

# Christian Service: Slavery or Sonship

*Christian Service*

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I don't know that I ever could be a pastor in North America for one reason, and that is my experience of preaching in the United States has been uncomfortable in this respect, that I find whenever I go somewhere, people phone up a month in advance, two months in advance asking what the title of the message is going to be and being somewhat of a last minute bug, I found that something of a burden and a problem to me. And so when John asked me for a title I think a lot more than two months ago, I gave him this rather general title of "Christian Service: Slavery or Sonship," and I want to begin unfolding that topic by asking you to turn with me to the gospel according to Luke 15, at first may strike you as rather an odd passage from which to address a pastoral fraternal, but I hope the rest of it will become clear as we go on this morning.

It's all too familiar a passage, and perhaps partly the cause of it familiarity we are inclined to neglect some of its great pastoral lesson. Remember the context in which Jesus is speaking, which is described in verses 1 and 2.

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

I think it's worth noting that the complaint at this juncture is not this man justifies sinners and eats with them, it's this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. The problem is attitudinal as well as theological. And so Jesus tells this parable, the hundred sheep of which one is lost, the 10 coins of which one is lost, the two sons of whom both are lost.

11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the

pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'"

I'm not sure that there is a term in our theological encyclopedia for the topic that I want to address with you this morning. Indeed, I would almost hesitate to give it a name lest in the process of naming it we drew the false conclusion that by naming it we understood it and had it both tied and tagged. But what I'm concerned to speak to you about and the reason why I want to draw your attention to some elements in this parable, so-called, of the prodigal son is the theme of the heart distortions. The heart distortions of the knowledge of God in the hearts of the servants of God and the kind of effect those heart distortions have on our own personal Christian living and consequently inevitably on our pastoral service and ministry to the people of God. If I did have to call this thing something, I think I would call it the Elder Brother syndrome. The Elder Brother Syndrome, and it's rather marvelously captured in the translation of the New International Version here in verse 29 of Luke 15 when the elder brother answers his father. Think of it for a moment. This is a certain kind of description of what it has meant to this individual to have lived in the home and served in the home of the heavenly Father and weigh the words, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." Now it's that kind of spirit that I want us to think about, that kind of spirit that I want us to see by God's grace may not finally have deserted us in our own Christian living or in our own

Christian ministry, the spirit that while it might not say with the lips of a Christian pastor, while it might not say to the Lord, "Lord, all these years, I've been slaving for you," while it might not say that, believe that spirit both in the mode in which we live the Christian life and sometimes also sadly, in the mode by which we minister to others for whom we have a spiritual care.

And it manifests itself, it seems to me, in a wide variety of ways. It manifests itself obviously in the most general sense in a kind of legalistic disposition, and of course in some measure in that context it appears in Luke 15. It manifests itself also I think, and perhaps more relevantly, in what the Apostle Paul calls in Roman 8 a spirit of bondage, a spirit of spiritual restriction and restrictiveness, but has not fully or finally given way to what the apostle in the same context calls the spirit of sonship that has begun to taste and experience what he calls, again in the same context, that eschatological liberty as the children of God. And I think this is a method of uncommon importance for us for a number of reasons. The first is because this spirit is endemic in humanity. This is the most fundamental attitude that natural man has to God. Natural man may say, "Of course," to it but contrary to what you are saying, speaking to me about my sinfulness and my need for repentance, "I believe that God is love." How often we will hear that on the lips of the natural man or woman, "What I believe about God is that God is love," and we must learn and understand the lesson that no single mature man who has ever lived has ever believed that. The natural man does not and cannot believe that God is love, and this disposition that to live in God's presence and for God's glory would essentially be for me a form of slavery, servitude and bondage is endemic in the natural heart and the natural disposition before God. And it's important for us to consider this topic for that reason alone, that we may personally and evangelistically understand the gap between what the natural man says he believes about God and what he really thinks about God.

There's another reason for considering, and it is this, that this spirit, if the teaching of Scripture gives us insight into the nature of the Christian life and our own pastoral observations confirm that biblical insight, this disposition is not wholly destroyed by regeneration. This disposition is not wholly destroyed by regeneration and therefore has the capacity to produce the most baneful effects in the lives of Christian believers. And for that matter, since we ourselves are Christian believers, has the capacity to produce the most baneful effects not only in our own Christian living, but also in the whole style of our Christian service and ministry. And it seems to me to be a matter of great pastoral wisdom that we should be aware of that possibility, first of all, in our own lives and correspondingly of pastors who seek day in and day out to counsel the spirits of men and women. How vital it is for us to recognize that this, however it may be covered up, will also be a legal characteristic of many, if not all of those to whom we have to give pastoral counsel.

The elder brother symptom that Christian living and Christian fathers are essentially forms of slavery, this Elder Brother Syndrome, seems to me, to be a matter, as I say, of great importance and I want to try and analyze it under four headings. First of all, to say something about its origin and character. Secondly, something about its evidence and fruit. Thirdly, something about its danger, especially in the work of the Christian

ministry. And fourthly, say something about its remedy in the nature of the Christian gospel.

First of all, then, let me say something about the origin and character of this Elder Brother Syndrome. I suppose that I've already hinted we are somewhat familiar in our personal evangelism with the notion that God is seen by the natural heart as a harsh taskmaster. Remember how Jesus brings this out several chapters later on in Luke 19:21 in this wonderfully insightful expression in the parable of the minas when the servant who has hidden his mina in the ground in a piece of cloth says to the returning master, "I was afraid of you, because you are a hard man." And as I say, that is the most instinctive view that the natural man or woman will have of the character and the work of God. "God in the pursuit of his glory is out for the destruction of my joy. God reaps where he does not sow." And so the natural disposition regards the character of God not as a gracious, loving heavenly Father, but essentially as a hard taskmaster.

And there is no doubt that one of the reasons Jesus uses the language he does in Luke 15 and again in the parable in Luke 19, it is because he has the Pharisees specifically in view. The Pharisees' understanding of the character of God is that God is a hard taskmaster who must be pleased by the most just servitude of those who seek to serve him, but if we were simply to say that this Elder Brother Syndrome is an expression of a Pharisaic spirit, we would not have penetrated nearly deeply enough. The problem with this spirit is not not, as we sometimes say, this is the spirit of the Pharisee in men and women, the problem with this spirit is that this is the spirit of Adam in the Pharisee, and the spirit of Adam in all of us in this sense but it was true this intellectual temptation that Adam and Eve fell, that Eve specifically was deceived by, in the event of the fall. You remember how that took place. It took place when the authority of God's word was formally denied. "Surely God didn't say that to you." But I wonder if it's true that often in our defense of the authority of Scripture and in our polemics, our recognition that the warfare we are engaged in to defend the authority of Scripture was already present in the garden of Eden, that sometimes in seeing that there was a formal denial of the authority of God's word in the garden of Eden, we must fight off what the material element in the temptation was. And do you remember what it was? It was, "Has God set you in this glorious garden, surrounded you by these marvelous, beautiful and attractive fruits and then said to you, you are to eat of none of the trees in this garden?" You imagine in a few weeks time, a father taking his son into Macy's or whatever major department stores around here are, and taking him to the toy department and showing him around and allowing the little lad's eyes to light up as he sees all the possible Christmas presents that might be available to him, and then the father saying, "Are there any of these things you would like?" And the little boy's eyes lighting up even more, and his tongue moving full fast now he can scarcely get them out, and then his father turning to him physically and saying, "Well, this year you'll have none of them. Not one single one. Not one single one." Can you imagine the spirit that would be borne in the heart of such a child in relationship to his father? Could such a child ever trust his father again?

You see, that was exactly the point of the temptation in the garden of Eden, not thinking the formal repudiation of a far more authority in Scripture but the repudiation of the

testimony of God's word to God's lavish grace. It's what Paul called exchanging the truth about God for the lie.. The truth about God was that he had given them a super abundance of good things in his love for them, and in that context, in order that they might taste more of his love, had given them a specific command to test their holiness and to advance it. It was all an expression of God's lavish love and was transformed by faith into an expression of the divine cynicism, the divine taskmaster. So Eve exchanged the truth about God for the lie and the belief in the lie has been endemic in the hearts of men and women ever since. By nature, we believe the lie about God and Satan has a vested interest in making sure that we continue to do so. He injected into humanity the lie, and he has an interest in that poison flourishing in the hearts of men and women and we only need, I think, to look at our own hearts to recognize the degree to which that is so.

Listen to how John Owen, the great Puritan writer comments on this. He says, "It is exceeding acceptable unto God, even our Father, that we should thus hold communion with him in his love, but we never received into our souls that he may be received into our souls as one full of love, tenderness, and kindness towards us. But flesh and blood is apt to have very hard thoughts of him. 'I knew thou wast an austere man,' saith the evil servant in the gospel. Now," says Owen, "there is not anything more grievous to the Lord nor more subservient to the design of Satan upon the soul, than such thoughts as these. Satan claps his hands, if I may say so, when he can take up the soul with such thoughts of God: he hath enough, all that he doth desire." And if we know only too well from the testimony of Genesis 3 the discussion that began with the reflection of the lie about God and the exchanging of the truth about God with a baneful influence on the whole life together of Adam and Eve and the human race that follows. God's word was corrupted, God's grace was restricted, and mark this, God's character was assassinated. That's what Satan was out to do, to assassinate the character of God and to introduce them to man's thinking, this endemic in state of response, "I knew that you were a hard man."

It's very interesting to notice the ways in which this spirit manifests itself, this bondage spirit in relationship to God, because it does so, interestingly, in two ways that many people would think were theological antithetical to one another. It manifests itself, of course, obviously in a spirit of legalism, but it's not simply legalism in the sense we must work our way to heaven which, of course, is based on the whole presupposition that we must earn the favor of God, it manifests itself also in legalism in the sense that was characteristic so often of the Pharisees, that we must narrow the field of liberty beyond the boundaries that God himself has set upon it. And what that means, in the last analysis, is that we think about law out of relationship with the gracious love gift of the Father. We think about law out of relationship with the gracious love gift of the Father. You have this finely defined legalism in these terms. He says, "It is a peculiar kind of submission to law, something that no longer feels the personal divine touch in the rule it submits to." Something that no longer feels the personal divine touch in the rule it submits to. And legalism, legalism with a view to justification, legalism with a view to sanctification, legalism with a view to community life is always the fruition of this sense that God is not all that he has revealed himself to be and that he is a hard and harsh taskmaster.

Paradoxically, however, the spirit of bondage, this Elder Brother Syndrome, reveals itself not only in legalism, which it manifestly did in the case of the elder brother, it revealed itself also in antinomianism. In a sense, that's what this parable is about. It's about two sons neither of whom were able to live happily and sweetly in the presence of their father. One obviously because he was a legalist, but you'll notice the other equally, obviously, as an antinomian His way of dealing with the sense that in the father's house there was restriction and bondage, was to go to the very opposite of legalism and become an antinomian. And I think it's vital for us not only as theological thinkers but perhaps supremely of pastors, to realize that however much legalism and antinomianism may appear to be the antithesis of one another, they are not set forward in Scripture as the antithesis of one another, they are set forward in Scripture as the antithesis of grace. In Scripture, the opposite of legalism, by which legalism may be healed and cured, is not antinomianism but grace, and in Scripture the opposite of antinomianism by which it may be cured, is not legalism but grace.

It is grace and it is to me a very striking thing reading back into the past masters of the spiritual life, to notice how there is a recurring emphasis in the best teachers of the nature of the Christian life, a recurring emphasis that recognizes this. Here is, if I may call him, one of your own poets if you are prepared to accept a Southern Presbyterian, one of your own poets here is James Henley Thornwell. Listen to this, "Whatever form antinomianism may assume, it springs from legalism. Men rush into the one extreme, but those who have been in the other." I happen to have been reading a little recently in the life of Tobias Crisp the great 17th century English father of English antinomianism, he's often referred to, and I've been struck by the fact that all those who comment on his life, those who write, his biographies, all comments on this principle, that earlier in his ministry, his ministry was marked by a deep spirit of legalism. And they all comment on the fact that it was in order to rescue himself from that spirit of legalism that he was drawn and attracted to antinomianism. The very point that Thornwell was making. This spirit of bondage, this legal attitude to God, this view that sees God primarily as the giver of laws not primarily as the Father of love. And as I say, that spirit is not necessarily, perhaps not ever immediately banished by regeneration. Here is one of my own poets, John Calhoun, the great 19th century pastor and theologian. "Some degree of this legal spirit," he says, "still remains in believers and often prevails against them. They sometimes find it exceedingly difficult for them to resist that inclination to rely on their own attainments and performances for some part of their title to the favor and enjoyment of God."

And it's a very striking thing that you find this spirit both in the elder brother and also in the younger son. Obviously in the elder brother in the words, "all these years I've been slaving for you," here he has exchanged the truth about his father for the lie. But there's also something offered in the spirit of the prodigal son as he has been awakened and has come back to his father. You remember the words that are in his mind and, indeed, I suppose some of the older copies of the early manuscripts of this gospel not only thought it should be in his mind but on his lips, "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son but let me be one of your hired servants." And you see the instinct and this, of course, explains why the father not only rushes to him, that weeps over him, embraces him, gives

him the new robe and the new ring, and kills the fatted calf and celebrates with the party because he recognizes that unless his son be the recipient of these special expressions of his grace, his son will never be able to believe that it's possible for him to be anything but a hired servant in the father's house.

So we have like in what we might call the legalist. We have it at the heart of the young man who is the antinomian and we have it, in a sense, still lingering there in principle in the young man as he is brought back into the presence of his father and his family and his home. And it is, it seems to me, one of the most insidious elements that Satan is able to inject into our hearts and lives, and it manifests itself in a thousand different ways in our relationships with one another, with our congregation, and with ourselves, as well as obviously in our relationship with the Lord. But there's a second thing, I think, that's worth noting. Not only the origin and character of this bondage spirit, but something about the fruits of this bondage spirit. And these, again, are manifold or if I can put it another way, there are many things that for their causes need to be traced back to this bondage spirit in the life of the individual. Let me mention some of them.

The first is obviously a spirit of self righteousness in relationship to others. Now the obvious illustration of that in the gospels is, of course, among the Pharisees, the sense that we have here in Luke 15, the sense that's expressed again in Luke 18, "I thank you that I'm not like other men," that sense of self-righteousness in relationship to others. But notice that is observable not only among the Pharisees who appear to be outside of the confines of the gracious kingdom of God, something of that reappears, doesn't it, in the early Christian church. For example, in the situation Paul deals with when he writes to the church at Rome, that spirit that instead of welcoming even the weakest brother for whom Christ has died, pushes that weakest brother to the back of the congregation, to the most distant fellowship with us because that brother has not attained the level of righteousness and conformity that we ourselves believe we have attained. The spirit of judgmentalism in relationship to our brothers, which spirit can exist in our hearts even when not a single judgmental word comes out of our lips. The spirit of private excommunication that sees, first of all, in a brother, the things with which I disagree or in which he does not come up to conformity to the standards and norms that we together have said. The spirit that actually is drawn like a magnet to that rather than being drawn as by a magnet to what the grace of Christ has already done in such a person's life.

Now, why is that so serious and insidious a thing? It is for this reason, that our attitude to our fellow believers is actually a clear expression not only of our attitude to God but of the way we think about God. We are to others precisely what we believe God has been to us precisely, and the spirit of a believer that does not embrace and welcome even the weakest of fellow believers, not only betrays a spirit of judgmentalism but betrays also that this is how they think of the Lord himself, that the Lord is like this. And of course, one of the great planks of Paul's reasoning in Romans 14 is to get these Roman Christians to see how utterly dissimilar from this is the Lord. "How can you condemn thus one for whom Christ died," he said. "Don't you see that in your attitude to your brother you're actually saying something about your Christology?" That's what he's saying, if I can put it in technical terms, "You're expressing that that's the way you think about Christ."

So there is a there is a self-righteousness and criticism and sometimes cynicism. There is an attraction to the things I dislike in my brother rather than an attraction to what God's grace has done in my brother. There is, in the second place, there's a fruit of this bondage spirit, not only that spirit of self-righteousness but what we might call a spirit of personal confinement. I think there is something of an allusion to this in what Paul says in Romans 8:2, "There is therefore now," he says, "for those who are in Christ Jesus no," and generally speaking it's translated "condemnation," but katakrima, as you probably know, conveys not only the idea of the judgment of condemnation but the sentence that follows condemnation. The restriction, the imprisonment that follows condemnation. There is now no confinement for those who are in Christ Jesus because the law of the spirit of life sets them free in Christ Jesus. And Paul takes this up again in Romans 8:15 and puts it into a familial pattern when he says we've not received the spirit of bondage to bring us again to fear in craven cynical terror of God but we've received the spirit of sonship by whom we cry, 'Abba, Father,' and to whom we come in childlike, trusting obedience." The spirit of confinement that becomes incapable of either seeing or sensing the lavishness of the grace of God. The spirit of confinement that cannot hear the Father saying, "My Son, everything I have is yours and you are always with me." He couldn't hear it. He couldn't take it in.

Here is Owen again. He says, "Many dark and disturbing thoughts are apt to arise in this thing. Few can carry up their hearts and minds to this height by faith as to rest their souls in the love of the Father. They live below it in the troublesome region of hopes and fears, storms and clouds. All here is serene and quiet but how to attain to this pitch they know not." And isn't this one of the most arduous tasks of pastoral ministry, to unravel the knotted heart of a true believer in such a way that their heart and disposition is opened up to the sunshine of the grace of God in Jesus Christ so that they break through the clouds that obscure the brightness and passion of the Father's love for them?

There's a third mark of this. It is a profound and yet often hidden spiritual insecurity. That, of course, is the theme that Jesus begins to work out in Matthew 6 in two different ways. First of all, in relationship to our spirituality in giving and fasting and praying in which the bondage spirit is confined, Jesus says, is confined in its insecurity to seeking the praises of men rather than the pleasure of God. And interestingly, he develops the same theme in a quite different way in the second-half of the chapter when he speaks about anxiety. "Why are you anxious," he says. "It is because you do not really believe that he is your Father." It's as simple as that. If you really believed that he was your Father and that you lived as his son, you would be increasingly delivered from these anxieties. Striking phenomenon, to me at least, is that what Jesus is saying in Matthew 6, that hypocrisy and anxiety both have the same root in an inability to have a heart that is open to the reassurances of the heavenly Father that we are accepted in his grace in Jesus Christ and that he will supply all of our needs out of the riches of his grace. I know we find other reasons for both hypocrisy and anxiety but Jesus roots them here. They're caused by a bad theology, he's saying. And you remember how Jesus strikes that note in Matthew 6 which is so contrary to the note that Satan struck in the garden of Eden where he said, "Take it because God will give you nothing." Jesus is saying to his disciples in



Matthew 6, "So simply receive it because the Father will give you everything." And this of course, is why Paul is so emphatic about the marvel of the Spirit's ministry in Romans 8 because only the Spirit of God is able to open the eyes of our understanding so that this dawns upon our souls that this is what God is really like to his children.

There's a fourth mark or fruit of it, it is that this bondage spirit becomes a ready prey to Satan and his wiles. The spirit of legality that underlies both legalism and antinomianism, for that matter, never rests secure in the knowledge that its sin is fully and finally forgiven, and that's why we become easy prey to the blackmailing of Satan. When we begin to think in any sense that God is this harsh taskmaster and not the God of exquisite grace he has revealed himself to be to us sinners in Jesus Christ, and we become such ready prey for Satan because of our guilt and our shame. And the way he begins to trade in our guilt and to squeeze us into the ground and say, "With that kind of thing in your life, how can your God in heaven ever look upon you with delight and joy and pleasure? You've blown it."

A fifth mark of this is often an inability to deal with indwelling sin. I rather suspect that was what lay behind the situation among the Colossians. They had found in themselves a certain restriction in their relationship to God, a certain inability to deal with them which made them prey to false teaching on sanctification. Isn't that a very striking thing how much false teaching on sanctification is related to a certain kind of legalistic, restrictive spirit that feeds, that feeds on what is hidden still often in the hearts of God's children, this niggling suspicion that God's grace is not in itself all the sufficiency I need.

Well, that brings me to a third major heading because if it's important for us to think about the nature of this bondage spirit and the fruit of this bondage spirit, it's certainly important for us, at least as briefly as I can, to underline some of the dangers of that bondage spirit, particularly as it affects ourselves and our own Christian living and in our Christian ministry. Let me put it like this. All of us who are engaged in preaching know that something happens to us when we preach. We become larger and grander than we are in any other context. Not different but, as it were, enlarged. The mind is enlarged. The emotions are enlarged. The affections are enlarged. If people want to see us fully exposed, then they will see that most clearly when we preach. I think it was Thomas Hooker that it was said most marvelously, would it were said of more of us, but when he began to preach, he seemed to grow so large you would have thought he could have picked up a king and put him in his pocket. And that does happen, doesn't it? Here are we, mild mannered Clark Kent's of this world, but when God's word takes hold of us, all that we are by nature and by grace seems to be enlarged as we ride upon the power of the Spirit and word of God.

But you know, precisely because that's true, precisely because that's true, the sad note is that it's not just our graces that may be enlarged, the Spirit doesn't enlarge us in bits and pieces, he enlarges us as whole men. That's why we never more fully communicate the tenor and tone of our own spirits than we do in preaching. We don't communicate that so largely in counseling as we do in preaching. People hear the words we say but since preaching and hearing preaching is more than drawing words out of this brain and

implanting it in your brain, they hear a lot more than the words we say. They hear what we are and who we are, and since that happens when what we are doing is communicating the very breath of God to them, the inevitable, can I call it risk that God has taken in making men preachers is this, that we may by our preaching and the spirit in which we communicate the gospel, so stand exposed to men and women that we communicate a false view of God to them.

And this, brethren, seems to me to be something so amazing. We need to give the most general attention to it. It ought to permeate the way we think about preaching. If we were to think about preaching simply as instruction, as the communication of information, we should close up shop tomorrow. For most of us, there are books that say it far better than we can. It would be far better for our people if it were just a matter of information that we stick books into their hands, but it's not. It's not and that means we personally are faced with a challenge that were it not for the grace of God, would surely destroy any of us who have any vestige of spiritual sensitivity. But if there is in my heart this view of God, "I know you are a hard man," if that were my view of serving him in the Christian ministry, then that would be bound to communicate itself to my people and the tragedy would be that since the people think about God in terms of the word that he speaks to them, the tragedy is they might begin to think about God in exactly those terms.

You will have noticed as you've moved around congregations, I'm sure, as I have noticed when I've had the privilege of moving around congregations, it is an amazing thing to see the extent to which a congregation takes on the personality of the person who preaches to it. Let me cite some words that I'll never forget reading as a student in the journals of Soren Kierkegaard. You may think this is an unusual place to get blinding illumination, but listen to this. Kierkegaard is actually here writing about his own father, and I think when you know this, you know Kierkegaard in a new way. That's not my point. Listen to what he says. "The greatest," I hope you believe this, I really hope you believe this. This is not an American thing to believe. It's not a fundamentalist thing to believe, but I certainly think it's profoundly true. "The greatest tragedy for a child is not that of having a free-thinker for a father." Now substitute the word "pastor." "The greatest tragedy for a child is not that of having a free-thinker for a father but someone who professes to know God but who clearly in the depth of his being does not himself trust him as Father."

The distortion, and this manifests itself, if I may take a few minutes to try and unpack this, this manifests itself in a number of elements in our ministries. Let me more or less just give you the headings because there are several of them. The first is this. I think one manifestation of this is that we may find it easier and, indeed, find ourselves being more creative as preachers in preaching on obligations rather than in preaching on grace, in preaching on sin rather than in preaching on Christ, in pulling down rather than building up, on judgment rather than in love. Now you do not know me, as the Proverb says, from Adam. Let me underline that by saying this: I beg you not to misunderstand me. I do not mean we must never preach the holiness of God, the law of God, the judgment of God, the necessity of repentance, the awful condemnation that awaits those who are outside of Jesus Christ. I do not mean that. I'm talking about creativity in preaching. I'm talking about the things that we feel we have something to open up to the people when we preach

it. And I think one of the evidences of this sinister spirit of bondage in our own hearts is the degree to which we are far more creative in preaching about sin, I mean creative in the sense of the crafting and the exposition of the material in our sermon. Far more creative and illuminating in preaching on sin than on preaching on Christ with the obvious danger that sin and judgment may become the heroes of our ministry rather than Christ and grace.

Do you see the point? And it's an interesting thing to notice this, isn't it, for example, in the kind of literature that we produce. You go into the local bookstore and there is an almost infinite variety of literature that may in many ways be most valuable and illuminating on a thousand things that will tell you what God requires you to do, and then you come to the slender section that will tell you about the beauties and the glories and the grace of our marvelous God, or the slender section that will tell you in an enriching way, in a genuinely biblically creative way about the splendors of the work of Jesus Christ. Do you see the point? We can be creative about everything in the best things and yet, in fact, manifest that we have given all too little attention to the riches of grace that are to be found in our glorious God.

A second danger is this: an inability to handle the sins of others gently in order to restore them. I guess if you made a real mess of the ministry, there are two people you would never dream of going to. One would be a legalist, the other would be an antinomian. A man you would go to when you were in need because of failure because of sin would be the man you knew understood the grace of God. That would not only bring forgiveness but bring restoration. And correspondingly, when we know all too little of the grace of God, we are unable to handle the sins of others and unable to respond to that biblical exhortation to restore them with gentleness.

I'm very struck in that connection by that hymn that is attributed to John Calvin. "I greet thee who my sure Redeemer art." He has a line in that that I'm sure reflects the fact that he found something in Jesus Christ that answered the deepest needs of his own soul. "Thou hast the true and perfect gentleness." And it's a very interesting thing, if I may digress for a moment, to discover how often the gentleness of God in his grace is something from which Calvin drinks like a thirsty man because, of course, he saw that was the only remedy for his own natural lack of gentleness that in his case undoubtedly was the fruit of this spirit of bondage. And it's also, incidentally, I'm sure you've noticed the only personal attribute in himself to which Jesus ever drew attention, his meekness and gentleness. The one who knows that the Father has expressed grace to him and that his own sins are freely as well as fully forgiven, is the one who is going to be able freely and fully to bring others to the enjoyment of the forgiveness of sins.

And the fourth danger is that the things that Jesus said were true of the Pharisees might ultimately become true of us. You remember how he described this in Matthew 23? How they shut the kingdom of God to others rather than open it. How they produced converts in whom their own legal spirit was not only replicated but exaggerated. How a spirit of duplicity crept into their dealings with others because you cannot live spiritually on that basis. How they majored on minors. How they were unable to deal with their own sins.

How they criticized others of their contemporaries by comparison with the great heroes of the past rather than seeing their own need to stand with those heroes of the past in the Father's grace. That's a very striking thing, isn't it, that a spirit of bitterness and complaint that I've got to live in the present age rather than in some better age, may actually be a sign not just of our view of church history, but our view of God. Our view of God.

Well, all this if we take it to heart can be devastating for us, so let me in a moment say something finally about our deliverance from this Elder Brother Syndrome. Our deliverance, as I've hinted, is not to be found in more legalism or in antinomianism, but as Scripture urges us to find deliverance for the condition of our spirits in the riches of Christ's grace. What we need most of all, and I suppose so many of us in our times constantly saying this to our people, our greatest need is to know God better. We need to reflect on that for our own ministry in this respect at least, "I need to know God better. And what most of all I need to know better in him is his grace, the grace that he has lavished on us in creation, the grace he has displayed to us in providence, the grace he has given to us in Jesus. I need to be persuaded in my heart that in creation and in providence, and especially in his dear Son, the Father is reaching out of heaven and holding onto my heart and saying, 'My son, everything I have is yours. Everything I have is yours.'"

We need to understand the grace of God in the way he has demonstrated that to us in the death of Christ not as the cause of the Father's love but as the fruit of the Father's love, and we need to recognize, of course, that this, perhaps above all, is what the Spirit of Christ indwelling us indwells us to do. He is the Spirit of Sonship. The first title of the Spirit, says Calvin, is the Spirit of Sonship who enables me to say not with the elder brother, "Look, all these years I've been slaving for you," but enables us to say with the Apostle John, "Look at the love the Father has bestowed on us that we should be called the sons of God." And this is what we are. And when we look and see that, then by that same Spirit we cry, "Abba, Father." I would be as surprised if you said to me that the spirit of bondage was absolutely absent from your life, as I would be surprised to say that about my own life, and while there is much more in the gospel, my dear brothers, we ought not to neglect this which is surely at the center, and at the heart: he is gracious to those who come to him, and he invites us not to be hired servants but sons.