

After going through the story of the Prodigal Son, a Sunday school teacher asked the kids, “At the end of the story who is it that ended up in the worst situation?” One of the kids shot up her hands and answered, “The fatted cow.” The animal-loving child was certainly correct, but the answer the teacher probably expected was “The elder son.”

There are three main characters in the Parable of the Prodigal Son: the father, the younger son, and the elder son. The younger son is a volatile, impatient, easily bored, ready-to-try-everything teenager. He collects his inheritance, goes abroad to see the world, and squanders his birthright in loose living. He represents every sinner. In sin we squander our human and divine birthright and in the end we are no better than in the beginning. Sin promises us a life of happiness, satisfaction and excitement but in the end all we get out of it is misery, wretchedness, dissatisfaction, depression, and a loss of the sense of personal dignity that belongs to us as God’s children. The good news is that no matter how deeply the sinner sinks into sin, there is always a still, silent inner voice within us inviting us to come back to our Father’s house where true freedom and satisfaction is to be found.

Then there is the father who is so loving that he lets his son have whatever he wanted. In fact we can say he even spoils the boy. We have this image of God as

a very stern, demanding father who is always ready to whip us into line. This is very far from the image of God we have in this parable. Here God is presented as a tender loving father who is easy on his children, and who is always ready to forgive, no matter what. If this is how God relates to us, then we can see that God possesses the tender-loving quality of mother as well as the tough-loving quality of father.

And finally there is the elder son who is introduced towards the end of the story. If you want to describe the elder son by one word you would call him a gentleman. He is a man of honor, solid, hard-working, consistent, disciplined, and sober — a perfect gentleman. In the elder son we see the virtues, as well as the vices, of middle class morality. What are the vices of middle class morality? Arrogance, better-than-thou attitude, intolerance toward those who do not meet up to our standards, insensitivity and a spirit of unforgiveness. The elder son exhibits these vices in the way he refuses to welcome his lost and found brother, his father's explanation and invitation notwithstanding. He must have his pound of flesh. For him it is a matter of justice, but for God that is nothing but self-centeredness and unwillingness to forgive.

Mother Teresa had an Advice for Living a Good Life. People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered: *Forgive them anyway.* If you are kind,

people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives: *Be kind anyway*. If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies: *Succeed anyway*. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you: *Be honest and frank anyway*. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight: *Build anyway*. If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous: *Be happy anyway*. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow: *Do good anyway*. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough: *Give the world the best you've got anyway*. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God: *It was never between you and them anyway*.

The story of the prodigal son reminds us that nobody stays on top forever. Money can be lost, position can be taken away, friends can disappear, power and glory can fade away. But what remained in the prodigal son was the memory of his home and his loving father. Humility was the key that opened the door that led him out of his brokenness and drudgery. Unless and until one is humble or is humbled, there can be no real conversion, no real freedom, and no real moving on.