

Parable of the Prodigal Son
Part II, The Elder Brother
A lesson in bitterness and forgiveness
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Poison brought to the party: The celebration had barely begun when the resentments of the older brother became an issue. The one considered dead had come to life again; the lost one had been found. The father, consistent in his love for the younger and the older alike, is rejoicing and the servants are celebrating withal. But now comes the poison. The elder brother, a picture of how legalism works, comes with his disdain, his arguments and his contempt for the brother who repented.



Rembrandt's Prodigal Son Is that the elder brother in the background? He was not there when the prodigal made his confession to his father.

Root of bitterness: We will never know if the elder brother listened to the wise counsel of his father. If he didn't, the root of bitterness would have taken over his life and defile others as well.

Forgiveness and bitterness. Forgiveness, the opposite of bitterness, has the power to bring back dead relationships and to recover lost friends and family members. But like the Scribes and Pharisees which we see in the first two verses of chapter 15, the elder brother could not readily comprehend the meaning of forgiveness.

The general types in this parable: The spiritual state of the prodigal brother rises during the parable while the spiritual state of the older brother falls. The father remains constant—he demonstrates love toward both and is consistent in demonstrating the love of God. He is a type of our heavenly Father. The younger son represents prodigals everywhere while the older brother represents all those who, through hardness of heart and meanness of spirit, want to bring down judgment on all those who are trying to make straight their paths.

Here then is the second part of the Parable of the Prodigal Son and some comments verse by verse:

Parable of the Prodigal Son, Part II:
The Elder Brother
Luke 15:25-32

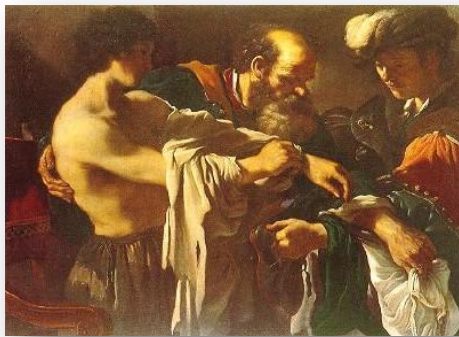
25 “Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. 27 And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has

received him back safe and sound.’ 28 But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. 29 But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; 30 but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’”

The elder brother—high work ethic without love and gratitude. Verse 25 gives us some detail about the work ethic of the elder brother. No one could gainsay or doubt his dedication to the job. No doubt he worked and worked hard. The servants knew his reputation for hard work. Probably he both gave and demanded much. Probably he was thinking of the entire estate as being his own, and that he was now deprived of what his father gave his prodigal brother when he demanded his portion of the estate. He has forgotten that what he is to inherit will also be a gift from the father. He could not be the man he is without the influence, gifts and training of his father. He has long since ceased to be grateful for what he has received, if indeed he ever was.

Doubtless nothing escaped his notice for long. Just so, either in his rounds or because it was the end of the day his path takes him toward the family home. Now he hears music and dancing.

A servant omits some critical details. Verses 26 and 27: One of the servants is summoned from whom the elder brother determines the details of what has happened concerning his younger brother. One can almost feel the sense of indignation and outrage that is building in his heart. The servant gives the briefest of accounts, omitting the truly repentant speech that the prodigal gave his father upon his return, or even any reference to the younger son’s repentant heart. He also does not mention that the prodigal returned in rags, barefoot and penniless. The elder brother may have well assumed that he would be broke, repentant and even broken in spirit, but even if he had it would not mater. He would only take some satisfaction in knowing that the younger brother got a taste of what he so richly deserved.



All he knows at this point is that his father has reacted to the prodigal’s homecoming with a sense of relief and joy, and is preparing a huge celebration—one that should have been given in honor of his own loyalty and hard work, or so he imagines. After all, who else has worked harder for the father? In the view of the elder brother, nobody deserves a celebration less than his brother, and no one more than himself.

The words “safe and sound” from the servant to describe the state of his younger brother are all he cares to endure. He makes no inquiry about his younger brother’s well-being of mind, his

financial state nor his sense of guilt or repentance. “Safe and sound” says it all. The elder brother is disappointed. The young man did not get what he deserved, and now, with the celebration in full-swing, the young man is honored for his folly while he himself is deprived.

Resentment boils over into actions. Verse 28. Now the pot of resentment boils over and anger becomes action. He refuses to go into the house—not even to give a cold handshake to his brother. He could never lend his approval to what is going on by even the shortest of visits and acknowledgement that he, too, is glad to see his own brother back “safe and sound.” So his father, and what a good father to pursue the elder son on this point, comes out with entreaties.

A bitter justification of a bad attitude from a hard heart. Verse 29. Without the courtesy of waiting for his father to make his case or explain why he is honoring a man whom the elder brother sees as a wastrel and scoundrel, the older brother launches into his bitterness full-stride, making his case. His conclusions are in two categories: First that he has not received what is due him, and second, that his brother has been honored and rewarded for unconscionable behavior. In both cases he now blames his father for the omission and commission.

The elder brother justifies himself. “Look, for so many years I have been serving you,” he begins. Certainly the father would agree with the idea that the older son has been both loyal and attentive to his commands. He will not dispute the true nature of the older son’s character. Whether for the right motives or not is a matter of some dispute, but the facts are facts. The behavior of the older brother has been exemplary.

The elder brother disowns his brother attacks his father. Verse 30. “But when this son of yours came . . .” Need anyone say more? How revealing these words are to all who hear them. He has disowned his brother. There is an edge to the words as well—the father is being rebuked soundly by the elder son. A world of resentment and hurt is boiling forth from the elder brother in how he sees the position of his own disowned brother.

He mentions the main sins of his brother: He devoured the wealth of the father (which the elder brother had worked hard to protect). That is bad enough. But how he devoured it is completely shameful. It has been with prostitutes.

He mentions the sins of the father: And what is the sin? Yes, he mentions that a celebration is being given in honor of the dissolute and rebellious one, but that is not the true indictment. It is that the father welcomed the younger son back at all. How could he receive back, save possibly as the most menial of slaves, disowned and dishonored, the man who betrayed them all?

The father in his peacemaking role. Verse 31. The father begins his speech by affirming the elder brother. He acknowledges the rectitude of the elder brother’s opening argument: He has indeed been serving for many years. Indeed, he has never neglected any command of the father. He is set to inherit all the father now has. If the older brother were listening carefully he would realize that the father has committed himself to not giving the younger son another chunk of the estate. No, what he received was squandered. There has been an acceptance of the person back into the family, complete with a signet ring of family authority—but there will be no second portion. “All that is mine is yours,” the father tells him; *all*.

Finally, the father tells him why he has decided to receive back the prodigal and to celebrate the advent of his return: “We had to . . .” When anyone repents he is to be forgiven. We have to. If we do not, we risk losing forgiveness ourselves. Even our Lord said as He concluded the prayer taught to His disciples, “But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” Matthew 6:15.

The father offers a gentle correction. More than that, the father gently corrects the elder brother’s attitude of disowning his sibling. “This brother of *yours* . . .” Not “This son of *mine* . . .” No lectures, no pleading on this point, just a statement of irrefutable fact. The elder is his brother’s keeper. He cannot divorce himself from the family and he cannot disown his flesh and blood.

A fitting conclusion to a beautiful teaching. Concluding, the father gives the same two reasons to the elder brother for the celebration that he previously gave to the servants when he instructed them to prepare the fattened calf: The prodigal was dead and has come to life again. He was lost and has been found.

Forgiveness has the power to bring back dead relationships and to recover lost friends and family members. Bitterness disowns and kills. Forgiveness heals and restores.