

Sermon: *Mistakes of an Older Brother*
Text: *Luke 15:1-3, 11-32*
Date: *March 14, 2010 AM*
Place: *Jesup First UMC*

Jim and Sue grew up together. They were born in the same hospital less than 8 hours apart. They were in the nursery together; they went to Children's Church together; they were in the youth group together. But Jim and Sue were very different people. Jim was a dedicated Christian and Sue was a rebellious teenager. Jim worked hard in the church as a young man and Sue just came when she wanted to and didn't really do much. Everybody looked up to Jim and admired him for his leadership and they looked down on Sue in disappointment.

And then, one Sunday, Sue walked down and knelt and the altar and surrendered to Jesus Christ. And then, there was a drastic change in her life. She came back to Sunday School; she went to work in the church. And the whole church took notice and began to admire her contribution to the church. Well, everybody ... except Jim. They had grown up together; they had done everything together from children's church to Sunday School, but there was trouble brewing in the church.

This morning, we are confronted with a wonderful story, perhaps the best story Jesus ever told. There was a Father who had two sons. And one day, the younger son came and asked for his inheritance and he left to live in the far country and wasted his money on riotous living. But one day, he came around and came back home and the Father welcomed him back with open arms, even threw a party for him. And

when the older son found out about the party, he refused to go. And when the Father went looking for him, he confronted his Father: *“How could you do such a thing? I’ve been a faithful, loving son all these years and you’ve never thrown me a party, but your other son comes home after wasting all your money and you have thrown an extravagant celebration.”* Watch out, there’s trouble brewing in the family.

You know, one of the things that makes this story so good is that we can see ourselves in it. We know that we have received the unconditional, unmerited love of God. For some of us, there was a time when we took our Father’s inheritance and moved to the far country, but we came around and made the journey home to the Father who received us with open arms and a loving heart.

But isn’t it interesting that we never see ourselves the way Jesus intended for us to? You see, this story was told – not to struggling sinners, but – to religious people like you and me. Listen to what Luke tells us: **“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear Him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’ Then, Jesus told them this parable.”** This story wasn’t told to tax collectors and sinners; it was told to religious people, people like you and me, as an explanation of why Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. We aren’t the younger son in the story; Jesus means for us to see ourselves as the older son, the son who stayed at home, the son who did the right thing.

So, Let's take another look at this story, because this boy made a few mistakes that are common to people like you and me.

1. HE EXAGGERATED HIS OWN RIGHTEOUSNESS!

Verse 29 says: **"But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.'**" What a statement to make! *"I've served you faithfully all these years and I've never disobeyed you."* This guy reminds me of Little Jack Horner, sitting in the corner, eating his puddin' pie; he stuck in his thumb, pulled out a plum and said: *"Oh what a good boy am I."*

You know, this is not that uncommon. You and I love God; we love the church; and we all have the purest of intentions. The only problem is: we compare ourselves with one another too much. We look around at one another and we say: *"Well, I'm just as good as Brother Jim,"* or *"I'm just as good as Sister Sue."* And the problem is that nowhere in scripture will you find that this is acceptable behavior. In fact, the Bible tells us to compare our righteousness with the righteousness of Christ. The Bible says: when we compare ourselves to one another, everything may seem okay, but when we compare ourselves with Jesus: **"Our righteousness is as filthy rags."**

When you compare yourself to the standard of God's Word, there's no way to overestimate your righteousness. The Bible says: **"No one is righteous, not even one."** In fact, John tells us: **"If anyone says he does not sin, he is a liar and the truth is not in him."**

We must not overestimate our righteousness.

2. HE OVERESTIMATED HIS BROTHER'S SINFULNESS.

Verse 30 says: *“But when this son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes, comes home, you killed the fatted calf for him.”* Now, notice the older brother never went to the far country; he doesn't know what his younger brother did in the far country, but he thinks he does.

There is a tendency within each of us to point out the wrong in others. Maybe that is our way of deflecting the attention off of the wrong we do; I don't know. One day, Jesus told a story about a Pharisee and a Publican who went to the synagogue. And the Publican stood at a distance with his face cast downward and cried: *“Oh Lord, have mercy on me a sinner.”* And the Pharisee stood boldly and said: *“Oh God, I think you that I am not like that Publican over there.”*

One of the things we all have to learn is that sin is sin. There is no degree of sin. Gossiping is a sin, just like murder is a sin. Lying is a sin, just like adultery is a sin. Sin is sin; and sin breaks the heart of God. One brother was a sinner who left home; and the other brother was a sinner who stayed at home.

We must not overestimated another's sinfulness.

3. HE OVERLOOKED THE FATHER'S LOVE.

Now, this is where the rubber meets the road. This is where exaggerating our righteousness and overestimating the sins of others meet. The older son said: *“It's not fair. This son of yours comes back; he gets a*

fatted calf and I get nothing for being good. It's not fair." And the Father said: "**My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.**"

You see, the older son never left home. He had done all the right things. He had been obedient to his Father, but he still didn't really know the Father at all. Now, who is Jesus talking to? He's talking to the Pharisees. He's talking to religious people, who go to church every Sunday because that's what they've always done. He's talking to people who read their Bible every day and pray every day, because it's their Christian duty. He's talking to people who are going through the motions of religion, but really don't know the Father's heart at all.

We must not overlook the Father's Love.

4. HE UNDERESTIMATED HIS NEED FOR HIS BROTHER.

What the older son really wanted is for the Father to send his brother packing. He's thinking: "*How could you let this piece of trash back in our house?*" He has no sense of love for his brother at all. He's the older son, the heir to the estate; he is the responsible one and he doesn't care about his brother. In fact, he refused to recognize him as a brother; he said: "**When this son of yours comes home,**" not "*When this brother of mine comes home.*"

Where is the love and forgiveness? One day, James Oglethorpe heard John Wesley preach a sermon about forgiveness. And later, he said to Mr. Wesley: "*Sir, I shall never forgive.*" And Wesley said: "*Then, Sir, I hope you never sin.*" Now, what did he

mean by that? Simply this: you cannot live in fellowship with God with unforgiveness in your heart. We may think we don't need to live in fellowship with one another to live in fellowship with God, but that's a lie from the pits of hell.

We must not underestimate our need for others.