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]

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, I 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 Pharasees.
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 Pharasee 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 Gods 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.
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."
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",
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.