

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE RELIGION OF THE ELDER BROTHER

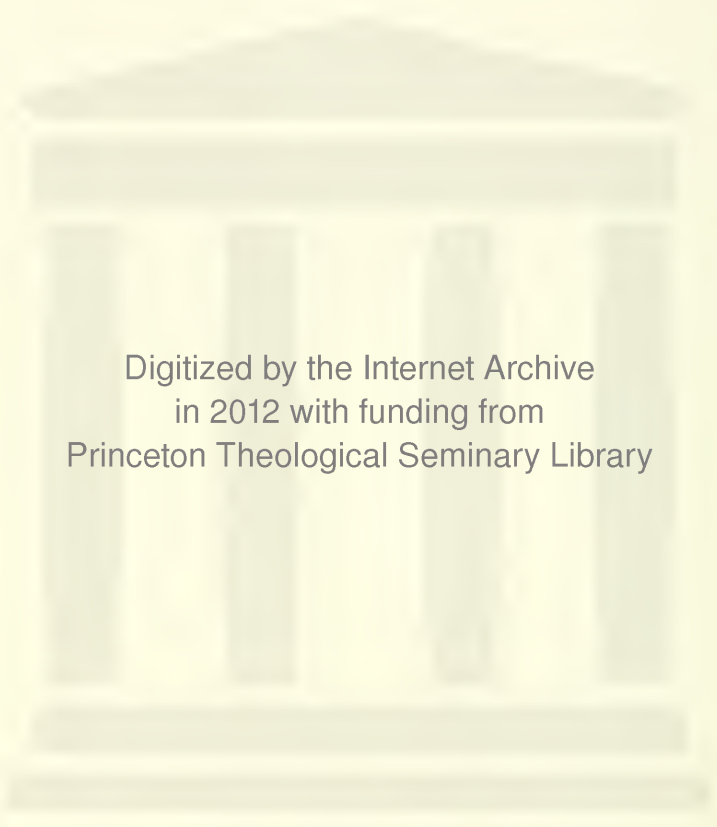
*"But he was angry and refused to go in."
Luke 15:28*

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"But he was angry and refused to go in."

Luke 15:28

It is a common failing in public speakers not to know when to stop. Some point or other is reached. It is clinched by a vivid illustration, a pungent aphorism, or perhaps a line or two of poetry. But, alas, friend speaker misses his opportunity (and ours). He has more to say and he goes on.

Was Jesus guilty of such a failing in the 15th Chapter of Luke's gospel? I refer to the story of the Prodigal Son. It is the well-known tale of a lad who left his father's house, lost everything in the far country and determined, when he finally hit bottom, to rise up and return. I have never come across a more succinct and accurate outline of the prodigal's experience than this: Sick of home! Homesick! Home! That tells it all.

But how would the father react? At worst he would berate him for his folly and throw him out. But, as we happily know, this was not the case. For when the son was yet a great way off the father ran to meet him, fell on his neck and kissed him, commanded that the fattest calf be killed, ordered a banquet prepared. He put a robe on his back, a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet. We can feel the exhilaration and electricity in the air in those words that fairly burst with joy, "This my son was dead, and is alive again, he was lost, and is found!"

* * *

But Jesus did not end the story there. He went on to say, "Now the elder son was in the field." What a comedown from the heights!

This Elder Brother portion has been challenged. Some have alleged that it did not belong to the origi-

nal, that it was added later. But Jesus alerted us from the start that there were three figures in this story. The parable opens with the words, "There was a man who had two sons." So, the Elder Brother belongs. He is there by design and not by accident. He is not present because some editor chose to tuck him in later on. Incidentally, the full story of the Prodigal Son is the longest parable that Jesus ever gave.

* * *

The Elder Brother comes through as the villain in the piece. At least so it would seem on first glance. There is no indication in the story that he ever missed his brother or went to seek him out. He is resentful of the father's love and smugly conscious of his fine record of hard work. He is totally "out of phase" with the father's highs and lows. He does not share the father's sorrow when the boy is away. He does not share the father's gladness when the lad returns.

We get the picture here of a sulking prude. The music angered him and he refused to go in. He would not sanction outwardly what he inwardly resented.

* * *

Nineteen years ago I preached on the Elder Brother under the title, "The Prodigal Who Stayed Home." In that message I pointed out that even though the older son was physically closer to his father there on the farm, he was spiritually as far away as the drifting Prodigal in the far country. It was my contention that there are two prodigals in this story, not one.

I remember how a young associate of mine came up to me following that sermon and chided me for being too hard on the Elder Brother. I believe now that he was right. In the intervening years I have come to appreciate the contribution that Elder Brother types make to the on-going life of the world.

Frankly, I have had just about enough of the anti-hero -- on the stage, in books and pictures! The

hooker who turns out to be the only one brave enough to rescue a child from a burning building; the alcoholic who outdoes the deacon in generosity at Christmas time; the likable cop killer; the porno flick operator who lectures us regularly on constitutional liberty; marijuana legalizers who are introduced with a trumpet fanfare as the enviable champions of humanity; contract-jumping athletes and coaches who break their word for monetary reward -- then turn around and preach to us on the character-building role of sports in American life!

Say what you will about this shadowy, icy figure, but let it also be noted that the Elder Brother was not a drain on anyone! Call him a drudge if you must, but he was productive - "Mr. Steady," "Old Reliable." On his labors others depended and he did not let them down. Come to think of it, were it not for him it is quite possible that the Prodigal would have had no home to go back to!

It is the Elder Brothers of the world who hold society together while the Prodigals are enjoying their fling. Are you not glad that when you called your mother Long Distance last Sunday the operator was not stoned? Are you not glad that as a child when you got home from school your mother was there - not running around in search of sexual liberation? Are you not glad that someone in your family saves regularly -- else how would you have managed in that last emergency? Let's hear it for farmers who farm, for teachers who teach, for salesmen who sell, for builders who build, for miners who mine. In short for workers who work!

Toast Dionysius if you will, but if all of us took the Prodigal's route, the world would revert to chaos by sundown! The Elder Brother stands for something good in history. He deserves something more from us than scorn and derision!

* * *

The story of the Prodigal Son is a story about religion. It was as a representative of religion and only in that role that the Elder Brother was wrong. His life style is not being censured in this story any more than the life style of the Prodigal is being praised.

The target of the story were the Scribes and Pharisees who could not understand why Jesus would consort with riffraff - publicans and sinners. Theirs was a religion of loveless piety, loveless morality and loveless respectability. So Jesus took pains to teach and show that God is a social being who is capable of a warm and welcoming love for men and women, boys and girls, no matter where they've been or what they've done!

But here is where this truth is up against it. The more decent and upright we are, the harder it is for us to understand and receive grace. This is the church's problem. We keep saying "grace" but the world keeps hearing "law." We claim to be in the church as recipients of grace, but we defend our membership on the strength of some moral record.

Joachim Jeremias offers an exciting translation of a verse that has given all ministers and teachers trouble over the years. It comes earlier in the 15th Chapter of Luke in connection with the parable of the lost sheep. The shepherd leaves the "ninety and nine" and goes out for the one that is lost. The story climaxes in these words, "So there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance." (Mat. 18:14) It's that "need no repentance" that is troublesome.

But Jeremias, regarded as one of the outstanding Biblical scholars of our time, puts it this way, not without textual justification; "I tell you," said Jesus to his critics, "that in the same way God rejoices more over one sinner who repents than over ninety and nine respectable persons who have never committed any

gross sin." 1

Not only do the upright have a hard time understanding and receiving grace, they actually resent it! They have the feeling that they deserve more and that others deserve less. Why did the Elder Brother resent it? He hadn't lost anything. He still had as much money and land as ever. He still had a place to sleep and a setting at the father's table. Why did he resent it?.

It puts one in mind of Jesus' story of the man who needed some "farm temporaries." He went out early in the morning and engaged some workers for one denarius. You know the story. He went out again at the third hour and hired additional men at the same rate. Likewise at the sixth and ninth hours. Still short of manpower, he went out and hired others at the eleventh hour. Behold, he gave them all the same wage. Then came the grumbling. But the lord of the manor held his ground. He asked, "Do you begrudge my generosity?" (Mat. 20:15) You got what we bargained for. I like the way the New English Bible puts it, "Why be jealous because I am kind?"

You see, love isn't like soy beans, the more of which you dispose of the less you have. Love is more like joy and peace and encouragement -- the more you give the more there is to go around. Jesus is telling us that there is a disposition in God to welcome warmly every man or woman, boy or girl, no matter where they've been or what they've done. That is grace.

But it is only a story, isn't it? And who is to say that that story is to be relied upon and trusted? A friend who once lived in India for many years tells of a story that made the rounds in that country when he was there. It is a simple story of a son who had shamed his father. He returned and functioned as before, with nothing said. Was he forgiven? "Yes," said one hearer. "No," said another, "the word had not been spoken." This is the longing of the human soul, to hear the forgiving word. This, I take it, is the fundamental meaning of the Crucifixion - that

we pass beyond parable and illustration to substance. On that central cross, with its forcefully out-stretched arms, the love that Jesus spoke about was acted out and openly declared.

* * *

How did it all end? We do not know. It is interesting to note that the father "went out" to both sons. He went out to the Prodigal when he saw him edging up the road. When he was told that the older brother would not come in for the music and dancing, he went out to him also. He addressed his eldest son by one of the most intimate terms in Greek, "teknon" -- my dear son.

But did the Elder Brother come in? The story could have ended in one of two ways. Ending number one: "And so he walked out to the barn muttering under his breath: 'I thank Thee God that I am not as other men - extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like my brother. I fast twice a week, and you know that I give tithes of all that I possess.'"

Ending number two: "He felt the power of his father's love and hurried in to welcome his brother back. And when the father saw it his old heart rejoiced and he cried aloud: 'A double celebration tonight - for both my sons were dead and are alive again, they were lost and are found!'"

CLOSING PRAYER

*God, grant that the words of our faith
may become the attitudes of our
minds and the dispositions
of our hearts.*

Help us to be toward others

what Thou hast been toward us.

-- for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

FOOTNOTE:

1. Jeremias, Joachim, The Parables of Jesus, p. 107, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1955

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