

A Tale of Two Sons

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Once there was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the property that will come to me." So he divided up his property between the two of them. Before very long, the younger son collected all his belongings and went off to a foreign land, where he squandered his wealth in the wildest extravagance. And when he had run through all his money, a terrible famine arose in that country, and he began to feel the pinch. Then he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him out into the fields to feed the pigs. He got to the point of longing to stuff himself with the food the pigs were eating, and not a soul gave him anything.

Then he came to his senses and cried aloud, "Why, dozens of my father's hired men have got more food than they can eat, and here am I dying of hunger! I will get up and go back to my father, and I will say to him: 'Father, I have done wrong in the sight of Heaven and in your eyes. I don't deserve to be called your son any more. Please take me on as one of your hired men.'"

So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still some distance off, his father saw him and his heart went out to him, and he ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. But his son said, "Father, I have done wrong in the sight of Heaven and in your eyes. I don't deserve to be called your son any more." "Hurry!" called out his father to the servants, "fetch the best clothes and put them on him! Put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet, and get that calf we've fattened up and kill it, and we will have a feast and a celebration! For this is my son-- I thought he was dead, and he's alive again. I thought I had lost him, and he's found!" And they began to get the festivities going.

But his elder son was out in the fields, and as he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants across to him and inquired what was the meaning of it all. "Your brother has arrived, and your father has killed the calf we fattened because he has got him home again safe and sound" was the reply. But he was furious and refused to go inside the house.

So his father came outside and called him. Then he burst out: "Look, how many years have I slaved for you, and never disobeyed a single order of yours? And yet you have never given me so much as a young goat, so that I could give my friends a dinner! But when that son of yours arrives, who has spent all your money on prostitutes, for him you kill the calf we've fattened!" But the father replied: "My dear son, you have been with me all the time and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and show our joy. For this is your brother; I thought he was dead-- and he's alive. I thought he was lost-- and he is found!" [Luke 15:11-32]



"Once there was a man who had two sons..."
So begins Jesus's parable of the Prodigal Son
which has been the subject
of almost uncountable sermons...
So many that I hesitate to add one more!
But it's a wonderfully rich little story,
with lots of interesting ideas to explore.

This parable has been given various titles,
usually the Prodigal (or Lost) Son,
or the Waiting Father.
I titled the sermon "Tale of Two Sons",
because this morning I want to focus
primarily on the elder son.

This parable is full
of wonderful truths and meanings.
One is, of course, that God loves us
no matter what--
no matter how far we stray from him--
and that when we have messed things up,
he not only waits for us,
but comes running toward us,
and welcomes us back...
celebrates our return with a big party!

There is another aspect to the story:
The son who goes away--
the lost, or "prodigal" son--
is clearly the "blessed" son.
He is the child so secure in his father's love

that he is free to claim his share of the property,
free to go away and squander it,
free to mess up his life generally.

BUT free enough also to repent and return,
and to join in the celebration meant for him.

The older son,
the son who stays home on the farm,
on the other hand,
seems to be the "unblessed" son.
He is not free to do anything.
All his life
he has anxiously watched his father's face
for signs of approval or disapproval.
He is aware that
no matter how early he gets up
to do his chores in the morning,
or how late he works into the night,
no matter how carefully
he follows his father's advice,
he will never make it.
He has no freedom to ask anything of his father,
not even a young goat
to have a party with his friends
(if, indeed, he really has any friends!)

He can't risk
because he can't handle failure,
can't take a chance on messing things up.
Nor can he repent,
return,
admit failure,
be loved and love in return.
He is unable to celebrate,
or dance!

The rules of Hebrew society,
as is true of the majority of societies,
said that the older brother
is to receive the blessing-- the inheritance,
but so often it didn't work out that way!

Strangely enough,
the Bible contains many stories of brothers...
stories in which the younger brother,
rather than the older,
is "blessed",
contrary to the rules of society.

For example, there is the older brother Cain,
who in resentment kills the younger brother Abel,
the one who receives the blessing of God.

There is Ishmael,
who with his mother is banished by Abraham

while his younger brother Isaac
receives his father's blessing.

There is the older brother Esau,
who is defrauded of Isaac's blessing
by his younger brother Jacob.
(Granted, they were twins,
but clearly birth order
was a big issue in their story!)

There is Reuben and the other sons of Jacob,
who resent their younger brother Joseph,
the "apple of their father's eye".

Anyway, here is still another story of two sons,
a story in which the older brother
feels cheated, resentful of
the younger brother who is blessed by his father.

Jesus could have condensed the story,
omitting any reference to the older brother,
emphasizing instead the father's forgiving love.
Most of his parables were very condensed,
with a clear emphasis.

What are we to make of the fact that
he complicated this story as he did,
risking his listeners' missing his main point?
Instead of ending the story on a happy note,
with feasting and celebration,
why did Jesus add this unhappy
and suspenseful ending to the story?

As in the case of the older of these two sons,
I think that many, perhaps most, people's religion
boils down to what they do for God.
When you speak to them about God,
what comes to their minds is
all that they have given up for him.
Or else they get anxious
and start worrying
about what is going to be asked of them.
And since the things that they have done for God,
or the things that they are threatened
with having to do,
seem generally gloomy and difficult,
religion is for them
something gloomy and difficult.
And because they don't want
to have any more to do
than they have done already.
They don't want to think any more about God
than they have to.

I myself identify more closely
with the older brother.

It is difficult for me to celebrate,
to feel and to express joy in life.
It's just not my nature!
I seldom get excited or enthusiastic about anything.
Not at all the "party animal"!

Christians can be divided into two groups--
the blessed and the unblessed,
the free and the burdened,
those who have come to the party,
and those who haven't,
those who think they can come,
and those who think they can't,
those who feel forgiven and accept it freely,
and those who can't quite fully comprehend it,
who can't comfortably accept it.
I, for one, like the elder son,
tend to fall into that second group.

(Karl Olsson,
in his book entitled *Come to the Party*,
divides people into four groups:
--those who doubt that there is a party,
--those who believe that there's a party somewhere,
but that they're not invited,
--those who believe that there's a party
and that they're invited,
but that they don't deserve to stay,
and
--those who are invited, go, and stay.

I did once taste the joy of that party.
During my senior year of college,
I became aware that there was a party going on,
a party that I was missing out on.
After six months of struggling on a conscious level
with intellectual doubts--
the problem of evil, especially:
i.e., why does a good God allow evil,
resulting in so much suffering in the world?
What does it mean
to say that Jesus is the Son of God?
that he is divine?
And so on.

These are all important questions.
But on a deeper level
I was struggling with a fear
of making a commitment,
I finally gave up the struggle
and committed myself to Christ.
I can't very well express in words
what I experienced then
and in the days that followed--
Joy, certainly--

the experience of "Christ in me"--
feeling closer to anyone and more intimate
than I have ever been before or since.
Because I felt "Christ in me",
every thought was a prayer.

I didn't arrive at this experience
by following the "four steps",
(which I can't even recite now).
I didn't experience guilt or
comprehend my sinfulness,
I didn't beg for God's forgiveness,
didn't commit to any doctrinal belief.
No belief in the trinity,
or a substitutionary doctrine of atonement,
for example.
I still had my doubts
about the resurrection being an historical event.

I just recall thinking about how,
left to myself,
I would certainly mess up and waste my life,
and recall praying
that Christ would save me from myself,
by letting me follow him.

Because of my personal experience,
I'm firmly convinced
that the Lord doesn't set conditions
for accepting us into his kingdom,
conditions such as "correct" belief,
that we confess our guilt and express remorse
and beg forgiveness.
Jesus simply requested of his disciples,
"Follow me!"
Only after living with him daily for several years,
being taught by him,
did Peter finally proclaim his belief
that Jesus was the Messiah, sent by God.
Only after the crucifixion did Peter fully realize
his own weak and sinful nature.
All that Jesus first asked of Peter and the others
was that they follow him,
live with him,
and allow themselves to be taught by him.

It was only after my experiencing his presence
that Christ made me become aware
of my weaknesses, faults and failings,
and hit a stumbling block.

Sometimes it is our own consciences
which are overscrupulous--
We find it almost impossible to believe
that God can be more merciful to us

than we are ourselves.

Perhaps it's also a matter of pride--

We are prepared to sweat and plod along
some "Road to Salvation" that we've mapped out,
but to accept what the New Testament presents
as God's free gift
is an insult to our precious sense of achievement.
We attempt to repeat the atonement,
rather than to accept it!
I think that was a problem for the elder son.

At any rate, it's important to make sure
that the Gospel we proclaim
is in fact "Good News".

Often the Christian message seems to start out
like one of those jokes that goes,
"I've got some Good News and some Bad News--
First, the Bad News...."
And then the poor listener is subjected
to a condemnation of his sins.
It is **not** Good News to tell someone
that he is a hell-deserving sinner.
Convincing someone that they are guilty,
in order to bring them to repentance,
is not Good News.

A lot of Christian preachers
quite often start at the wrong end.
They try with all their power
to convince people of the depth of their sin.
That doesn't seem to be the way used by Jesus.
His way was to call people to follow him,
to follow his way of life,
and to share his quality of living.
I think he knew quite well
that people who sincerely try to do this
will discover quickly enough
their own selfishness and sinfulness.

If someone means business
where God is concerned
and is trying to follow Christ's way,
he won't need anyone to tell him
of his own weakness and sinfulness.
He'll find out soon enough!

Christians pay too much attention to the fact of sin,
and too little to the possibility
of becoming and living like "sons of God"....
this possibility **is** the Good News!

Contrary to our usual ideas about forgiveness,
God's forgiveness doesn't depend
upon our first feeling guilty.
To "repent" doesn't, as the Bible uses it,

mean to feel guilty and remorseful--

It means to turn around,
to change directions,
to follow Christ's way.
But even this kind of repentance
isn't a pre-condition for forgiveness, is it?
Jesus, on the cross, asked of God,
"forgive them,
for they don't know what they're doing."

The Father in the parable
had undoubtedly forgiven his son
even before he turned around and returned home.
That, Jesus taught us, is simply God's nature!
Then, as is true today,
this aspect of God's nature was hard to accept.
It doesn't seem "right", somehow.
It violates our idea of God's Justice.

Moslems, for instance,
respect Jesus as God's prophet,
but they refuse to accept his divine nature
because they can't accept the idea of a God
who's so "unjust"--
who doesn't take vengeance on his enemies,
but suffers abuse from them,
who lets the wicked do as they please,
and who, instead of annihilating them,
anxiously hopes
they will eventually return to him.

If this idea of a suffering God is bothersome to us,
it means that we haven't yet got God's spirit.
We're what are called deists, perhaps,
but not really Christian.
For us to resent God's being
so generous with forgiveness--
forgiving "them", at any rate,
implies a belief that
we are somehow more deserving than "them".

That was the issue
separating Jesus and the Pharisees.
That was the problem
faced by the Prodigal Son's older brother,
who was outraged--
"How dare you forgive this son of yours....!"
Neither the Pharisee nor the older brother felt
that the Father was too generous in forgiving them,
because they underestimated their own need
and misunderstood forgiveness.

"God alone can forgive sins,"
the scribes argued,
and accused Jesus of blasphemy

when he told the paralytic man
that his sins were forgiven,
and healed him [Mark 2:7].

Perhaps they're right.
"God **alone** can forgive sins".
But does this mean
that God alone may forgive,
God alone is authorized to forgive,
that we aren't allowed to!
"God alone **can** forgive sins".
No! Rather, this is a description of God--
Only God knows **how** to really forgive.
We certainly don't.
As the old saying goes,
"Women forgive, but never forget."
On the other hand, we men, I've heard it said,
"forget, but rarely take
the time, thought, or trouble
to forgive."

Perhaps you ask,
"Is this guy suggesting that God is
throwing open the gate to heaven,
inviting everyone in,
even the unrepentant sinner,
even the most evil person we can think of?"
(such as Hitler or Pol Pot, perhaps).

Am I carrying this forgiveness thing a little too far?
Am I a (shudder!) *universalist* ?
I suppose that in a way I am--
not that I disregard God's judgment
as well as his forgiving nature.
I don't foresee eternal bliss for everyone,
no more than I see
universal happiness around me today,
even among Christians.

There's a recent newspaper report
that says that over half of all Americans
pray daily!
Perhaps I'm overly skeptical,
but I found that claim rather incredible!
Unless perhaps we're talking about a short prayer
which is said as a lottery ticket is being purchased.
"God, **please** let this one be a winner!"

And I am always surprised
by the occasional report of a Gallup poll
that indicates that
a rather large majority of Americans
believe in God,
believe in an afterlife,
in heaven and hell.

But I think that
their conceptions of heaven and hell
are terribly wrong.

Many people, having never met God,
yet fondly hope to meet him in Heaven.
Many people, myself included, I'm afraid,
hope to be with him in Heaven,
but neglect the opportunity to
experience fellowship with him daily,
through prayer.
Most of us seem to experience a great difficulty
in being faithful in prayer.
We are incapable
of staying quietly in God's presence.
We cannot endure the silence!
We are like the teenagers
who need their stereos as background
while they study for their exams.
We are simply incapable
of praying for five minutes in a row--
not because we don't want to,
or so we tell ourselves,
but because we are incapable of concentration,
cannot endure the silence,
cannot stay in one place,
cannot wait and listen.
Some nervous energy drives us on,
reminds us of some urgent task that we need to do,
some errand that has to be run--
anything to avoid God's presence.

Where was the older brother
in the parable that Jesus told?
--out in the field!
I grew up on a farm,
and spent many long days out in the field,
plowing, cultivating corn,
walking bean rows and pulling weeds...
It was time spent alone with myself.
And I didn't dread it, being an introvert by nature.

So the older brother comes in from the field
at the end of a long day,
and finds a party going on.
He is angry, resentful, hurt.
He realizes
all the parties he has been missing out on.

But I suspect that,
if he could be honest with himself,
he would see that he didn't know how to party--
would just as **soon** be out in the field by himself
rather than at home with his father,
particularly if his father

was sitting on the front porch,
watching and hoping
for his younger brother to come home!

It seems that we want God's salvation,
whatever that is,
without God himself!
To a great extent,
it's because we cannot
fully comprehend God's forgiveness,
the fact that he loves us even as we are.
We don't feel comfortable in God's presence.
Our prayers convey the message,
"Give me that, and I'll leave you in peace!"

We hope to commit no more sins. Why?
So that we're not forced any longer
to go back to him for forgiveness.
We confess our sins. Why?
In order to be rid of the duty of confessing,
so as to be all square with God.
We say we want salvation,
of **course** we want to spend eternity in Heaven!
But in the meantime,
we want to avoid God whenever possible.
And we don't see how inconsistent that is!

Leslie Weatherhead, in one of his books,
describes his idea of eternity
with an interesting analogy:
He likens eternity to a concert of classical music,
to which everyone is not only invited,
but obliged to attend.
To one fellow-- Joe, let's call him--
to Joe, who really appreciates classical music,
the concert is sheer delight--
he is caught up in it.
To the fellow sitting next to him-- Bill, let's say--
to Bill, who loves country & western music,
or jazz, or rock music, or whatever,
the concert is totally boring,
agonizingly so.

Joe and Bill sit together, side by side,
but between them is a vast gap.
Bill, the country & western fan,
cannot cross it all in a moment
and be where Joe is.
Joe's years spent listening to classical music,
perhaps studying and performing himself,
have made him able
to enjoy this wonderful experience.
Poor Bill is feeling horribly out of it-- miserable--
he cannot respond to highbrow music,
which leaves him "cold"--

and at a concert,
music is all there is to respond to.

(I don't know
whether Weatherhead was implying
that classical music is more "divine"
than other types of music.
I don't mean to imply that,
and maybe I should have turned the story around
and made it a C&W concert,
with a captive audience
of miserable classical music fans!)

Weatherhead says,
"I never think of heaven and hell as two places.
I think it must be hell to be in heaven
and not be able to enter into its delights--
like being at an endless concert and being deaf,
or like being at a banquet and having no appetite."

God's presence,
if Weatherhead is right,
will surround us, like music at a concert,
will penetrate our very being.
If you'll allow me to switch metaphors,
his presence will be a light
which will expose our sinful nature,
expose how self-centered we are,
how proud, ...

Can you imagine what that must be like
to someone who cannot feel forgiven?
The person who knows God's forgiveness,
will also see more clearly how sinful he is,
but on the other hand,
he or she will also experience
the joy of being forgiven.

C.S. Lewis says somewhere,
"It may be that salvation consists not
in the cancelling of [our shame],
but in the perfected humility
that bears the shame forever,
rejoicing in the occasion which it furnished
to God's compassion,
and glad that it should be
common knowledge to the universe....
If so, it would indeed be true
that the joys of Heaven are,
for most of us,
an 'acquired taste'--
and certain ways of life may render the taste
impossible of acquisition.
Perhaps the lost are those
who dare not go to such a public place."

God surely judges, but he also forgives freely...
I believe he judges, but he doesn't condemn.
God doesn't refuse us,
doesn't throw us out of his presence,
doesn't bar the door to the party.
There are no "bouncers" at the door
to throw out the partycrashers.
It is we who condemn ourselves
by avoiding his presence.
It is we who, like the elder brother,
condemn ourselves
by staying outside and refusing to join the party.

C.S. Lewis has a fascinating little book
called *The Great Divorce*,
It's a fantasy in which
he describes a vision of heaven and hell.
Hell is a drab, colorless city.
New arrivals in hell
disembark at the center of the city,
but as time goes on,
and they quarrel with their neighbors,
or find the need for more solitude,
they eventually migrate toward the outskirts--
the suburbs--
but the city is endless and sprawling,
and as they spread outwards,
the people grow more and more
remote from each other.

Leaving regularly from the center of the city,
in Lewis's story,
is a tour bus to heaven.
Most people live so far from the city's center
that they can't (or won't bother to)
make it to the bus stop.

But many do make it there,
and the book tells the story of
a busload of these 'tourists'
after they arrive in heaven and get off the bus
for a day of sightseeing.
At the end of the day,
the tourists are invited to stay in heaven,
but nearly all of them find it not at all to their liking,
and get back on the bus when it's ready to return.

Some cannot tolerate
seeing themselves in broad daylight
as they really are.
Some cannot stay in the same place
with someone they cannot forgive.
Some cannot free themselves
of some vice or habit

which has become their master
and which forces them to return.
Some cannot give up their position
or social status back in hell.
For various reasons,
they are not yet ready to remain.
They condemn themselves by returning to hell!

According to both Lewis and Weatherhead, then,
our future in eternity will not mean
ceasing to view ourselves as sinners,
but in seeing that fact ever more clearly,
and either accepting it
and rejoicing in God's power and incredible love
which can rescue us in spite of everything,
or else we will deny it,
think of some justification for our sins,
and try to rationalize it away,
shutting out the light
which exposes us both to ourselves and to others.

We may confess our sin,
but deep down think,
"I may be no better, but I'm no worse
than the next guy.
Sure, I have my sins,
but basically I'm a decent sort.
Under the circumstances,
I do about as well as anyone could expect."

"The rain falls on both the just and the unjust,"
Charlie Brown's dog Snoopy was told,
and he complained,
"But what about all of us in-betweens?"
(The original author of these words
considered rain a blessing, I'm sure,
but I'm not sure
that's how Snoopy viewed the rain!)

The older brother in the parable
appeared to be one of these "in-betweeners"
that Snoopy refers to.
That's why I think he was "unblessed".
He was in that respectable middle group--
neither very holy nor very sinful.
He was not one of those for whom Jesus came.
Jesus said,
"I've come for sinners, not for the just...
I've come to save those who are lost!" [Luke 5:32]
The older son wasn't blessed
because he didn't consider himself a sinner.
("Look," he said to his father,
" how many years have I *slaved* for you,
and never disobeyed a single order of yours?")
And because he didn't feel like a sinner,

he couldn't feel forgiven.

The "in-betweens" only make believe they are sorry for their sins, and because they can't admit their sin, even to themselves, they can only make believe they are forgiven. Like the older brother, then, they aren't able to join the party. They haven't anything to celebrate. The tragedy--the irony--is, that these "in-betweens" are already forgiven, if they could only realize it. God has already generously forgiven them. "All that I have is yours...", the father says to his elder son.

The parable ends here, with the father's plea to his older son. Jesus doesn't tell us how it ends but leaves us in suspense. How does the older brother respond to his father's plea?

I thought that it would be interesting to try writing alternative endings to the story, like one of those kids' books that used to be (still are?) popular. But I think that my time is up, and I need to end here.

Each of us "elder brothers" (and sisters) have the responsibility of writing our own ending!

footnote to the sermon:

During the past 25 years or so, several books have been published about experiences of people who have had near-death experiences, who have been clinically dead, but have been revived. One of these books was "Life After Life", by Dr. Raymond Moody, a psychiatrist, who interviewed many such persons and found a commonly recurring story. I don't know whether or not these experiences might have some completely natural explanation. Perhaps. But they do make for fascinating reading. In a typical report,

a dying man hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor...

he sees his own body from a distance, and the attempts to resuscitate him... sometimes he becomes aware of the presence of friends and relatives who have already died previously... and he becomes aware of the presence of what is usually described as a "being of light", a loving, warm spirit, who asks him, in effect, "What have you done with your life?"

I quote from Moody's book:

"In being pressed to explain as precisely as they can what the point of this question was, most people come up with something like the formulation of one man who put it to me most succinctly when he said that he was asked whether he had done the things he did because he loved others, that is, from the motivation of love. At this point, one might say a kind of judgment took place, for in this state of heightened awareness, when people saw any selfish acts which they had done, they felt extremely repentant. Likewise, when gazing upon those events in which they had shown love and kindness they felt satisfaction.

"It is interesting to note that the judgment in the cases I studied came not from the being of light, who seemed to love and accept these people anyway, but from within the individual being judged....

"In thinking about all this, it has occurred to me that a very common theme of near-death experiences is the feeling of being exposed in one way or another. From one point of view we human beings can be characterized as creatures who spend a great deal of our time hiding behind various masks.... we hide our innermost thoughts and certain of our deeds from the knowledge or sight of others.

"However, in the moments around the time of death, all such masks are necessarily dropped. Suddenly, the person finds his every thought and deed portrayed in a three-dimensional, full-color panorama. If he meets other beings he reports that they know his every thought and vice versa...."

Moody includes quotes from a lot of interviews, such as the following:

"Then it seemed there was a display all around me, and everything in my life just went by for review, you might say. I was really very, very ashamed of a lot of things that I experienced... That's the part that has stuck with me, because it [i.e., the being of light] showed me not only what I had done but even how what I had done had affected other people...."

Another person said,

"Now, he asked me about love. How far had I learned to love? What he was asking was obvious to me then, but it is so hard to explain now. He wanted me to understand that it was the kind of love that has nothing to do with downgrading people. Could I love people, even when I knew them really well, even their faults, was what he was asking."

and another:

"He showed me all that I had done, and then he asked me if I was satisfied with my life... He was interested in love. Love was it. And he meant the kind of love that makes me want to know if my neighbor is fed and clothed and makes me want to help him, if he is not."

Frankly, I'm not sure exactly what to make of these accounts.

They shouldn't be considered scientific proof of anything, but I think they are certainly consistent with Christian ideas about God.

