heart. **And so, I can easily hear the Christian singing – Change my heart O God... You are the potter and I am the clay...**

#### 1. The Signs of Religious Type Lostness (29-30)

There are some people who are complete older brother type.

- I. They obey God with the expectation that God owes them something.
- II. They may never even understand the Bible.
- III. Or they may know parts of the Bible with their heads, but with their hearts they are far away.

2. What does the older 'brotherish' type look like:

- i. **Anger** (v. 28) – Older brother types believe that God owes them a comfortable and good life if they try hard and live up to standards. So they say, "my life ought to be going really well" and when it doesn't go their way they think it should go - they get angry.

But we are reminded that salvation does not exempt us from suffering and does not promise us the good life. New Testament makes it clear that suffering is a part of the Christian life (2 Tim 2:3, 4:5; **James 5:10**, 13; 1 P 3:17, 4:19).

- ii. **Joyless and mechanical obedience** (v. 29) – **"I've been slaving for you."** Older brothers obey God as a means to an end – as a way to get the things they really love. Obedience to God is sometimes hard but older brothers almost always find obedience joyless, mechanical, and slavish.
- iii. **A coldness to younger brothers** (v. 30) – **"This son of yours."** The older brother will not even acknowledge his younger brother. Older brothers are too contemptuous of others unlike themselves to be effective in evangelism. They pride themselves on their doctrinal and moral purity; unavoidably feel superior to those who do not have these things.

**iv. Not certain of Father's love** (v. 29) – **“You never threw me a party.”** As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through your goodness, you will never be sure you have been good enough. So every time something goes wrong in your life, you wonder if God is punishing you. Or you have irresolvable guilt. You are never sure you've repented enough, so you beat yourself up over what you did. And there is no real sense of intimacy in your Christian life. You may pray a lot of prayers asking for things but do not sense his love.

Lastly, **an unforgiving, judgmental spirit** (v. 30) – The older brother type does not want the father to forgive the younger brother. It is impossible to forgive someone if you feel 'I would never do anything that bad!' You are something of an older brother type if you refuse to forgive.

### 3. What Can We Do About This Spiritual Condition

First is to understand the uniqueness of the gospel. Believing the gospel is not a one-time event, but a daily repenting of sin and unbelief and trusting Christ. If you tell a moral, religious person who is trying to obey the bible so God will bless them that they are alienated from God, they'll just be offended. If you know you are sick you may go to a doctor; if don't know you won't go you will just die. Moralistic religion works on the principle that I

obey therefore God accepts me, but the gospel works on the principle I am accepted by God through Jesus Christ, therefore I obey.

Yet both sets of people sit in church together, both pray, both follow the ten commandments, but for radically different reasons. And because they do these things for different reasons, they produce different results – different kinds of character. One produces anger, joyless obedience, compliance, superiority, insecurity, and a condemning spirit. The other slowly but inevitably produces contentment, joy, humility, and a forgiving spirit. Unless we know the difference between religiosity, moralism and the gospel, we will tend to fall into moralism and older brotherishness.

The gospel makes it clear that we are all sinners to the core. We can do nothing to earn God's favour. Our sin separates us from God, it condemns us, and we deserve only his wrath. But because of his extravagant love, Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, taking the wrath of God upon himself. Salvation is a free gift, but it requires a turning away from sin and embracing the gift of life God offers.

**Amen!**