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The Prodigal Brother

Luke 15:25-32, "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' "

Burn out is emotional exhaustion brought about by a prolonged, improper response to difficulty or

perceived indifference. It is a serious threat to any ministry. In fact, it is a serious threat to our ministry. Unlike so many churches today where 10% of the body are the pillars of the church and 90% are the caterpillars (who crawl in and out each week), at Bethel that percentage is almost reversed!

Because we have few elders, years ago we all recognized that if this body is going to be cared for pastorally, we all need to be a part of the ministry! And this is with biblical precedent. Paul describing how the church grows exhorted the body:

Ephesians 4:15-16, "But speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him, who is the head, *even* Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."

Truly a church that is growing is a church where every person engages in the ministry. And what specifically is that ministry? While the answer involves many details, nevertheless James gives at least one when he wrote this:

James 1:27, "This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world."

The word James used here for "visit" is the word use in other contexts to describe the pastoral care of the eldership (cf. Acts 15:36; Hebrews 12:14). Yet here, it is said to be the responsibility of the entire body! Truly, all have been charged with the souls of one another. And this is the ministry of Bethel! And thus as we participate in the care of each other's soul, the body grows!

Now again, as a church we have embodied this such that a lot of people at Bethel do a lot of things for one another, the ministry, and so the Lord. And as such, we are at grave risk when it comes to the issue of ministerial burn out! Let me ask you these questions:

- Have you grown tired of ministry?
- Has service in the name of Christ gotten old?
- Are you tired of the Sabbath and its activities?
- Are you tired of...
 - Worship?
 - Serving in the nursery?
 - Fellowship?
 - Showers?
- Are you tired of the ministry of God's kingdom as it exists today at Bethel?

Then you probably are experiencing burnout, which is why I am so thankful for the text before us this morning, for it is quite relevant at it pertains to "Christian burnout!" Traditionally Luke 15:8-32 is identified as "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," yet as we have seen, it addresses two different individuals: The prodigal son who spent the family-wealth on sin (vv. 8-24) and the prodigal brother who succumbed to "burnout" (vv. 25-32). In order that we might "watch over our hearts with all

diligence” (Proverbs 4:23) and protect ourselves and the ministry of Bethel from burnout, let’s consider this text.

The Rude Awakening

Luke 15: 25-27: “Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’”

This depicts a typical scene when it came to celebrating in Christ’s day amongst the wealthy. As with funerals in which professional mourners would be hired to weep and wail, so also with times of celebration, people could be hired to play music, dance, sing, and rejoice. And such most likely would have been the case in this parable. Accordingly, when the older son approached the house and heard

- Music.
- Dancing.
- Loud voices.
- Laughing.
- Celebrating.

He would have known immediately that something was up; someone very important was in his house. Yet he would have had two questions: Who were they? And why were they there? Now as to the who: It was the prodigal son, his brother (v. 27a)! And to the why: It was because he had returned home “safe and sound” (v. 27b)!

I can hear the brother saying, “*THAT’S ALL?! ALL THIS FUSS IS BECAUSE OF HIM?!*” Now if this news wasn’t shocking enough for the older brother, the extra bit of information that “the servant” shared clearly pushed him over the edge.

Luke 15:27, “...and your father has killed the fattened calf...”

The diet of most Jews rarely contained meat; it was too expensive. As such, the slaughtering of a fattened calf occurred on rare occasions on account of very special guests like a king, a governor, or a wealthy individual. Understandably it was this news that sent the older son into a rage as we will see in vv. 28-30. And yet before we proceed, notice the reason for the older son’s anger, or at least the tip of the iceberg.

Luke 15:25a, “Now his older son was in the field...”

This important fact brings out the emphasis of this section. While the prodigal son was out gallivanting and consuming the household wealth, the older brother was “in the field” working. While the dad was out looking for the son, the older brother was where, “in the field” working. When the prodigal came to the end of himself, returned home and received his father’s loving reception, where was the older son? “in the field” working. And when the celebration began and the fattened calf was butchered, what was the older brother doing? He was “in the field” working.

With this little phrase, “his older son was in the field” we get a glimpse at the apparent inequity of the situation. While the prodigal was transgressing against “heaven and his father,” the older son was faithfully working in the field serving his father!

Do you see why the older son was angry? Because his record was one of years of faithful labor unrecognized! His was a forgotten and unappreciated work! It is this that serves as the soil for spiritual and ministerial burnout;: un-appreciated or under-appreciated labor! Truly, the Christian who serves the Lord to the best of his ability, but seems to encounter an endless flow of trial and difficulty is at risk of spiritual burnout. The elder or deacon who tirelessly serves for years all the while seeing little fruit and even less thanks is at risk of ministerial burnout. And the body of Christ which gives itself to one another year in and year out with little apparent benefit to self is at risk Christian burnout.

The Rebellion

Now notice the typical cause and consequence we experience when burnout sets in, rebellion.

Luke 15:28-30, “But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.’”¹

This passage gives us first the cause of burnout and then its consequence. Notice first cause of burnout was spirit of slavery.

Luke 15:29b, “But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you...”

We could translate this passage this way: “For so many years I have been slaving you!” And with this we begin to see the problem of the older brother and so one of the root causes of burn out. The spirit with which he did his work for “all these years” was NOT the spirit of a son, BUT the spirit of a slave! Frederick Danker put it this way:

When he says I have served..., the mask drops, revealing the frigidity of the soul. The father thought he had a son! But to the older son the father’s house spelled slavery. (Danker, 1988, p. 277)

The error of the older brother was his relating to the father throughout the years on the basis of merit. Accordingly, to behold a feast thrown in honor of his brother was to conclude that somehow the prodigal had earned the feast! Leon Morris wrote of the elder boy:

He did not really understand what being a son means. That is perhaps why he did not understand what being a father means. He could not see why his father should be so full of joy at the return of the prodigal. (Morris, 1988, p. 267)

Now when we assume the line of thinking represented in this parable, represented also by the scribes and Pharisees, the response of the older son is understandable. When he observed a celebration in honor of “a bum” when you have done far more and received far less is to arouse the feelings of anger! And yet I fear that for so many of us, though we have been saved by grace and adopted into the Father’s household, nevertheless in the words of Danker, “...the father’s house [speaks of] slavery” (Danker, 1988, p. 277) and that is why we oft-times suffer with burnout!

Why do you do the things you do in this body? It is out of compulsion? Do you feel forced? Guard your heart, brothers and sisters. If the service you render to God is on account of blind duty, you are at risk for burn out!

Luke 15:29b, “But he answered and said to his father, ‘Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid [we could translate this as, “and yet you have never given me so much as a goat” which was a much cheaper meal than a fatted calf], that I might be merry with my friends”

Secondly, notice the focus of the son in this text is on HIS labor and HIS virtue that earned, in his mind, the benefit of a party for HIS friends! It is as John MacArthur commented on Matthew 20:

The charge of unfairness was not grounded in a love for justice but in the selfish assumption that the extra pay they wanted was pay they deserved. (Dr. John F. MacArthur, 1988, pp. 212-213)

This is the second cause of burnout! It is NOT the work that we do which brings it on, BUT the perceived lack of appreciation! When we labor long and see little in return, the heart is at risk of going cold! Be careful!

The Consequences of Burnout

Luke 15:30, “But when this son of yours came...”

The brother’s rebellion is at a climax. In fact, he is filled with so much resentment that he has disowned his brother! In fact notice the phrase, “this son of yours.” It is derisive. While the prodigal was the older boy’s brother, by Luke 15:30 the prodigal had become nothing more to him than “the son of his father!”

Sadly, this is how burned-out people deal with ministry; they first disown it in their heart, and then in their lives.

- *“Daily Quiet times are over-rated! I don’t need ‘em!”*
- *“This ministry is no longer worth my time!”*
- *“I’ve tried; it doesn’t work. I’m just not the fellowshiping kind of guy or gal!”*

This state of mind led the “older son” to break the Ninth Commandment which brings us to the fourth consequence.

Luke 15:30b, “But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots...”

With this, the older son bore false witness! For notice, both of the elements of this accusation are wrong.

- It wasn't the father's wealth that this son “devoured”; the money the boy used in his rebellion had been freely given to him! Legally and morally, it was his to do with as he pleased!
- There is no way the older son could know whether his brother spent his money on “harlots”; he hadn't even talked to him at this point. The implication is that this older son was just smearing his brother's name- making him seem worse than he really was.

And so here we see the typical thought processes of an embitter man who has burned out of the ministry. In order to feed his anger, he must demonize that which once was important to him. Here it was the brother who or what is it in your life? And so the older son is angry. He is angry at the seeming:

- Insensitivity of his father which obviously had neglected to reward him with a “thank you” party.
- Partiality of his father which apparently had chosen to love his prodigal brother more than him.
- The foolish choices of his brother.

In fact, one can just hear the older son grumbling against his father, “This man receives sinners and eats with them”- which is the very attitude Christ is here combating (cf. Luke 15:2)!

End Note(s)

¹ The irony of the response of the older brother is that his attitude was no different than the attitude of the prodigal before he left. Both viewed the father from the perspective of what they could get. That the prodigal was led down one path and the older son down another is of little significance. Both were guilty of taking the love of their father for granted. The importance in seeing this is that rebellion can take a variety of forms. When we serve the Lord for what we can get or find ourselves disowning someone in the kingdom of God, then we know we are no longer serving God as His child; we are in rebellion- JUST LIKE THE PRODIGAL!

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on December 18, 2011. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.