

The Messenger



“... How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” Romans 10:15

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The Prodigal Who Stayed at Home

by Paul Earhart

“Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’ But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him” (Luke 15:25-27).

It is here that the plot of the parable of the Prodigal Son thickens. The setting of Jesus’ story makes it evident that however moving the saga of the younger son, the older son is the true focus of the parable. It was told in response to the self-righteous charge of the Jewish religious elite that Jesus exposed His true character by the company he kept – notorious “sinners” and scoundrels. Their accusation actually did more to reveal their own sanctimonious and merciless pride than any flaw in the Lord, a fact they were unlikely to notice. And it was out of concern from them, not the “sinners” they despised, that this great parable arose – a story about a wastrel son, a brokenhearted father, and a brother who refused to be reconciled to either. How could they possibly not be touched by this compelling story of a father’s love for a wayward son and his rejoicing at his recovery? Weren’t they fathers, too? Isn’t this what they would have done?

The older son does not seem at first to play much of a role in the story. When his father at his brother’s request divides his property, he simply receives the two-thirds of his father’s wealth which was, as the firstborn, due to him (Deuteronomy 21:17). If he shared his father’s heartbreak at his brother’s abrupt departure or his anxious longing for him while he is gone, we are not told of it. He was tending to business on the farm. While his witless brother was wasting good money in a wild revel, he was the soul of industry. He was respectable and responsible. His brother was unforgivably worthless. He was good, his brother, bad. In this

contrast the elder brother found his sense of meaning and value. It was what made his world orderly and sensible.

But now suddenly all that order comes crashing down. His wastrel brother has returned; not to shame and disgrace, as he surely deserved, but to music and dancing! The anger of the older brother ran white hot at such injustice. For his diligence and faithfulness there had been no rejoicing and festivity, not even a skinny kid goat! But now, for this worthless whoremonger, an ecstasy of joy! It was absolutely and unalterably wrong.

His father's entreaty for him to come in and join the rejoicing was for him an invitation to soft-headed stupidity. His father was as big a fool as his brother was a profligate. It was a violation of all that was fair and right and he was not about to have a part in such insanity. In his reaction he not only shows his contempt for his once wayward brother, but for his ever faithful father. For the man who reared and gave him all he had there is neither respect nor compassion. His arrogant self-righteousness ("I never transgressed your commandment at any time") and self-serving ambition are left rawly exposed. It was an ugly scene; and Jesus meant it to be.

The boy who stayed at home was as much a prodigal as his younger brother. He had lived all this time eating the dry husks of self-righteousness while, as his father reminded him, "all that I have is yours." It was not his worthiness that would have provided this abundance, but his father's love. All he had ever needed to do was ask.

This great parable is a portrait of two figures: God in His great goodness and mercy and the Pharisee in his wretched spiritual miserliness. Like the elder brother, the Pharisee did not serve God because he loved Him, but because it brought him some sense of overwhelming personal superiority. He was abjectly poor in his imaginary worthiness when he could have been rich in God's grace. As the elder brother viewed his younger brother, the Pharisees looked with disdain on socially disgraced "sinners" and never saw their own spiritual poverty. The truth is that they were worse by far than the publicans and "sinners" with which they accused Jesus, because those outcasts frequently knew and readily acknowledged their sinfulness – something of which no self-respecting Pharisee would ever have been guilty. Therefore, as Jesus once told them, "*the tax collectors and harlots enter the kingdom of God before you*" (Matthew 21:31). And yet God loves them, and pleads with them also to come to the party. What a great Father!

News and Notes:

Remember to check the prayer list for those with ongoing spiritual weaknesses and physical illnesses.

"...Pray for one another...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."
James 5:16