

EXPOSITORY THOUGHTS ON THE GOSPELS.

FOR FAMILY AND PRIVATE USE.

WITH THE TEXT COMPLETE,

And Many Explanatory Notes.

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LUKE XV. 25–32.

25 Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing.	transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gayest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:
26 And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant.	30 But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf.
27 And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound	31 And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.
28 And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him.	32 It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive <i>again</i> ; and was lost, and is found.
29 And he answering said to <i>his</i> father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither	

THESE verses form the conclusion of the parable of the prodigal son. They are far less well known than the verses which go before them. But they were spoken by the same lips which described the younger son's return to his father's house. Like everything which those lips spoke, they will be found deeply profitable.

We are taught, firstly, in this passage, *how unkind and ill-natured are the feelings of self-righteous men towards sinners.*

This is a lesson which our Lord conveys to us by describing the conduct of the "elder brother" of the prodigal son. He shows him to us "angry" and finding fault because of the rejoicings over his brother's return. He shows him complaining that his father treated the returning prodigal too well, and that he himself had not been treated so well as his merits deserved. He shows him utterly unable to share in the joy which prevailed when his younger brother came home, and giving way to ill-natured and envious thoughts. It is a painful picture, but a very instructive one.

For one thing, this elder brother is an exact picture of the Jews of our Lord's times. They could not bear the idea of their Gentile younger brother being made partaker of their privileges. They would fain have excluded him from God's favour. They steadily refused to see that the Gentiles were to be fellow-heirs and partakers of Christ with themselves. In all this they were precisely acting the part of the "elder brother."

For another thing, the elder brother is an exact type of the Scribes and Pharisees of our Lord's times. They objected that our Lord received sinners and ate with them. They murmured because He opened the door of salvation to publicans and harlots. They would have been better pleased if our Lord had confined His ministry to them and their party, and had left the ignorant and sinful entirely alone. Our Lord saw this state of things clearly; and never did He paint it with such graphic power as in the picture of the "elder brother."

Last, but not least, the elder brother is an exact type of a large class in the Church of Christ in the present day. There are thousands on every side who dislike a free, full, unfettered gospel to be preached. They are always complaining that ministers throw the door too wide open, and that the doctrine of grace tends to promote licentiousness. Whenever we come across such persons, let us remember the passage we are now considering. Their voice is the voice of the “elder brother.”

Let us beware of this spirit infecting our own hearts. It arises partly from ignorance. Men begin by not seeing their own sinfulness and unworthiness, and then they fancy that they are much better than others, and that nobody is worthy to be put by their side. It arises partly from want of charity. Men are wanting in kind feeling towards others, and then they are unable to take pleasure when others are saved. Above all, it arises from a thorough misunderstanding of the true nature of gospel forgiveness. The man who really feels that we all stand by grace and are all debtors, and that the best of us has nothing to boast of, and has nothing which he has not received,—such a man will not be found talking like the “elder brother.”

We are taught, secondly, in this passage, that the *conversion of any soul ought to be an occasion of joy to all who see it*. Our Lord shows us this by putting the following words into the mouth of the prodigal’s father: “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.”

The lesson of these words was primarily meant for the Scribes and Pharisees. If their hearts had been in a right state, they would never have murmured at our Lord for receiving sinners. They would have remembered that the worst of publicans and sinners were their own brethren, and that if they themselves were different, it was grace alone that had made the difference. They would have been glad to see such helpless wanderers returning to the fold. They would have been thankful to see them plucked as brands from the burning, and not cast away for ever. Of all these feelings, unhappily, they knew nothing. Wrapped in their own self-righteousness they murmured and found fault, when in reality they ought to have thanked God and rejoiced.

The lesson is one which we shall all do well to lay to heart. Nothing ought to give us such true pleasure as the conversion of souls. It makes angels rejoice in heaven. It ought to make Christians rejoice on earth. What if those who are converted were lately the vilest of the vile? What if they have served sin and Satan for many long years, and wasted their substance in riotous living. It matters nothing.—“Has grace come into their hearts? Are they truly penitent? Have they come back to their father’s house? Are they new creatures in Christ Jesus? Are the dead made alive and the lost found?”—These are the only questions we have any right to ask. If they can be answered satisfactorily we ought to rejoice and be glad. Let the worldly, if

they please, mock and sneer at such conversions. Let the self-righteous, if they will, murmur and find fault, and deny the reality of all great and sudden changes. But let the Christian who reads the words of Christ in this chapter, remember them and act upon them. Let him thank God and be merry. Let him praise God that one more soul is saved. Let him say, "This my brother was dead and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."

What are our own feelings on the subject? This after all is the question that concerns us most. The man who can take deep interest in politics, or field-sports, or money-making, or farming, but none in the conversion of souls, is no true Christian. He is himself "dead" and must be made "alive again." He is himself "lost" and must be "found."

NOTES. LUKE XV. 25-32.

25.—[*His elder son.*] The part of the parable which begins here was evidently intended to apply to the Scribes and Pharisees who "murmured" at our Lord because He "received sinners." The unkindness, moroseness, and self-sufficiency of the elder son, are an exact type of the spirit manifested by those who found fault with our Lord for showing kindness to publicans and sinners.

It is important to keep this point clearly in view. It furnishes a clue to a right understanding of the whole passage. The elder son represents the Pharisee.

[*Music and dancing.*] Some commentators have carefully dwelt on this expression, and have hinted, not obscurely, that it sanctions recreations and amusements from which many Christians think it better to abstain. Stier exclaims, "A note for the Pietists!" Alford says more gravely, "Would these festal employments have been mentioned by our Lord on so solemn and blessed an occasion if they really come among those works of the devil which He came into the world to destroy?"

I can see no force in arguments of this kind. There is not the slightest proof that the dancing referred to in this place was at all like the dancing of modern times. There is no proof that it was at night, or that it was a dance of men and women mingled together. Until these things can be proved, such comments on the verse before us are much to be regretted. I am not aware of any Christian objecting to music. Dancing, as it is conducted in modern times, many excellent Christians object to, and, I frankly say, I think with good reason.

28.—[*He was angry.*] Let those who think the elder son was a good man notice this expression, as well as those in the following verse. It is just the counterpart of the "murmuring" of the Scribes and Pharisees at the beginning of the chapter.

[*Entreated.*] The kindness of the father's character appears once more in this expression. He might have rebuked his ill-natured son. He only entreats him.

29.—[*Neither transgressed...at any time.*]—Let this expression be carefully noted. It is precisely the spirit of the Pharisee, "I am not as other men,—or even as this publican." It shows clearly that the elder son cannot fairly be regarded as a weak believer. He is a type of the self-righteous, ignorant moralist, who cannot bear the doctrine of salvation by grace, or endure the idea of great sinners being completely pardoned and put on a level with himself.

[*Thou never gavest me a kid, &c.*] The spirit of this expression should be noted. It is the thanklessness of a proud, conceited person, who thinks that nothing is too good for him, and that he is never treated so well as he really deserves.

30.—[*This thy son.*] Mark the ill-natured tone of these words. He is speaking of his own brother. He calls him “this thy son.” It is an expression of scorn and contempt, like “this publican” in Luke xviii. 11.

[*With harlots.*] Let this expression be noted. The fact asserted is an addition to the younger son’s unhappy profligacy, which we hear of for the first time. It may possibly have been true, but it is evidently brought forward here with an uncharitable intention, and in a contemptuous manner.

[*Thou hast killed the fatted calf.*] This expression should be compared with the beginning of the chapter. The Pharisee said, “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.” The elder son’s words here are an exact counterpart to this charge. “Thou hast not only received thy sinful son, but hast even made a feast for him, and eaten with him.”

31.—[*Son thou art ever with me, and all...thine.*] These words have made some persons suppose that the elder son is the type of an erring believer, who is stumbled by seeing great sinners pardoned, but who has never departed from grace himself. This idea is untenable. We are not reading a conversation between a child of God and his heavenly Father. We are simply reading an incident in a story which is intended to show Christ’s love towards sinners, and the ignorance of those who are stumbled by it. The words show us no doubt that the elder son had always lived a steady life compared to his brother’s, and that his father had never denied him anything. But they entirely fail to show that he was humble, charitable, or acquainted with his own heart, notwithstanding all the privileges he enjoyed. The words in short show that the elder son had no right to complain of his father, but they do not show that the father had no right to complain of him.

32.—[*It was meet, &c.*] This verse concludes the argument of the other chapter, and sums up the case between our Lord and His self-righteous enemies, the Scribes and Pharisees. Whatever the elder son might say, he could not deny these two great facts. His brother, who a short time ago had been as one dead, was alive again. He was lost: he was now found. Before these facts all envious and murmuring feelings ought to go down. It was meet to make merry and be glad.

The application of the words to the case of our Lord’s hearers is clear and plain. However much the Pharisees might murmur at Him for receiving sinners, they must confess it was better for sinners to be saved than lost. If publicans and sinners were made alive unto God through His ministry, the Pharisees, if they had had a right spirit, would have been glad. Instead of finding fault they would have been thankful. Instead of murmuring they would have rejoiced.

Let us observe the difference between the way in which the elder brother and the father speak of the prodigal son. The elder brother says, “this thy son,” as if he was not his own brother. The father says, “this thy brother,” to remind him of his relationship.

If we take the secondary, or national view, of the parable, the application of it is not difficult. It rebukes the Jews for their unwillingness to see the Gentiles brought into the Church of Christ, and made partakers of the Gospel. The elder brother is a picture of the Jews of St. Paul’s time, disliking the conversion of the Gentiles, and “forbidding him to speak to them.” (1 Thess. ii. 16.) In this point of view, unhappily, the parable is again a prophecy. Our Jewish elder brother still stands without, and refuses to come in.