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THE BROTHER OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Sermon by Rev. Wm. Dobson, Pastor of First Methodist Church Charlottetown.

A Character Not Often Studied His Anger at the Re-joining—The Indifference of Those Who Never Stray to The Sorrow of the Prodigals.

Text:—And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. Luke, 15th. 31st.

I have heard sermons preached, and have read others on The Prodigal Son, but have never read or heard a sermon on this, because the elder brother as truly represents his class as does the prodigal. That we may have the whole scene before us and see all the parts in their true relations, let us first remind ourselves of two or three important facts. First, both boys were sons of their father, and in virtue of this fact were heirs to their father's estate. If the picture be a Jewish scene, the elder son would inherit two thirds, the younger the remainder. Had they both remained at home, one would have been much more wealthy than the other, and as far as social status rests upon wealth, one would have been higher in society than the other. But one day the younger son foolishly, presumptuously, came to the father saying, "Father give me the portion of thy substance that falleth to me" and he divided unto them his living. Though the father made this division it does not appear that he gave away all his own rights in the portion of the elder brother for the father said to the elder son later "all that I have is thine".

Not many days after the division of property was made, the younger son gathered all together and took his journey into a far country. Here he wasted his wealth, wrecked his health, and ruined his moral character, and became what we know as a common tramp. Compelled by the situation, he returned to his home and was received by the father enthusiastically, joyfully. He was reinstated in the family, a ring was put upon his hand, shoes upon his feet, and with the best robe that the house could afford he was clothed. In his enthusiasm and joy, the father prepared a banquet. The fattest calf was killed, the banquet spread, after which the house rang with music and dancing. Such was the state of things in the house as the elder brother was returning from the field and heard it. He called one of the servants and asked what it meant. The servant fully explained the matter to him, but the effect of the explanation was to make the elder brother angry, so angry that he refused to go in, and like a spoiled child he remained outside and sulked.

At this course of conduct on the part of the elder brother one is simply surprised, it is so unnatural. Has he lost all affection for his own brother? Does he no longer look upon him as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh? Can you imagine anything meaner than to see one of any thing grow angry because a member of that family has turned away from dissipation and crime and is trying to struggle up into manhood or womanhood and to occupy the position in the home and the affections of the household that he forfeited long years ago? For a brother to grow angry at such a course of conduct is not only mean but base and criminal. One feels while standing in the presence of such a character that no language is strong enough to denounce it. Yet such was the conduct of this elder brother. Still it was said in the parable that he was a son, orderly and decorous. "Never at any time transgressed I thy commandment" is his statement to his father, and the father never challenged the statement, so we must assume that it is true. This being so there must be something lying back that we have not yet seen. One cannot imagine a man growing angry and sulking at seeing his relatives and friends struggling towards a truer, nobler life. Might it not have occurred to the elder brother that this prodigal who had wasted his inheritance and ruined the reputation of his home and family, is now trying to insinuate himself into the father's affections and thus prompt the father to change the original will? This would mean that there would be another division of the property, and the division could only be made at the expense of the elder brother. That such thoughts were in the elder brother's mind is more than a suspicion, for when speaking of the prodigal to the father, the elder brother renounces his relationship to him, points out the enormity of his extravagance, and the viciousness of the methods employed in wasting his living. As if he had said to the father "He has forfeited every right to your protection and sympathy." When it becomes a financial question, we begin to understand to some extent the conduct of this elder boy. How much disgraceful conduct, how many family feuds and quarrels, how many family feuds and quarrels, I have seen because the father had changed his will and not distributed the property according to the judgment of some members of the family. How many shameful lawsuits have sprung from this very source. How many boys and girls have grown angry at the father, and refused to go into the old home because the father had treated some returning prodigal with kindness and liberality at the expense of the others. It is at these points where our religion is apt to break down, and selfish human nature manifest itself. If it were not for this eternal struggle after wealth, many of us might be better Christians than we are.

Again, it is quite possible, yes, even probable, that another question came up before the mind of the elder brother and tended to intensify his anger. The home seems to have been a very respectable one, and when the elder brother came in to the full possession of the property, he would be a very respectable person and perhaps an aristocrat. And I think it is a fact that

in such circumstances few persons care to be haunted by their poor relations. We do not mind meeting them in the country and having a social talk with them, but when we have given a great dinner and invited Sir Sam Jones and all our aristocratic associates it is very humiliating to see our poor relatives down upon us and be compelled under such circumstances to acknowledge their relationship to us. In British Columbia, in Manitoba, and in some parts of Nova Scotia, there are men whom the people call "remittance men". They are broken down sons of the English aristocrats—men who are either brainless or have in some way forfeited their right to the society of their fathers, and to be rid of them they have been sent out to Canada and their expenses paid from home so that they may not mar by their presence the brilliancy of a social circle in their father's drawing room. The fact is, disguise it as we may, few of us like to be bothered with our poor relatives, especially if it means money.

But again: there is an old proverb, as old as Solomon, and I for one believe it to contain much truth. It is: "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." I am aware that this proverb has to be modified by the laws of heredity, still the fact holds that the boy on the street reflects his home training. When we see those lads around the streets, ten, twelve, and fourteen years of age, smoking cigarettes, swearing and telling lewd stories, we do not blame the boys so much as the parents who have trained them. There is no way by which we can so well penetrate the inwardness of a home as by studying the characters of the children it sends out upon the street. We instinctively feel that the child reflects its home training. I know you will ask me the old question: "Why are minister's boys the worst boys in the community?" In the first place the statement is not true, it is far from being true, and in nine cases out of ten where the minister's boy does turn out bad the cause is to be sought in his home. I am speaking now of what I know. These things being so, it throws some light not only upon "remittance men" but upon the anger of the elder brother. The prodigal had not only disgraced the family by wasting his substance with riotous living, but had become a common tramp about the country, and the elder brother might rightly feel that all this was a reflection upon the family circle, and jealous of its reputation, he became angry. So, in the last analysis we find this elder brother very human, and not doing anything that Christian men and women have not done in nearly every walk of life.

But the parable starts another problem. Here is a wreck of humanity returning to his father's house, pardoned for his past offences and restored to his former position. On the other hand, we have a son who remained at home and never at any time transgressed his father's commandments. Over one there is raptures of joy, while the other is treated as a matter of course. While it seems strange to us, our Lord Himself has said it is right. "I say unto you" said Jesus, "that even so there shall be joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth more than over ninety and nine just persons that need no repentance." Are we to learn from this that the child who has grown up in the fear and favor of the Lord, though there may be clinging about him many things that are unchristian, is no better than the man who has become thoroughly converted after he has gone the whole round of sin? This can never be. It is not only the teaching of the Bible, but the teaching of all experience that the man brought up from childhood in the fear and nurture of the Lord is a better man than he whose moral character has been wrecked by years of profligacy and sin. Such a one is better in the family, better in the church, better in the state than the other. The joy manifested at the return of the prodigal grew out of a consciousness of the awful calamity that is before a non-repentant sinner. It sprang up in the hearts of those who were interested in him, those who sympathized with him, those who had prayed for him. The prodigal rejoiced when he saw the dangers he had escaped. Those who loved him and sympathized with him rejoiced for the same reason, and gladly received him to his home. This, I take to be the consciousness of error of the elder brother. He was not interested in the welfare of his wayward kinsman, he had not loved him as he ought, he had not prayed for him as it was his duty to do, and as a consequence his whole interest was concentrated upon himself. So when the prodigal returned, instead of being a source of joy, he became a source of irritation and anger.

Again, this brings us to another thought. Why is it that we who profess to be Christians and who are apt to say with the elder brother "Never at any time transgressed I thy commandment" are so supremely indifferent to the sin and misery of those around us? I know full well that the joy of pardon depends much upon the consciousness of sin committed, and that he who has been forgiven much will love much. But how are we who are not guilty of enormous sins to realize in our own souls the joys that flow from pardon? "There is joy in the presence of God over one sinner that repenteth" but angels never sin. There was joy in the father's bosom when the prodigal returned, but it is not said that the father had ever sinned, and so it seemed to me there may be joy in our hearts over

the return of erring sinful men. Do you remember the full meaning of the word sympathy? It is a compound of two Greek words, sym, with and pathos, to suffer. It means to suffer with another. Unless we use the word in this sense we are only playing with its meaning. The mother feels its full force when she sympathizes with her sick or dying child. We know something of its force when we stand beside the bed of a sick or suffering friend, we suffer with him. It is this that explains much of the suffering of our Lord. Though perfectly sinless Himself, He suffered with and for the sinner. One of the grandest truths of the New Testament is the sympathy of Jesus, without suffering there is no redemption. So to raise the fallen and bring home the wandering, you and I, as Christians must learn to suffer with them. This can only be done, first, by knowing and studying their condition, realizing all that it means to them both for Time and Eternity. The knowledge thus gained will lead us to an interest in them, an interest which will manifest itself not only in supplying the comforts of life, but in praying for their restoration and their salvation from the sin that has held them so long in bondage. And when one who has been the object of our earnest prayers, and our highest endeavors to save, turns from the error of his ways and begins to build up a new manhood in harmony with the thought of God, it will bring a joy into our hearts analogous to that in the father's bosom when he met his returning prodigal. It is only by such a course, a course that means intense earnestness, that we can be saved from the selfishness that manifested itself in the elder brother when he grew angry and refused to go in.


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