Big Brother's Blunders

Fifth in the series “More Parables of Jesus.” (The original idea for this outline came from J. T. Seamands in A Feast for Life)

# Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

# Key Thought: Loving God means celebrating with Him when the lost are found.

# Intro:

I mentioned two weeks ago when we talked about the first part of the parable of the lost son that this parable has more than one key point. As we spoke then, one of Jesus’ purposes in this teaching is to highlight again the value that God places on finding spiritually lost people. The story of the younger son and his return to his father, and the account of the father’s celebration of his return makes this point. I mentioned also that it is important to remember in interpreting the parable that the father of the parable represents our heavenly Father.

### Three groups being addressed by Jesus

Today I want us to focus our thoughts upon the role of the elder brother in the parable. There are good reasons why Jesus included the elder brother and spoke about him at length. Remember that I said that Jesus was always speaking to three groups of people in his teachings. He was always teaching his disciples and helping them to understand his teachings about our heavenly father and showing them by example and precept the nature of ministry. That is one group. The second group are those common people who so eagerly listened to Jesus. Many of these could be described as lost spiritually. They were neglected by the religious leaders of the day who disdainfully considered them “common people.” But Jesus addressed them, called them to be his disciples and taught them. The younger son is a representative of many in this group who would be considered lost and needed to return to their heavenly Father. But the third group, who were always in Jesus mind and heart, where the Pharisees. They provided a foil for him because their actions and sometimes their teachings were a contrast to his own. We think Jesus created the picture of the elder brother to speak to them. In the actions of the elder brother, they would recognize their own attitudes. There is good reason to believe that Jesus told this whole parable because the Pharisees were "muttering" about his association with sinners (15:2). And the stories of both sons in the narrative would point out their errors of attitude.

### Good things about the elder brother

It’s good to admit right at the beginning that we much prefer speaking about the younger brother. His sins are obvious. It is obvious he needs to return to God. And we in the church family often have a great deal of sympathy for the elder brother. We hear far fewer sermons about the elder brother. Another reason we don’t talk so much about the elder brother is that he has many major good points. And these strengths of his are good points that we admire in ourselves as well.

* He was faithful to his Father! In the parable, where are we introduced to him? He is out in the field doing the work of the family farming business or watching the cattle or sheep or overseeing other servants as they labored. He was a faithful worker. All the time the other brother has been off being a playboy, the elder brother has been faithful to the task, an admirable characteristic indeed!
* It is likely that he was a hard worker too. Perhaps his own description of his work as "slaving for you" (15:29) is a little hyperbolic, but taking those words coupled with his location when the parable opens and his Father’s attitude toward him help us conclude that it is very likely that he was a hard worker. He was his Father’s right-hand man as we would put it.
* He was obedient to his Father. His Father does not disagree when the elder brother says that he has never disobeyed his Father's orders. He has labored in submission to his Father. So, the working relationship has not been strained by insolence and insubordination. He has indeed been a good son!

So, there is much to like about the older brother. He is free from the obvious sins of the younger sibling. He has many characteristics we admire greatly.

But in this short mini-drama, Jesus does not paint a favorable picture of the reactions of the big brother. Why is that? That is our task for today. What should we learn from what I have called “Big Brother’s Blunders?” I am suggesting four ways that the elder brother was making a mistake—four blunders he was making that teach us in this parable.

# The elder brother was mistaken about His relationship with his father

## The brother’s performance-based model

The first mistake that the older brother was making concerned the nature of his relationship to his father. Clearly, the older son’s idea of how to maintain a good relationship with his father centered around his work performance. He thought in terms of physical conduct not spiritual communion. He thought in terms of duty, perhaps even begrudging duty, though he hadn’t said so. If he was present, and fulfilling his job description, then the relationship was okay. If he should let down in his duties, then he might not be loved. Or maybe, he didn’t even think of it as being loved, just as things being normal. It is not a very big step for us to see that this concept was very much like the religion of the Pharisees. The Pharisees’ idea of how to maintain a good relationship with God had to do with physical fulfillment of certain rules. It was very much a performance-based religion. Pay your tithes. Avoid ritual uncleanness. Meticulously follow Sabbath rules. Don’t eat with Gentiles; Etc. etc.

This kind of thinking about relationship is external and not about the heart. Humans consider this kind of relationship thinking shallow as relating to human relationships. So, it is no surprise that God also does. At another time, Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah as he spoke against the Pharisees.

“‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.’” Matt 15:8-9 NIV

Doing the right things for the wrong reasons, or for inadequate reasons, is just not as high a relationship as our heavenly Father desires. That's why Jesus constantly admonished the Pharisees for their legalism.

Can we relate to this? I’m afraid that we can, all too well. Frequently, Christian commitment degenerates into a guilt-ridden legalistic duty, a grudging faithfulness. We catch ourselves envying those who don’t follow the rules, so to speak. We don’t say it but our idea of our relationship to God has degenerating in a performance-based model.

## The Father’s revelation

The good news of this passage is the revelation of the Father about this relationship.

The Father went out to the older son as well. Just as he has showed his concern for the younger brother by running towards him and hugging him, so the father shows that same concern toward the older brother by going out to the field to plead with him (Luke 15:28). That shows the father’s love for this son too. Then the father says something that should’ve revealed to the older brother that while his father had noticed his faithfulness and appreciated it, the relationship between them was far deeper and based on something much stronger and more lasting than dutiful performance, as good as that was. The father said to the older brother,

## “My son, …you are always with me.” (Luke 15:31 NIV)

What was the relationship based upon? The father is clear. The relationship is based upon the fact that the older brother was his son. That was the rock, the foundation of the relationship. This relationship had a permanence that the father speaks to when he says, “You are always with me.” The father is making clear that this is a relationship of the heart. This is a personal family relationship. It is not a performance-based employer–employee relationship. Rather, it is a family love relationship.

That lesson needs to come across to us as the children of our heavenly Father, especially when we also fall into the performance trap. Once we have opened our hearts to Jesus Christ, when we have asked Jesus to forgive our sins and have opened our spirits to his Holy Spirit, then the Bible assures us that we have become God’s children in a life-giving way. We are no longer simply the products of his creation by flesh and blood. We are now the children of his Spirit too. We have been born a second time; the first in the natural world, the second as a spiritual child of God. This begins a solid loving, joyful and living family relationship between us and our heavenly Father. While Jesus has given us things to do, and while our good deeds will certainly be rewarded, and are even expected, our relationship is not based on our performance. It is based on the gift of sonship and “daughtership” that God has granted through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We need to hear this clearly in this parable.

# The elder brother was mistaken about the nature of righteousness

A related lesson that goes with the first one is this. We need to see clearly that the older brother was very much mistaken about the nature of righteousness itself, as were the Pharisees to whom Jesus is speaking in this part of the parable. This mistake becomes evident as we study the following table which compares the obvious sins of the younger brother with the subtle sins of attitude of the big brother. You see, the elder brother, the Pharisees, and many legalistic Christian since then have been quite sure that if one avoids the obvious fleshly sins, one is certainly righteous. Their definition of “righteous” had only to do with avoiding the sins of the left column. But that is clearly not the whole teaching of Jesus. Certainly, Jesus did not approve of sins of the flesh. He and his followers made it clear that the way of the cross is a way of self-denial and holy living. But Jesus was very clear that he was equally concerned with the sins of the heart that are often hidden. The Jesus definition of righteousness considers heavily what is happening with us regarding such things as are on the right side of the chart too. Consider the following;

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Sins of younger | Sins of older |
| flesh | spirit |
| action | reaction |
| outward behavior | inner attitude |
| commission | omission |
| lack of respect | lack of compassion |
| lack of wisdom | lack of forgiveness |
| wasting | begrudging |

Francis Schaeffer once wrote, "True spirituality is not just outward. It is inward. It is positive inward reality and then positive in outward results."

True spirituality is loving God and then caring about others because God loves them. True holiness shines best in our reactions to the things that happen to us.

The Pharisees could not help but see in Jesus’ description their own attitude toward the poor who came to their dinners and who hung on Jesus words when he was teaching. Think about the woman who poured the jar perfume on Jesus at a dinner. They despised her. At least on disciple bemoaned her wastefulness. But Jesus affirmed her love.

The greatest temptation of strong spiritual commitment is pride. We began to be in some small way like the Pharisee who looked down at the tax collector beside him while they were praying together and said, "I thank you let that I am not like this tax collector here" (Luke 18:11).

The elder brother was full of resentment and anger (Luke 15:30). He doesn't even call the younger son his brother. Rather he uses the phrase, "this son of yours." You can hear the disdain in his voice.

Self-righteous Christians have a way of being harsh on others who don't measure up to their standards. Now I'm not suggesting that we start excusing what the Bible calls sin. But we need to learn to have compassion as Jesus did when he dealt with the woman who was caught in adultery. He told her that he did not condemn her to stoning or to death as the others are going to do. He had obvious compassion on her, rescuing her from the harshness and lack of compassion of those who had condemned her. Yet at the same time he said to her, “Go and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11 NIV).

We need to beware as well, lest we are guilty of defining righteousness only by avoiding the kind of sins in the left-hand column. Respectable middle-class people try to avoid those. But unfortunately, all of us must hang our heads and acknowledge with tears, that we are often guilty, just as the elder brother was, of the sins in the right-hand column. Only in foolish and spiritually harmful self-defense, do we fall into the trap of defining righteousness only as avoiding the sins of the left column, while conveniently forgetting that Jesus’s teachings also often convicted us of sins in the right column.

## Our choice

Jesus does not finish the story. We don’t know whether the older brother accepted the father’s pleas, repented of his snobbery, and came in from the field to celebrate. I think Jesus did not finish the story because the choice is open to the listener. The verdict is still out! The same is true today. This is a time when the verse applies which is our key verse for this message series,

“If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.” (Mark 4:23 NIV)

It is still our choice this morning as to whether we will hear Jesus clearly and understand the need to define righteous as he did. To live rightly is not just to avoid outward sins, but also to repent of sins of the heart and attitude.

# The elder brother was mistaken about His responsibility

Next, we note that the elder brother had gravely misunderstood his responsibility. Certainly, the big brother had been faithful in the field, plowing, sowing, planting, shepherding, etc. But he took no responsibility for others. Had he been there in Genesis, he could have answered with Cain, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9)

This is Jesus main point for the Pharisees who were listening. They were more concerned about lost coins and lost sheep in a physical sense than they were about lost sons in a spiritual sense. They were more concerned with proper robes and proper washings for themselves than with anybody else's soul. They are more interested in splitting doctrinal hairs and defending tradition -- in saving themselves from ritual uncleanness than they were in reaching out to find those who needed to return to the Father. Have we ever been like that?

Today elder brother type commitment to God often expresses itself in the maintenance of church machinery for its own sake, indeed, for the sake of those who were already in the fold. Such elder brother commitment is a commitment to the church as a past institution. It forgets totally that Jesus created the church for a mission. By the defining words of Jesus, his body cannot exist for its own sake! It must exist to call and disciple those who are not yet a part of it. By Jesus’ commission to it, the church was created to seek and to save those that were lost. Jesus gave it a task to be his witnesses, to reach out—to go out into the roads and country lanes and encourage people to come into Jesus’ family.

If we can consider our church Christian and at the same time be happy with the situation when years go by and we have no new Christians or new baptisms to record, we need to listen to Jesus again! If we can think ourselves good Christians without taking any personal responsibility for helping others find Jesus, we need to think again! If we can allow ourselves to go business-as-usual without celebrating when someone far from God returns to the Father, then we have misunderstood the nature of true religion and true righteousness.

Unfortunately, our too-human ideal would be a comfy secluded Christian-only estate with some close Christian friends and family. Then we wouldn’t have to deal with this messy world at all. I hate to say it, but that's a mirror image of the elder brother’s misunderstanding of a brother’s responsibility for another brother. It’s a picture of how we want to seclude ourselves from those needy ones whom Jesus sent us to find.

In the story, the Father pleaded with the elder brother to come in and celebrate when the lost was found. Our heavenly Father pleads with us to be a part of that process too.

Organizational leadership theory tells us that what is celebrated in an organization tends to be repeated. What is ignored does not. Do we want the church geared up to help the lost find Jesus? Then we need to celebrate when it happens! That’s one reason I try to make a really big deal on Palm Sunday when people confess their faith through confirmation and membership vows. But that should not be the only time we get to celebrate.

We need some ideas of steps to take on a weekly and even daily basis. How can we help in reaching others in our world today? Here are seven suggestions.

* Pray for those in your circle who need to move closer to God
* Share the story of something God is doing in your life with someone
* Invite someone to church or Bible study
* Help teach children about Jesus
* Help with a church outreach event such as Suffield on the Green
* Help the church contact or assist a person in need
* Volunteer your skills to help the church with social media outreach

# The elder brother was mistaken about His resources

He thought he was poor. He said he could not even get a baby goat to celebrate with. Did he think his Father was stingy? Did he think he was not privileged to share in the family wealth? Whatever he thought, it was clearly a misconception.

But that misconception is a picture of us, I am afraid. Even though we are children of God, we think of ourselves as having no resources and we act as if we have no resources.

But the elder son’s father gave a completely different picture! His father said, "Everything I have is yours" (Luke 15:31). The father’s resources were his resources! Since the younger brother had taken his share of the inheritance already, all that was left would come to the elder brother. He would receive it all! I think the father was also hinting that the brother could have been feasting quite often if he had asked! Certainly, he was letting him know that he was not without resources. He had access to far more than he was using.

Oh, how much like us. In Jesus we have access to far more than we are using. Our heavenly Father has resources available to us in Jesus that are more then we can conceive.

Since the older brother did not have a true conception of his resources, he was also missing out on the joy they could’ve gone with it. We might even describe him as a sourpuss. I’m afraid there are a lot of Christians like him today. Since, they are very much mistaken about their spiritual resources, they are also without the joy that they should have. Our hearts falter and we join the chorus of our own detractors who say to us as the Psalmist’s ancient enemies said to him,

"There is no help for you in God." Ps 3:2 NRSV

We become discouraged and filled with doubts.

What we need is a more accurate and a God-given assessment of our true spiritual resources. Listen to the Psalmist’s answer;

But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.  
I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill. Ps 3:3-4 NRSV

For example, repeatedly we are encouraged in the Scripture that God will give his people joy.

"The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Neh. 8:10)

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,   
1 Peter 1:8 NIV

Notice how many of the fruits of the Spirit which are operating in the life of every Christian relate to our attitudes and our inner life—every single one of them!

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Gal 5:22-23 NIV

How about the resource that we have for victory in our struggles? Jesus said,

In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

John 16:33 NIV

Everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 1 John 5:4-5 NIV

Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor 15:57 NIV

Take heart this morning! Your spiritual resources in Jesus are much greater than you imagine. Just as the father in the parable came out to plead with the eldest son, God sends his Spirit now to you to encourage you today. Here the message clearly, “Son, All that I have is yours!”