

POWER

"... the gospel ... is the power of God unto salvation ..." (Romans 1:16)

"THIS THY SON" - ACCEPTING THE RESPONSIBILITY TO BE OUR BROTHER'S KEEPER (PART 2)

by Matthew Jones

Editor's Note: In the last installment of this study, Matthew explored the pronoun usage in the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

He gave special attention to the elder brother's refusal to acknowledge the prodigal as his brother. He further detailed the refusal of the elder brother to receive the prodigal back. In this part of the study, Matthew will explore what our response should be to the elder brother, to the parable, and to those erring around us. The study is sure to make us think about whether or not we are fulfilling our duties to our brethren today.

A Reasonable Response

A response to the elder brother of the text is, in fact, a response to many of the people with whom a Christian is associated.

Furthermore, such a response calls that Christian to respond to some that he would regard as great men and women of the faith. There is no doubt that among the religious leaders being depicted by our Lord as this older brother, there were many who were considered great and holy men. Their daily actions aside from their attitude toward the lost would have earned

them respect in the eyes of many.

In like manner, the Christian who responds to this elder brother will be responding to the elder, deacon, preacher, Bible teacher, etc. who has won respect because of great works and constant labors but who has utterly failed in this matter of the heart.

In the parable the Elder Brother is not impressive. In the parable we are ready to hurl stones at him. Out of the parable he is not anathematized. Out of the parable he is held on considerable regard. And, in strict fairness, a certain tribute must be paid him. He was steadily industrious; on the day of rejoicing he came in late from the field. He was conscientious, dependable, and consistent. (Buttrick 198)

Chiefly, however, a proper response to the actions of the elder brother ought to be a response of introspection. It would be far too much like him and like the Pharisees he represents to sit back and say, "Yes, those around me do struggle with this problem," and then move on unchanged by the message.

In light of the previous sections

concerning the elder brother's actions toward the prodigal, how should one respond to him? Some give him a pass, trying to argue that he is misunderstood and has a reasonable complaint to his father. Such would argue that it is not fair that he worked so hard and did not receive what this wicked brother received for merely ceasing wicked behavior. One who would argue such would be showing the elder brother inside him. Also, such an argument is blasphemous; it allies the one making it with the Pharisees and Sadducees and, therefore, against the Lord.

Rejecting this response, the Christian may embrace, rather than attempt to soften, the stinging lesson of this hardhearted brother. Given that many of the shortcomings of the elder brother have a tendency to show up in congregations of the Lord's church and the individuals who make it up, throughout this section, as a response is made, it would be fitting to substitute "self" for "elder brother."

Response To The Elder Brother's Actions

"Self, stop working so hard at what seems righteous that you

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overlook the needs of the brother in your midst." Of course our Brother teaches us how to avoid such foolishness.

Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.

And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:38-42)

Martha was not doing wrong things; in fact, that which she did could be considered good. It is true that the reader should not make too much of a parallel between this text and the text of the prodigal son, but the one point that can be seen in the Lord's response that certainly would apply to the elder brother is that he should have been looking away from his many great works and focusing on his struggling brother.

Merely busying oneself with morally sound tasks does not mean that that one is doing what is right

or "needful." It is good to consider what Roy had to say: "The attitude of the elder son could have induced his brother to leave" (69).

"Self, be active in being a good brother before the crisis comes." Our Lord epitomized the concept of being a good brother to the greatest extent possible; "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). It is interesting that Christians often find it difficult to do for one another that which our Lord requires that they do for those who are enemies.

And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise. For if ye love them which love you, what thank have ye? for sinners also love those that love them. And if ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same.

And if ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

(Luke 6:31-36)

Jesus indicates that the actions required to be a good brother to those whom a man loves is a task so simple that those in the world carry it out. He does not paint the picture that such care is worthless, but that it should not be viewed as tedious as would be caring in that way for an enemy. How much then can one challenge self to be loving and caring toward "this my brother?"

Response To Jesus' Action And His Reason For The Parable

The Lord taught this parable as an answer to the words and attitudes of the religious leaders of His day.

These men exhibited great pride and self-righteousness, which lead them down the path of complacency toward those morally wrong individuals whom they deemed unworthy of God.

They, in their accusation of the Lord, used their brethren as a method for insulting the Lord. Rather than helping the wayward, they used them as ammunition in a battle against the One to whom they should have been bringing them.

The Christian can respond to the Lord's actions and words in two ways. First, it is not wrong to associate with immoral individuals in order to bring them to the Lord. However, the Christian, in this situation, must follow the Lord's example in not getting entangled in

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or condoning the actions of those whom he is reaching. Second, the Christian should respond to those who would argue against being a brother's keeper by doing what Jesus did: teaching.

Some will undoubtedly hold the Pharisee line and argue against the loving attention that needs to be given to the wayward brother. These individuals should be taught and encouraged to do the right thing and have the proper response to the prodigals with whom they have association. The response necessary in both these cases is to consider Jesus' words and actions and be a little more like Him every day.

Response To The Charge To Be "My Brother's Keeper"

To properly respond to what can clearly be seen to be the Christians' duty to his brother, that Christian must first turn the parable inward and find where he stands in relation to the characters depicted in the parable. "What attitudes are indicated by my recent words and actions?" one might ask.

At this point you have invested some time in considering this portion of this volume, and a challenge comes to you. Would you be willing to stop learning or pondering and start applying? Are you a person of action? This writer challenges you to do what he did, to take a sobering look at self and recognize the need, if any, for change in your life. Simply consider and respond to the following questions.

Who were the last three people to respond at your congregation? (Can you name them? First and last name?) Why did each respond? (Can you recall each specific struggle and need?) What have you been doing since then to help encourage each? (Prayers and cards are good, but what have you **done**?)

A brother in Christ is the Christian's responsibility at all times. He should receive care and thought even as he walks daily in faithful adherence to God's Word. The occasional oversight to one's brotherly duty to such a brother is understandable, but how does the Christian defend himself when a fellow brother goes forward and broadcasts to the church that he is coming home, struggling, or hurting.

The charge to be his keeper is

real. It requires prayer. It requires a kind word. It requires **action**.

How can a Christian's response end at the hug given after service? Does the problem somehow disappear? Does Satan throw up his hands and surrender the fight? Does the world withdraw its influence upon him? No! The brother will go out and face the same difficulties the next day but will he face them with the constant support of a whole family of Christians?

What is the answer to the charge to be "thy brother's keeper"? It is answered when the invitation is less about getting them down the aisle than it is about helping them in their daily lives.

The charge is met when "going forward" is not merely met by a hug and a pat on the back but by a daily

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Deuteronomy 5:32

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devotion to the brother who responded in accordance with the need that he stated. It is answered when Christians make a concerted effort on a daily basis to get the wayward brother there in the first place so that he may respond to the invitation of our Lord to come home. It is met when brothers encourage one another in the first place so that they have the support necessary to help them choose not to go off into the far country to begin with.

A Simple Solution

Strive to be like the Father and the third brother of the parable, the One who told it.

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