

September 8, 2019  
Sunday Morning Service  
Series: Luke  
Community Baptist Church  
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Greer, SC 29650  
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## To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as we prepare to hear from Luke 15:25-32.

1. Why didn't the elder son know about the party for his prodigal brother?
2. List some tell-tale signs that call the elder son's character into question.
3. What does the elder son's argument to the father say about him?
4. Who, in the crowd that day, did the elder son represent?
5. Who did the father represent?
6. How did the story really end?

### **PRESUMPTION REVEALED** **Luke 15:25-32**

Jesus was the master storyteller. The Gospel accounts record over forty parables (including analogies and allegories) that Jesus taught. Parables are stories about life, similar to life, taken from common life, to illustrate important spiritual truths. In every parable, an object or person represents a particular truth that Jesus highlighted or intended to drive home. We often run astray when we try to make every detail of a parable represent something or someone. That is virtually impossible. That is not what Jesus intended. We often say

that at some point, every parable breaks down as we apply it to real life. That becomes especially obvious in the kingdom parables.

In this story about the prodigal son and his sinful brother, there are some very clear and intentional representations that we cannot miss. Remember that Jesus told this story, as well as two other stories about lost stuff, as the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Him to hear Him teach. In that setting also were the ever-present scribes and Pharisees who constantly looked for opportunity to criticize and accuse Jesus.

Therefore, the people of the real-life setting are clearly represented in this story. Obviously, the prodigal son represents the tax collectors and sinners who took all the blessings that God the Father gave them and squandered them on wicked, sinful living. God the Father's great desire is that all such sinners would return to Him confessing their sins, repenting, and asking for forgiveness.

Therefore, also, the father in the story must of necessity represent Jesus, to whom we come humbly bowing before Him as we confess sin and ask forgiveness. He was the Father's representative on earth.

But, the main focus of the story is actually on the elder son. Typically, this story is taught as though the main point Jesus made was the restoration of the prodigal. That is certainly important. But as we will see from our text, the elder son was quite sure that he was right with his father and, therefore, he despised the sinning prodigal who dared to return. There is little doubt that Jesus intended to represent the scribes and Pharisees through that son. The real point of the story was for Jesus to plainly expose the wicked, presumptuous attitude of the religious people. They needed to confess sin and needed forgiveness as much as the tax collectors and sinners did. But they were unable to admit their need.

The real people represented by the characters of this story are still alive and well in our world. Indeed, they are us. Either we are the prodigal who has returned to Jesus to ask forgiveness, or we are the elder brother who sees no need to ask forgiveness because he has always been "good" with the father. Such people are horribly deceived. People like that need to pay special attention to the end of the story, as it does not end at all as we would expect. That was on

purpose. Jesus taught us a very important truth through a surprise ending.

### **Good News – Bad Attitude (vv.25-28).**

The Father’s servant shared the good news. “*And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound’*” (v.27). That the elder brother’s prodigal brother had returned should have been very good news. After all, this was the arrogant, self-centered brother who messed up the family estate. This is the guy who had insisted on having his legal one-third of the estate assigned to his control before the rightful time. This brother had liquidated all his assets, which put the remaining members of the estate in difficult and embarrassing circumstances.

But, in light of all that the prodigal had done, we can see how easy it would have been for the elder brother to justify in his mind his hatred of his sinning sibling. That was Jesus’ point. He was presenting the elder son as a picture of the self-righteous Pharisees who hated the tax collectors and sinners. The unspoken, but huge, problem was that the elder brother sinned against his father just as much, but couldn’t see it.

Therefore, it probably really irked the elder son to hear the father’s servant tell him that his father was celebrating. To compound the elder brother’s grief, the servant related that the noise was actually a big celebration. What! How could the father be so unjust as to celebrate the sinner’s return? Wasn’t that the point of the first two stories Jesus told? The shepherd invited his friends to rejoice because he found the lost sheep. The woman invited her friends to rejoice because she found the lost coin. Now, in this story, in a similar way, the father invited friends and family to rejoice because the lost son was restored. And there is much rejoicing in heaven when the rebel sinner comes back to God the Father through the door of God the Son.

The servant explained that the father was rejoicing because he had received his son (your brother) back safe and sound. That was a pointed explanation because the Pharisees’ complaint at the outset of this context was that Jesus *receives* (*prosdekomai*) sinners (15:2).

They grumbled because Jesus made Himself available to sinners, He welcomed fellowship and relationship with them. But now at this point in the story, the Greek word for “receive” changes to a more common word (*apolambavno*). This compound word combines the idea of taking or apprehending with the preposition that means from or to be separated. It conveys the idea of receiving back from wherever the thing received was.

Plus, the words *safe and sound* make us wonder what parent would not rejoice to have a wayward child return safe and sound, physically, okay? But even greater is that the one Greek word translated *safe and sound* also means peacefully. It is related to the Hebrew word that speaks of being at peace with the authority who had been offended. It speaks of reconciliation. The wonderfully good news from the father’s servant was that “your father and your sinning brother have been reconciled.” The story is so pointed. Receiving people unto reconciliation is what was happening as the tax collectors and sinners were gathering around Jesus. And the self-righteous Pharisees were angry!

And so was the son angry. In verses twenty-five, twenty-six, and twenty-eight, we see the elder son’s bad character. Of course, at the outset in verse twenty-five, it surely does not appear that he was a bad egg. If anything, the picture in this verse is that of a faithful worker. “*Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing*” (v.25).

The text reveals that he had been out working in the field. We assume it means he had been out for the day. But if he was shepherding, it might mean that he had been in the field for days at a time. However long it was, the son was busy doing what he did well. Maybe he was preoccupied with farming, which was his point of identification in life. His farm (that he would inherit) was his life and life was his farm. There is a good chance that nothing else mattered to him. Maybe he did what he did too well, as an excuse to be separated from the father.

Obviously, work was more important to this man than family relationships because he didn’t even know what was going on. He had to check with a servant. This is just another example of how easily sinners embrace the gracious gifts from God, and at the same time ignore God. That is the picture of all sinners: “God I don’t have

time to think about my relationship with You because I am consumed with the stuff of life.” But what is the source of all the stuff of life? How would the sinner even be able to work apart from God’s common grace of air, water, sunlight, or breath?

As we hinted at in verse twenty-six, this man was in the dark. Maybe his communicative skills were suspect. “*And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant*” (v.26). Why didn’t he know about this huge, estate-wide (if not community-wide) celebration? According to many traditions, he, being the eldest son should have been in charge of planning the celebration. Technically, the father was using the elder son’s inheritance to pay for this party. We know that the father had already legally given 2/3 of the estate to the son. Granted, the father was still free to use the inheritance while he remained alive. But shouldn’t there have been some communication about the matter?

It is a picture of how communication breaks down in the presence of sin. When Adam sinned, he hid from God and discontinued the practice of walking with God in the cool of the evening. Sinners do not talk to God. They use God’s name to curse God. But they pray only in a time of crisis, not realizing that unless the prayer is, “Father, forgive me,” they are wasting their breath. The psalmist warned, *If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened (Psalm 66:18).*

Furthermore, the story reveals that the elder brother was an angry man. “*But he was angry and refused to go in*” (v.28a). No doubt in his mind, it was not right for the father to receive the prodigal at all. That is how the Pharisees felt about Jesus receiving sinners. No doubt in the elder son’s mind, the father should have excommunicated his brother from the family. That is how the Pharisees felt about tax collectors and sinners. Remember they called them the *People of the Land*, people who were to be avoided by all means, people who God should justifiably obliterate (in their humble opinion).

The elder brother’s conclusion was simply, “Who cares if my brother has come to himself, confessed his sins, repented of his sins, and humbled himself to return to his father.” And more than that, if he did return and ask forgiveness, “Why shouldn’t the prodigal have to work his way back into the father’s good graces?”

How many good, religious people demonstrate that same attitude toward sinners—of which they themselves are? They cannot be bothered with telling the good news of salvation to the “down and out,” the societal outcasts, the fools who are responsible for having messed up their lives. They are satisfied to attend their antiseptic church buildings, observe their antiseptic worship, and walk out each week unaffected by a light antiseptic sermon in which the antiseptic clergy reminded them of how good they are as long as they keep putting their money in the plate.

### **Expression of anger (vv.28b-30).**

In spite of the elder son’s rotten attitude, the father went to him and entreated him. “*His father came out and entreated him*” (v.28b). Now it was not the servant, but the father himself who offered the invitation. The father temporarily left hosting the invited guests to plead with the angry son.

Jesus drew such an accurate picture of His own work of reconciliation. He willingly stepped out of heaven’s glory to come to us sinners. He pleads with sinners just like the story pictures the father pleading with the angry son. And like this father, Jesus invites sinners to come to the celebration. Jesus even provides the means so that sinners are able to enter the banquet and be reconciled with the Creator. Jesus used words in this story to show the father begging the son, encouraging, calling him alongside himself and his restored brother.

Notice that he demonstrated love for both sons. Obviously, we saw that last week as our study revealed the father welcoming his penitent prodigal. And here we discover that the father’s goal was for the elder son to be reconciled with the brother who was reconciled with the father. But also here, we are beginning to see that there was a longstanding conflict between the elder son and the father. When sinners are not reconciled to God, they cannot be reconciled to penitent sinners, no matter how religious they are.

The unity of the Church that Jesus the Church-builder seeks is possible only when there is unity between the forgiving God and the forgiven penitent. Self-righteous, religious folks cannot possibly comprehend the possibility that they need to be reconciled with

confessed and forgiven sinners. Why not? Because they are so much better, so much more faithful than rebels who wander away from God.

The angry son was not receptive to the father's invitation. Instead he presented his argument for why he was justifiably angry. He reminded his father of his many years of faithful service. *"But he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command'" (v.29a)*

It is likely that this man truly did serve his father faithfully. But it is highly unlikely that he never disobeyed the father's command. Okay, faithful service is good. But we might wonder what was his motivation for serving faithfully? Maybe he realized all his life that two-thirds of the estate would one day be his. Maybe he was actually padding his own account by serving his father. If that was the case, he did "good" for selfish motives. Mark Twain would have said about this man, "He was a good man—in the worst sense of the word."

That was the classic picture of the Pharisees who unarguably did wonderful religious deeds. But they did their good deeds in order to be seen by others and to gain their approval. They did religious and moral things in an effort to ingratiate God to themselves. They laid claim to faithful service to God and keeping all God's commands in order to put God in debt to them. They failed to understand that God will never be indebted to any person no matter how religious they are. Ultimately, they were so proud and self-centered that they assumed they could manipulate God.

In his response, the elder son also revealed his jealousy for his brother. He argued with his father that in spite of his faithful service, *"yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends" (v.29b)*. It seems likely that somewhere along the line of faithful service, the father could have honored the boy with at least a birthday party. Now the truth came out that the elder son despised his father for supposed slights. This is just a common experience in living life in relationships with sinners. The elder brother was separated further from his father in his attitude than his brother had been in his actions. The younger brother needed to confess his sin against his father and be reconciled. The elder brother needed to do the same thing, but couldn't see the need. Such were the Pharisees – then and now!

Third, in his argument, the elder son focused on his brother's sin. He said, *"But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!" (v.30)*. Notice that the accusation was about, "your son" not "my brother." He accused the brother of willful sin, which was true. He accused his father of unjustly throwing a party for his brother, which was patently false. He could see everyone else's sin, but not his own.

This was the Pharisees' argument against Jesus. They accused Him saying, *"He receives sinners and eats with them" (v.2)*. Pride, jealousy, envy, and such characteristics of the flesh are why we don't forgive our brother's or sister's humble request for forgiveness.

### **The Father's Reply (vv.31-32).**

Rather than lambast the elder son, which he deserved, the father offered assurance of generosity. *"And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours'" (v.31)*. That is the same kind of tender affection the father offered to the prodigal. He offered it to the elder son because now he was the rebel. He had revealed his disdain for his father. He had revealed his anger. He had revealed his jealousy of his brother. He should have received a harsh reply from his father, a rebuke at the least, if not being disowned.

Instead of giving the rebel what he deserved, the father showed the same tender compassion for this rebel as he did for the prodigal. The typical Greek word for son is *hweeos*, a general term. Here, as Jesus told the story, He has the father call the stubborn rebel *teknon*, an affectionate term meaning, "my child." The father acknowledged that the elder son was faithful to the family estate. The father acknowledged that he had already assigned what was left of the estate to this son. The father offered only tender affection.

We must remember that Jesus made up this story in an effort to cause the Pharisees to acknowledge His love for them. God had given the Jews every advantage possible. They had the same evidences of God in creation and in conscience that everyone has. They enjoyed God's common grace like everyone else. But beyond common grace, God gave the law to them through Moses. God chose Abraham's seed and formed them into His special nation. God sent them His special messengers, the prophets, over and over. God sent Messiah, the

Savior through them. God was their God first and gave them all He could give. And they rejected Him and still do!

Finally, the father challenged the son to respond correctly. He should have joined in rejoicing because his lost brother had returned. *“For this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found” (v.32b)*. His brother was as good as dead because of sin. But now his brother was alive and found. It is a vivid picture of all of us. Every person is born dead in sin, lost from relationship with our Creator God. By grace He brings us to Himself, washes away our filth of sin, clothes us in Christ’s righteousness, puts the ring of identification, the Holy Spirit, within us, and puts sandals on our feet that identify us as His children.

Joy is the fitting response to such incredible displays of God’s grace. So the father said, *“It was fitting to celebrate and be glad” (v.32a)*. Joy is the right expression when the Heavenly Father turns a sinner into a saint. Sadly the response is often suspicion toward the penitent because they have picked up some pretty lousy baggage from their sinful journey. There is reticence to embrace the forgiven because they are not as mature as we are. The Father would have us rejoice.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we need to recognize that this story actually has no proper ending. It just kind of stops. Jesus suddenly ended the story with no expected resolution to the problem. A detailed analysis of this story reveals this lack of resolution with no uncertainty. It stands out like a sore thumb. It sounds like a song that ends without resolving the final cord. It is like reading a mystery novel in which the writer waits until the last chapter to reveal who did the crime. But having read through the whole story, you realize that someone ripped the last chapter out of the book.

Jesus told the story, did not resolve the conflict in the story, and then just walked away. Obviously, Jesus intended for the ending to make a lasting impact. What happened in the conflict between the father and the elder son? Did the elder son confess his sin against the father and his brother? Did he humble himself, forgive his brother’s sin, and embrace him in love?

But we know how the real-life story, about which this story was a picture, ended. The elder son (representing the Pharisees) picked up a spear and thrust it through the father’s side killing him (the father representing Jesus). That is still the picture of the unrepentant, unforgiven sinner. We all must come to grips with the fact that our sins hung Jesus on the cross. My offense put the crown on His head, drove the spikes through His hands and feet, and thrust the spear into His side. Until we admit our participation in that abhorrent crime, we will see no reason to ask for forgiveness. Everyone is either the prodigal who has returned to the Savior of our souls and been forgiven, or the elder son who sees no reason for forgiveness. Which are you?