



Discipleship 101 New Believer Lesson #20 The Return of the Prodigal - The Lost Elder Son



Based on the Book,
The Return of the Prodigal Son,
by Henri Nouwen
as well as
The Cross and the Prodigal,
By Kenneth E. Bailey

By Andy Madonio
July 18, 2011

Introduction:

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.

Luke 15:25-28

It is very helpful at this point to have read the entire 15th chapter of Luke, and re-read verses 11-32 several times, so you have this story firmly in your mind. The story begins with a family – a father and his two sons, but soon is revealed as a terribly dysfunctional family.

As I have stated before in previous *Return of the Prodigal* lessons, it is vital you remember that when reading Jesus' parables, you are asked to see yourself in the parable. Which character are you? Which one have you been in the past, and which one may you become in the future? The parable seeks your introspection and begs for careful, truthful self-analysis.

The Rebellious Elder Son:

We learned in D101 Lesson #19 that the father had a plan in mind to rescue the younger son; he was determined to protect the younger son from well-deserved and self-inflicted punishment that the village would most certainly inflict upon him if he showed his face again.

The father waited, then he raced to intercept the boy and initiate restoration, moments before cruel restitution and revenge spun out of control.

The father waited and watched, waited and watched, but the elder son had other priorities; he worked, unwilling to let his baby brother's misdeeds interfere with his ordered, structured life. Therefore, he completely missed the emotional return and surprise welcome of his prodigal brother. Remember, the elder brother refused to

take his historical and expected role in negotiating between his younger brother and father regarding the request to liquidate the estate. He refused to do his duty; he refused to acknowledge his rightful place in the family, clearly implying he wasn't really interested in being part of the family.

The elder brother was as lost as the younger brother, but simply chose to abide apart while living under the family roof. [Rembrandt depicts this](#) in the tense space placed between the father's tender embrace and the stiff, stoic, elder brother. Nouwen describes Rembrandt's masterpiece:

"With the elder son in the painting, it is no longer possible for me to sentimentalize the "return." The main observer is keeping his distance, seemingly unwilling to participate in the father's welcome. What is going on inside this man? What will he do? Will he come closer and embrace his brother as his father did, or will he walk away in anger and disgust?

"The way in which the elder son has been painted by Rembrandt shows him to be very much like his father. Both are bearded and wear red cloaks over their shoulders. These externals suggest that he and his father have much in common . . . But what a painful distance between the two! The father bends over his returning son. The elder son stands stiffly erect, a posture accentuated by the long staff reaching from his hand to the floor. The father's mantle is wide and welcoming; the son's hangs flat over his body. The father's hands are spread out and touch the homecomer in a gesture of blessing; the son's are clasped together and held close to his chest. There is light on both faces, but the light from the father's face flows down through his whole body – specially his hands – and engulfs the younger son in a great halo of luminous warmth; whereas the light on the face of the elder son is cold and constricted." (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pg 68-69).

The younger son was clearly rebellious, hopelessly lost, and left home to seek "freedom." The elder son was always at home, but wandered away from the father spiritually and mentally, if not physically. He was rebellious in his duty as a son, as a brother, and as a distinguished member of the village. He isn't even curious enough to find out for himself the source of the music and dancing; he sends in a servant so as to avoid interaction with his father.

But he was angry and refused to go in. Luke 15:28a

Bailey remarks: "The older son is angry. Everything left in the house is legally his. The father still maintains authority, but the property [all that is left] is his. The recently butchered calf is also his. Perhaps he feels his father had no right to butcher it without consulting him.

"But there is something else . . . The older son is expected to stand and serve all through the meal as a "head waiter." The only difference between him and the other servants is that he joins in the conversation with the seated company. By stationing

the older son as a servant the family is in effect saying, “You, our guests, are so great that our sons are your servants.” This task is always fulfilled by the oldest son in the house. It is standard practice . . . But in this case the honored guest is his *brother*. The very thought of serving his brother is not endurable! . . . His standard of village honor does not permit this . . . Reconciliation and restoration without a penalty paid by the offender is too much to accept.

“His response is crucially significant. He refuses to enter the banquet hall. The guests have arrived . . . the male members of the family *must* come and shake hands with the guests even if they don’t stay and visit . . . It would be a personal insult to the guests and to the father if any member of the family refused to fulfill his ritual courtesy. But this is what the older son does. He thereby intentionally insults his father publically.” (*The Cross and the Prodigal*, pg 68-69)

The Father’s Response to the Elder Son:

His father came out and entreated him. Luke 15:28b

For the second time that day, the father responds in a way no one of that culture could have expected.

Again, I rely on Bailey’s words: “In direct contrast to the son who summons an inferior to demand an explanation [of the music and dancing – V. 26], the father goes out to “entreat” (*parakaleo*), to “appeal to,” to “try to conciliate.” . . . So the son summons the youth to stand facing him, as an inferior should. But the father tries to “entreat” his son. He calls on him to “stand alongside” his father, to look at the world from the father’s perspective.

The father *had* to pay the price of self-emptying love in order to reconcile the prodigal to himself. Now he must pay the same price to try to win the older son. The father *must* go out to his boy in humiliation if he wants a son. If he is satisfied with a servant, self-emptying suffering is unnecessary. He can bring the boy in and beat him. But this will cause great bitterness and deeper estrangement. If he overlooks the incident, he is finished as a father. The son would then try something more radical the next time. The father does with his son the only thing that can be done. Indeed, was not this the only thing a loving God could do with sinful men?” (*The Cross and the Prodigal*, pg. 80-81)

Rejoicing – The Only Option:

But he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' Luke 15:29-30

In the first verses of Luke’s parable (three stories that really make up one parable), we see: the shepherd takes responsibility for the lost sheep ([vv 3-7](#)); the woman takes responsibility for the lost coin ([vv 8-10](#)); and the father bears the burden for the prodigal younger son.

The elder son, vested with many important duties in the cultural setting of Jesus’ day, refuses to acknowledge any ownership of the family’s struggles or perform any of his expected functions. Bailey notes importantly that the prodigal is portrayed by history as the rebel of the family, and rightly so. The elder son, however, shows a hidden rebellion, one that can be seen residing comfortably in today’s church – the rebellion against authority, against duty, and against properly expressing familial love. He refused to acknowledge basic family responsibilities that would have avoided much of the turmoil the prodigal’s actions initiated. He says, “I never disobeyed your command,” but he has abdicated his family duties, and the family has suffered greatly for it.



Have you been the elder brother, neglecting duties Jesus expects his disciples to perform within your church family? Your blood family? Your community? Are there areas in which you can contribute to strengthen your faith family, like including brothers and sisters who seem to be drifting, always left out of group activities; giving comfort to those who seem to be hurting – even if you might not know them well – get to know them?

The elder brother has neglected and damaged, by omission, all of his family relationships. He refused to intercede on behalf of his younger brother. He insults his father by refusing his duties as family member and host of the proceedings. He views his father the same way his prodigal brother did – as a manager or supervisor, not as a loving father – bemoaning “you never gave me a celebration like this one for this son of yours,” not willing to even call him “brother.” He says all this in the presence of the servants and some guests, brazenly airing the family laundry for all to see.

The Restoring Father:

And he said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.” Luke 15:31-32

Again, the father’s love continues, unabated even in the face of such anger, hostility, and self-absorption.

In [verses one and two](#) of this parable, the Pharisees were unhappy with Jesus because “he receives sinners and eats with them.” The father wears such bitter claims with pride as he is forced to explain why a celebration is necessary and fitting. The shepherd needs to offer no explanation when he brings back the one lost sheep. Similarly, the woman doesn’t explain to her friends and neighbors the source of her joy at finding the lost coin. Yet the father is forced to explain to his own son why there is joy in this event.



What can a disciple, an apprentice of Jesus, do to keep the “family” in the best spiritual health possible? What can you specifically do? What areas can you be the elder brother, the “father-in-training” for those in your range of influence? Pray and ask the Lord to allow you to serve in his home as an elder brother, bringing strength and wholeness to the church family.

Unity in the Heavenly Family:

In spite of everything the father endured on this day, he is not short of grace towards those who have so wounded him. To his angry, rebellious, unloving elder son he simply says, “Son, you are always with me.” Nouwen closes this lesson out:

“The joy at the dramatic return of the younger son in no way means that the elder son was less loved, less appreciated, less favored. The father does not compare the two sons. He loves them both with a complete love and expresses that love according to their individual journeys. He knows them both intimately. He understands their highly unique gifts and shortcomings. He sees with love the passion of his younger son, even when it is not regulated by obedience. With the same love, he sees the obedience of the elder son, even when it is not vitalized by passion. [\[To the pure all things are pure . . . Titus 1:15\]](#) With the younger son there are no thoughts of better or worse, more or less, just as there are no measuring sticks with the elder son. The father responds to both according to their uniqueness. The return of the younger son makes him call for a joyful celebration. The return of the elder son makes him extend an invitation to full participation in that joy.” (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pg 80-81).

“The words of the father in the parable, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours,” express the true relationship of God the father with Jesus his Son. Jesus constantly affirms that all the glory that belongs to the father belongs to the

son too. There is no separation between Father and Son: ["The Father and I are one"](#); no division of work: ["The Father loves the son and has entrusted everything to him"](#); no competition: ["I have made known to you everything I have learned from my Father"](#); no envy: ["The Son can do nothing by himself, he can do only what he sees the father doing."](#) There is perfect unity between Father and Son. This unity belongs at the center of Jesus' message, ["You must believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me."](#) To believe in Jesus means to believe that he is the one sent by the Father, the one in and through whom the fullness of the Father's love is revealed." (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pg 87).

?

The father is uttering those words to all his disciples – “Child, you are always with me.” What does it mean to you knowing the father is not eager to lose his own, going to the ends of the earth for his children? How can you better be his apprentice in actions towards his other children, becoming the father to them? Find out and begin to do it – be the father – do the gospel.

[Note – This lesson can be downloaded in PDF format for printing or sharing]