

PARABLE: THE FATHER & 2 SONS (LUKE 15)

The Elder Son reflecting the erring attitudes of
believers

*In the September issue of **The Vine**, I shared the parable's message through [the younger son](#). Now, I share the parable's message through the elder son. At a later time, I shall share the parable's message through their father.*

While the younger son was wayward in his preoccupation with the self, disregarding the rest of the family, the elder son was no saint as he later revealed himself also to be self-centred in thinking for himself instead of welcoming his repentant brother back with love.

(1) Lack of grace:

The elder son was a diligent worker, loyal to the father. When he heard about the father's forgiving treatment of his younger brother, he became angry. This revealed his self-conceit about his loyalty to his father. Although he was not like his brother, a sinner who ran away, his attitude spoke negatively of him as a sinner without the spirit of love.

Faithful Christians who work hard in the Father's field, sowing seeds and reaping harvest should not let big feelings of self-importance set in. They should avoid comparisons between brethren about lengths of service loyalty in years or the relative eminence of talent contributions to boast good works with an expectation (even if unspoken) of earthly rewards.

The elder son displayed visible responsibility in his work and would have been blessed in being close to the father. Yet, the spirit of love was missing in his heart. He worked hard as a dutiful child, but without joy. This elder son's lack in the spirit of love to forgive his repentant brother is thrown into sharp relief by the grace of the father to both sons:

- How the father welcomes back the lost son, with no question asked!
- What the father said to the elder son, "My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours."

Christians are not to be like the elder son, missing the Gospel of Grace because they are focussed too much on the boast of good works.

(2) My Way, Your Way ... but not God's way?

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him." – v.28

A Christian, having served in the Church for decades, is warmly received in heaven. He compares himself to a brother who received Christ just one day before being received into heaven. Would the first Christian complain about unfairness of the Heavenly Father?

The elder son's anger betrayed his lack of understanding about his father despite his long time of being in the family. The elder son had his own mindset which he stubbornly stuck to. Acts of the father not in conformity with his way of thinking would be grounds for him to show his temper. He even "refused to go in" to see his father, and the father had to go out and plead with him. Arrogance of the son!

Christians must always defer to God's Way instead of the self-righteous and self-centred "My Way" attitude represented by the elder son in his impudence.

If in the Church all decisions are centred on God's Way (sola scriptura) instead of My Way, Your Way, His Way ... there will be more unity, fewer divisions.

(3) Wrong service attitude:

"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." – v. 29

The elder son indulged in self-pity, labouring under the false impression of not having received much from the father, not being given "even a young goat". In reality, he had much more than that to receive for being always with the father.

What the elder son expected to receive would be a privilege for being the father's son and bestowed out of the father's love and grace, not an entitlement to be demanded. Whatever praise deserved by the elder son for his good works in the field was undermined by the lack of joy undergirding his service for his father's pleasure. Instead, he glaringly betrayed the frame of mind common to many who do work out of duty and for rewards whereby they harbour a lot of grouses and display their unhappy faces.

There is nothing wrong to recognise duty and enjoy rewards, but duty and rewards should come into the picture after we have grounded our service on the love for what we do to render positive outcomes. **In spiritual service in the church, it is not difficult to find people with the same wrong attitude as the elder son. There is no joy in service, but lots of grouses. There is no love underpinning the service that is performed out of duty** – "I am doing this because I am compensated to do it," "I am doing that because my ministry leader pushes it to me," "I have no choice but

to do the task because no one else is willing to do it,” “I do this but am not willing to do that because this is my job but I am not free for that which is none of my business” ...

It is some encouragement to us that there are people in church who would be honest in saying, “I am taking up this ministry or job because I simply love the work and feel great pleasure in the calling to be a blessing, never mind if it means much pressure with not much recompense, and going the extra mile for God when needs arise even if it exceeds my normal duty.”

People like the elder son (defined by self-interest) and his father (grounded in love) don't have to proclaim aloud for all to hear what types of attitude they possess. The attitudes are transparent.

The contrasting attitudes of people (grounded in love or defined by self-centred self-righteous humanist philosophy) are plainly revealed by their words and actions.

(4) A good-weather brother?

“Evangelism”, “Outreach” and “Missions” all convey one common idea; i.e., spreading the Gospel by sharing God's Word **and** personal witness.

Note that I have emphasized the conjunction “**and**” which I prefer to the word “**or**”. If we use “**or**”, we might be subconsciously condoning the idea that evangelism can be all words and no action. By using “**and**”, attention is drawn to the fact that words and actions must combine for the substance of the Gospel Truth, rather than just the words of preaching, to be carried across.

*Bind us together, Lord,
bind us together
with cords that cannot be broken;
bind us together, Lord,
bind us together,
O bind us together in love.*

In the parable, there is no mention about how the two brothers related to each other in the time before the younger one turned prodigal. Nevertheless, it would be

difficult to imagine that there was never the natural brotherly love between them. So, I shall assume that there was this love between them, love that was easily unravelled by the prodigality that began to affect the relationship.

Obviously, the elder son was too ready and quick to untie the cord of love that bound him to his brother, all for a simple reason that the latter did wrong. If the elder son had prior love for his brother, he did not have a whit of love to direct it towards encouraging the lost brother who had returned (contrasting the father who remained steadfast in loving the lost son).

In a sense, Christians are not to be like the elder son who lacked any interest in “evangelism”, “outreach” or the “mission” to reach out with the Gospel of Love (John 3:16) to those whom we once loved as our own in the family of God.

Within a fellowship of brothers and sisters, there are those we love ... but surely not with the love that stays only in good weather and becomes broken when sin interposes between the self-righteous and the straying sheep.

(5) What an attitude!

“... this son of yours ...” (v. 30)

What an attitude the elder son showed when speaking to his father!

The younger son was a sinner who turned back. Was the elder son in any way good in his personal witness of “righteousness”?

He put on a powerful display of multiple sins:

- Blaming the father for what the father did no wrong in showing his grace and love towards the younger son.

- Baring a heart hardened with anger and hatred, expressing an extremely unforgiving spirit of odium, declaring to the effect – “He is your son; he is not my brother!”
- Being self-righteous like the Pharisees in obeying the laws but not the Gospel of Grace – *“Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.”* (v. 29)

We are all human to face practical difficulties at times when witnessing with love to those whom we feel are “hard to love” or those who fall away from the family. **It is one thing to acknowledge the difficulty and our struggle with loving a prodigal who was once with us in a warm and caring fellowship; it is wholly another thing for us to outrightly disown the prodigal brethren and commit the same sins as the elder son.**

“Outrightly” is a strong word with synonyms like “absolutely” and “utterly”, yet it was exactly the manner of the elder son in completely (leaving no iota of doubt) disowning any blood relationship he had as an elder to a younger brother.

(6) Missing out on the joy:

“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” (v. 32)

It was a celebration time.

- The father was joyful for having his lost son back.
- The repentant son was joyful for being forgiven and feeling the warmth of his father’s love again.

- Alas! The joy was missed out by the elder son by the hardness of his own heart. He was not physically lost like his prodigal brother had been. However, while the prodigal brother had returned to a joyful reunion with the father physically and affectionately, the elder son became lost and lonely in the heart by his own choice to be away from the warm embrace of the father.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.” – 1 Jn 3:1-2

Regrettably, the elder son did not know the father. In his self-righteous and Pharisaic conscience of obeying the father’s instructions (“laws”), he failed to see that the father’s love was extended not to him alone but to all his children. (In similitude, about Pharisaic self-righteousness, the point may be made that God’s love is extended not just to the legalistic Jews but also to the Gentiles, everyone else under the Gospel of Grace.)

As children of our Heavenly Father, do we often find ourselves detached from the warmth of the Father’s embrace by the hardness of our own heart with the unloving attitude of the elder son? Are we like the elder son, so near to the father and yet so far away in heart?

If we don’t feel “*what great love the Father has lavished on us*,” it is not for us to blame the Father. We should look into our own heart for the reason.

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