

Luke 15:29

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends:

Analysis

And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. The elder brother's complaint lays bare his mercenary heart. His words "I serve thee" (δουλεύω σοι, *douleuō soi*) use the verb for slave labor, not the loving service of a son. He views himself as an employee earning wages, not a child enjoying inheritance. The phrase "these many years" (τοσαῦτα ἔτη, *tosauta etē*) emphasizes his perceived merit—he's tallying years like an accountant, calculating what he's owed.

His claim "neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment" (οὐδέποτε ἐντολήν σου παρῆλθον, *oudepote entolēn sou parēlthon*) reveals self-righteousness rivaling the Pharisees'. He believes his external conformity has been perfect, meriting reward. Yet his present anger, resentment, and lovelessness expose the falsity of this claim—he's transgressing the greatest commandments (love God, love neighbor) even as he protests innocence.

The complaint "thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends" betrays multiple heart issues:

1. entitlement—he deserves a feast

2. ingratitude—ignoring that all the father's wealth is his (v. 31)
3. selfishness—he wants to party with friends, not family
4. comparative bitterness—measuring his treatment against the prodigal's.

This is works-righteousness in its essence: viewing God as debtor, service as transaction, and grace to others as personal injustice.

Historical Context

A young goat (kid) was considerably less valuable than the fatted calf, making the elder brother's complaint more bitter—he's been more faithful yet receives less. In his economy of merit, this is unjust. However, his claim to have never transgressed any commandment would ring hollow to Jesus' audience, who knew the universal sinfulness of humanity and the impossibility of perfect law-keeping (Ecclesiastes 7:20, Romans 3:23).

Related Passages

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the elder brother's slave language ('I serve thee') reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of sonship versus servitude?
2. What does his claim of perfect obedience expose about self-righteous blindness to one's own sin?
3. In what ways do believers today keep score with God, resenting His generosity to others while ignoring their own blessings?

Interlinear Text

ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν τῷ πατρὶ Ἰδοὺ, τοσαῦτα
G3588 **And** **he answering** **said** G3588 **to his father** **Lo** **these many**
G1161 G611 G2036 G3962 G2400 G5118

ἔτη δουλεύω σοι καὶ οὐδέποτε ἐντολήν σου
years **do I serve** **thee** **and** **at any time** **commandment** **thy**
G2094 G1398 G4671 G2532 G3763 G1785 G4675

παρῆλθον καὶ ἐμοὶ οὐδέποτε ἔδωκας ἔριφον ἵνα μετὰ
transgressed I **and** **me** **at any time** **gavest** **a kid** **that** **with**
G3928 G2532 G1698 G3763 G1325 G2056 G2443 G3326

τῶν φίλων μου εὐφρανθῶ.
G3588 **friends** **my** **I might make merry**
G5384 G3450 G2165