

THE OLDER BROTHER

Farmer Joe was in a serious accident and decided to take the trucking company responsible for the accident to court to help pay his medical bills. In court, the trucking company's expensive lawyer was questioning farmer Joe. "Didn't you say, at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine'?", questioned the lawyer. Farmer Joe responded, "Well I'll tell you what happened. I had just loaded my favourite mule Bessie into the..."

"I didn't ask for any details," the lawyer interrupted, "just answer the question. Did you or did you not say, at the scene of the accident, 'I'm fine'?" Farmer Joe said, "Well I had just got Bessie into the trailer and I was driving down the road..." The lawyer interrupted again and said, "Judge, I am trying to establish the fact that, at the scene of the accident, this man told the Highway Patrolman on the scene that he was just fine. Now several weeks after the accident he is trying to sue my client. I believe he is a fraud. Please tell him to simply answer the question."

By this time the Judge was fairly interested in Farmer Joe's answer and said to the lawyer, "I'd like to hear what he has to say about his favourite mule Bessie." Joe thanked the Judge and proceeded, "Well as I was saying, I had just loaded Bessie, my favourite mule, into the trailer and was driving her down the highway when this huge semi-truck and trailer ran the stop sign and smacked my truck right in the side. I was thrown into one ditch and Bessie was thrown into the other. I was hurting real bad and didn't want to move. However, I could hear ole Bessie moaning and groaning. I knew she was in terrible shape just by her groans. Shortly after the accident a Highway Patrolman came on the scene. He could hear Bessie moaning and groaning so he went over to her. After he looked at her he took out his gun and shot her between the eyes. Then the Patrolman came across the road with his gun in his hand and looked at me. He said, "Your mule was in such bad shape I had to shoot her. How are you feeling?" It was then that I said, "I'm fine."

Today let me start by asking, how are you doing? There is no need to say "I'm fine" if your not. We have all been touched by death, because of sin. Let me ask a bigger question. How are WE (as a church) doing? Are we OK? Are we fulfilling our mission? Are we touching our community?

Luke 15:1-2 Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 Then Jesus told them this parable:

Jesus is telling this parable to the religious leaders of the day. The central character in the parable of the prodigal son is not the younger brother or the father. It is the older brother. Not the one who went away but the one who stayed. He represented the ones Jesus was telling the parable to.

Luke 15:25-32 Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 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. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 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.' "

I always find it amazing how unsaved people like Jesus, but they do not like the church. It was the same when Jesus walked the earth 2000 years ago. All through the gospels we see that religious people were offended by Jesus but hurting and lost people were attracted to Him. In every case Jesus chose the outcast over the religious 'scripture believing' leader He had contact with. He attracted irreligious people. Generally today our churches do not. Why do you think that is?

I think part of our problem is that we have become the religious elite of our day. As churches we have become the older brother in the story. The reason we as churches often don't attract the lost is that we sometimes show the same unattractive traits the older brother had in choosing not to attend the party. From the mouth of the older brother we see 3 ugly attitudes:

1. MY SERVICE – I have been slaving for you all these years

When invited into the party the older son reminded his father of all the years he had served him. The Greek word used here is DOULOS which meant a bond servant or slave. The older son is implying that serving his father had been a burden to him and not an enjoyable experience. I have met many Christians who display this same attitude. They may not say it with the same words but their attitude and underlying feelings are exactly the same: being a Christian is difficult - it takes a lot of work.

People who base their righteousness on works do not like the idea of grace. Those who have worked hard for something do not like it when others get the same thing for free.

Matt 20:1 "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. 2 He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. 3 "About the third hour he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. 4 He told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' 5 So they went. "He went out again about the sixth hour and the ninth hour and did the same thing. 6 About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 7 "'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard.' 8 "When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, 'Call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first.' 9 "The workers who were hired about the eleventh hour came and each received a denarius. 10 So when those came who were hired first, they expected to receive more. But each one of them also received a denarius. 11 When they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. 12 'These men who were hired last worked only one hour,' they said, 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.' 13 "But he answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? 14 Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. 15 Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' 16 "So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

It is interesting that the Apostle Paul used this word DOULOS to describe himself:

Rom 1:1 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God

The Apostle Paul had worked harder and had endured more than any of us ever will. In 2 Corinthians Paul addresses some people who were bragging about their service. Boasting in all they had done for the Lord.

2Co 11:23-28 Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. 24 Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, 26 I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. 27 I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. 28 Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul had faced so many hardships in serving the lord but he was not a bitter person. In fact his life was marked by grace. Grace was evident in everything he did and every word he said. How do you keep serving from becoming a chore? You focus on who you are serving.

Phil 3:7-8 But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ

How does the father in the story respond to his son. He reminded the older son of his PRESENCE. He says to the son "you are always with me." The flip side of that statement is "I am always with you!" It isn't what you have DONE that is important – it is who you have DONE IT FOR. It isn't the reward you get for serving but the joy you give.

A woman was married an abusive husband. After they were married he gave her a list of all the things he expected her to do. In time she grew to hate that list and the man who gave it to her. After a few years her husband died. Latter she remarried another man who was kind and loving to her. This husband had no list – he loved her unconditionally. While going through some old boxes she found that first husbands list. She realized that she was now doing all the things on the old list, but they were not a chore because they were done out of love and gratitude and not out of compulsion.

2. MY SACRIFICE – I was never given even a young goat so I could celebrate

Not only does the older brother point to his years of faithful service but he also points out all the things he had missed out on and sacrificed in order to serve his father. Have you ever felt like that? You start thinking about all the things you have missed out on in life because you are a Christian?

I have met many Christians whose faith seems such a burden to them. You get the idea that they were born unhappy. In fact, some people almost give you the impression that unhappiness is a good thing and that suffering and sacrifice are essential component of holiness. I think the church is guilty of sometimes communicating to the world – "if it is fun it can't be spiritual." In reality nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps part of the problem is that we have focused more on the prohibitions than we have on the permissions. Focused on what we CAN'T have more than what we DO have.

Gen 3:1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

God gave us every tree in the garden except one. There were millions to choose from. Instead of focusing on everything they could eat they were reminded by the devil of what they could not eat.

Eve, with all the fruits of Eden blest, save only one, rather than leave that one unknown, lost all the rest. -- Thomas Moore

I think we are like that sometimes. We focus on what we have gone without rather than focusing on all the good things we have been given to enjoy. Jesus came to give us life TO THE FULL. He wants us to enjoy life and has given us everything we need for joy and satisfaction. Years ago a musician named Michael Card wrote a song that has always been one of my favourites. The song says:

There is a joy in the journey, there's a light we can love on the way
There is a wonder and wildness to life and freedom for those who obey

Mark 10:28-30 Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" 29 I tell you the truth, Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields--and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

Notice that Jesus says that those who have sacrificed will receive a hundred times returned IN THIS PRESENT AGE, and then even more in heaven. We often think as Christians that faith is a pie in the sky when you die, but Jesus says here that we get our pie then but can eat it now as well!

How does the father respond to this charge? He reminds the older son of his POSSESSIONS. The father says "everything I have is yours." In this situation this was quite literally true. Everything that belonged to the younger brother was gone. Everything left belonged to the older brother. When the father gave the prodigal the best robe and put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet he got them from the older brother's closet. It was the older son's fattened calf they were celebrating with.

The issue here is that the oldest son was not enjoying what he already had. I think the father is gently saying here to his son "you have not because you ask not". It isn't what you have GONE WITHOUT but what you ALREADY HAVE that is important. If the older son had asked for a young goat – don't you think the father would have given him one? After all, it all belonged to him anyways. He didn't have because he had never asked.

There's a supposedly true story of a woman who lived in a remote cottage in the Highlands of Scotland. She went to a great deal of trouble and expense to have electrical power installed in her home. However, after a couple of months, the electric company noticed that almost no electricity had been used at all. Thinking there might be a problem, they sent a meter reader out to check on the matter. The man came to the door and said, "We've just checked your meter and it doesn't seem that you're using much electricity. Is there a problem?" "Oh no" she said. "We're quite satisfied. We turn on the electric lights every night to see how to light our lamps and then we switch them off again."

Why didn't she use her electricity? She believed in the promises of the electric company – she went to a great deal of trouble and expense to have her house wired for it. She knew the power of electricity. The problem was she didn't understand the potential of electricity and so she used its power sparingly. Likewise God has given us light but we can still choose to live in darkness.

3. MY SINLESSNESS – I never disobeyed your orders

The last thing the son says to the father is that he had never disobeyed him (I guess that did not include refusing to go into the party). He points to his own righteousness. The younger son had walked away from the father physically, financially and morally. His bad decisions had cost the family in every way possible and yet now the older brother felt that he was being rewarded for his actions.

Often we wear this same attitude to church. We take great pride in our own sanctification but then look down on anyone else who may be struggling. Why can't people just be more like us? Jesus is the only person to ever live a sinless life. If anyone ever had reason to 'look down' on others it was Him, but He never did. He spent His time and poured out His life for those who were sinners and outcasts.

Luke 18:9-14 To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: 10 Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' 13 But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' 14 I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

How does the father respond to the older brother's comment? He reminds him that what is really important in life is not PERFECTION but PEOPLE. He says "this brother of yours was dead and is alive again, he was lost and is found." People matter to God. We tend to focus and judge based on externals but God sees the heart and understands the value of every human life.

Jonah 4:9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." 10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left ... Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Jonah was so focused on justice. How could God spare such evil people? He was concerned with his own little vine and the comfort it brought him. God was concerned about the people.

When it comes right down to it, life is all about people. Success is not measured by the achievements and accomplishments we make but by the people we impact. The same is true of the church. It is not the quality of our programs or the size of our buildings that matter. What really matters is people. Are we touching the lives of those around us? Are we making a positive impact in our community. Are people being blessed and finding life and salvation through our ministry? That is what truly matters.

We get so preoccupied sometimes with our own 'vines'. Should we pave the parking lot? What colour paint do we put up in the fellowship room? Should we sing contemporary or traditional songs on Sunday so that everyone is happy? Don't get me wrong, I am not saying these things are not important. They are simply not AS IMPORTANT as people.

I believe our Father in Heaven would remind us today to look above our own condition and comforts to the city that is around us. There are so many people living in darkness who do not know the truth.

So many people dying without the hope of salvation. That is what God is concerned about, and that is what we should be concerned about as well.

One of my favourite movies around Christmas time is Frank Capra's classic "It's a Wonderful Life." In the movie the older brother George Bailey (James Stewart) has dreams of moving away and seeing the world. One crisis after another in the family business leads to George sacrificing his dreams and staying at home to work. He hopes one day his younger brother Harry will take the business but when Harry shows up with a girl he wants to marry and with opportunities to get away George once again sacrifices his own dreams to allow his younger brother to leave.

When World War II erupts, George is unable to enlist due to his bad ear. Harry becomes a fighter pilot and is awarded the Medal of Honor for shooting down 15 enemy aircraft, including one that would have slammed into a U.S. transport ship full of troops.

Trouble comes again when, on Christmas Eve, Uncle Billy misplaces a large amount of money. George's world falls apart and he thinks about suicide figuring that he was worth more dead than alive. He wishes he had never been born. An angel comes and grants him his wish. George has the opportunity to see what the town and world would have been like if he had never existed. He realizes how many lives he has been able to touch.

George is returned to his own life and goes home joyfully to find many people who have heard about his trouble and have come to help. Far more than what was lost is returned and Harry the war hero shows up and proposes a toast, "To my big brother George, the richest man in town."

The moral of the story – life is not about the things you possess or the accomplishments you achieve but about the people you impact. Ultimately the only thing that really matters in life, the only thing we can take with us into eternity is people. Older brother George Bailey finally got it right. Despite his years of service and many sacrifices he finally understood that this truly is a wonderful life.

How about you? Maybe today you are here and at some level you have refused to enter fully into the celebration of grace that God has offered. You point to your years of service – all the times you have taught Sunday School or lead the choir or set up chairs. You point to your years of sacrifice – all the times you stood your ground and said no while everyone around you seemed to be living it up by saying yes. You have tried to do all the right things and be a good person but in doing so have isolated yourself from the very people Jesus wants to reach.

How about us as a church? For all our plans, prayers and programs have we become the religious elite of our day? Have we become the older brother? Today we can choose to stand our ground and enjoy our vines while the world goes by without us. Or, we can choose to join the party. Choose to engage our community and culture and embrace the prodigals that we find there. God's presence is with us, His power and possessions are available to us and the precious people Jesus died for are around us.

Let's put aside our pettiness, and join the party.