

# The Elder Brother

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Those who listened to Jesus preach were often shocked by what they heard. More often than not, he shocked their expectations: 'If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man or drink his blood, you will not have life in you' (Jn 6:53); 'I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it was blazing already' (Lk 12:49); 'For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother' (Mt 12:50). It would have shocked Jesus' Jewish listeners to hear him speak of God loving everybody, Jew and Gentile. And what about forgiveness? Well the God of Jesus seemed very liberal on that also.

The Gospel of Luke is filled with stories that tell of God's forgiveness and compassion. Jesus began his public ministry announcing that he was anointed to bring 'good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind and to set the downtrodden free' (Lk 4:1–19). This is the message he went around proclaiming, and he matched his words with his actions, eating and drinking with the outcasts of first-century Palestine. By identifying with the tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus preached a God who was offering his mercy and forgive-

ness to the God-forsaken, a God of mercy rather than revenge. Jesus stands with the sinner and said as much about God, but Jesus' listeners expected a God who would stand side by side with the good, defend the just, reward the pious and most importantly punish wrongdoers.

In the story of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32), the elder son represents those who think wrongdoers should be punished. He didn't like the idea that his younger brother could be so easily forgiven. The elder brother had done everything right. He worked hard for his father and was no doubt pious, and now he was witnessing his younger brother, having wasted his fortune and shamed the family, come home and say sorry and ask forgiveness. Why was he home





***The Elder Brother* by John Macallan Swan, 1888,  
oil on canvas, Tate Britain**

anyway? Because the cash had run out and his ‘friends’ had all abandoned him. Perhaps it was because he was caught up in a famine and had no safety net? Or perhaps it was because he was feeling sorry for himself? Whatever the reason, the elder brother wanted his father to punish the boy. He wanted his father to withhold his mercy or at least make him work of his forgiveness: ‘Well Son, here’s the deal. Don’t screw up for a year, work the land without payment, go to the synagogue every Saturday, listen to Rabbi Ezra, meditate on the Torah and then in a year or so I will begin to consider forgiving you.’ That would have sat better with the elder brother. Perhaps such an ending would have sat better with us. The younger son would be forgiven even-

tually but it doesn’t come cheap, and he would have to work for it.

I think we can all agree that there is something of the elder brother in all of us – a potential to resent others being forgiven for their failings, their sins and their evil acts. We are often more comfortable in the Old Testament world of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’. We would rather punish than forgive. Jesus’ words and actions challenge such attitudes. The God that Jesus presents in the story of the prodigal son and proclaimed throughout Palestine is a God who forgives, a God who embraces sinners. And let’s be honest, most of us really need just such a God.