

# 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 believe 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 stereo 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!

**mmmmmm**  
*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.

mmmmmmmm