

THE PARABLE OF THE OLDER SON: THE SELF-RIGHTEOUS RELIGIONIST

LUKE 15:25–32

Introduction

This passage is about the second son of the father (v. 11, 25). The older son represents the self-righteous religionist — the moral, the just, the good — the man who has never committed gross and visible sin. He is religious and does religious works; therefore, he feels and believes he is acceptable to God. (Lk. 11:37-54; 18:9-12; Rom. 2:17-29.)

Most people feel they are *religious*. For this reason, the religious person needs to pay close attention to what Jesus is saying in the passage. The religious person needs to examine his heart and life to make sure his religion is genuine. In this parable Jesus pointed out five faults with the self-righteous religionist.

- I. Fault 1: he was in the field away from home (vv. 25-27).
- II. Fault 2: he shut himself out (v. 28).
- III. Fault 3: he was self-righteous (v. 29).
- IV. Fault 4: he lacked compassion and the understanding of sinners (v. 30).
- V. Fault 5: he failed to see two critical facts (vv. 31-32).

I. *Luke 15:25–27 Errors of the Religionists*

The first fault of the religionist is his tragic position. He was “in the field” away from the house. He was in the field of religion, but not in the house of salvation. He was unaware of his father’s affairs (vv. 26-27).

1. The older son was *in the field* of his father. He was working diligently, looking after the responsibilities of the field. So it is with the religionist. He is working diligently at the field of religious things: services, rituals, ceremonies, ordinances, prayers. He even uses religious talk and terms in his daily conversation. He attends services and prays and talks as much as he needs to satisfy his conscience.

The point is this: the religionist is “in the field” of religion. He professes to know God and to be a follower of religion. Just how much religion he practices depends upon how much religion he needs to save his conscience and to feel acceptable to God. Most men want to feel acceptable to God, so they do whatever amount of religion makes them feel acceptable.

Thought 1. How much religion does a man need to save his conscience and make him feel acceptable to God?

- 1) Some men sense the need for *very little religious activity*.
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- 2) Other men sense the need for *a great deal of religious activity*, even to becoming professional ministers.
2. The older son was in the field, not in the house of his father.
- => He did not know what was going on in the house (of salvation and repentance), only what was happening in the field (of religion).
- => When he looked at the *celebration* of repentant sinners, he questioned. He did not understand.
- => He had to ask what the celebration meant (what the celebration of repentance and salvation meant).

2 Tim 3:5 *Having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.*

Mat 23:23 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees [religionists], you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law — justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”*

Gal 4:10-11 *You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.*

Eph 2:8-9 *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.*

2 Tim 1:9 *[God] who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time.*

Titus 3:4-7 *But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

II. **Luke 15:28 The Tragic Rejection of God**

The second fault of the religionist is his tragic rejection of God. He shuts himself out. Note the son in the field became angry at the repentant son who was now in the father's house. He did not understand repentance, how a man who had been so immoral, dirty, and unclean could change so much. The claims of being safe and secure and the sound of celebration and testimony disturbed the son from the field. So it is with the religionist. He does not understand such claims as...

- being saved
- being filled with power
- being delivered *immediately* from enslaved habits (such as alcohol, smoking, immorality, cursing, covetousness, selfishness)
- being healed
- being saved *by God Himself*
- being filled with joy
- being indwelt and given power by the Holy Spirit

The religionist reacts against such claims. How? He wants nothing to do with such a *house of repentance and salvation*. He shuts himself out. Sometimes he even talks against and criticizes such a celebration and house.

Mat 23:13 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.”

Isa 29:14 The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men. Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

Mal 2:7-8 “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from his mouth men should seek instruction — because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,” says the LORD Almighty.

Note a significant fact: the religionist *shut himself out*. God does not shut him out. The father “went...out and pleaded with him” to come in. The father does even more for the religionist in that he comes seeking him, whereas the prodigal had to return home before the father could run out to meet him. The father came out and begged the religious son to understand repentance and salvation and to come in. (The religionist is already in the field of religion and close to the gospel, whereas the prodigal son is out in the field of the world far removed from the church and the gospel.)

Note the terrible jealousy and envy in the heart of the older son. He was jealous of the treatment, of the fruit and blessing’s being given to the prodigal son. (See *Fruit Bearing*, Jn. 15:1-8; see Gal. 5:22-23.)

JOHN 15:01–08 FRUIT-BEARING, ABIDE

There are four stages of fruit-bearing given: (1) no fruit (v. 2), (2) fruit (v. 2), (3) more fruit (v. 2), and (4) much fruit (vv. 5, 8).

What does it mean to say a Christian is to bear fruit? It means to bear converts (Rom. 1:13), to bear righteousness (Rom. 6:21-23), to bear Christian character or the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Note also the conditions for bearing fruit in life: cleansing (v. 3) and abiding or remaining in Christ (v. 5), and obedience (vs. 10, 12). A true Christian is a person who really does abide in Christ (1 Jn. 2:10). John said that to abide or remain in Christ means eight things.

1. A person walks in open confession before God. He walks through life opening up his life to God; he confesses all known sin. He does not walk in sin, and he does not allow any sin to go unconfessed (1 Jn. 1:6-10).
2. A person walks and fellowships with Christ. He lives and moves and has his being with Christ. He communes and lives in a consciousness of God's presence, and from God's presence, he learns of God and he draws the strength and authority to live victoriously day by day (1 Jn. 2:6; 2:27; see Psa. 16:11; Prov. 3:5-6).
3. A person continues in the church; he has not gone out from the church (1 Jn. 2:19).
4. A person possesses confidence, an unashamedness in life, that prepares him for eternity (1 Jn. 2:28).
5. A person does not walk in continuous sin (1 Jn. 3:6). He experiences constant victory over sin.
6. A person actively surrenders himself to obey God's commandments (1 Jn. 3:24).
7. A person experiences the indwelling presence and witness of the Spirit (1 Jn. 4:12-13).
8. A person dwells in love and unity and fellowship with all other believers (Jn. 17:21-23; 1 Jn. 4:16; see 1 Jn. 4:20). □

III. *Luke 15:29 Religionists and Self-righteousness*

The third fault of the religionist is his tragic self-righteousness. Note the older son claimed three things.

1. He claimed to be religious: "I've been slaving for you." A religionist does serve God through religious things: he worships, prays, tithes, witnesses, reads his Bible, and teaches.
2. He claimed to be moral and just: "[I] never disobeyed your orders." He never committed immorality, not any other dirty or unclean act that could be visibly or publicly seen. He never stole, cheated, lied, or cursed. He was obedient to his parents and responsible in his work and duties both to God and man.

3. He felt he deserved more, that he was not recognized enough: “You never gave me even a young goat,” that is, the spiritual food of power, love, joy, peace, confidence, joy, and the absolute assurance of heaven and eternal life. He felt he did not get enough, that he deserved more than those who were now filled with so much spiritual food and celebration.

Note what the religionist lacks: *faith* (Mt. 23:23). He just does not *trust* the Father’s love and judgment, His plan of salvation and repentance *for all*.

Jer 2:35 *You say, ‘I am innocent; he is not angry with me.’ But I will pass judgment on you because you say, ‘I have not sinned.’*

Mat 7:22-23 *Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’*

Gal 2:16 *Know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*

Mat 23:25 *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.”*

Mat 23:28 *In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.*

IV Luke 15:30 Self-righteousness and Lack of Compassion

The fourth fault of the religionist is his tragic lack of compassion and the understanding of God’s spiritual feast. Note three things about the older son.

1. He did not call the prodigal son his brother. He said with arrogance, “this son of yours.” He felt *above* and *better* than the prodigal son, despite the change of heart and life that existed within the repentant son. He felt no compassion or joy whatsoever. But note something: his statement was true. The repentant son was *God’s true son*.
2. He focused on the prodigal’s faults, especially his immoral past. He ignored the prodigal son’s repentance, his return home, and the glorious reunion. He ignored God’s...
 - great love
 - great forgiveness
 - great joy
3. He did not understand God’s spiritual feast. The fatted calf would symbolize the spiritual food God gives to the repentant sinner.
 - a. There was the food of absolute assurance of salvation and eternal life.

Rom 8:15-17 *For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

Gal 4:4-6 *But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”*

- b. There was the food of love, joy and peace.

Gal 5:22-23 *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

1 John 3:18 *Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*

Mat 7:21 *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*

1 John 3:23 *And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.*

V. **Luke 15:31–32** *The Tragic Blindness and Unbelief*

The fifth fault of the religionist is his tragic blindness. He fails to see two critical facts.

1. The religionist has the same privileges as the repentant prodigal. Note the words, “Everything I have is yours.” He has the worship, the Word, the promises, the preaching, and the teaching. He has constant exposure to all that is God’s (Rom. 9:4-5). He can enter God’s “house of salvation” anytime. All he has to do is repent, turn from trusting the field of religion, and enter God’s house. He simply needs to believe in and trust the love of God. He is to stop opposing God’s love to the prodigal sinner and come in himself.

2. The salvation of the repentant prodigal was real.

=> This brother of yours was dead, but he is now alive.

John 5:24 *“I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.”*

Eph 2:1 *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.*

1 Pet 1:23 *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

=> This brother of yours was lost, but now he is found.

Isa 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Luke 15:6, 9 And goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’

Luke 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.

1 Pet 2:24-25 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. ■