

The Elder Son

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[0 : 00] Will you now turn with me for a short time to the portion of scripture that we read, the gospel according to Luke, the 15th chapter, and we may read again from verse 25.

Luke chapter 15, reading at verse 25. Now his elder son was in the field, and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come, and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry and would not go in.

Therefore came his father out and entreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment.

And yet thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

[1 : 04] And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad. For this thy brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.

Now we are very well acquainted with the parable in which the words that we have read here is incorporated.

The parable of the prodigal son. And it is not with the main body, as it were, of the parable that I want to concern myself at this point.

But to draw attention to the secondary character, as it were, that emerges in this parable.

The older, the elder brother. We aren't perhaps as familiar with the elder brother as we are with the younger one.

[2 : 15] But he obviously plays an important part within the account, or he would not be mentioned there.

And I suppose that one could consider from a variety of views the reasoning and attitudes of the elder brother.

It is always useful to take the accounts that we have within the word of God, to take them within their context.

Because not taking them within their context very often diminishes from the impact that is intended with what is declared and revealed.

Nevertheless, we have also to remember that God's word is a spiritual word. That it is the revelation of God to mankind.

[3 : 29] And that it is in a particular sense, the revelation of God to his own people. And that they are instructed, and they are nurtured, and they are corrected, and they are encouraged by his own holy word.

And there is nothing in that respect, or inappropriate in anything that is declared within the word of God.

And here in this parable, while we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ intended something specific with regard to the actual parable itself.

You will note, of course, that it isn't just one parable that has been declared here. There are three, one following the other.

And the intent that there is an intention behind the declaration that Jesus made with these parables is evident.

[4 : 34] And we again are persuaded that the initial impact of the parables was aimed at those to whom he spoke, namely to the Jews and to the Jewish nation.

And in respect of that context, it would seem appropriate that when he is here speaking of the elder brother that is featured in this story, in this parable, that it is of the Jews, of the Pharisaical Jew, that he is making mention.

Now, we might consider that that being the case, then what relevance does this have to ourselves? If he is talking of the person who is brought to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, a person who is made aware of his sinful state, made aware of his lostness, and is brought back to Christ, back to God, back to Christ by the Holy Spirit.

And that is something which is relevant and understandable to ourselves. And then over and against that, he is featuring for us the Jewish nation, the Pharisaical Jew, the Pharisee in particular, who was unwilling to acknowledge the need for salvation through Christ, who was unwilling to consider that God had a particular plan of salvation, which he himself, that is the Pharisee, could not accept.

[6 : 33] Are we not within our rights, therefore, to dismiss the Pharisee, to dismiss this elder brother from our own experiences, and not to countenance him, as it were, but rather to concentrate on the one who was saved?

Well, I think not, my friends, because I think that within the context of the narrative here, within the context of the parable, there is a lesson for ourselves to be learned from a consideration of this particular man, the elder brother.

In looking through the incident, and in considering the attitude and the demeanor of this man, and the reaction with which he expressed himself in respect of what took place, I suppose that for the lack of a better phrase, one could perhaps use the phrase self-pity, that this man was displaying a measure, a great measure of self-pity or self-indulgence, but that the great, the main emphasis upon what he was displaying was an emphasis upon self.

Now, when we consider that, and when we consider it in the light of what is expressed to us within this account, this short account of this man, and we begin to apply some of the features that evolve for us in an examination of this man's demeanor to ourselves, to our own natures, to our own demeanor, then perhaps we can begin to understand a little of the relevance of this particular incident to ourselves, and apply it in many respects to our own situations as a lesson to be learned, and as instruction to be considered with respect to our Christian walk and witness.

I suppose that in one respect, the mentality of self-pity is one that is with each and every one of us.

[9 : 28] I suppose there is some occasion within our experience, in our everyday life experience, where the mentality of self-pity emerges from time to time, where there are occasions when we grouchingly feel sorry for ourselves in the light of some other incident, but I don't think that that is precisely what is being postulated here at all.

I think that there is a deeper implication of self in the pitiable attitude of the elder brother than merely what might constitute everyday incidents.

And I think that in respect of that particular view, we can examine the attitudes of this man in respect of this deeper aspect of self within his state.

For example, in the first instance, when we think of the deeper aspect of self, self-indulgence, self-pity in a religious context, in a Christian context, we note that it is an accursed thing.

There is a curse, the curse of self-pity, the curse of self-indulgence. Now, we might ask ourselves the question, what is the effect of that curse of self?

[11 : 33] What is the curse of self-pity? How does it show itself? Well, in one of the ways, one of the ways perhaps in which it shows itself is in its destruction of happiness.

We are told that this man, and he was working out in the field, obviously a very industrious person, when he came back and heard the music and the merrymaking in his father's house and inquired as to what it meant and when he was informed of what was taking place.

Because of his particular demeanor, he did not rejoice. He was not happy as a result of what had been revealed to him.

His happiness was destroyed. On the contrary, he became very sad, very angry, very despondent. He was not at all inclined to rejoice as one would have naturally expected him to. He showed a totally different tendency upon being informed of what was taking place.

[13 : 05] Now, I don't know, and the scripture doesn't reveal to me or to any of us whether or not he was normally a happy individual or whether he wasn't.

Every individual has an individual personality. Everybody is different. Everybody is made up differently. Some people are naturally more joyful than other people. Nevertheless, regardless of the differences of nature, it is a fact that when there is an overemphasis on self-indulgence, on self-pity, on this pharisaicalism that was being expressed and displayed here, then the happiness, the joy of the gospel can be lost. It can be destroyed. And, of course, there is another element to it as well, and that is that it destroys the usefulness of the person who is smitten with that particular disease. Just consider, here was the eldest brother of the family.

[14 : 45] Just consider the contribution that he could have made to the actual homecoming, to the actual incident that was taking place had he had a different attitude.

Now, very often, my friends, this selfish, self-indulgent attitude curtails the usefulness of the Christian.

It prevents the Christian from extending him or herself, from developing with respect to the work, with respect to the witness, with respect to the Christian environment in which he or she is abiding. The moment that one is caught up in this attitude of selfishness, of self-indulgence, and it is a sinful attitude.

It is something that is destructive and a cursive thing, as we said. Then the usefulness of a useful life ceases to be useful.

[16 : 14] Or one might consider, one might think that one is indeed executing one's duties, that one is doing what one ought to be doing as one ought to do it.

But there is the restrictedness, the restrictedness of this selfish attitude. And of course, following on from that, there is the destruction of fellowship.

This man didn't want to go in and join those who were celebrating inside the house.

He was indignant. He was angry. He was opposed to what was going on. Now, with respect to his actions in that first instance, perhaps the question goes by begging, was there any justification for his attitude?

Was there anything wrong with what was going on? Perhaps, had you been there at the time, and it's only a parable, but had you been there at the time, had you asked him, I'm sure he would have found umpteen reasons for saying that there was, that it was wrong to do what was being done.

[17 : 53] You see, that is another aspect of this selfishness. It does not allow for anything other than one's own personal view and opinion and so on.

You know, my friends, it is indeed a great curse, the curse of self, of self-pity, of self-indulgence. It, I think, it shrinks rather than than expands the soul when it gets a hold in the being of the child of God.

It shrinks the soul. And of course, it evidences itself in those in whom it is who are smitten by it. The evidence is there to be seen. One of the ways in which it evidences itself is in our restricted vision.

vision. If you note with regard to this particular person, you will see that there is something which is emphasized by him in all that he discoursed to his father when his father came out to speak to him.

[19 : 29] And what is emphasized by him is the intonations upon self, I, I, serve thee, I, at any time, that I might make merry, I, me.

You get the impression from the from the from the discourse that there is a whining, a griping about circumstances, about his situation, and that the griping and the whining about the situation emphasizes himself in all of it.

His vision is totally restricted. He does not see beyond his own little patch, as it were, beyond the things that are taking place immediately within his own experience.

He does not project his vision outwith into the wider circle of his environment, of his Christian environment. Rather, he draws, he introverts himself, he draws himself into himself, and of course, when he does that, the emphasis is placed upon what he has done, the service he has given, the way in which he has conducted himself, the sort of worship that he has shown.

Oh, my friends, it's a very easy trap, as it were, to fall into. It's a very easy attitude and mentality to take, that when self comes in, our vision is restricted and introverted and instead of Christ being the focal point, the total focal point of our vision, we are diverted from him toward ourselves.

[21 : 51] And instead of seeing what Christ has done for my soul, I am too busy considering what I am doing every day for him.

And then accusing because of the rough deal that I might be getting for all that I am doing. You see, the way the thing is turned oppositely from what it ought to be.

And of course, the moment that vision is restricted, the moment that the Christian's vision is diverted from Jesus Christ, then values are distorted.

Christian values are distorted because you are then, the Christian does not evaluate the things which are in his life against the one who dispenses these things.

Rather, he evaluates things in respect of his own achievements, in respect of his own ideologies, in respect of his own demeanor.

[23 : 17] and there is a total distortion of values. I think that that is evident here in regard to the way in which this man reacted.

Having displayed his restricted vision, I do serve these many years, neither have I transgressed at any time the commandment, then he goes on to show the distortion of values, yet thou never gavest me a kid that I might make merry with my friends.

The thing which was used by the father that was used for the feast, that his father had prepared for the homecoming of his younger son, was not a kid, it was the fatted calf, it was the fatted calf, the most prized beast that he had.

he took it and killed it to celebrate the homecoming of his son. And that is no doubt whatsoever if one considers the context, as it were, of the parable that this wouldn't be the only year that there would be a fatted calf on the estate.

If this was, as we are led to believe, a large estate, which had many workers and much land and much cattle and sheep and goats, then there would be a fatted calf, perhaps every year, on growing from year to year.

[25 : 20] But this man's vision, being so distorted, he now begins to undervalue the actual celebration that he himself would have desired.

You didn't even give me a kid to celebrate. No, one can take it from the context of considering that he was merely saying, well, even if you had offered to give a young lamb itself, fine, but nevertheless, there is an undervaluing, there is a distortion of value evident in his actual demeanor. And this is what happens when self takes over, when self becomes prevalent in our heart, our values are distorted.

you see, Christ is belittled. His worth begins to become diminished in our eyes.

Or we can all ask ourselves the question from that point of view, we can all ask ourselves the question from that point of view, what value do we put upon our Saviour?

[26 : 57] What do you see him as? How worthy is he in your eyes, even this day? Is he as worthy in your eyes as he was in the eyes of the apostle Paul when he said, for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

I'm quite sure that the apostle Paul, with that spirit, would never have denigrated as did this man, the celebrating of somebody being brought back again into the fold.

For that is what he was doing. And what made it even worse was the fact that it was his own brother, his flesh and blood. Oh, distortion of lives.

And my friends, if we do not value Christ as the most valuable entity in our existence, then all our other values will be totally distorted.

Every one of them. Then, before I leave this, the evidence of self-pity, there is another aspect to it, and that is that we see here displayed an outraged virtue.

[28 : 26] His father came out to speak to him and said to him, reasoned with him, he said it was neat for us that we would do this because of the one who has returned.

But he wasn't having any of it. And in his outraged virtue, he even went as far as perhaps in some respects laying false accusations.

We are not told. We are told that this man wasted his money on riotous living. What kind of riotous living we are not told but the elder brother pinpoints.

And furthermore, he again distorts the truth of the matter. As soon as this thy son, and note what he says. Note what he says.

He says, he doesn't say, as soon as this my brother. He says, as soon as this thy son. He as it were, wants to destroy himself from the one who has returned.

[29 : 44] He doesn't want, as it were, to relate to him too closely, this thy son is returned. To have devoured thy living with harlots.

Now, you see, again, there is a distortion here. He is as if he were laying accusation against the younger brother that it was his father's money he had spent.

The estate had been apportioned and the younger brother had received one third of the estate and he himself, in lieu of his eventually possessing it, was in holding of two thirds of it.

And yet, he says, thy living with harlots thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And how often, my friends, how often it is true that the spirit of self-righteousness and self-indulgence and self-pity can give rise to outraged virtues, to distorted evaluations.

But then, and finally, we see the cure for self-pity, self-righteousness or self-indulgence.

[31 : 23] And the cure for it is presented before us here in the final words and the words which the father spoke to this elder brother in the last couple of verses of the chapter.

First of all, in his indication of his own abiding presence. Son, he says, remember, the elder brother said to him that he had never left him but he says to him, son, thou art ever with me.

Thou art ever with me. Now, that can be taken in the opposite context that I am forever with thee.

The abiding presence of the father. He is with all his people. He is with everyone who belongs to him.

I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. There is no time in the experience of God's children when God deserts them.

[32 : 45] There is no time in the experience of God's children when Christ is not watching over them, over the church that is his body as the head of it.

I am ever with thee. And not only is there the abiding presence of God, but there is the abundant provision, and all that I have is thine.

He will not hold anything, any good thing from those who are faithfully his. Oh, there is this tendency for us on occasion to be moaned of leanness.

Israel of old did it. My leanness, my leanness. why are we bemoaning? Are we bemoaning because we are saying that God will not provide, that God does not provide?

Oh, if we are saying that, then we are sinning against God. He will not keep anything from us. all that I have is thine.

[34 : 00] And my friend, if today, if today you or I are smitten with a feeling of emptiness, emptiness not in the sense of our own inadequacies, but emptiness arising out of discontentment with our lot, then we must come to a place of repentance.

We must come and take heed of the Father's voice to us. And you will note that in his discourse with his elder son, he did not chastise him as he spoke to him in respect of punishment.

The father was not angry with him. He did not wail on him for his unreasonable attitude to the return of his brother.

He did not as it were treat him with alienation as he was prepared to treat his brother this thy son. But he said to him son thou art ever with me.

And that is one of the amazing aspects with which we are confronted in respect of the chastisement of God.

[35 : 39] Or we know that God can chastise and his chastisement can be sore. And perhaps in respect of our sinfulness and in respect of our wavering and wandering.

We need the pain of chastisement from time to time. But my friends, surely, surely, when we are out of our place, when we are not where we ought to be, and when we are in this spirit of defiance and self-righteousness and self-indulgent spirit, and God comes to us in love.

God comes to us and addresses us gently and tenderly. Does it not, ought it not to wring our hearts?

Ought it not to soften our demeanour? Ought it not to humble us before him? Ought we not to consider that here God is showing us his eternal love, his eternal concern.

All that I have is thine, and of course, finally, there is also the achieved purpose of the father. It was meet that we should make merry and be glad, for this thy brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.

[37 : 16] And note, my friends, the contrast. This thy son has devoured thy living. This thy brother was dead and is alive and was lost and is found.

The achieved purpose of the father. And what is the achieved purpose of the father? Surely it is to furnish his own kingdom. Surely it is to bring in the lost sheep of the house of Israel to bring them all into the fold so that the word of God will finally be vindicated and completed that on the day when

he makes up his jewels none of them shall be lost.

and as we my friends prepare for another communion season and as we consider all the aspects all the aspects of Christianity within our own day and generation and within our own lives and person ought we not to consider regardless of the various and they are varied and many incidents that can occur within our experience ought we not to consider the unchangeable unmovableness of the God and Savior who himself has brought us to our knowledge of himself we didn't do it none of us who are here today who profess to know the

Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior can lay any claim to having been brought by our own endeavours to that situation he has done this and ought it not to be wondrous in our eyes and if it is wondrous in our eyes and ever eye is settled upon him ought that not to sweep away every aspect or most of the aspects at any rate of our self indulgence our self righteousness our self pity may he bless to us these few thoughts of his word let us pray oh lord we thank thee that we can look unto thee and that by coming unto thy presence by bowing down before thee by casting all our cares upon thee that thou art able to deal with all our circumstances we pray oh lord that thou would bless us now and part us with thy blessing that thou would bless all that will be done later this day in this congregation that thou would continue with us as we wait upon thee and forgive sin in Christ amen