

## INTRODUCTION

Over the last three weeks we have been looking at what has been called the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In this masterpiece, Jesus communicates several lessons. I believe the main point of this story is to show us what God is really like; He not some impersonal tyrant who is too busy to care about you. He is a loving Heavenly Father who has numbered the hairs on your head. He will forgive you when you return to Him. We also learn that if you wander away from God, you can repent and return to His open arms. Today, as we look at the older brother, we learn another important lesson.

Let’s review the first part of the parable. A man had two sons and the younger son demanded his inheritance and took the money and ran. He went away and wasted all the money on wild living. He ended up broke, hungry and miserable in the mud and mess of a hog pen. When he came to his senses, he confessed to God that he had sinned and he headed home. He wasn’t sure how his father would receive him, so he was prepared to take the job of a servant. But when the daddy saw him, he ran to meet him. The Father embraced his son and showered him with kisses. The father dressed his son in a new robe, gave him a family ring, put shoes on his feet and killed the fattened calf. They had a wonderful celebration. It would be nice if the story ended there, but Jesus had a message for the religious Pharisees who were listening. Let’s pick up with verse 25:

Meanwhile the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music [*sun phone*—from which we get our word “symphony”] and dancing. [*choron*—from which we get the word “choreography”] So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. “Your brother has come,” He replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But this son of yours [he’s so mad he can’t even call him “my brother”] who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

There are a couple of famous pieces of art that portray this parable. The most famous is the one done by Rembrandt, but I personally prefer the one painted by the 17<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish artist, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. Cindy and I saw the original oil this summer when it was part of a special Murillo exhibit at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth. I stood before the picture and stared at it for a long time. You can immediately find the father and the prodigal son in the picture, but it’s the little details I love. The prodigal son is gaunt and filthy. His clothes are in tatters. His hands are clasped in prayer and he has a hopeful look on his face as if he is still wondering, “Will he take me back?” The Father is leaning over and embracing the son, oblivious to his dirt and smell. I love the little dog Murillo painted jumping at the son’s knee. Perhaps that was his puppy at one time. You can almost see the little tail wagging furiously as the pup welcomes home his friend.

Behind the father, two servants are bringing a tray with a fine robe and sandals for the boy. Another servant is holding a ring. To the left a young servant is leading the fattened calf, and a workman has an axe ready to kill the calf so the feast can begin.



It's a joyous scene—except for one face. There to the right in the shadows Murillo painted the older brother. There is an unmistakable resemblance between the two sons. At the exhibit I got really close to study his expression in the original work. I was amazed to see Murillo painted a smirk on his face. In his eyes and on his lips you can see the resentment and sarcasm. The younger son is on his knees looking up at the father, but the older brother is the highest head in the painting—as if Murillo intended us to understand he was looking down on the whole scene with indignation and anger.

I call his older brother, the Pouting Prodigal. Although he never left his home physically, it's obvious he had a dysfunctional relationship with his father and with his brother. He represents many religious folks here today who haven't sinned against God by running off and going wild. In fact, your life is so tame and boring that "wild living" isn't part of your vocabulary. You've

been around for a long time warming a pew. But when it comes to really celebrating what God is doing in the lives of others, you don’t rejoice. I’m convinced there are many more people in this room who are guilty of the “older brother syndrome” than are guilty of the younger son’s sin. To see if you are, let’s examine the:

## I. CHARACTERISTICS OF A POUTING SON

After working all day in the fields, the older brother arrived at his house only to hear the Karaoke music shaking the rafters. When he learned the party was for his younger brother’s return, he became angry and refused to enter into the celebration. In his attitude and statements we can find three characteristics of a pouting prodigal:

### (1) An angry spirit of grumbling

Verse 28 tells us he became angry. It’s the word *orge* which means he flew into a rage. When his father came out to plead with him to join the party, he began to grumble and complain. He said, “I’ve never left home and spent all my money on prostitutes, and you’ve never even killed a little billy goat for me!” Can you hear him whining?

Sometimes church members who have been around for a long time get jealous when a church starts paying attention to new people. That’s the older brother syndrome. You can recognize an older brother Christian because they are quick to grumble and complain.

You can call them grumblers, complainer, or grippers. They usually begin a sentence, “Now I don’t mean to be critical but...” and then that’s exactly what they do—criticize.

Hey I’m not angry at these people, the Father loves them, and I do, too. You want to say to them, “Come on in and join the party!” But they’d rather be miserable and stand on the outside with their arms crossed, a sour expression on their face.

They say things like, “Pastor, I don’t think we ought to clap our hands in church, and last week I counted three people that lifted their hands during a song. I’m afraid we’re going to turn into a bunch of them ‘charsmatics’ if we aren’t careful.”

The funny thing is these are some of the same people who will go to a college football game and lift their hands in the air and shout “Touchdown!” Or, lift their claws, or hook ‘em horns, or bend over and whoop—and they are *happy* when they do it! But they’re afraid things are going to get out of hand in church. Vance Havner used to say, “Some people are so afraid of getting out on a limb that they never get near the tree!”

“And, pastor, we sing too many praise songs—the music’s too loud. And pastor, I saw a guy walk down the aisle and he had an earring on—you gotta preach a message against that. And I saw a guy with shorts on!! You gotta stop that. And who brought the drums in the church in the first place? And by the way pastor, our services are way too long, the Methodists are beating us to the restaurants!”

That’s how you can spot a pouting prodigal ten pews away—they are seldom happy and they are constantly complaining about something they don’t like! I heard about a Sunday School teacher who told the story of the Prodigal son. She told about the Prodigal returning and the father hugging the son. The father put a ring on his hand, shoes on his feet and killed the fattened calf. But the older son refused to join the party. After the story it was question time. She asked the students, “Boys and girls, who was *not* happy because the prodigal son returned?” One little boy answered, “The fattened calf!” Funny, but the older son wasn’t happy either. Do you know anyone like that in this church? They just can’t be happy about what’s going on? Maybe you are the older brother who is full of resentment and bitterness.

## **(2) An inflated sense of goodness**

Another characteristic of the older brother can be found in verse 29. He exaggerated his own goodness and he exaggerated his brother’s wickedness. Five times he used the first personal pronoun: “All these years *I’VE* been slaving for you; *I* never disobeyed you. You never gave *ME* a goat so *I* could celebrate with *MY* friends!” And then he compared himself to his brother. “And this little brat of yours goes off and spends all your money on prostitutes.” We aren’t told in the previous verses the younger brother visited prostitutes—that’s just what the older brother said. Perhaps because that’s what he would have done!

There’s no way he had been totally obedient to his father for all those years! But in his mind, when he compared himself to his wicked younger brother, he was proud of his goodness.

In construction, the I-beam is the strongest beam. It’s also the strongest temptation for a Christian. This brother was so full of “I” he couldn’t see the repentance and restoration of his brother. He was blinded to anything but his own feelings. You can block the light of the mighty sun with a thin dime if you hold it close enough to your eye.

You will always mess up when you start comparing yourself to other sinners. It’s easy for you to look at people whose sins are open and vulgar and think we are so much better than them. We must remember there are secret sins of the spirit as well.

Henri Nowen’s life was revolutionized by understanding this point. Nowen was a religious, moral man—a minister who was proud of his goodness. God used this passage to show him he was guilty of the sins of the older brother and it changed his life. He wrote:

“Looking into myself and then around me at the lives of other people, I wonder which does more damage, lust or resentment? There is so much resentment among the ‘just’ and the ‘righteous.’ There is so much judgment, condemnation and prejudice among the ‘saints.’ There is so much frozen anger among the people who are so concerned about avoiding ‘sin.’“

You don’t have to waste your life on wild living. There are the sins of jealousy, pride, anger, and resentment that are much easier to hide.

## **(3) A faulty understanding of grace**

The older brother was insulted because he really thought he deserved better than the younger son. He thought he deserved a fattened calf, or at least a billy goat. He was offended because he thought his brother deserved less. After all, he had been serving in the fields and he had kept all the rules while the brother was off living it up. It just wasn't right!

Older-brother Christians are big on keeping rules. They are the church members who have been working in the church for many years and they think they deserve some kind of recognition or reward for their service. Anytime you start talking about what you deserve you leave the realm of grace and get into the area of human performance. Most pouting Prodigals carry a Bible and attend church and Sunday School faithfully—and they are proud of it, too.

In Matthew 20 Jesus tells a parable about the nature of God's grace. It's a story of a master who sends workers to work in his vineyard. He agrees to pay them a dollar for a full day's work, so they start working at sunrise. At 9 a.m. he sends some other workers to help, and then at noon and at 3:00 he sends some more. Then, just before quitting time, at 5:00 he sends some new workers to help, too. Finally, the whistle blows and it's time for the workers to receive their wages. We'll pick up with the story in Jesus' own words:

“Call the workers and pay them their wages. Start with the last hired and go on to the first. Those hired at five o'clock came up and were each given a dollar. When those who were hired first saw that, they assumed they would get far more. But they got the same, each of them one dollar. Taking the dollar, they groused angrily to the manager, ‘These last workers put in only one easy hour, and you just made them equal to us, who slaved all day under a scorching sun.’ [sound like the older brother?] He replied to the one speaking for the rest, ‘Friend, I haven't been unfair. We agreed on the wage of a dollar, didn't we? So take it and go. I decided to give to the ones who came last the same as you. Can't I do what I want with my money? Are you going to get stingy because I am so generous?’” (Matthew 20:9-15 *The Message*)

To understand this parable you must remember the audience to whom Jesus was speaking in verses 1-2. There were tax collectors and sinners there, but there were also Pharisees. Pharisees were hyper-religious men who were full of their own sense of goodness. They hated tax collectors like Zacchaeus and Matthew. Whenever they saw a tax collector on the street, they would cross to the other side and call their names and spit. “Zacchaeus, (spit)!” And stomp their foot. Jesus is telling us God the Father receives sinners. The Pharisees were trying to *earn* God's acceptance, and Jesus was teaching them they needed God's grace too. For some of you, you are like the older brother. You've known the Lord for years, and you have a proud sense of your own religious purity. You have forgotten what it was like to be lost, and you think you deserve God's blessings. God's grace is available to anyone who comes to Him in repentance. Remember, the thief on the cross? He was saved just minutes before he died, but yet Jesus promised him he would be in paradise with Him—that's grace.

## II. GOD'S MESSAGE TO THE PHARISEE IN THE PEW

Sadly, our churches are full of Pharisees in the pews. Are you one? It’s easy to think about other people being Pharisees, but what about me? Will you stop right now and ask God to examine your heart to see if there is even a shred of a Pharisaical spirit? Will you pray the words of Psalm 139:23-24? “Search me, O God, and know my heart; See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

If you are an older brother type, a Pharisee in the pew, God has some tender words to say to you. In the parable, the father didn’t rush out and say to the older brother, “Get yourself in that house right now or you will lose your part of the inheritance.” No, he tenderly pleaded with him. There are three things God is saying to the Pharisee in the pew.

**(1) “I treasure our relationship more than your work.”**

The father said, “You have always been with me.” He was saying, “It not your work that I cherish—it’s *you*.” Just knowing you were here at home with me gave me a great sense of enjoyment. Mr. or Mrs. Pharisee, God doesn’t want your service as much as He wants *you*. Remember the story of Mary and Martha? Martha was slaving away in the kitchen while Mary was sitting at Jesus’ feet. She became angry at Mary (it’s the older sister syndrome). Jesus said Mary had chosen the one thing that will never be taken from her—a relationship with Him. Some Christians work so hard they have substituted work for worship.

**(2) “You have access to all of my resources.”**

Next, the father said, “All that I have is yours.” He was saying, “If you wanted a billy goat feast, I would have been glad to give you one, but you never asked.” To Christians today, He says, “You are my heir. You are a joint heir with my Son, Jesus. All that I have is available to you right now.”

Sometimes older brother Christians look around and are jealous because it seems other Christians are receiving more blessings than they have. God says, “You have not because you ask not.” Sadly, so many Christians think they have to *earn* those blessings—but its all part of God’s grace.

It’s like the fellow I heard about in Europe who scrimped and saved enough money to purchase a ticket on a ship sailing to America. On the voyage, he looked through the windows into the dining room and saw the sumptuous meals that were being enjoyed, and then he would return to his little room and eat the crackers and cheese he had brought. The crackers soon ran out and the cheese got moldy, and the passenger grew hungrier and hungrier. A day before arriving in America, he was almost fainting from hunger. He finally swallowed his pride and approached a steward and begged for some leftover food. He would be willing to wash dishes or perform any work for food. The steward asked for the man’s ticket. Upon examining it he said, “Sir, when you purchased your ticket all the food we have been serving was included in the price.” He felt like an idiot. All the time, he could have been feasting while he was starving.

The same is true of the Christian life. You didn’t buy your ticket, Jesus paid it all. But everything you need in the Christian life was included, and if you are missing out, it’s simply because you

haven't claimed what is yours in Christ. All the power, all the joy, all the peace, all the security, all the love, all the patience you need is *available* to you.

### (3) “It’s my party, so come join me!”

For a long time I missed what the father was really saying in verse 32. But as I studied in the original Greek text, I saw it. What the father was actually saying was “Son, you and I HAVE to celebrate.” The verb is an imperative. He was saying, “It’s not your younger brother’s party, it’s MY party. I’m the one who’s celebrating because my son was dead and he’s alive. So you MUST join me, not for your brother’s sake, but for MY sake!” The party was not for the Prodigal son it was for the loving father.

That’s the point of the three parables in Luke 15—celebration over lost things being found. In these three stories you can see the Trinity at work. The Shepherd found the lamb—that’s like the work of Son of God. The woman found the coin—that represents the searching work of the Holy Spirit. The dad forgave his wayward son—that’s the work of God the Father. And in all three parables, God was the One who was celebrating. To every pouting prodigal, God says, “Come on; join me in the celebration, because there is *joy* in the presence of angels over *one* who repents!”

Now, how does the story end? We’re left hanging. Does the older brother spit and stomp off into the fields and continue to nurse his bitterness? Or does he uncross his arms and allow his dad to put his arms around his shoulders and they walk into the house together and celebrate the lost son’s return? I think Jesus left it open-ended on purpose. It’s up to you, pouting prodigal. What will you do? The door is open and the Father says, check your bitter, complaining spirit at the door and come on in—enjoy the party.

## CONCLUSION

What a story! What applications for us! There are actually three sons in the parable—did you catch it? There’s the younger son who ran away and returned. There’s the older son who was full of bitterness and resentment. And then, there’s the third son—the Son of God who is telling this story. He left His Father’s house to come to far country of planet earth to die for our sins. He wasn’t disobedient, He was obedient unto death. Whether you are like the younger son, or the older son, or you haven’t even become a part of God’s family, yet. Will you choose the Son of God today as your Savior?

Years ago, I heard an amazing story that may be true or it may be a parable, but it’s a great story. There was a wealthy man who had one son, whom he loved dearly. His wife died in childbirth and he never remarried. He was a lover of art and he taught his son to love fine art. Because he was wealthy, he and his son worked to amass a valuable private collection of priceless works of art.

When he was old enough, the son joined the Marines and was sent to Vietnam. He was killed in action and the father’s heart was broken. A few months after he buried his only son, a man knocked on his door. He had a large wrapped package in his hands. When the father opened the

door he said, "Sir, I knew your son. We were in the same platoon, and he was my best buddy. I'm an amateur artist, so we had many discussions about art. It's not very good, but I painted a portrait of your son from a photograph I took, and I'd like for you to have it." The man was touched and tried to pay the artist, but he refused any payment. He said, "I painted him because he was my friend." Although the picture wasn't that good, the proud father displayed it in a prominent place.

Several years later, the wealthy man died, and his works of art were to be auctioned off. There was millions of dollars worth of art to be sold. Art dealers crowded the home wanting to bid on the Van Goghs and the Monets. The soldier-artist was there, as well, but he was too poor to bid.

The lawyer announced to the crowd that before any of the valuable pieces of art were auctioned off, the deceased had left instructions that the portrait of his son must be auctioned off first. The impatient art dealers complained and said "Get on with it. Get that picture out of the way so we can bid on the real art!"

The auctioneer held up the painting and said, "Who'll you give me \$100 for the picture of the son?" No one replied. Finally, the soldier friend who painted the portrait said, "I'll give you \$20 for it." The auctioneer said, "\$20 once, \$20 twice, sold for \$20." The artist bought back his own painting because he still felt a great fondness for the man's son.

At that moment, the rich man's attorney stepped to front and announced to the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, there will no more bidding. My client left secret and specific instructions that whoever bought the painting of his son would receive all the other works of art at no additional charge. So, the gentleman who bought the picture of his son also receives the other pieces of art. To quote the words in his last will and testament, he wrote, 'Whoever chooses my son, gets it all.' This concludes the auction."

And indeed, ladies and gentlemen, God is saying the same thing. Whoever chooses my Son, Jesus Christ receives it all. Will you choose Him today? If you are an older brother Christian, God is saying, "I love you, I've always loved you—loosen up and join my party." Will you ask Him to forgive you for your bad attitude and take away your critical spirit of resentment and bitterness? Can you hear the music? Can you smell the feast? Come on in.

## OUTLINE

### I. CHARACTERISTICS OF A POUTING PRODIGAL

1. An angry spirit of grumbling
2. An inflated sense of goodness
3. A faulty understanding of grace

### II. GOD'S MESSAGE TO THE PHARISEE IN THE PEW

"Search me, O God, and know my heart; see if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." *Psalm 139:23-24*

1. "I treasure our relationship more than your work."
2. "You have access to all of my resources."
3. "It's MY party, so come join me!"



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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes