

**The older brother**

• His only response to his father's generosity is one of anger and withdrawal

• It is possible to claim loyalty to God and yet be very ignorant of His grace

**The characteristics of good religious people**

1. 'Good' people think that they are accepted by God because of how good they are

2. Such a 'good' person hates the grace of God

3. 'Older brothers' are sinners too, but their sins are more subtle

• Self righteousness, resentment, anger and self exclusion

The third figure in the parable of the lost son is the elder brother. He stands for the Pharisees, who had been so critical of Jesus and His friends. The older brother comes along and hears music and dancing<sup>□1</sup>. He finds out that his younger brother has come home, and has been given a warm welcome<sup>□2</sup>, but his only response to his father's generosity is one of anger and withdrawal<sup>□3</sup>. His father is still gracious even to his angry older son. He has to come out<sup>□4</sup> to explain how he views what is happening. The older brother is as much a son of the father as the younger son, but the father specially rejoices in the recovery of his more obviously rebellious son<sup>□5</sup>.

**It is possible to claim loyalty to God and yet be very ignorant of His grace.** The Pharisees thought of themselves as 'good' people. They were outwardly moral. They attended the synagogues for worship every Sabbath. They claimed to be law-abiding people. They disliked 'tax collectors' (who were employed by the Romans and were greedy for money) and 'sinners' (people who did not keep the Pharisees' regulations). They wanted to be loyal to God, yet they had lost sight of God's grace. These were the people who grumbled at Jesus because He ate with tax collectors and sinners<sup>□1</sup>.

The older son represents good religious people who somehow think that because they are externally law-abiding they are acceptable to God. But the older son, and the religious people he represents, have some characteristics they have not thought about.

1. **'Good' people think that they are accepted by God because of how good they are.** The older brother thinks he is a good son to his father. He has not sinned in the disgraceful way that his younger brother has. This is precisely how a certain kind of religious person thinks. He is a good son to God, he thinks, because he has behaved so well in public and has not disgraced himself.

2. **Such a 'good' person hates the grace of God.** He thinks the grace of God is too easy, too cheap, and is scornful of what he considers is an 'easy' salvation. 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them!' the Pharisees said with scorn. 'This son of yours!' says the elder brother scornfully.

3. **'Older brothers' are sinners too, but their sins are more subtle.** The older son was angered by his father's generosity and kindness. He did not like it that his father was so compassionate towards his wayward son. He thought that he himself was fully obedient to his father. He feels worthy of special treatment by his father. Yet all of this is wickedly sinful –just as the younger son's wild living was wickedly sinful. The older brother's spirit is entirely wrong. He is sarcastic about his younger brother. He omits any respectful way of speaking to his father. He feels that he has been a slave for his father (the very thing that the father did not want!).

The older brother's sins are self-righteousness ('never did I disobey your command'), resentment ('you never gave me a goat') and bitterness ('this son of yours!'), which show themselves in his anger and self-exclusion.

- 1 15:25
- 2 15:26-27
- 3 15:28a
- 4 15:28b
- 5 15:29-32

□1 see 15:1-2


4. *The hero of the story is the father*

- *He takes the initiative in seeking reconciliation*
- *No mention of atonement*
- *Parables are not intended to teach a wide range of doctrine*
- *The Father waits for the prodigal to come back; and He waits for the law-abiding people to come inside*
- *Surprisingly, the one from a far country discovers grace. The older brother in the next room misses it*

4. **The hero of the story is the father.** He treats both sons well. He waits patiently and lovingly for the younger son to return, but he also responds patiently and lovingly to the elder brother. The elder brother stays away from the father, but the father does not stay away from him. The elder brother takes no initiative in seeking friendship with either his father or his younger brother, but the father takes the initiative in seeking reconciliation with his older son, and also tries to get the older son to be pleasant to his younger brother. The elder brother speaks of ‘this son of yours’; the father speaks of ‘this your brother’, gently correcting the older son’s attitude.

There is no mention of any atonement for sin in the parable of the lost son, but we should not make any special deductions from this. Parables are not intended to teach a wide range of doctrine. They have one or two main points, at most three. One should not expect them to have teaching other than the few central points that each parable makes. It is important to remember that this parable is being given as Jesus is steadily making His way to Jerusalem to die. Luke has already told us that Jesus has ‘set His face’ to go to Jerusalem<sup>Ⓜ1</sup>. The parable of the lost son is not isolated; it comes in a setting where Jesus is travelling to Jerusalem to die as a sacrifice for sins. God is a ‘waiting Father’ because the sacrifice for sins is about to be made. As for ourselves, we may know that God is reconciled to us in the cross of Jesus; now God ‘waits’ for us to be reconciled to Him. ‘Younger sons’ (wild and rebellious people who have ruined their lives) and ‘older brothers’ (respectable people who are thought to be law-abiding) are both in need of the graciousness of their Father. The Father waits for the prodigal to come back; and He waits for the law-abiding people to come inside. The surprising thing is that prodigals often come home from a far country but the law-abiding people do not come inside the place where everyone is celebrating. The elder son is not in a far country; he is nearby, but he still stands outside and misses the party. The one from a far country discovers grace. The older brother in the next room misses it.

Ⓜ1 9:51

		<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p> 
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