### **From Labor to Love: The Elder Son’s Journey Back to the Father**

Luke 15:20-32 | Inspired by Henri Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

Have you ever thought of yourself as the elder son in this story? Today, I invite you to hear this story from a new perspective—by seeing ourselves as the elder son. The younger son came back home, and the father put the best robe on him and sandals on his feet. Not only for this, but the father also had a feast to celebrate his lost son’s coming back home.

However, this made the elder son get angry and he refused to go inside the house. What kind of situation is this? What is going on inside the elder son? Verse 29-31 explain the reason for this: **29But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. (NRSVUE)**

Look at what the elder son says. Do you see the word slave? He thinks of his father as a strict boss, someone who gives orders but doesn’t show love. In his mind, he is not a son but a servant who works without kindness or reward. This is how he sees his father, even though that’s not the truth about who his father really is. According to what the elder son says, it can be assumed that he did all the right things. He was obedient, responsible, and hardworking. It seems that people respected him, admired him and considered him as a model son. Outwardly, the elder son was faultless.

Who comes to your mind in the Gospel when you think of people who see themselves as righteous? Maybe those who think they are better than others? The context in which Jesus told this parable was that he was being criticized by the Pharisees and scribes. They were upset because Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them (Luke 15:1-2). Most of the time, we focus on the younger son and the loving father in this story. But the second half of the parable is about those who believe they have done everything right—yet struggle to accept God’s deep, unconditional love. The elder son shows the part of us that finds it hard to accept God's love—not just for others, but even for ourselves.

Do we sometimes think that God only loves us when we do everything right? That if we fail or fall short, God will punish us? When we believe this, our desire to do good comes from fear, not from love. But is this really who God is? Looking at the elder son’s understanding of his father, he describes his father who loves his children only when they observe the commandments. He never understands the grace-filled loving relationship with his father. He doesn’t understand why the father embraced the younger brother who does not deserve the father’s love. He thinks that he should be more favored by the father. So, he complaints to his father, “This is unfair!” I work so hard every day, but I have never been given a party like this.The elder son becomes angry because, deep inside, he has been holding His pride makes him feel like he deserves more, and his jealousy blinds him to his father’s love. Thus, **self-righteousness bears resentment and jealousy, which leads to being distant from God’s love.**

We live in a society that teaches us we can earn favor by how well we perform. From a young age, we learn that our grades in school, our job success, and our social status define who we are. The better we do, the more approval we get from others. Because of this, we may start to see God the same way. We might think that, like other authority figures in our lives, God only loves us when we perform well. But is that really true? Does God’s love depend on how good we are?

Henri Nouwen points out something important—there is often a lot of resentment among those who see themselves as “good” and “righteous.” These people are committed to doing God’s work. They are faithful, responsible, and always trying to do the right thing. But when certain situations arise, we sometimes see a different side. Instead of grace and love, there is judgment, criticism, and even prejudice among those who consider themselves faithful.

*Heny stats that* ***When I carefully read the words with which the elder son attacks his father – that is, self-righteous, self-pitying, jealous words, I hear a deeper complaint. It is the complaint that cries out from a heart: “I tried so hard, worked so long, did so much, and still I have not received what others get so easily. Why do people not thank me, not invite me, not play with me, and not honor me?*** *( P.72)*

In this complaint, we recognize the elder son in us. In this way, we have left the father’s home.

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Now, let’s focus on how the father responds to his elder son. The father’s response is key to understanding God’s heart. Let’s take a closer look at what he says and what it means for us today.Then his father said**, ‘Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours**. (v. 31) In this story, the father wants not only his younger son back, but his elder son as well. The elder son also needs to be found and led back into the house of joy.

As we come to the end of the elder son's story, we are left with an open question— Will the elder son accept his father’s invitation or will he remain outside, holding onto his resentment? The parable doesn’t give us an answer, but it invites us to reflect on our own hearts. Father does not want you to serve Him out of duty, but to live in the freedom of His love. How can we overcome the elder son in us and enjoy the joy of being at the father’s home? Here is some encouragement—practical steps we can take to soften our hearts and embrace the father’s joy:

1. **Letting Go of Rivalry**: We must stop seeing others as competition. God’s love is not limited—it is abundant for all God’s children. We don’t need to prove we are more deserving than others. we don’t have to earn it or prove ourselves more worthy than others.
2. **Through Trust and Gratitude:** Choose trust and gratitude. Instead of focusing on what we think we deserve, recognize that everything we have is a gift from God. we should trust in God’s goodness. Gratitude helps us shift our mindset from entitlement to thankfulness. Gratitude is more than a feeling—it is a choice we make every day. This practice can break the chains of self-righteousness, self-pity, jealousy, and unrealistic expectations.

Let us not be like the elder son, standing outside in frustration, unable to rejoice in God’s grace. Instead, let us step into the Father’s joy, accepting His love for ourselves and extending it to others. May we join God in welcoming all into God’s kingdom, celebrating the boundless grace that God so freely gives. Let us remember what God says, **“you are always with me, and everything I have is yours**.” (Luke 15:31)