
*Grace
Illustrated*

By Dave Roberson

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture notations are taken from the *King James Version* of the Bible.

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By Dave Roberson

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Dave Roberson Ministries

The Family Prayer Center

P. O. Box 725

Tulsa, OK 74101

Contents

Chapter 1	
The Elder Brother 4
Chapter 2	
Relationship Does Not	
Always Equal Fellowship 6
Chapter 3	
Our Inheritance	
Comes by Grace 8
Chapter 4	
Present-Day Speaking 11

Chapter 1 ***The Elder Brother***

When I was first born again, there were several couples in my church who had been saved long enough to have raised their children in church. Many of these parents had a prodigal son or daughter who had left the faith and gone out into the world. Often I would hear these parents praying about their prodigal sons and daughters, asking God to bring them home again.

The Wrong Approach To the Father

This term *prodigal son* comes from Jesus' teaching in Luke 15 that we refer to as "the story of the prodigal son." However, because so many people identify with the concept of a believer who backslides and goes back into the world, we have missed the fact that this teaching is just as much about the elder brother as it is about the younger brother. Jesus also wanted us to see how the elder brother based his entire relationship with his father on his works instead of on the grace that made him his father's child.

Even though the elder son didn't transgress a law, he didn't understand his father well enough to know that his father would have killed the fatted calf for him at any time, for no other reason than just to celebrate their relationship as father and son. Therefore, the elder son approached his father on the basis of **WORKS** rather than **GRACE**, whereas the younger brother approached his father on the basis of **GRACE** rather than **WORKS**.

We can see this by looking at the words the prodigal son speaks to his father after he transgressed his father's commandments and broke his laws:

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.

Luke 15:21-24

By contrast, the elder brother's words demonstrate what he based his relationship with his father on:

And he answering said to his father, 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.

Luke 15:29,30

I cannot begin to tell you how many people base their entire relationship with God on the same thing the elder brother did. Their entire lives with God are based on works. If their works were taken away from them, they would have nothing left.

The only perceived responsibility these people have before God is their works. They know they should go to church. They know they should witness. They know they should give in the offering. They know they should volunteer. But their works have replaced their fellowship. The only time they spend with God is in their performance of works. Like the elder brother, they don't know God well enough to know that He is ready to celebrate with them every day just because they are His children.

Failing to Take Advantage Of the Inheritance

Minutes after the prodigal son had restored his relationship with his father, he had entered back into fellowship with him as well. On the other hand, although the elder son had never broken his relationship with his father, neither had he ever entered into real fellowship with him.

The devil loves to use this same trap on us—causing us to base our faith on works instead of on grace. But as we come to understand the vast difference between fellowship and relationship, we can avoid falling into the enemy's trap.

After the prodigal son's return, he entered into a great celebration of renewed fellowship with his father. But not the elder brother! Even when he saw his younger brother in fellowship with the father, he refused to enter into the celebration. In fact, he accused his father of never giving him that kind of feast that he might celebrate with his friends.

Notice how the father responded to his eldest son in verses 31,32:

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.

Now let's back up a moment to verse 12 in this same chapter. In this verse, we learn something further about the father's relationship with his eldest son: **And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.**

Did you notice that this verse said he divided unto **THEM**? That means the father gave both sons their inheritance at the same time!

So not only did the father say to the elder brother, "All that I have is thine," but the elder brother's inheritance was also available to him the entire time the younger brother was out spending his!

This is the condition of a great number of Christians today. Their spiritual inheritance has been available to them ever since they were born again. Yet they don't know God well enough to enjoy close fellowship with Him—and that is the most important part of their inheritance!

Chapter 2 ***Relationship Doesn't Always*** ***Equal Fellowship***

So many people have never become acquainted enough with God to understand the difference between relationship and fellowship. They have always based their relationship on their works, not on the grace that made them God's children and gave them the ability to enjoy close fellowship with Him.

'Relative-ship' Opens the Door For Fellowship

These Christians remind me of some natural families. In the families I'm thinking of, the only thing that ties the family members together is the fact that they were thrown together into the same gene pool! Similarly, believers who are not well acquainted with God have been born into a relationship, or we could say a "relative-ship" with God and with other believers. However, these Christians are not experiencing the sweet fellowship that was made available to them when they became members of God's family.

You and I became God's relatives by virtue of the new birth when Jesus gave us the power to become the sons of God, just as First John 3:1 says, **Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not.**

But this relationship with God doesn't replace fellowship with Him.

Rather, being in a "relative-ship" with God makes fellowship possible.

You see, God provided the way for us to enter into relationship with Him through the blood of Jesus. It is that relationship that has now opened the door for us to enjoy fellowship with our Heavenly Father.

Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.

For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh:

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Hebrews 9:12-14

God's Number One Desire: Fellowship With Us

I can tell you right now that what God wants from us is our fellowship. He doesn't intend to wait until we get to Heaven to enjoy fellowship with us. The last thing He wants is for us to remain distant relatives!

Jesus put an even higher priority on fellowship than on those things that warrant the anointing of the Holy Spirit, such as the ministries of casting out devils and laying hands on the sick. Notice what He said when the seventy returned to Him after He had given them power over unclean spirits:

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

Luke 10:19,20

Many church members, deacons, and yes, even preachers backslide in their hearts while they sit in church pews and stand behind church pulpits. The reason for this is simple: Although these Christians are in **RELATIONSHIP** with God, they have never really entered into **FELLOWSHIP** with Him.

When Jesus' disciples got so excited about devils being subject to them in His Name, Jesus told them to rejoice instead that their names were written in Heaven. Why was He so glad their names had been written in Heaven? Because it was finally possible for Him to have fellowship with them!

The thing God desires more than anything else is fellowship with us. He wants to spend eternity with us, but He wants the fellowship to begin **NOW**!

Chapter 3 ***Our Inheritance*** ***Comes by Grace***

So how should we apply Jesus' story of the prodigal son to our lives? First, we should desire to be like the elder brother in our determination to never break relationship with our Heavenly Father. But, at the same time, we should run to God with the understanding of grace that the prodigal son possessed when he received the restoration of both his relationship and his fellowship with his father.

Receive God's Blessings By Grace

The most important thing the elder son didn't understand was that his father had already given his inheritance to him by grace. Because the elder son refused to fellowship with his father, the blessings of that inheritance remained a mystery to him. Having never truly received those blessings, he didn't know how to enjoy them.

We certainly don't want to stand before God on the Day of Judgment the way this elder son stood before his father after his prodigal brother came home. We don't want to experience a lifetime of lack and unmet needs and then hear the Father say, "My child, all I ever had was thine. You could have had every need abundantly met in every situation. But you never got to know Me well enough to understand that I had already given you everything you could ever need by grace!"

A tell-tale sign that a person doesn't understand the difference between grace and works is a sense of confusion about the way God sees his giving and receiving. Sometimes the difference between grace and works is very subtle, especially in this area of giving and receiving. In fact, the true nature of works can only be exposed when a person takes time to fellowship with God through prayer and worship.

Enough cannot be said about the many worthwhile church programs carried out and financed by faithful believers. But let's not slip into the same trap the elder brother did, who based his relationship with the father on his works instead of on fellowship by grace.

Join in God's Celebration

Immediately after the prodigal son restored relationship with his father, they rejoiced and fellowshiped together because the son who had been lost was now found. But the elder son didn't care that his lost brother had been found. The only thing he cared about was getting what he thought he deserved—a celebration held in **HIS** honor with **HIS** friends.

That's the exact opposite of the attitude Jesus described in Luke 15:7: **I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.** It is also evident from this verse that the father of the prodigal son and elder brother is a type of our Heavenly Father.

The elder brother didn't care about the lost brother coming home; he only cared about himself. He wanted prosperity so he could celebrate the good life, not so he could work toward the salvation of his brother or even of his friends. And because he didn't care about the lost, it wasn't possible for him to enter into joyous celebration with his father when his younger brother returned home.

It isn't that his father didn't try to get him to come into the house where the great celebration was going on. Luke 15:28 says, **And he [the elder brother] was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.**

In the same way, God tries to convince us to join Him in the great celebration that is always going on in HIS house. In this celebration, He is killing the fatted calf for the great feast. He is putting rings on the fingers and shoes on the feet of the lost. He is clothing them in royal robes of righteousness, calling the dead alive and the lost found.

Second Corinthians 5:21 tells us why: **For he [God] hath made him [Jesus] to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.**

The elder brother was the type of person who belongs to the local church, attends every service, and gives each week in the offering. He might even be on the board of administration for the various church programs. These are all good things, but remember the source of the elder brother's problem: He based

his relationship with God on his good works rather than on God's grace. So when the father came to entreat him, trying to convince him to enter into the great celebration for the lost son who had come home, the elder brother refused.

Many of us don't enter into celebration with God for the same reason: We have been deceived by works. Like the elder brother, we haven't learned to fellowship with our Heavenly Father; therefore, we don't understand that God's biggest celebrations take place when the lost are received into His Kingdom.

The elder brother's heart wasn't in the celebration held in his brother's honor. He was only interested in his own prosperity. He wanted his father to prosper him so he could celebrate with his own friends. In this, the elder brother failed to obey Proverbs 4:23, which says, **Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life.**

Notice the way the prodigal son humbled himself before his father when he returned home:

I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee,

And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants.

Luke 15:18,19

But the father wouldn't listen to such a plea because he wanted to fellowship with his son. He wanted to

celebrate his return with a feast. He wanted to bestow his inheritance upon him, put the covenant ring on his finger that designated him as his son, and enter into fellowship with him forever.

Now think about the way the elder brother acted toward his father—more like a servant than a son! Even though his father entreated him to come into the house and celebrate with him, the elder brother would not.

But no matter how he acted, the elder brother was indeed a son. Like so many Christians today, he was deceived into basing his relationship with his father on works instead of grace. Consequently, the elder brother was rewarded according to what he was actually worth rather than according to the grace that made him his father's son.

Romans 4:4,5 explains this principle:

Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.

A Simple Suggestion

In conclusion, let me suggest something to you that I believe will help you draw closer in fellowship with God. If you diligently follow this suggestion, I believe His grace will come upon you in a way that will cause an avalanche of blessings to flow your way.

Whenever you are preparing to give an offering to God for the lost, take about fifteen minutes just to hold up your offering before Him and tell Him how much you love Him. Open your heart to celebrate with God for the lost who are being saved through the preaching of the Gospel. Make sure you also praise Him simply because your name is already written in Heaven. You can start by saying something like this:

Father God, for the next fifteen minutes, I just want to fellowship with You regarding the lost. I don't want anything. I'm not asking for anything. I just want to celebrate with You regarding the people who will be saved through the blessing of giving. I also want to tell You how much I love You for saving me and for writing my name in Heaven. Thank You, Jesus, for paying the price.

Chapter 4

Present-Day Speaking

Yes, all that I am, all that I have,
all that your covenant is meant to be—
I am that to you, says the Lord.

My desire is to fellowship with you,
for I have places of fellowship
that you know very little about—
places of fellowship where wisdom and
peace meet together; where I give you
peace to walk out My wisdom;
where I give you exploits to perform,
mountains to move, things to do.

And the strength you receive is from
Me. For greater is he that is in you
than he that is in the world. I am your
Strength. I am your High Tower. Cross
the line. Make a notation in your spirit
that your time of fellowship with Me is
the most important.

For it is here within the Holy of
Holies that I will teach you how to walk
with Me. I will teach you what you need
that you might walk with Me and
succeed in those areas you need to
succeed in. I will teach you peace,
righteousness, and joy in your walk with
Me, says the Spirit of the Lord.

Not by Works, But by God's Grace

If you sometimes feel like you never measure up in God's eyes, this book is for you! Dave Roberson takes you through Jesus' familiar teaching on the prodigal son and his elder brother to prove a crucial point: Your fellowship with God depends not on what you can do to earn it, but on what Jesus did to purchase it!

God isn't waiting for you to do all the right things so He can enjoy fellowship with you. He is just waiting for you to get it in your heart once and for all—it's not by your works, but by His grace!

**Dave Roberson Ministries
The Family Prayer Center
P. O. Box 725
Tulsa, OK 74101
(918) 298-7729**