

## "SOMETHING MORE THAN MORALITY"

### INTRODUCTION

The subject of today's sermon was suggested by a member of this church. This friend heard me preach on the Parable of the Prodigal Son back in the month of October and after the service he mentioned to me that he had heard several sermons like the one I had preached and they had all been similar. They had concentrated, for the most part, on the Prodigal and there had been little or no mention of the Elder Brother, or if he had been mentioned he had been disposed of in a few short sentences. The friend said that this did not seem to him to do justice either to the parable or to the Elder Brother. What about the Elder Brother? Was there something to be said in his favor. He had his good points. Why pass over them?

### IN HIS FAVOR

This is a point well taken. Suppose we consider the case of the Elder Brother here this morning. Yes, he had his good points. He had many of the qualities which make for solid character and sound citizenship. He was hard-working, conscientious, reliable and responsible. This is to his credit and deserves our respect. And besides, with his record what it was - years of hard work behind him - it was natural that he was somewhat upset and indignant when he found the whole house turned upside down - singing, dancing, feasting, lights in every window - all because his younger brother - self-indulgent, pleasure-loving, irresponsible - had come back home in rags and tatters and without a cent to his name.

We need to keep things in perspective. We need to be fair to the Elder Brother. Where was he when the Prodigal came home. He was "in the field" - that is, he was hard at work. What did he discover when he came in from the fields? He discovered that without a word passed to him the welcome home celebration had already started. It's not surprising that he felt slighted and miffed when he discovered that his ne'er do well brother was being given the hero's welcome. The Elder Brother had some sterling qualities. Hardworking, conscientious, dutiful, dependable. Perhaps we have overpreached the Prodigal Son. His story has a happy ending, but the first chapters do him little credit. He was the lazy one of the family. He had little inclination to do an honest day's work. He went off to eat, drink and to be merry and left his brother to carry the burdens at home. Let credit be given where credit is due. The Elder Brother had some good qualities, qualities needed for solid character and sound citizenship.

### FLAWS IN HIS CHARACTER

Nevertheless, there were some flaws in his character and they were serious. When we have acknowledged his industriousness and rectitude, when we have made allowance for the naturalness of his indignation over the home-coming party for his younger brother, we have to reckon with those flaws. What were they. For one thing, he was quick to judge and harsh in his judgment. Turning to his father, he said, "This son of yours who has devoured your living with harlots". He's the only one in the story to say something about harlots. Where did he get the information. Was it assumption? He blackens the picture. Remember - love keeps no score of wrongs and does not gloat over the sins of others, but the Elder Brother seemed determined to think the worst of his brother. Remember - rectitude can become loveless, and once it is loveless, it is flawed. The Elder Brother was as upright as a marble column and we might add - just as cold and as hard as one.

It appears that not only was he ready to think the worst of his brother, but he was ready to disown him. He didn't want to have anything to do with him. He didn't want to have anything to do with the homecoming celebration. When the father encouraged him to come in and join the party, he responded with contempt and derision, "This son of yours!"

We begin to see that he had trouble with his personal relationships - his brother, his father. We begin to see strains of bitterness, jealousy, self-righteousness, and we even see a measure of self-pity. He said to his father, "These many years I have served you....and yet thou never gavest me a kid". This is the essence of self-pity. Jealousy, self-righteousness, self-pity - all these come from the inward turning eye. Isn't it true that on occasion we encounter people of upright character, people who have many sterling qualities, but who have difficulty in getting along with others, who acquire a reputation for being difficult to get along with, to work with. An old lady, after hearing a sermon on the text, "In my Father's house are many mansions" said, "My son-in-law, William, is a good man and well deserving of the heavenly mansions. But I have no desire to live with William".

WHAT IS EMERGING Do you see what is beginning to emerge in all of this consideration of the Elder Brother. As I see it, Jesus, in telling this parable, was apparently thinking of people who were moral, who thought of themselves as moral, who took great pride in their morality. They committed none of the offenses society classified as crimes. They violated none of the recognized canons of socially acceptable behavior. They kept all of the commandments. They took seriously their duties and obligations in the family and in the nation and were models of respectability and rectitude. But they were rigid in their rectitude. Their ideals were high, but their sympathies were narrow. There was little of the milk of human kindness in them. They did justly, but did not love mercy or walk humbly. They denounced the sins of the body - lust, drunkenness, gluttony, but it never dawned on them that for sheer, cumulative, misery-making power - the sins of the disposition - things like anger, hard-heartedness, lovelessness, indifference - were every bit as bad and in many a case far worse.

We have been slow to learn the lesson taught by this parable. When we talk about gross sins it is the sins of the Prodigal we have in mind, and not the sins of the Elder Brother. When we talk about immorality, it is sexual immorality we think of - not bad temper, jealousy, self-righteousness, self-pity, and pride. Perhaps it has never occurred to us to question which is worse. And yet, if we do, if we ask which has caused the great amount of human misery - the sins of the body or the sins of the disposition - there can be only one answer. For embittering life, for breaking-up homes, for withering up men and women, sins of thought and speech, sins of unkindness, spitefulness and meanness have no equal.

A friend paid a visit at the house of a well-known, respected man. He found in the living room the wife of the man and her unmarried sister, who lived with them, both gifted, gracious and charming women. The three of them had a lively and interesting talk. Suddenly the front door opened and shut sharply. A silence fell on the two women. Presently the sister-in-law excused herself and went out of the room. She came back a few moments later with an uneasy smile and said in an undertone to the wife, "He says he won't have any tea. Perhaps you should go down to see him". The wife got up and excused herself and remained out of the room for several minutes. She came back and gave a little glance to her sister, who again slipped out of the room, and the conversation continued in a rather half-hearted manner. The visitor decided that he had better leave, and departed, aware that his departure was a relief. Later on he mentioned that it gave him a deep feeling of depression to think of the constant repetition of similar scenes. The husband, apparently, was a man of moods - morose, irritable, self-absorbed - and the sense of his possible displeasure and unpredictable and ungracious way with others lay like a dark cloud in the background of those who lived with him.

Now, I wonder what that man of moods would have made of the teaching of Jesus, or for that matter, I wonder what we make of it. The teaching of Jesus, at this point,

if we take it seriously, should reshape our thinking about the cardinal virtues, the first of which is love, not rectitude, and about the deadly sins - the worst of which is not lust, but pride. The churchmen of Jesus' day could not bring themselves to do this, to see this. Their total emphasis was on morality - on rectitude, rigid rectitude. They felt they had to be relentless in their condemnation of immorality, which for them signified the sins of the body, the sins of prodigals and harlots. And by comparison, they regarded the sins of the disposition lightly, as venial, defects of temper and temperament. And they were shocked by the attitude of Jesus to people they shunned as moral lepers. They said, "Why he receives sinners and eats with them". They were shocked by his reply to criticism, "I tell you the publicans and harlots go into the Kingdom of heaven before you".

FRIEND OF PUBLICANS AND SINNERS

Yes, Jesus was the friend of publicans and sinners. He spent hours of time in their company, trying to attract them to higher levels of life, trying to make the spiritual world real and radiant. Severe in His judgment of the rigidly righteous, He was compassionate toward men and women who were guilty of what have been called the warm-hearted sins. But, he never condoned those sins.

In his judgment, a woman who is a gossip, a shrew, a prude, is a gross sinner. In the judgment of Jesus, a man who is cold, harsh, and cruel is a gross sinner. In the judgment of Jesus, the major distinction to be drawn is not between the virtuous and the vicious, but between the loving and the loveless. Do we take his judgment seriously? Where is our heaviest condemnation? On sins of the body or on the sins of the disposition? Do we believe with Him that it is worse to be right in deed and wrong in spirit than to be wrong in deed but loving and generous and kind in spirit?

Think again of the Elder Brother. He never left home. The far country never lured him. And yet all of the time he was in something of a far country of his own making. Hardworking, conscientious, and self-righteous, he nevertheless bungled the greatest of all arts - the art of living happily and harmoniously with his own kith and kin. He didn't get along with his father. He didn't get along with his younger brother. In fact, more than anybody, he may have been the reason the younger brother packed up and left home. There was little love in the Elder brother's creed: he did not love God with all his heart and he did not love his brother in God.

There are two prodigals in this parable told by Jesus - not one - and the wonderful thing is that the father went out to them both. His heart went out to the son who came home in rags and tatters, without a penny in his pocket, but penitent and who resolved to make amends for his poor ways. His heart also went out to the son who refused to cross the threshold, who stood sulking outside, burned up with resentment because his brother was getting all of the attention, feeling sorry for himself, telling himself that his years of service had never been given recognition, asking himself what was the use of trying to do one's duty if the ne'er do wells got all the consideration and their return from dissipation was celebrated with a feast. The father's heart went out to both. He was as kind, generous and forgiving to the one as to the other. "My boy" he said to the firstborn, "you are always with me". "Everything I have is yours". Not a word of rebuke. In a sense it is a picture of the God with whom we deal - the Father God - patient, gentle, understanding, forgiving and loving. Can it not be said - in a sense, we have all fallen short, sinners if you will. Sins of the body. Sins of the disposition. And we are forgiven and cleansed and given the second chance, the fresh start, the opportunity to lift our thoughts and change our ways.

Arthur Miller, one of our outstanding playwrights, was discussing the stage and what makes a drama great. He said that in any successful play there must be something which makes the audience say within themselves, "My God - that's me". Well, here is a

great parable, and if we look carefully at both the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother, perhaps we'll see something that will make us say within our hearts, "My God - that's me" - and it will have done its work.

LET US PRAY O God and Master of us all, help us to put into practice in our daily lives these things that we believe and think so sincerely and so seriously; and as we go about our way, help us so to live that we may be more nearly measured by the character of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.