

# *When Being Good Isn't Enough*

*Luke 15: 25-32*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**January 21, AD 2018  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---

The impulse to leave the Father's house to pursue life on our own terms is universal in the human heart. Of course, not everyone departs as dramatically as the younger son. Some of us stay home, like his older brother, and dutifully take care of our responsibilities. We have not had any major breaks with the values we received as children. Our parents rarely worried over us late at night. For the most part, we have maintained our faith in God, perhaps even serving in the church as part of our civic responsibility. Communities are built upon such people. Churches make pillars out of those who are like the older brother in Jesus' story. But such is human nature that good people can get estranged from home as well, without even leaving the premises.

When the younger son returned home, the father called for a feast. Almost immediately, there was music and dancing in the house. But there was still time left in the workday. The young man's older brother was out in the fields tending to the farm. As he got near the house, he heard the merriment and wondered what was going on. He asked a servant boy and was told, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." As he thought about this, the elder brother got so angry that he refused to go to the party.

Shortly afterward, his father came out and pleaded with his son. But it did no good. The young man replied, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your commands, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!"

*Elder  
brothers  
secretly feel  
that they are  
not worthy of  
God's love.*

In the course of an hour, the father had gained one son, but had nearly lost the other one. Suddenly, it seemed that a happy, normal life all along had been a life of drudgery. Was this what it meant all these years? The elder brother perceived his life as working like a slave, obeying orders, slogging through each day in unexpressed hopes of some reward of distracting entertainment. He lived with his father and, yet, was as far away as a foreigner.

## **An Absence of Joy**

The elder brother's sudden declaration of estrangement was extreme. In varying degrees of intensity, though, a number of us may experience this kind of distance from God. One common quality our faith may have with the older son is a dearth of joy. We find, perhaps, that we have no particular antipathy toward God; we simply have trouble getting deeper than the surface of religious practice. Some of us who go to church, say our prayers and try to live a good life nevertheless realize that if our faith stays small, our experience of God is negligible. Persisting in us is a quiet sense that, while others can connect with God, we do not. Others seem like they get it, and we may look like them; yet, we feel that, through some fault of our own, our spiritual life simply is not vital. Elder brothers secretly feel that they are not worthy of God's love.

Furthermore, resentment can build in us when the elder brother's sense of duty blocks our connection to the joy that is supposed to underlie all the work:

- If we pray without experiencing the presence of God, before long the activity is mere empty habit or neglected altogether.

- Going to church regularly becomes drudgery when appearances before others replace warm fellowship.

- We can scoff at the stories of the ways God transforms lives when it seems that only those who have been as prodigal as the younger brother receive rich experiences of grace. Aren't there any rewards for being good? Do you have to mess up your life and the lives of all those around you in order to know the joy of salvation?

- We can burn out on mission work when there is no underlying spring replenishing our energies.

- It is no joy at all to check our impulses and live self-controlled, moral lives if we have no sense of being part of a higher purpose by doing so.

So, faith can become just a chore. God can be but one more burden in a life of requirements. And being good simply isn't enough to restore our joy. Despite all we do, we never feel good *enough* to truly rejoice in the Father's presence. We may feel as lonely for God as if we'd gone to the far country.

## **Too Much Responsibility**

Another quality we may share with the elder brother is a feeling of bondage to our responsibilities. The younger brother left without a thought toward how the family would get along maintaining the estate in his absence. The older son, though, never entertained thoughts of leaving for long. He knew that he was needed, and he lived in service to duty. This can happen today just as well.

For example, one child leaves town, makes her own way, gets married, and raises a family miles from home. Another child stays nearby and tends the family heritage. When the parents grow ill, the child at home takes on the burden. He feels he has no choice and, in fact, wouldn't want an alternative. But how it burns when that spendthrift sister can hardly manage a week away from her life to lend a hand!

Children who grow up in alcoholic families sometimes may find the same struggle, magnified to disastrous dimensions. One child seems to bear the weight of the family in her own body. It's her fault that Mom and Dad fight. Her father drinks because she – the unexpected, unwanted child – was born. She spends her life trying to fix things, trying to take control of the uncontrollable, shoveling her life into the bottomless hole of her parents' addiction. Is it any wonder she gets migraines no doctor can explain? She is the one who cleans up her father, makes dinner, does the laundry, and becomes the family counselor at age 13.

And, oh, how she hates her brother who seems unaffected by all this! He comes and goes as he wishes. He feels no compulsion to stay and fix things. It's not his fault; he won't buy into it. He's got his own life to live. And, so, he incurs the righteous indignation of the poor little one caught in a trap that has made her old before her time.

Or maybe it's simpler than all that. Some people have a stronger sense of responsibility than others. They take burdens upon themselves willingly. The needs of others always weigh upon them. Most of the time, this way of life is fine. But there are days when resentment builds – they carry so much while others seem to skate along: How can it be that other people find God so easily while I struggle every day to be faithful and get nowhere? How can that person just waltz in here after the rest of us have held things together for so long?

I experience the elder brother's anger when I feel that everything depends on me, and no one appreciates my obvious contributions to the maintenance of the cosmos. I begin to squirm over my toil. No one is helping me. Why do I have to slave away at this when no one cares? When my children were younger, I used to serve my family this peevishness as I served breakfast. My attitude said, "Here's the food your loving father has made for you, you ungrateful wretches!" All the time I was blocking the joy in my life.

In such a state, I would fail to see how the love that I have for each of my children could flow through such simple tasks as pouring cereal. I would fail to

notice *them*. Now that they are older and have left the house, I see what joy I squandered in my hours of petty indignation.

Whether the task is as simple as making a meal or as serious as caring for an aged parent, those crushed by a sense of duty find that the work never ends. The temptation toward bitterness (and, so, to a disconnect with God) will be great. Elder brothers are prone to resentment. Their path to joy must be found beneath the surface level of circumstances.

## **You Are Always with Me**

We said earlier that the father in the story is the source of a blessed life. His house is a celebration of abundance balanced with hard, but satisfying, work. Labor, for this father, is to live out one's full potential. There is joy in working his fields and contributing to his resources. In the midst of a famine, the father extends a generous hand and offers food. The father in the story represents God our heavenly Father. His house is our deepest home.

*He already was with the father. All he had to do was become aware of that reality and enjoy it.*

The elder brother was part of that vigorous house, but he lost his connection to the joy of its life. He could not find a reason for laboring to maintain it, and so it seemed to him a house of slavery.

The father replied to his peevish boy, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." The father assumed that the son desired to be with him. I wonder if the elder son had ever thought of that. This is a wonderful reversal. He didn't say, "I am always with you," implying something about himself, as if he hovered around the son, restricting his freedom; rather, "*You* are always with me."

What did the young man think of that? Perhaps he wanted to answer, "No, I'm not. I'm out working in the fields most of the time. The sun is there, making me thirst, sapping my strength. But you spend the day looking down the road for my brother. I don't see you until the end of the day, and we rarely have much to say."

Then the father might clarify, "Look, you, my son, are right here, in my home, on our farm, doing our work. You are near me, you have access to me at all times. You can be with me whenever you want. I always have time for you, but I won't hound you while you are busy. I am always interested in what you are feeling and doing."

*The joy he desired he already possessed!* Already, he always was with the father. All he had to do was become aware of that reality and enjoy it. Jesus in this story is telling those of us who are elder brothers, frustrated and striving, that we already are with God. That is our status. God is not hovering over us to scowl when every duty is not perfectly completed. In all that we do, we already are with God. We may enjoy the house of blessing in which we already live.

What would it mean to you if God were to say, “Daughter, Son, you are always with me. It doesn’t make any difference whether you are thinking of me; I am always thinking of you. I am keeping you with me.” Every moment, we are with God. God is with us. We already are connected!

### ‘All That Is Mine Is Yours’

The father also said, “And all that is mine is yours.” I like to imagine the conversation that could have occurred when the elder son began thinking about this:

**Son:** “You mean I’m free? I could go off and spend all your money, and have parties and live away from home?”

**Father:** “Of course. That has always been an option.”

**Son:** “I could ask for anything I want and get it?”

**Father:** “Yes.”

**Son:** “I could quit, and the farm wouldn’t fall into ruin?”

**Father:** “Of course not. It doesn’t depend on you. You may contribute if you like and share in our harvest. But I have plenty of resources. You may go if you like. Do you want to leave your work and home now, like your brother?”

**Son:** “Yes. Well, no. Actually, I like being responsible; I really have always liked being at home. I just get tired sometimes of all I have to do.”

**Father:** “Leave the burden of the harvest to me. I’ll see to that.”

**Son:** “But don’t you want me to do better? Aren’t you going to tell me to earn my way?”

**Father:** “Son, you are already with me. You already have all that I have. Now, come into the party. It’s all right to celebrate. The work will keep. Your brother has just returned to his senses and come home. He was dead and is alive again. He is back with us. He was lost and is found.”

There is a lifting of a burden in the father's words. No more striving is needed. Right now, already, all that God has is ours. God is always with us. Our work, then, is the joy contributing to God's work: creating the estate of blessing that he offers to the world. And though we labor, the harvest does not depend on us. God is the master of the house. Our joy is to be living as those who already belong and already share in the life of God. We can leave if we want to; God's land will still be plowed; the harvest will still be reaped. We can take off if we desire, but we already know, that deep down, we don't want to go – particularly now that we know God is responsible. We need not sweat to prove our worth anymore; we need not strive to get the inheritance. That is all done. It is all taken care of already. Because of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

*Our joy is to be living as those who already belong and already share in the life of God.*

Earlier this month, a colleague told the story of a game he plays with his young son. It started when the little guy climbed into his father's lap while he was watching TV. The boy couldn't get his attention. So he put both his little hands on his father's cheeks and pulled his father's face towards him. "Hi!" he said. His father replied, "Hi!" The boy said, "I love you." So the dad answered, "I love you." From that moment they have been repeating the ritual. As a game now, the dad will try to move his face from side to side while the laughing boy tries to capture his cheeks. But it always ends the same way. The father is caught in the boy's hands because he wants to be. "Hi!" "Hi!" "I love you." "I love you."

Your Father wants you to stretch forth your hands and speak to him. He does not play hard to get. Speak to him. See him smiling. Urging you into the party. Try on these incredible declarations. Walk through the days thinking and acting as if it were so: You are always with me. All that is mine is yours."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This sermon comes from my book, *Discovering Jesus: Awakening to God* (Lenoir, NC: Reformation Press, 2007).