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# THE BEREANS

ACTS 17:11

**Luke 15:25-32**  
Lesson #5  
*The older brother's religion*  
5/31/2026

1

## The Parable of Prodigals

Luke 15:11-32

1. The Prodigal runs away to a distant land.
2. He becomes destitute through worldly living.
3. This brings him to repent and return home.
4. His father graciously receives him back.



**But the story is not over.**

**The older brother is alien to his home.**

2

### Context

*Luke 15*

“<sup>1</sup> Now all the **tax-gatherers and the sinners** were coming near Him to listen to Him. <sup>2</sup> And both the **Pharisees and the scribes** began to grumble, saying, “**This man** receives sinners and eats with them.’ <sup>3</sup> So He told them this parable, saying, . . .”

- The **prodigal son** represents the tax-gatherers and the sinners.
- The **father** represents God (Jesus), “this man” who receives sinners and eats with them.
- The older brother represents the “Pharisees and the scribes” **who don't know the Spirit of God.**

3

*Luke 15*

“<sup>25</sup> Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> And he summoned one of the servants and *began* inquiring what these things could be. <sup>27</sup> And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup> But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him.”

4

“<sup>29</sup> But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and *yet* you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; <sup>30</sup> but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.’ <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost and has been found.’”

5

*Luke 15:30*

“but when this son of yours came, who has **devoured your wealth with prostitutes, . . .**”

**The older brother is preoccupied with the father's wealth and rules rather than a relationship with the father.**

*Matthew 23:27*

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the **outside** appear beautiful, but **inside** they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.”

*Matthew 5:3*

“Blessed are the **poor in spirit,**”

6

“28 But he became angry and was **not willing to go in**; and his father came out and *began* pleading with him .... 31 And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and *has begun* to live, and *was* lost and has been found.’”

**The older son lost nothing.  
He just did not want his brother  
to get anything he hadn't earned.**

**The older son in refusing to celebrate  
showed that he was (spiritually) not at home,  
(and unlike the younger son) he felt entitled.**

7

## Some signs of a “older brother illness”

- Failing to understand the distinction between the O.C. (law) and the N.C. (grace).
- Failing to see that **the essence of life in the Spirit of God is more than** orthodox ethical doctrine and discipline.
- Failing to live by the Spirit **separates us from the glory / grace of God and takes away His witness to the world.**

8

### Profile of the older brother

#### 1. He has a “religious spirit”.

- ▶ **He values his relationship with his father.**
- ▶ **He is willing to make sacrifices for his faith.**
- ▶ **His faith is defined by his ethical behavior.**

#### *Romans 10*

“1 Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. 2 For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. 3 For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. 4 **For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**”

9

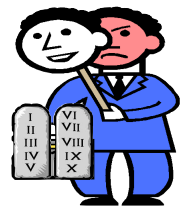
### The older brother is awakened:

- not when the Prodigal leaves home and squanders his inheritance.
- nor when the Prodigal repents and comes home.
- **but only when the father's grace is revealed.**

He failed to share the love, grace, & joy which was the **father's heart and glory.**

Jesus and the Apostles consistently criticize a

**hypocritical  
religious spirit.**



10

“You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God **hates all the same people you do.**”

Anne Lamott



“With or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; **but for good people to do evil – that takes religion.**”

“Of all bad men religious bad men **are the worst.**”

Steven Weinberg  
(theoretical physicist)

C.S. Lewis

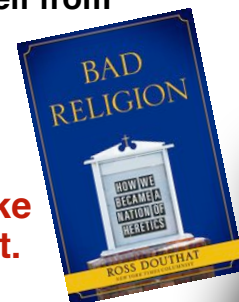


11

Many Jews **expected** their Messiah to separate himself from people like the “prodigal (younger) son.

Jesus was a “friend of sinners” while separating himself from the **hypocritical** religious.

**Luke 15 and  
Romans 2 make  
the same point.**




Ross Douthat  
N.Y. Times



12


“There are only two kinds of men: the righteous, who believe themselves sinners; the rest, sinners who believe themselves righteous.”



Blaise Pascal

13

**The older brother had a *log in the eye problem.***

<b>Others are:</b>		<b>I am:</b>
legalistic		principled
angry		intense
fearful		cautious
careless		flexible
selfish		tasteful
wasteful		generous
materialistic		conservative


14

**The older brother had a *put on the face problem.***

“God must be proud to have a disciple like ME!”

“I always show up, shut up, cough up, keep busy, and look holy.”

“I am a member of the church of the good looking sheep.”



15

*Luke 18*

“9 And He also told this parable to certain ones who **trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:** 10 Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a **Pharisee**, and the other a **tax-gatherer.**

11 The **Pharisee** stood and was praying thus to himself, ‘God, **I thank Thee that I am not like other people:** swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. 12 I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.’

13 But the **tax-gatherer**, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘**God, be merciful to me, a sinner!**’

14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”



16

Characteristics of the older brother’s

**“religious illness”**

a distortion of God’s Law and His Spirit

- **Rules focused**
- **Purity oriented**
- **Fear motivated**

17

Profile of the older brother

**2. He sees life through O.C. eyes where:**

- ▶ Keeping the Law is **mandatory for salvation.**
- ▶ **Orthopraxy** (not orthodoxy) is the main issue.
- ▶ Religion is **reduced to keeping the rules.**

*1 Timothy 1:8*

“But we know that the Law is good, **if one uses it lawfully.**”

*Romans 5:20*

“And the Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more;”

- **point us to our needs.**
- **bring us to our knees.**
- **point us to the Cross.**
- **bring us to faith in Christ**

18

## Old Covenant

*Leviticus 18:5*

“So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, **by which a man may live** if he does them; I am the Lord.”



## New Covenant

*Galatians 3*

“12 However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, **“He who practices them shall live by them.”** 13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us.”

*Romans 3:28*

“For we maintain that a man is justified by faith **apart from works of the Law.**”

## Some signs of an **Old Covenant** spirit

- **It's focused on the RULES** - Right / Wrong
  - Spiritual status is based on following the **rules**.
  - Almost everything is **reduced** to a rule.
  - It is **superficial** looking at the “outer life”.
- **It's focused on MY WORKS** - not Christ's work.
  - seeking hope and peace via **keeping the Law**.
  - **keeping score** with self and others.
- **It's focused on SEGREGATION** from sinners.
  - sense of **entitlement**
  - **blame** and **shame** oriented

19

20

### Profile of the older brother

#### **3. His relationships are transactional:**

- ▶ **Blessings / cursing** are based on keeping rules.
- ▶ **Limiting community** to law keepers is important.
- ▶ **A sense of entitlement** comes with keeping rules.

*Romans 10*

“1 Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. 2 For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. 3 For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. 4 **For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**”

21

The Prodigal had an older brother who stayed at home and followed the Law, **but was his HEART in a distant land?**

- He acts like an **alien to his father's home**.
- He does not share **his Father's heart**.
- His faith, hope, and love for life is based on **LAW & RULES more than a LOVE based RELATIONSHIP**.



**Legalism can have many faces:**

**Bibliolatry, Religiosity, Sacramentalism, Charismania, Social justice, Tradition, etc.**

22

“29 But he answered and said to his father, **‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours;** and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends;

- **Rules focused**
- **Purity oriented**
- **Fear motivated**

➡ **Is focused on HUMAN MERIT.**

- Holiness = following the rules (**Law of Moses**).
- Almost everything is **reduced** to a rule.
- Grace and faith are **notarized by good works**.
- We **earn God's blessing** by keeping the rules.

23

“You and I do not see things as they are. We see things as we are.”

*Matthew 6*

“22 The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. 23 But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

**The challenge of the Parable of the Prodigal brothers in Luke 15**

**We can do “good deeds” without good faith and God's Spirit.**

**Like the Pharisees and scribes we can be religious but not right with God.**



24

# Prodigal Son

Next week  
Ephesians  
4:11-16

This parable  
has a word for  
the church  
in our day