

The Pharisees registered a complaint against Jesus: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” (Luke 15:2) Included in Jesus’ response to their disapproval is the beloved parable of the lost son.

Consider the elder brother’s perspective. Little brother had taken off with his rightful portion of their father’s estate. It was premature, it was rude, but it was his share. The elder brother is angered not by the return of his little brother, but by the father’s response to that return. If the father had accepted the youngest back on his stated terms—“I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men”—my guess is that the elder brother would have thought, “fair enough.” But, to receive him back as a son, and as a son with all the honors and privileges, that was too much: that was painfully unfair.

This led me to think about what I will call “big brother bookkeeping”: spiritual and moral accounting that is precise and accurate and one dimensional. It records actions but not attitude, deeds but not heart. Debits and credits are made and paid through works alone.

But Father God’s bookkeeping is not limited to one dimension: it records action *and* attitude, deed *and* heart, works *and* motivation. By the father’s books, both sons were in the red. The eldest son displayed right actions, but they were motivated by duty not by honor and love: “Look! All these years I’ve been *slaving* for you and never disobeyed your orders.” (Luke 15.29) The younger blatantly chose ungodly actions and attitudes: “the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.” (Luke 15:13)

In the eyes of the eldest son, who kept one-dimensional records, it was entirely unfair for the father to even remotely show favor to a son before he had at least “made good” his debt through restitution. Receiving him coolly as a slave would have been just. But embracing and giving gifts and celebrating the return of one with an impossible debt seemed shockingly unfair, unjust, weak, and inconsistent. Big brother bookkeeping has never, will never, make the acquaintance of grace.

For the big brother, the injustice was not solely that the father celebrated the younger son’s return, but that the father had never celebrated the eldest son’s—whose works account balance was certainly higher—presence and “goodness.” (Luke 15:29-30) The eldest’s anger no doubt appeared reasonable to the religious leaders who also adhered to big brother bookkeeping. Perhaps what was bothering the Pharisees, whose question the parable addresses, was not only that Jesus was choosing to eat with sinners, but that Jesus was choosing to eat with sinners *instead of with them*. If Jesus really was from God, would not he be just and fair and reward the Pharisees for their “goodness” by spending his time with them instead of with all these sinners? Why was Jesus celebrating the presence of hopelessly indebted sinners more than the presence of the obviously “righteous” religious?

Additionally, what remained of the father’s estate after the younger brother left, eventually would belong to the eldest son. To receive the prodigal back and to lavish gifts upon him was to cut into the eldest son’s “share”. Contentment can ward off jealousy and greed and possessiveness only when we realize and accept the fact that our Father’s estate, His resources, are limitless: Infinite resources are un-depletable.

In the midst of his wanderings, the youngest son stumbled upon a truth that the eldest son could not comprehend: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” (Luke 15:21) Grace rises to greet sincere and sober estimations of our sinfulness. That truth will eternally evade the understanding of those bound by big brother bookkeeping.