

Theme: The elder brother in the parable mistakenly thought that success, life, and joy was found in attempting to keep the rules rather than in relationship with the father, who he misunderstood and disdained.

I. Intro - Amadeus - Salieri & Mozart

- A. A great fictional account of Mozart
- B. Salieri - prayed and vowed to live obediently if God would make him a great composer
- C. Mozart is an immoral buffoon - and far greater talent, whose middle name Amadeus means “loved by God”
- D. “It was incomprehensible... Here I was denying all my natural lust in order to deserve God’s gift and there was Mozart indulging his in all directions - even though engaged to be married - and no rebuke at all!”
- E. “From now on we are enemies, You and I”
- F. What of the elder brother in the parable? Is he lost too? What is his real problem?

II. The Important Background

- A. The reaction of various groups to Jesus
Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ Then Jesus told them this parable... ¹¹ There was a man who had two sons... Luke 15:1–3,11
 1. Two groups: “sinners” and religious leaders
 2. The parable has a man with two sons
 3. The parable is told to speak to these groups
 4. The young son is like the “sinners”

5. The elder brother is like the Pharisees who muttered about Jesus’ reception of the “sinners”

B. The importance of this background

1. Luke has told us how to read the parable
2. The parable is about God’s heart for lost and wandering children.
3. This parable is not really about the external behavior of the younger son, but about the heart of the father, and how both sons are lost and both misunderstand their father.
4. This parable is ultimately meant to speak to “elder brothers” as much as it is to speak to wandering “younger sons”.

III. The Elder Brother’s Trouble

- A. The elder brother’s suspicions
Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ Luke 15:25–27
 1. The older brother is off dutifully working
 2. At the first signs of celebration he wants to know what is going on
 3. Very often elder brothers are suspicious of feasting, celebration, and joy. They think that faithfulness and celebration are virtually mutually exclusive.
 4. Puritanism: The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy. - HL Mencken

B. The elder brother's anger at the situation

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. Lk 15:28

1. The elder brother becomes angry at the situation
2. He refuses to go in and join the party
3. This is exactly like the Pharisees we refused to rejoice as "sinners" turned to Jesus and He received and restored them
4. When confronted with the father's prodigal grace and joy, elder brothers refuse to join in and become angry.

C. The elder brother's anger at his father and brother

But he answered his father, '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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' Luke 15:29-30

1. His words are full of anger towards the father
2. He is rude, and even hurls accusations at the father
3. He accuses the father of being partisan - see v30
4. He won't acknowledge his brother: this son of yours
5. He is angry at the brother for his actions and for being received, and he is angry with the father for not rejecting the brother.
6. Elder brothers think they are holier and wiser than the father, and they are offended at the prodigal grace of the father.

IV. The Roots of the Elder Brother's Trouble

A. The elder brother is self-righteous

But he answered his father, '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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' Luke 15:29-30

1. He thinks he never does wrong (but this is false)
2. He clearly sees the sin of the younger brother but can not see his own
3. When a newspaper posed the question, "What's Wrong with the World?" the Catholic thinker G. K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief letter in response: "Dear Sirs: I am. Sincerely Yours, G. K. Chesterton." That is the attitude of someone who has grasped the message of Jesus.
4. Elder brothers always think the REAL problem is the sins of other people rather than their own
5. Self-righteous people always minimize their sin while maximizing the sin of others.

B. The elder brother is legalistic

But he answered his father, '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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' Luke 15:29-30

1. He thinks of himself as a slave, not a son, precisely because he views his father as a harsh taskmaster rather than a loving father.
2. Legalism always values rules over relationship - this is a deadly trap.
3. Legalistic elder brothers think the father is most pleased when the child is most restricted. The more he restricts himself from joy and pleasure, and the more ceaselessly he labors, the happier the father will be. But this is a gross misunderstanding of the father.
4. For legalistic elder brothers, holiness and joy are antithetical, and true spirituality is found in slavish obedience to rules rather than in a flourishing relationship with the Father. This is a deadly, dehumanizing error.
5. Consequently, he thinks he is owed something by the father - not because he is a son, but because he has kept the rules like a good slave

C. The elder brother is judgmental

But he answered his father, '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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' Luke 15:29-30

1. He sees the sin of the younger brother - and wants it judged, not forgiven!
2. An old Jewish saying, 'There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world'. This is the view of the elder brother.

3. Judgmental people view the job of God and the universe to judge sin harshly, so prodigal grace is a scandal to them.

D. The result: an angry, alienated person

1. Elder brothers misunderstand themselves, others, the world, and the Father!
2. The end result of an elder brother approach to life is inevitably anger and fear rather than joy and love, for their view of God is that of an angry judge rather than a gracious father.
3. When confronted with the Prodigal grace of God, elder brother types often become sullen and angry, for they disapprove of God's way of running the universe.

V. Applying the Word

A. How do I think and act like the elder brother?

1. This is the main problem Jesus addressed in this parable
2. This is the greater danger for serious Christians who want to understand and obey God's Word!
3. But this was the very group most likely to reject Jesus during His ministry!
4. Do I struggle with a self-righteous, judgmental, legalistic attitude and approach to life?
 - a. Do I primarily view God as a loving Father or a stern Judge?
 - b. Do I tend to primarily worry about and confront my own sin or that of others?

- c. When others sin (especially against me) do I want to see them forgiven or judged?
 - d. Do I view true spirituality and holiness as restricting myself from joy and pleasure or as liberation to be truly, fully human?
 - e. Do I view holiness and joy as antithetical or complementary?
 - f. Am I known for what I am for or against?
5. We live in an amoral culture, but being an elder brother will never solve this - only the Gospel can!

B. The True Elder Brother and Father

- 1. We do not have a slavemaster but a gracious, loving, forgiving Father! Who invites us to His celebration feast!
- 2. Thanks be to God we have an elder brother Who did not disown us, but traveled to our distant country and rescued us!
- 3. Come eat at the Celebration Table!

The Elder Brother's Trouble

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

January 27, 2019

Communion

Number 6:24-26

Teaching keywords: legalism; humility and pride; God's grace; confession and repentance

The Lord bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace. Numbers 6:24–26

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” ³ Then Jesus told them this parable:...

¹¹ Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.

¹³ “Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

²¹ “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. ²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ ²⁸ “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

²⁹ But he answered his father, ‘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. ³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ³¹ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³² 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.’” Luke 15:1–3, 11–32