

# **St. Mary's Sermons**

**Luke 15:25-32**

**The Older Brother**

If you remember, three weeks ago we looked at the first part of the parable of the prodigal son. We left the story just when it appeared that there was going to be a nice happy ending, thanks to the outrageous generosity of the father who gladly welcomed his son back and even reinstated into the family. Today we pick up the story again and we discover that in fact it has a sting in the tale, with the re-emergence of the older brother.

I wonder what you make of the older brother. Having been brought up in a Christian family and always tried to live my life in a way that pleases God I have always related more to the older brother, rather than the rebellious younger one. Perhaps you feel a bit sorry for the older brother; after all he has stayed at home and worked on his dad's estate while his younger brother went off on his escapade and wasted half of his dad's fortune. Initially he comes over all holier than thou but when you stop to look how the older brother reacted it soon becomes abundantly clear that his behaviour was far from perfect.

The very first thing the older brother did wrong was when his brother had come to ask his father for his share of the inheritance he had simply done nothing. According to Middle Eastern culture he should have stood up for his father. Not only that when his brother does eventually return and his dad throws that lavish party for him his actions clearly reveal that he is a very sad and bitter man who is full of resentment.

The elder brother in the story is in fact a picture of all those who embrace a life of religious striving. He is the embodiment of that drive to earn God's love through endless acts of self righteous religious observance.

Mark Stibbe sums it up like this, "If Jesus stands for the law of love, the elder brother stands for the love of law. While Jesus rests in the knowledge of his fathers love, the elder brother strives to earn his fathers affection".

If you look at context of the whole story it soon becomes clear why Jesus included the character of the elder brother. Not for the first time, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are having a right old dig at Jesus because he was prepared to associate himself with those they considered to be sinners, like tax collectors and prostitutes. To them, everyone who did not measure up to their standards was considered an outsider. In telling this story Jesus completely turns the tables on these self righteous leaders exposing the way in which they were misrepresenting God. God is not a lawyer but a lover. He is not an angry and exclusive legalist, rather he is forgiving father.

Mark Stibbe suggests that the elder brother displays seven characteristics of the mindset of someone who has a master slave relationship with God. Time only permits us to look at these characteristics very briefly.

### **1. Angry.**

No prizes for guessing that the first characteristic is anger. He is angry because the younger brother has been reinstated without the punishment he clearly believes he should receive. I am sure that he is also aware that his brother's restoration has big implications for him too. He has been slaving away in order to protect his portion of the estate now he will receive less. Everything he has worked is under threat because of the generosity of his father. Anger is the normal reaction when one of my goals becomes blocked.

### **2. Unloving.**

Jesus tells us that the older brother has an almighty strop on the doorstep of the house, in full view of all the guests and refuses to enter the party. To understand the significance of what is going on here we need to realise that it was a cultural given that the older brother should be there to welcome all the guests. By staying outside he refuses to act hospitably and as a result he insults his father. So the story ends with the older brother doing exactly what his younger brother had done to his father at the start of the story although of course in an entirely different way. You can't help but feel a bit sorry for the father who has a pretty hard time of it one way or another now from both of his beloved sons.

At this point once again the father does something quite extra ordinary. He goes out to his son and pleads with him to join the party. Remember that it was the son who was expected to go into the father, not the father who was expected to go out to his son. Once again the father would have been justified in punishing his son in some way for his shameful behaviour. Once again the father does not act as we would anticipate. For the second time on the same day this extra ordinary father shows mercy and reconciliation rather than retaliation.

### 3. Rude.

The son's response to his dad's exhortation to come into the party is to put it mildly darn right rude. Instead of the appropriate polite address to his father he launches straight into a self righteous remonstrance. He refuses to acknowledge properly either his dad or his brother addressing him instead as this son of yours.

### 4. Driven.

The most telling moment of this final section of the parable can be found in verse 29 when the elder brother proclaims, "All these years I've been slaving for you and **never** disobeyed your orders." In this statement we clearly see that the older brother is acting like a slave, in order to earn his father love, through performance. In other words, he understands his relationship in terms of **duty** not joy, **law** not love, **performance** not position.

This is exactly the trap that many people have fallen into in their relationship with God. They think and act like slaves demanding their rights when all along they should know that they are sons and daughters of God.

### 5. Competitive.

Notice what the older brother says to his father, "I have worked hard for you all these years and I did not even get a goat so that I could celebrate with my friends". Sadly there is no mention of the father here, so we can

only conclude that he is not invited to his sons intended merry making, once again there is yet more rejection for this poor long suffering father! What lies behind these comments is the fact that he is competing with his younger brother for his father's possessions. He is relating to his father purely on the basis of what he can get out of him rather than out of love.

#### 6. **Selfish**

We then come to an incredibly selfish statement that the older brother makes, which clearly exposes his self centeredness. Again this must have completely devastated his father. "But when this son of yours who has squandered **your** property with prostitutes comes home you kill the fattened calf for him!" He completely fails to appreciate that his brother was well within his rights to do whatever he wanted with his share of the property, once his dad had given it to him he no longer had a say in it.

#### 7. **Proud.**

The older brother assumes the moral high ground. Firstly by making claims about his own performance, claiming that he had never disobeyed his father. One is left wondering just how true this claim is given his refusal to obey his father and join the party for his brother. But secondly, by accusing his brother of squandering his father's money on prostitutes, up until this point there has been no mention whatsoever of prostitutes. Of course he does not have any evidence to back up this claim, he is simply trying to paint his brother in the worst possible light. In fact by making these claims about his brother he is fantasizing and gossiping. He is proud and arrogant and assumes a stance of self righteous superiority.

So the story has something of a tragic ending. It shows that the older brother is lost in a life of striving, in an ethic of performance that never satisfies. We are not told how this brother responds to his father love towards him.

The older brother serves as a warning to those of us who have been Christians for a long time. Mark Stibbe says, "It is quite simply amazing how easy it is to slip into the older brother's shoes and start living a driven life based on performance rather than a joyful life based on position. The bible calls this slavery and we are to avoid it like the plague."

It seems to me that there is only one anecdote to the slavery of performance that is an encounter with the father's love. Those who are imprisoned within a life of religious striving need the father to come out to them and whisper his gentle words of love in their ear. Only an experience of the loving spirit of adoption will set us free from slavery and bring an end to the nightmare of being on the outside looking in at the party that we desperately want to attend ourselves.