



The One Who Stayed

Brad Miller for October 3, 2010

Hi, I'm Brad. I'm one of the older types here who is "married", has a "regular job", has to shave more than once a week, etc. I also have a son named Zane, a daughter on the way, name pending and I just finished up an MBA...which is a good part of why I haven't been up here teaching in a while. So naturally now I'm going to talk to you about how I feel old.

This was a slow process because like with most potentially negative things in life, I was in denial for quite some time, but I recently had three revelations that have made me feel much older. First, I am getting fatter. This really came clear about 3 months ago when Lacey and I were eating at Sweet Tomatoes and I was going to get ice cream. Now, very long ago I learned that at buffets, using the ice cream bowl is for suckers. If you really want to get some ice cream, you take the much larger soup bowl and make yourself a man-sized sundae. However, this trip, when I was bringing my soup bowl to the ice cream machine, there were two other buffet veterans doing the same. One was a very muscular looking college aged athlete enjoying his high metabolism, the other was an older woman who probably weighed about 300 pounds and I'm guessing utilizes the motorized carts at Wal-Mart. To me the guy represented my past, I was a high school and college athlete when I started this trick at buffets, and the rotund older woman represented my future if I continued eating ice cream from a soup bowl...yes even your gender can change from overeating

Second, I am undeniably balding. I can ignore this a lot of the time because I have a green towel. Specifically a dark green towel that does not show dark hair. However, I recently went on a cruise where the towels were white, so after the shower I had a good 20-30 clearly visible reminders that I'm losing my hair. One of the times as I was looking down at my towel full of hair, I remembered when I was growing up finding my dad's hair in the shower drain covered in what I thought was old

person hair grease and I examined my fallen hairs for this grease and realized that what I saw back then was probably just soap and shampoo residue. Regardless, my hair pattern of hair loss is clearly tracking with my father's...not my maternal grandfather as I was led to believe would be the case.

The third thing that made me feel old was reading when I listened to a message recently about the very story we've been covering the past two weeks, the Prodigal Son...and I realized that I now relate more with the older brother...you know the boring, angry one that I always associated with other older people. The message I listened to was by John Ortberg which I now realize is based on a book called Prodigal God by Timothy Keller. What we are going to talk about today, coincidentally, is the older son in this story and what Jesus was trying to teach the religious people of his day through this character. I am going to steal shamelessly from Ortberg and Keller. Some of this will be my own take as well, so whenever you hear something confusing and inarticulate, that's probably my stuff.

Going back to set the stage for this story. The passage begins with the following narration in Luke 15,

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (NIV)

As we talked about last week, Jesus had two distinct audiences for this parable, the tax collectors and sinners who he addressed with the younger son telling them that despite all of their rebellion, disobedience, sin and betrayal, when they decided to turn back to The Father, he would run to them with open arms, embrace them and celebrate with the whole town that his beloved lost son had returned.

The second half of the story, the part about the older brother, the often ignored part of the story is directed toward a group of people that Jesus had multiple run ins with during his ministry, the Pharisees and teachers of the law. As we read in the beginning of the story, the Pharisees did not like that Jesus welcomed “sinners”. To give a little more background on this group, lets look at another place they appear in the Bible where we hear about their reaction to an encounter with Jesus from the book of Mark:

“The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.” Mark 11:18 (NIV)

The parable we're looking at today is one of the teachings that led the Pharisees and teachers of the law to plot to kill Jesus, yet this is the portion of the story that is often missed by today's audiences. Let's read what it says, and remember, this comes right after the younger son has returned and the father has welcomed him back and ordered a lavish party in his honor.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 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 when this son of yours 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.’”

Jesus meant this part of the story to be a wake up call to the religious leaders of the day. He points to their rule following as merely a front and says that in the end, the condition of their hearts will be revealed. He lifts up the sinners in his audience, the people who know they need help, and he tears down the people who think they are blameless and are better than everyone else.

The thing about looking back at the groups that Jesus is clearly opposed to in the Bible, is that we very naturally identify with Jesus and his disciples and internally distance ourselves from groups like the Pharisees. I think we very much miss something when we read these stories and do not look for the parts of ourselves that are similar to the people Jesus is opposing. This story is about the best opportunity to uncover parts of our lives that, despite looking good to those around us, are in direct opposition to the love that Jesus preaches.

So with that in mind, lets take a closer look at the older brother in this story.

When the father comes out to plead with his son to come into the party, he responds by saying,

“Look! All these years I’ve...never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat... But when this some of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

Basically he's saying where was my party these last months and years that I've stuck with you? You throw a party for this schlub of a son of yours who makes one good decision in the time I made hundreds...where's my veal dad? The older brother basically believes that his choices make him better than his brother and that he *deserves* to be celebrated and recognized for everything he has done. This is the first characteristic of the older brother type that Jesus is condemning, **superiority and entitlement**. There were two of this first characteristic because I couldn't decide which one to

use.

This reaction makes tons of sense to me and I'm guessing it makes sense to a lot of us because this is how our country works...you're supposed to get rewarded for your work. If you go to college you're supposed to make more money, if you work hard you're supposed to get ahead. If you apply yourself and do your best you can have the house of your dreams, or the car you want, etc. This idea is more than just how our country works, it is the driving force behind capitalism.

Speaking of capitalism and working hard...like I mentioned earlier, I recently finished an MBA. In my last class, my professor went around the room (there were around 60 of us) and asked everyone why they were getting an MBA. Then we all lied...trying to find any way to say that we most certainly are not getting an MBA because we want to make more money. Maybe not everyone lied, but in one way or another we were all there because we thought getting this degree would help us get ahead. We, or at least I believed that an MBA really meant something, that it was an elite degree that not many people could get. I no longer believe this and found myself during my education getting very upset that some of the people in my class were getting the same degree as me. Let me explain...there are roughly two types of MBA classes, qualitative classes like ethics and marketing where grades are based on participation and group work so you pretty much can't fail, and quantitative classes where there are right and wrong answers, clear skills and methods of analysis that are being taught. I dominated quantitative classes...getting legitimate un-curved As. Others did not do so well, getting uncurved grades as low as 20 and 30%. These grades, however, were curved up to mostly Bs, sometimes Cs, but passing grades nonetheless. So while I thought that having an MBA meant you had a broad view of how business works, that you have the ability to do market analysis, understand economic trends, interpret financial statements, etc....I now realize that much like undergrad, it *should* mean that you know these things, but in many cases it means that you had smart people in your group or that you got pushed through classes because you were trying and the university wants money. Much like the big brother in the story, I felt like my better performance entitled me to something better than my classmates and I was upset when we received the same degree and would look very similar to potential employers.

This is actually a fairly trivial example, and I kind of overplayed the amount of anger I felt to make a point, but when this same attitude extends to the rest of our lives, to how we see people, it is a much bigger deal. The main way this happens is when we forget that we have been forgiven.

We initially come to God like the younger son in the story, ashamed, repentant, very clear that we have messed up, that we are not good enough by ourselves and that we need God. After we turn to God and He forgives us, we begin changing, becoming better hopefully both superficially and in reality. We do fewer destructive things, we treat people better, we begin to even think better thoughts, we also start to watch less reality television, and start liking dogs more than cats and other things that get at the true core of a person's character. Sometime during this changing with God, we begin to think that we are pretty good people. We internalize the changes that God has brought

about in our lives and begin to think that this is how we are...we begin to take credit for what God has done in our lives and forget that all of this was possible because God forgave us. Furthermore, we forget that we continue to need God's forgiveness even when we appear to be "better" or "more righteous" than those around us. We begin to think that we *deserve* be with God, that us and the God of the universe hanging out makes a lot sense. When we begin to think this, we are simultaneously thinking that there are a lot of other people who are not good enough for us and not good enough for God. We start thinking that God forgave us because we were special or good in some way and that this forgiveness and redemption we've experienced is only for the best, the brightest, and the most potentially holy people. This is the sort of thinking that causes so many Christians, or more accurately, most every Christian at some time or another, to come across as, or actually be self-righteous. This is the common manifestation of the attitude of superiority and entitlement that we see from the older brother in this story and it is one of the biggest deterrents to Christianity for people outside the Church.

The power of The Gospel that Jesus is telling in the story of the younger brother is that in Him there is another chance for people who have messed up. That no matter how badly you have screwed up your life, there is a Father who is waiting for you to come home. The self-righteousness of the older brother attitude that creeps into Christians is an attitude that is the complete opposite of this Gospel message. It says that the younger brother is not good enough, that the Father should not and will not forgive. This big brother self-righteousness quiets and strangles the power of the Gospel, confusing the younger brothers of the world and giving them the impression that there is not forgiveness available in Jesus, that if they come home, there will not be a joyous reunion, but rather guilt, rejection, and condemnation. So, the first characteristic of the older brother that Jesus is very not happy about is one of superiority, entitlement and self-righteousness.

For the second one, lets look back at the story...same passage:

"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 when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

This time we're going to focus on the older brother's attitude toward his work. He refers to it as *slaving*. This does not sound like a highly motivated self-starter who works well with others. In fact, it sounds much more like someone who takes no joy at all in what he is doing, but is doing it because he feels he has to. The older brother goes on to point out that his brother has "squandered your property with prostitutes" and is accepted right back into the family when he returns. At this point the older brother is looking at the last years or months that his brother has been gone, comparing what they have been doing...he has been slaving in the fields, his younger brother has been living it up with all the prostitutes his inheritance could buy, and in the end they're *both* members of the family in good standing (sort of). I think the older brother is not only feeling like his work, or his "slaving" is going unrecognized, he's also a little bit jealous of what his free-spirited

younger brother got to spend his time doing with no apparent long-term consequences.

The older brother's language reveals that he has not stayed with the Father all these years because he wanted to, or because he loves his father. He stayed because he thought that by staying he would end up ahead, he would get his inheritance, and be recognized and glorified as the good son. This is the second characteristic of the older brother, he is **joyless in his time with the Father**. He does what the father asks of him not out of love, not because he enjoys the work, but because he believes he must do it to receive a reward. All things being equal, the older brother would actually prefer to live like the younger brother if it didn't mean giving up his good standing, good reputation, and expected reward.

This sort of joyless work being done simply for personal gain is something we see quite frequently. I would say probably a majority of people don't really like their jobs or going to class to the point that they would do it if they weren't getting paid, or expected the end result to be a better life. I remember both in undergrad and grad school staying up late writing papers and wanting nothing more than for the assignment to be done so that I could sleep, or play video games, or hang out with my roommates who never seemed to have work to do. Never during these times was I concerned about actually learning about the subject of my paper, or getting better at writing, when it got really late I even stopped caring about getting a good grade and just wanted it to be done in some kind of non-final grade wrecking form.

In some ways not liking school or work is relatively unimportant, although focusing on actually learning or on having a good attitude at work will make us happier and almost certainly will yield better results. However, this is not what Jesus is referring to in this parable. The older son saying that he has been slaving for the father and never disobeyed his orders is more like someone who doesn't go out partying, sleeping around, cheating on their wives or husbands, or getting drunk, but really wishes they were. They stay in, do the right thing, but all the time a part of them longs for the sinful life that they're forbidden from living. This is a miserable way to live.

The slightly different angle of this is someone who is doing a lot of good things that they know God has told them to do, but doing so feels like "slaving" and the real motive is that the person thinks that not doing so will mean punishment, or guilt, or rejection by God. I have certainly felt this way to some extent and again I think this is a very common feeling. There are definitely times when any of reading my Bible, praying, coming to church, going to small group, preparing a teaching or a message feels like a burden and an obligation. There are times when I have done a devotion out of guilt, when I have thrown together a message because I knew people were counting on me and put very little effort or passion into it. I think this has occurred through the history of Christianity, just take a look at some of the terms common to Christian practices, we call daily time spent with God "devotions" we call things done to draw closer to God "spiritual disciplines", we call doing ministry or helping out at church "serving". These are all terms that for me evoke drudgery and to quote the older brother, slaving. This is not how our lives with God are supposed to be. These tasks that

would appear to be slaving in another context, should be an outpouring of the love God has shown us and that he continues to show us.

Love is supposed to be what motivates us to do what is right. Love is supposed to be what motivates us to not do what is wrong. Love is what the older brother was lacking in his work and it became apparent when he refused to go into the party celebrating his brother's return. What the older brother failed to understand is that staying with the father was not a means to an end, it was the end. The greatest reward that is available in the story of the prodigal son is not the inheritance, the ring that was placed on the younger son's finger, or the robe that was put on him, or even the delicious fattened calf, the greatest reward available in the story is the father. It is living with the father, not working for the father, although that is part of it, it is being with the father and experiencing his love everyday. This is the reward that was always available to both of the brothers throughout the entire story, and throughout the story we see first the younger son choose money instead of the father, then we see the older son choose his anger and superiority over the father.

Much like the first characteristic, Christians being joyless in our relationship with God and being fueled by guilt and obligation instead of by love is another thing that keeps people away from God. This is partially where the idea that Christians are boring and have no fun comes from. This is actually what kept me from really following God for quite a while. Most of the Christians I knew who I thought were more serious about their faith were dreadfully boring. Not the type of people I wanted to hang around with and at the time I believed that this was how serious Christians were. It was not until I saw some people who were both serious about God, and were actually fun to be around and appeared to enjoy life in a way I could relate to that I decided to really pursue God. It's sad that so many Christians, including myself most of the time, go through a lot of the motions of our faith without experiencing the love and the joy that God means for us to have. And this is the sort of thing that people notice. When we only give lip service to the love and fulfillment that Jesus provides, but don't actually experience it, or let it overflow our lives, people can tell that something isn't right.

So to review, the two attributes of the older brother we've covered are that he feels superior and entitled and is joyless in his service of the Father. These are two of the reasons Jesus was constantly at odds with the Pharisees and religious leaders of the day. And as we have talked about, the real thing that upset Jesus about these attitudes is that they kept other people from coming to him. Jesus says this much more clearly to the Pharisees in a passage called the seven woes:

Woe to you teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying.” Mat 23:13-14

Their self-righteousness and lack of love for people made the younger brothers of Jesus day stay away from God, and when we adopt the self-righteous, joyless and loveless attitudes of the older brother we too shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces...and possibly some women's faces as

well. (Maybe briefly point out that this is cultural, God is pro-women)

Alright, we've talked about how we are sometimes like the older brother and how these attitudes that we've identified in ourselves are the same attitudes that Jesus condemned over and over again so what should we do about it? Perhaps sometimes we feel superior and self-righteous, perhaps we are not always convinced that being with God is better than the alternative, perhaps we obey God mostly to feel good about ourselves or because we think we will be rewarded for being good, and we understand that Jesus is saying that these attitudes separate us from the Father and keep other people from turning to him, but what can we do to change these attitudes?

For the problem with superiority we need to learn to continually accept God's grace and forgiveness. The core of this problem is that we have decided that we are good now and we take all of the credit for it. The reality is that we probably aren't that good and that any good changes we have made are a result of God's touch on our lives. We need to abandon the idea that we will someday be good enough or that we can change enough that following God and doing what is right won't require some work and effort. We need to realize and meditate on the fact that we need to be forgiven every day and always remember that we need God. We just got through a series we called Crave where we pointed out that God is the answer to all of the deepest desires of our hearts. Our desire for intimate relationships, our desire for someone to trust and believe in, and our desire for a future that is better than the present. God is the answer to all of these things and living with God is the only thing that will fulfill these desires. We need to remember that we are, on our own, all younger brothers who have done and said awful things to our father and are in desperate need of forgiveness. When we remember that it is only God's grace that makes us good, then we will live lives of gratitude and we will rejoice when our brothers are offered the same reward we have been offered: forgiveness for our mistakes and a future lived with The Father.

The other issue of being joyless in our relationships with God and in our service of him is a matter of what we focus on and what changes in us as a result. When we realize that there are areas of our lives that need changing, we can either decide to fake change and make everything look good on the outside, or we can go through the much harder process of asking God to really change us so that we not only look different, but actually are different in what we think and want. To do this, we must have God's help. The only real concrete thing I know to explain how to do this is to pray and ask God to change you. Then with your efforts (he doesn't do it all) and God working on you from the inside, we can really change. And this kind of change is what will result in obeying God and serving him because we want to, not because we know we should. This is not what the older brother in the story did, or what the Pharisees who are Jesus' audience did either. In Matthew Jesus says the following to them (another of the seven woes):

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you

are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.” Matthew 23:27-28 (NIV)

Instead of trying to look like perfect Christians, we need to allow others to see our shortcomings, and we need to ask God to really change us instead of settling for just pretending to be something we are not.

We're now coming to the end of the message, so let's look at the end of our story. After the angry, self-righteous and “slaving” older brother has said his piece to his father. The father responds saying:

“My son,...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.”

And that's it. Jesus does not say whether the older brother goes in and joins the party, or if he walks away from his father and brother because of this incident. This is very interesting because as we have said, the big brother in this story is the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the audience. This is the group Jesus repeatedly clashed with, a group that as I have shared, I have much too much in common with to feel comfortable reading this story. It is interesting because in this story, Jesus is actually not strictly condemning the Pharisees. He is pointing out their pride, self-righteousness and hypocrisy and then he is, just like the father in the story, inviting them to give up their anger and jealousy and join the party.

You see, just like the Pharisees, those of us who struggle with being an older brother can be forgiven just like the younger brother is. The father is always willing to take us back. All we have to do is let go of our superiority, admit that we too need God and enter into the celebration with the father and our brothers and sisters who were dead, but are alive again. The people around us who were lost, but have been found. Let's go eat some fattened calf.