

Russell Kelfer

Lo, These Many Years

#1363-A

Series: The Parables of Scripture



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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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The real essence of what Jesus was saying was not getting through to the scribes and the Pharisees. We know that. They “did not have ears to hear”. The rich flow of spiritual treasure that God had designed to pour into the human heart and transform it, had to have a door through which to enter. That door was Jesus Christ.

These religious leaders were still so self-focused and so possessed with power that they were not interested in a gospel that involved servitude and humility. They were not interested in dying to self, and certainly not in dying for their faith. They were interested in the status quo, and this man Jesus was decimating it. So they were looking for a way to get rid of Him.

The disciples, however, had been given antennas with which to receive the message of the kingdom. Jesus, therefore, began teaching that message in parable form, so that His followers could receive truth, while the unbelieving crowd could hear the stories and marvel at their simplicity.

Such was the case as we continue our journey where we left off in our last lesson. Jesus had just told them stories about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally about a lost son. It was the latter that must have come closest to touching an emotional chord in the orchestra of these men’s hearts.

In our last lesson, we looked at that story, a story we have come to know as the story of the prodigal son, and we saw a father whose youngest son wanted to go out and taste of his independence. He believed that life outside the confines of his father’s authority had a lot more to offer. So he asked for his inheritance early, took his leave, and went off into a far country.

We looked at some key phrases in that story and found that they included such words as: *“Father, give me mine”*; *“He wasted his substance in riotous living”*; *“When he came to himself”*; *“I have sinned against heaven”*; *“I am no more worthy”*; and *“Make*

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me as one of thy servants". Strangely enough, these phrases are enough to paint the image on the screen of your mind that depicts what this young man went through, and partially what that father went through as his beloved son left the safety of the father's house to taste of the garbage this world offers.

We paused in our look at the story when the prodigal returned home and his father raced to his side, sobbing, forgiving, loving, and restoring this pathetic-looking shell of a man who had done it all and found it all worth nothing. In today's culture, he would have done drugs, alcohol, tasted of all forms of immorality, and found them all to be nothing but momentary pleasure followed by grief, despair, and depression. Not only that, in the process, he lost every penny of his inheritance, and was reduced to feeding someone else's pigs to earn enough to exist. So he came home. And when he did, the father welcomed him with open arms.

Not everyone, however, shared Dad's enthusiasm. Our story, then, takes up in Luke 15:21, where the boy is asking the father's forgiveness and expressing his willingness to become a slave, for he is "no more worthy" to be a son.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put *it* on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on *his* feet:

And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill *it*; and let us eat, and be merry:

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry.

Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.

And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.

And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.

And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.

And he answering said to *his* father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy

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commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.

It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:21-32)

The richness of the father's forgiveness is suddenly overcome by a cloud of bitterness; the ocean of joy that was encompassing this family community was about to be attacked by an enemy called envy. The glory of a father's love was being momentarily frustrated by a brother's jealousy.

Here, again, are key phrases that tell the whole story:

- 1- *"He was angry"*
- 2- *"He would not go in"*
- 3- *"Lo, these many years"*
- 4- *"Thou never gavest me"*
- 5- *"This, thy son"*
- 6- *"Thou art ever with me"*
- 7- *"All that I have is thine"*
- 8- *"Thy brother was dead, and is alive"*

We will begin, once again, by looking at those key words with an eye to see: 1- What they say about the character of man, and 2- What they say about the character of God. The first five are spoken by the elder brother and represent the heart of man as he seeks to justify his rebellion. The last three are spoken by the father and represent the heart of our heavenly Father as He patiently deals with his proud, angry children. Let's proceed:

1- He was angry (verse 26). Poor guy. His rights had been violated. He was out in the fields, overseeing the planting, and as he returned, tired, sweaty, and weary, he heard the sounds of the Jerusalem Orchestra playing "Home, Home on the Range". It says, *"He heard music and dancing"*. He heard happy people celebrating. He called one of his servants over to him and asked "what these things meant" (verse 26). "What's all the commotion?" he must have said, "I didn't authorize any parties tonight".

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He had not been consulted. He had his cell phone on. He was wearing his beeper. Someone could have at least told him about this party. "What's the meaning of this?" he asked. And the answer he got made him furious. "*Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound.*"

"Your long lost brother has returned and he is alive. Your Dad has called for a celebration". That was the gist of the conversation. The next verse says, "*He was angry*". Anger is a funny thing. *It doesn't just happen*. Anger is a hidden time bomb waiting to explode, *and the things that set it off are usually not the real cause*. Bitterness. Jealousy. Resentment. Fear. They often settle into the soul and hide there. They are all a form of sin. We call them diseases in our day and treat them as such, and sometimes various ailments, physical and emotional, may need to be treated, but the actual harboring of those things is sin. The Bible says so.

This man was angry because his young brother who had supposedly been considered dead, was alive and had come home. He may have harbored resentment all this time that Dad had given baby brother his inheritance just because he asked. He may have been secretly jealous of his brother's escapades and harbored jealousy all this time, pretending to be self-righteous and holy. From the next verse, however, it is most likely that he grew up thinking that Dad and Mom favored the little brat over him, and this was just another show of favoritism. In any case, *he was angry*, and anger is only the beginning. Anger uncontrolled and unconfessed always leads to further sin.

2- "He would not go in" (verse 28). His anger now affects other people. It always does. His testimony as the elder brother who is righteous and caring, dissolves, as he stays outside and pouts. The servants accompanying him see a scheming, jealous child, rather than a mature, forgiving brother. Don't ever underestimate how many people are affected by your displays of anger or your self-righteous shows of self-pity.

Your children will probably prefer to imitate what you do, rather than what you say. Your employees will lose respect for you. Your mate will be careful not to be honest with you, lest they trigger another display of childishness. Picture how childish this response is: The whole neighborhood is having a celebration.

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Servants, friends, relatives have gathered together to eat and dance and enjoy the festivities. The occasion is joyous. In our last two lessons, we learned of celebrations from such things as a lost sheep being found and carried home, and a woman finding a lost coin in the straw floor of her house.

This was cause for *a real celebration*. A long-lost son was home. An errant brother had repented and returned. A young man destined to be God's man, had chosen sin and found that the wages of sin are indeed death. Celebration? What more could there be to celebrate? Now look just outside the dining room door, will you? There is Paul, the pouter, baby brother's shining example of righteousness, cowering outside the window looking in, muttering, "*I'm not going in there. He doesn't deserve a party.*" He's right. He didn't deserve a party. The Father deserved the party, because his son had come home. They weren't celebrating the son's escapades. They were celebrating the father's joy at his return. Until you've been a father, you might not understand that.

What was the basis of Paul's pouting outing? The next verse tells us:

3- "Lo, these many years" (verse 29). Verse 28 says Dad had to leave the party, go outside and beg big brother to join the festivities. It says, "*His father came out and intreated him.*" He had to beg him to come in and not ruin the occasion or miss the blessing of the reunion. Surely, by now, Scooter, the errant brother, must have wondered where Paul was. Everyone else was there, but not his own brother. Now, you begin to wonder if there wasn't real friction between these two before Scooter ever left. Maybe the rivalry triggered his departure. We don't know. Suddenly, the self-righteous brother isn't the hero any more. His t-shirt that says, "I'm a Believer" is less believable. He has begun to show his true colors. He knows all about righteous living. But does he know how to love the unlovable? It seems not.

4- "Thou never gavest me" (verse 29). His argument to dear old Dad was not very plausible, but it was typical of sibling rivalries. He answered Dad's entreaty with this:

Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends, but as soon as this, thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.

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This was not a bad argument for a five-year old to use. For a grown man, however, it was a clear exposure of a bitter spirit. It was also obviously the response of a man who did not understand the heart of a father. Children often think that Mom and Dad have “x” amount of love. If they give brother or sister “y” amount, then they only have “x-y” left for them. They see love as a commodity stored in the bank of the heart, and once withdrawn, it is no longer available to give to someone else. Thus, jealousies, envy, anger, revenge all occur because one thinks that the love that should be reserved for them has been shared with someone else, and is thus no longer available.

Love isn't a commodity; it's a release of the essence of the nature of God. Every attribute of God's character can be multiplied by infinity. There is no limit to the love of God. When you express it, then, you only reveal more of who God is; you never deplete His storehouse, or diminish His power.

Like Job, Paul, the pouter, begins a dissertation on his own self-righteousness. “Look at what I've done all these years while Scooter's been cavorting with prostitutes. I've done everything you asked me to; I've faithfully done my work, and you've never had a celebration for me and my buddies. What kind of justice is that?” He was demanding justice. His brother was receiving grace. Oh, the portraits that emerge from this one confrontation.

How did he know the brother was fellowshiping with immoral women? We don't know. Maybe he had spies sending back reports. The guy was in a far country. There weren't many e-mails working then. Microsoft didn't even exist. And look at his basis for self-righteousness. “Lo, these many years, I have...” Oh, the curse of competition. “He did; but I didn't.” “He was bad, but I was good”. “He is a heathen, and I am a believer”. The flesh is so greedy. This heathen son has come home. The believer ought to be rejoicing the most.

Can't you hear Jonah in the background, complaining about going to Nineveh? Can't you hear Job complaining that nobody appreciates his righteousness? “Lo, these many years”. How often we as Christians begin to take things for granted in the church, or think we have a right to power because we have served for “Lo, these many years”. So often, instead of rejoicing at younger men and women coming up, developing leadership, we cling to positions of power, because they are new and we have been here,

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“Lo, these many years”.

Churches throughout the world are stagnated spiritually because power struggles have developed and families or staff members or deacons have become so entrenched in power, that anyone who wants to do any thing must first pass through this one whose position is not based on spirituality, but on the fact that he has been there, “Lo, these many years”.

By comparing his righteous behavior with his brother’s sinful behavior, he was building a case for equal rights. In a kingdom where justice is the final source of power, he had a point. But God was developing a kingdom that would balance justice with something called grace. It would honor the faithfulness of the righteous, but it would allow sin to be forgiven, wrongs to be made right, the unworthy to be blessed, the sinner to be cleansed. It would rejoice over repentance, while still allowing sowing and reaping. It would allow all of mankind the privilege of beginning again.

The younger brothers of this world whose lives had been destroyed through the ravages of sin could awaken to a new life in Christ. Some scars would remain as reminders of those wrong choices, but the inner peace, the joy, the freedom to walk before God as holy would be returned in a single, miraculous act of a gracious God. The ones who painted themselves into a dark hole through sin would have a way of escape. God’s love would now surround His holiness and the two would supernaturally find a way to deal with His wrath over sin and still grant joy and forgiveness to the sinner. Miracle of miracles. Grace was here.

The elder brother’s arguments were based on performance. He had done it all right. The younger brother had done it all wrong. Grace, however, was not based on man’s performance, but on God’s agape love. A loving God would welcome a sinner home, no matter what he had done. The one who should, by rights, be rejoicing the most, is the elder brother who stayed home, who never wasted his substance in riotous living, who never got involved with immoral relationships, who never got down and lived where the pigs lived before he was willing to come home. He wouldn’t have all that baggage to carry around for the rest of his life. He should have been praying for baby brother, and he should have been the number two man in the receiving line, next to dear old Dad.

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Speaking of the father, it is now his turn to respond, and as he does, listen carefully, for God is demonstrating how our heavenly Father responds when a sinner comes home, and when his own children can't cope with His grace.

1- “Son, thou art ever with me” (verse 31). Note that he addressed him as son. This is a portrait of a pompous, insensitive believer, who is jealous over the blessings God is pouring on another, when he assumes that other one is not as righteous as he is. Remember that.

Note, also, that he is reminding him that his position with the father is secure. “Thou art ever with me.” The grace He gives one need not be a stumblingblock to the one who has the lesser need for forgiveness. It ought rather to be a source of great joy. The key is that the heart of the Father is big enough for all His children. The Psalmist struggled so to reconcile how God could pour such blessings on those he perceived to be the wicked. Softly, the Spirit reminded him that God was not asleep, and that how He treated one need not be a concern of the other. They are God's creation and He can deal with them as He chooses.

2- “All that I have is thine” (verse 31). Once again, God reminds the jealous brother that it is not a matter of an undeserving brother taking from the father what belongs to the other. It all belongs to both. Oh, that we could grasp the depth of the love of God. His reservoir runs through the reaches of eternity, and pours with unbridled power through the recesses of mankind, giving itself away with utter abandonment.

God's mercy, His cleansing, renewing gift of love, and His grace, His undeserved enabling power, will flow without limits until He comes again. They are the two-sided coins of the love of God. You cannot measure that love; you cannot overpower it; and you cannot stop it. Satan cannot even grasp it, let alone remove it. God's love is so powerful, that were He, in one second, to release it all, both heaven and earth would tremble and dissolve.

This young man is so typical of Israel as she struggles to honor Jehovah without grasping that grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ. And he is also so typical of the arrogant, self-righteous kind of Christianity that plagues the Master's church in these latter days, struggling to be seen and heard and noticed, jealous over other parts of the body of Christ who might be more visible, and critical of other parts of the body who just

might be ministering in a different way or to different people.

3- “Thy brother was dead and is alive again; was lost and is found” (verse 32). The last statement made by the father was the crux of the parable. He came back once more to the gospel of the lost and found. Dead; Alive; Lost; Found. No doubt about the finality of conversion, and no doubt about what matters to God. All of the peripheral issues need to be addressed, but not necessarily at the expense of the one great issue for which the Living Son of God gave His life on a Roman cross.

Sin is the issue. The Cross is the solution. Jesus is the answer. Nothing else comes close in importance. If you are embroiled in controversies over petty things in the church, wouldn't this be a reasonable time to stop and step back and ask yourself, “In the light of eternity, *what difference does that make?*”

The hours of the services. The length of the sermon. The color of the pews. The shape of the parking lot. When Jesus comes again, *will He inquire about those things?* And if there is a church up the street who doesn't quite see eye to eye with you over certain doctrinal issues, but is leading people to Christ and guiding them to grow into His likeness, *ought you not to be praying for them and thanking God for them, rather than judging them over things that will not determine salvation?*

No, don't abandon your “correct” positions on sound doctrine. But don't appoint yourself judge and jury over the rest of the body of Christ either. One thing matters first: “Thy brother was dead and is alive; He was lost, and he has been found”. Dear God, help us to get our perspective once again.

Such are the phrases that leap from the pages of the Scriptures about the elder brother and his pouting outing at the door of his father's celebration over his brother's return.

The messages that stem from those phrases ought to serve as a handbook for us to help us avoid some of the pitfalls that plague the elder brothers of the faith. One big problem with elder brothers: they don't usually realize they're elder brothers.

Just in case you know somebody who might qualify, however, here are some areas of application that seem to cry out for attention from this parable:

1- Uncontrolled anger will eventually surface and it could cost you your reputation, your testimony, and your ministry. So

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many a temper lies hidden behind a facade of super-spirituality that thinks no one will ever know. Oh, the children know. They have seen you “lose it” one time too many. Your mate knows. He or she may have an ulcer or high blood pressure, just from not knowing when the volcano will erupt again. But the boss doesn’t know. The neighbors don’t know. And best of all, the folks at the church don’t know.

But God knows. And it breaks His heart. The Psalmist said it all in a very few words:

Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: (Psalm 37:8)

In other words, *stop it!* Anger is an internal problem. When suppressed, it causes bitterness and depression. When released, it causes grief and hurt. Both are serious. But just because you are able to control your temper outwardly doesn’t mean your heart isn’t filled with anger. This elder son had deceived himself into thinking that because he was living such an outwardly respectable life, *he deserved better treatment at the hand of his father.* Given the right set of circumstances, however, *his anger burst through, ruined a glorious event, and broke the heart of a rejoicing dad.*

2- Don’t ever underestimate how your behavior affects others.

The people who work next to you know you are a believer. They may or may not listen to what you say. They will listen to how you behave. And if you preach against something and live a lie, they will never listen to another word. This elder brother was pouting like a preschooler at the doorway of the celebration, while his bewildered servants and friends looked on in horror. If your temper or your language or your dress or your insensitivity has negatively affected those around you, *and you know it*, go to them tomorrow and ask their forgiveness. Pray as you go that your humbling yourself will draw them to look at Christ, and not at you. And purpose before God, not to do the things that offended them again.

3- Remember: God owes you no explanations for how He treats you or how He treats others. He is God. There is no other. When you parade your self-righteousness before Him as Job did, He will question you as He did Job:

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?
declare, if thou hast understanding. (Job 38:4)

God doesn’t owe you any explanations. The Father can hold

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as many victory celebrations as He chooses. He can kill the fatted calf for whoever He chooses. He can celebrate the return of as many prodigals as He deems proper. He knows them. He knit them together in their mother's womb. And if He chooses to exalt one and put down another, *it is for His glory, and that is the only thing that matters.*

Oh, how shallow is our perspective. We tend to put God on some kind of performance-based behavioral program, and we judge Him based on how He deals with His other children relative to how He deals with us. Beloved, we aren't the judges, and He isn't on trial. If you can't understand how a loving God could...(fill in the blank), it's only because God has not chosen to give you that understanding just yet. It isn't your problem. It's His. The truth is: a loving God can do whatever most glorifies His name, and whatever is best for the kingdom. The elder brother couldn't understand, so he pouted. A lot of good that did him. He missed the blessing, missed the feast, and missed a chance to please his father's heart.

4- God's great promise is "Thou art ever with me". God hasn't promised you a rose garden, but He's promised you something much more wonderful: He has promised that the Rose of Sharon will never leave you or forsake you. Your eternal security is bound up in the faithfulness of God, not in your record of good works or activities. He is ever with you because He promised to be, and *He cannot break His word.*

The elder son was looking for comparative blessings based on behavior, while the father was explaining to him that he didn't need a celebration for returning; he was fortunate enough to have never left, and never for one moment had he been separated from his father the way the younger brother had. He had so much more to be thankful for.

And so often, in our quest to question God with, "Why me, Lord?", we forget that the very crises of life we complain over are the quiet vehicles God uses to transport us into a closer walk with Him. When the thunder rolls overhead, and the storm clouds gather in our lives, sometimes all we have is the gentle reminder that *"Thou art ever with me"*. And in that moment, the reality of that promise becomes so precious, we are never, ever the same again.

5- Once more, we must be reminded that the Father has one

basic purpose for the church, and we “elder brothers” had best not lose sight of it, or we, too, will get angry over things that do not matter, and forget the things that do. The father quietly reminded his high-minded son that a dead man has just come to life, and that dead man happened to be his brother. Had his brother been brought back in a casket and raised up, throwing off the mantle of physical death, it might have been a different matter.

This brother was dead in trespasses and sins, and through a miracle, he had repented and come rushing back into his father’s waiting arms. The angels were singing. The father was exuberant. The servants were rejoicing. And the elder brother was pouting. What’s wrong with this picture? He had lost his first love. He had forgotten the moment of his own conversion. He had allowed the artificiality of his own self-righteousness to cover over the drama of the moment, and *he was more concerned about how the fallout from this miracle was going to affect his own life than he was about the miracle itself.*

Don’t judge him too harshly, beloved. There are inherent dangers that lurk in the background for those of us who have walked with God a long time.

1) We tend to think we have all the answers, when sometimes we don’t even know the questions.

2) We tend to be less forgiving, when in reality we have, through the years, been forgiven for that much more.

3) We tend to assume God owes us certain things because He has blessed us so before, rather than expecting God to require more faith on our part, since we know Him so much better.

4) We tend to think that since we have walked with God for “lo, these many years”, that He owes us merit badges for keeping the faith, when in reality, it is His precious grace that has “kept us by the power of God unto salvation, ready to be revealed at the last day.”

5) We tend to get so wrapped up in the management of the church, or the traditions of the church, we forget the purpose of the church: to see dead men come alive in Christ.

We laugh at the elder brother, don’t we? Why is it such a nervous laugh? Could it be that we looked in the mirror one day and saw him? Could it be that we have been masquerading

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as something we aren't? Could be it that we have become so enamored with our own existence, spiritually, that we have forgotten that the reason for our existence is to see the dead come to life? Could we have gradually lost sight of our purpose?

Could we, then, *like the prodigal*, have been breaking the heart of our Father for *lo, these many years*?

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- What was the key difference between the attitude of the prodigal and that of his elder brother? Which one, at the moment, was most pleasing to God? Can you think of a verse of Scripture to verify that?

2- Take a concordance and do a study of the words “anger” and “wrath”. What consequences are described? What solutions? How does God feel about an angry spirit?

3- Find two other characters in Scripture who suffered from the same basic problem as the elder brother. What common words are used in the passages?

A Challenge to Further Application

1- Try to create a reenactment of this part of the parable, using an illustration from today’s world. Ask God to give you an example from your own life. Ask Him to help you see yourself as the elder brother.

2- Make a list of things that make you angry. Write beside each one, on a scale of 1-10, how important each is in the light of eternity.

3- Have you been angry at God that He has allowed certain things in your life that He has not allowed in others; others who may seem “less spiritual” than you? Have you ever considered that He considers you worthy to enter into Christ’s sufferings, and so He has withheld from you some things He gives to others? Are you willing to thank Him for it?

4- Do you tend to think more highly of yourself because you have been a believer, “lo, these many years”? How do you think that makes God feel?

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Luke 15:31

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(06.20.18)