

Elder Brothers Need Grace, Too!

By Paul Anderson

I don't identify with the prodigal son. I never left home for the far country. I didn't shoot my father's wad in a flurry of sinful extravagance. I haven't been a disgrace to my family like he was. I find more in common with the elder brother.



That makes me a little uncomfortable, because he doesn't come out too well in the story. In fact, that is why Jesus told it. We named it "The Prodigal Son," not Jesus. He might have called it "The Prodigal Brother." He directed the message toward people who didn't like the way he was hanging around sinner types, people more into control than contrition, more concerned about their mask than their motive. The parable gives us powerful truths for people like me who have struggled with elder-brother issues.

Honesty is hard for elder brothers.

Ollie, a new believer fresh with the love of Christ—and fresh off the streets—gave me a mouthful as she sat in my office and shared her story.

When she finished, I commented, "You're so honest," to which she replied, "I have no choice." I warned her, "Some people will have a tough time with what you're telling." She smiled and agreed, "I've already found that out."

The body of Christ should be the place where people can tell their story—all of it—and find a safe place, a sanctuary. Unfortunately, it often is the place where we pretend it is good when it ain't. Something in your life may be stinking, but spray it with air freshener before going to church.

Enter the elder brother. He looks good. He's respectable, conscientious, hard-working. When they ask him at the school reunion what his young bro is doing, he swallows hard and says, "Last I heard he was working in a pig pen at Beersheba." Silence. "And what are you up to?" "I'm managing my Dad's farm." Score ten points for big brother; minus 50 for the prodigal.

But it's all a sham. Inside he seethes. He hates a father who makes him work for every penny, who never gives him time off, who talks about the young one coming home some day. When he finally does return, and the father wants him to join the celebration, he refuses. Yet he tells his father to his face, "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders." Hey, Charlie, how about the one you just refused? He's so out of touch with his own hard heart that you couldn't possibly get through to him.

I was two years the elder to my sister Lois. Her rebellion took more recognizable forms than mine. I did a better job of protecting the image. I did the best I could to control her behavior—which meant law, not love. Control was important to me. After college I even tried to tell my dad how to

Lutheran Renewal

(Independent of North Heights Lutheran Church)

Telephone: 651-490-1517 • Fax: 651-486-2865

2701 Rice Street • St. Paul MN 55113-2200

www.LutheranRenewal.org • ilrc@aol.com

Alliance of Renewal Churches

www.arcusa.org • 651-486-4808

The Master's Institute

www.themastersinstitute.org • 651-765-9756

run his church. I had a lot of pride in my own righteousness, and it expressed itself by attempting to control others. Likewise, the elder brother. He tried to shape his younger brother, and he attempted to regulate his father's response to his brother, all the while out of control with rage.



Prodigals can teach us truckloads about honesty. Truth is what calls down the grace of God. Look what happened to the prodigal after his confession—he didn't even get through his prepared speech. Isaiah found out the same truth. His "woe is me" when he had a revelation of God's holiness was followed by a "here is me", when he discovered that God calls weak people. God is not looking for infallibility, but he requires integrity. Soon after Peter cried out, "*Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, oh Lord,*" he turned in his fishing pole for a discipleship manual.

Elder brothers who can take off their mask long enough to be weak will discover just how weak they are—and how great God is. But that isn't easy for elder brothers.

Grace is hard for elder brothers.

You'd think they were talking about different dads. The prodigal tells you how much he was forgiven, how his dad gave him everything he wanted and more. In fact, the things he dreamed of getting in the far country he received when he returned home—freedom, love, respect, clothes, a party, a fancy ring. When his brother opens his mouth, it's just the opposite: "*You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends*" (Luke 15:29). His dad sounds more like a stingy boss than a caring father. Why? Because he considered himself a servant, not a son. He was an employee who clocked in every day, worked hard for his wages, and never expected anything more. Why should he? Employees get what they work for.

Elder brothers are more comfortable with law than grace, with performance than promise. They can't take gifts they don't earn. Darlene could not accept the unconditional love of God, because she didn't get it from her mother and father. Instead she got rules, demands, expectations. If she vacuumed, she never did it right. If she got her hair cut, it was too short. She figured God must be the same picky perfectionist.

God has a way of blessing the wrong people. "Hey, what about me, God? I'm serving you. I am witnessing as best I can. I read my Bible. I am serving you." Careful, you're sounding like Jerry. He served on the Board of Trustees at his church. He outworked everyone else. He showed up for everything. He ushered, he sang in the choir, he volunteered for whatever was needed. Yet

he was a difficult person to work with. He seemed to be keeping score, as if to say, "Appreciate me. I am killing myself for you."

People like Jerry are more common in the Church than we'd care to think. They know about God's grace in their head, but they still believe that it is up to them, by George. They turn love into law and relationship into rule. They stiff-arm the attempts of a caring Father to show them grace out of their need to perform—to earn their way.

They need to take their cue from the prodigal. He embraces grace, he wears it. He fulfills the words of Jesus, "*He who has been forgiven much loves much.*" He discovered that where sin had abounded, grace abounds much more. He walked and lived, stunned by the grace of his father. He knew he didn't deserve it, which made its reception all the more wonderful. Grace is related to truth. When we embrace the truth, we are embraced by grace. It is ironic: people who feel they deserve grace cannot lay hold on it. They can talk about it; they just can't receive it. Grace is hard for elder brothers. But people who know they don't deserve grace will find it being poured on them. There

"He who has
been forgiven
much loves much."

Jesus

wasn't much grace in the far country. The prodigal wanted friends, but "no one gave him anything." He found the source of grace back in the father's house. How are you at giving grace to those who don't deserve it? If you've taken it, you can give it.

Celebration is hard for elder brothers.

There's no time for fun when there's work to be done. So when the party starts to roll, the elder brother is still out in the field. His question to a servant reveals how out of touch he is with a life of celebration: *"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"* (Luke 15:25,26).

Celebration is foreign to elder brothers. They are too serious, too concerned about standards, performances, boundaries, to party. Too many deadlines. The boss expects too much of me.

And yet "the boss" came out and tried to get him to loosen up a bit. *"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'"* (Luke 15:31,32).

When we realize that there are three celebrations in Luke 15, that heaven has a full-on explosion when sinners repent, and that Jesus was telling this story to let us know about his Father, we must be gripped by the words, *"We had to celebrate..."* God absolutely loves his kids. And life is a relationship. Jesus said, *"This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent"* (John 17:3). Life is knowing the Father. The Christian life is not primarily doing something for God; that isn't even close. It is knowing God, being known by him, letting him love and enjoy his family. He is a father—and fathers loves their children. The prodigal's father was so exuberantly happy when the son returned that he HAD to celebrate.

Workers will labor hard but not enjoy life. Martin Luther was working hard trying to serve God as a young monk. When asked whether he loved the God he was trying to please, he answered strongly, "Love God?—I hated him." You may serve that kind of God, but you won't love him. He drives you too much. He expects more than you can produce. Hardly a way to live the Christian life.

Servants get a paycheck, but sons get an inheritance. Servants are paid for work done. Sons are heirs simply because they are sons. Paul wrote, *"Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.' So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir"* (Galatians 4:6,7).



It never occurred to the older son that the father would think of throwing a party for him, because he was an employee, not a child. Sons who live like servants operate in self-imposed poverty. It is all there for them. The father said graciously, *"All that is mine is yours."* And yet the son couldn't get his hands on any of it.

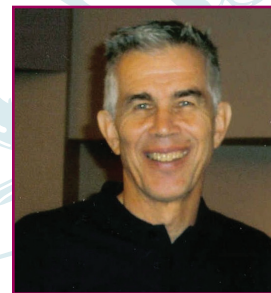
May we be honest enough to admit our need. May we repent of our self-righteousness that has driven younger ones into the far country. May our congregations be gracious enough to embrace the prodigals—and the elder brothers

who need the same grace. May our congregations be known as places of grace-full people, receivers of God's grace in Christ, and dispensers of it. And may we remember who we are—children of God—so we can

celebrate our life in Him.

**"All that
is mine is
yours."**

the Father



Paul Anderson

GOD'S SUPERNATURAL POWER *for a* KINGDOM LIFESTYLE

February 2012 Equipping Conference



Worship band from Lighthouse Community Church in Rosemount



Jack Deere on Friday afternoon: *"Jesus wants to share with us the joy of a life that counts."*



Jack Deere

Jack Deere on Saturday morning: *"The real power is not in what we've done, but in what we've overcome."*



Steve Thompson

Steve Thompson on Friday evening: *"Many times we miss the supernatural because we're looking for the spectacular."*
"Christ in us is God's expectation of His glory coming to the planet."

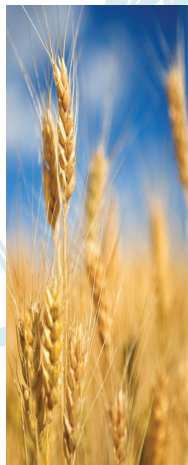


New from Paul Anderson

"Harvest School"

August 27, 2012-May 9, 2013

Location: Arden Hills, MN



A nine-month school for 18-30 year-olds who:

- want to be equipped to think biblically and live radically
- desire to be trained rather than taught
- want to learn how to hear God's voice and know His will

Cost: Entire Year: \$3,500
One semester: \$1,900

For more information: HarvestSchool@gmail.com

The Harvest School is independent of North Heights Lutheran Church and Lutheran Renewal

Arise! Women's Conference • April 13-14, 2012

All In

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

Luke 10:27

Featuring Graham Cooke, with Diane Brask, Carolyn Haas, and Kalley Heiligenthal

Location:
Woodland Hills Church
1740 Van Dyke Street, Maplewood, MN 55109

Early-bird price: \$40.
Pre-registration closes on March 31.
On-site registration welcome: \$50

Brochure and online registration: www.LutheranRenewal.org
For details, please call: 651-490-1517, ext. 20