

The Older Brother Syndrome



I don't claim to be a prophet, but I have a prophecy for this church today.

Here it is:

"If the people who are now a part of this church cooperate with what the Spirit of God is about to do here, this congregation will experience phenomenal growth. This growth will not be what most people would consider normal church growth. It will be the result, rather, of an influx of people from the margins of society. The kind of people most churches never see except when these folks come for food or a helping hand."

And here's the amazing thing....

Even though most of these new brothers and sisters will have little or nothing to put in the plate...

This church will thrive in every way.

It will thrive spiritually.

It will have more than it needs financially.

But we will first have to be cured of a syndrome that afflicts almost every church on earth. It's called, "The Older Brother Syndrome".

Now the parable that we call, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son", has been misnamed. It should be called, "The Parable of the Older Brother".

Because when Jesus first gave this parable, it was given as a rebuke to a bunch of self-righteous, religious types who resented the fact that Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners.

"If Jesus is a man of God, if he really is a prophet, why is he eating with tax collectors and sinners? Why does he spend so much time with people who have wasted years of their lives in sin?"

So Jesus answers these religious phonies with a parable.

Here we have two sons of a father who loves them both

- He never stops loving them but they don't seem to get it.

The younger son takes his inheritance and goes traveling, blowing it all. He's a mess. But no less a son. In fact, this young man is the source of untold anguish and worry because the father loves him.

This son is just like these sinners that are coming to Jesus, just like those conniving tax collectors.

Has God written them off?

Has he abandoned them?

NO!

There's not a day goes by that the Heavenly Father doesn't come out and look down the road and hope, and long for their return.

Then one day it happens:

I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants." And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to make merry.



Luke 15:18-24

This is exactly what Jesus is doing for these tax collectors and sinners.

He's welcoming them home.

Opening his arms in love.

Creating a new life for them.



Now we get down to the nitty gritty of the parable.

We're looking at....

The older brother who's out in the field.

The good son who never left the farm.

The good Christian who went to church and did all the proper things.

Of course, if this older son really *knew* his father and loved his father, he'd be the happiest man on the farm. He'd be out there singing in the fields. Treating the hired servants with kindness. He'd be fun to have around.

As it is, this guy is a real pain. He's a nitpicker. If there's anything to criticize, he'll find it.

Now he hears music coming from the house, and laughter, and dancing. Dancing? He's a "good Christian", he doesn't believe in dancing!

He calls one of the servants, "*What's going on in there?*" "*Why, your brother has come home and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.*" "*That does it! I ain't goin' in there! All the years I worked on this farm! Did they ever celebrate like that for me? But when he comes home after wasting all that money! Living it up in Vegas! Running around with call girls! they kill the fatted calf for him!*"



Why is it that people who come in off the street, people who wasted years of their lives going the wrong way, when they find their way to Jesus,

God seems to fill their hearts with such joy?

Why do *they* seem to have such a good time?

But notice, Jesus isn't condemning the older brother. He isn't putting him down.

He's telling this parable to all these nitpicking Pharisees in the hope that some of them at least will allow him to cure them of "The Older Brother Syndrome".

This self-righteous, self-pitying envy which has poisoned their hearts.



Just as the father pleads with his older son, so Jesus pleads with the Pharisees and with us;

And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours."

In other words;

Open your eyes and behold the love God has for you!

Repent of that hardness, that self-pity that prevents you from receiving God's life.

There was a woman named Grace. She's with the Lord now, I'm sure. Grace never missed a Sunday at Messiah Church. She visited the sick. She ran the church kitchen. She attended Bible Study.

One day a commune of "Jesus People" from northwest Detroit suddenly needed a place to stay. The leadership of Messiah Church invited them to use the gym until they sorted things out. This invasion of young men with long hair and beards and young women in long dresses, with a leader who looked like Fidel Castro was too much for poor Grace. She was sure that "hanky panky" was going on up in that gym! How could these young men be Christian, walking around in long hair?

The "Jesus People" came to church. They were full of joy. They had no idea how Grace felt about them, and adopted her as "Sister Grace." "Good morning, Sister Grace! Praise the Lord, it's good to see you, Sister Grace." Grace broke down and invited a few of these strange Christians to dinner, so she could get a closer look at them. They prayed before the meal. "Thank you, Father for this magnificent meal. Thank you for the warmth and kindness of your servants, Grace and Harry." The "Jesus People" melted Grace's heart.

It took her a while to figure out that every time she rejected one of these outsiders, she was rejecting her own name.

It's an awesome thing to be named Grace. It's a lot to live up to. And for a church named Grace - that's really a lot to live up to!

Every time a prodigal son or daughter walks into this place, if we had eyes to see, we'd see that they did not come alone.

They were brought here by a friend and that friend is Christ himself.

If we welcome them with open arms, guess who stays here with them?

If we fail to give them a real welcome, and they turn and walk away, guess who walks away with them?

And every time a prodigal son or daughter walks into your life or mine the same thing happens.

They didn't come alone.

They were brought by a Friend.

If we give them the brush off, Christ goes with them.

“His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!’

And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Luke 15: 28b-32

Jesus never told us whether the older brother broke down and decided to join the celebration or whether he walked away with a bitter heart.

He never told us, because....

We are the older brother.

And we have to decide whether we’re going to go into the party or stay outside.

One thing is for sure. The party for the return of the prodigal is going on all over the earth right now. Lost sons and daughters of God are coming home.



Wherever it’s happening people are having a good time! They’re singing and dancing, eating and drinking, and praising God for his goodness! The party will continue until Jesus comes back.

It’s a lot more fun to be in there celebrating than to stand outside listening from a distance.

Back to the prophecy.... Prodigal sons and daughters are going to begin stumbling across our paths, into our lives, and into this church in greater numbers. The thing about these people is that you won’t have to twist their arms to come to your place for dinner or to have a coffee with you.

Plus, they’re really serious about finding their way back to God.

They know something is missing in their lives and they’re searching.

All we have to do is what Jesus did.



Open our hearts in welcome to these people who are trying to find their way back home and who for some strange reason keep coming to us.



Eat with them.
Have coffee with them.
Talk with them.
Listen to them.
When the time is right, don't be afraid to pray with them.

**And you'll be amazed, not only at their joy,
but at yours!**



Prayer: Oh yes Lord, give us the insight, the heart, and the compassion to celebrate when prodigals....the broken, the lost, the rejected ones come into our midst. And yes, forgive us for our self-righteous envy....this poison that bitters our hearts like the older brother. And instead of standing on the outside filled with bitterness, may we come into the party celebrating and shouting for joy at their redemption. Help us to welcome them, truly welcome them in every little way we can and share in your redeeming joy because they are saved, because of your tremendous mercy and because you are their friend and loving father. Amen.

Maranatha Mirror

*Message: Richard E. Bieber 2001 Nova Scotia (sermon has been edited to apply to any church or Christian gathering)
Featured Art: Sculpture- Reconciliation (various angles) a sculpture by Margaret Adams Parker on the campus of Duke Divinity School, North Carolina, USA. Paintings and mural- Courtesy and kindness of Ross Boone at Raw Spoon rawspoon.com*

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HAS BEGUN HIS REIGN