

From Duty to Delight

The Quiet Crisis of Faithful Men



Dr. Corey Carlisle

A brief word to the reader

There is a kind of man who rarely draws attention to himself. He shows up and faithfully carries out his responsibilities without complaint. Over time, his life shaped by such unquestioned responsibility becomes so familiar that it is no longer examined.

This paper is not about dramatic failure. It is about something quieter - the slow narrowing of a man's inner life, even while his outward faithfulness remains intact. It explores a pattern Scripture names in the older brother: proximity without participation, obedience without enjoyment.

These reflections have emerged from conversations, observation, and personal experience. If certain lines feel close to home, you are not alone in that recognition. The invitation here is not toward more effort, but toward a recovery of joy.

The Quiet Crisis of Faithful Men

There was a time we hid our brokenness - too blessed and sanctified to darken the church door with our struggles or personal shortcomings. Thankfully, we now rightly make space for it. But while we have learned how to extend grace to the prodigal and welcome him back home, the older brother in our churches often gets overlooked. It is good for us to celebrate the return of the prodigal, but we must not neglect the older brothers among us as we do.

The Older Brother Problem

The older brother was not the one who asked for his inheritance early. Nor was he the one to waste his money in wild living. He was the one who stayed, worked hard, and was obedient to his father in every way. And yet his anger and unwillingness to go into the feast to celebrate the return of his younger brother revealed the deeper state of his heart. His heart was full of bitterness and resentment, which was likely there the whole time, but only came to surface at this moment of celebration. On the one hand, he was in daily contact with his father, but he could not freely enjoy his presence. And the distance from just outside the door back to the father's heart proved to be greater than that from the pig pen.

The reality of his parable still plays out today in many of our churches. We run to meet the prodigal and provide whatever services he needs to find his place back home with us. Meanwhile, the older brother is left outside in the cold. This is not intentional, as most older brothers in our midst have not yet expressed their anger or resentment toward our treatment of the prodigal. Most simply quit quietly even as they continue to show up and serve. They might teach a Bible class, serve as an elder or deacon, take mission trips, and lead their family in regular devotions. And yet their inner man is checked out - spiritually dry, relationally disconnected, and filled with unacknowledged resentment. He's likely free of major scandals, and simply continues to fulfill his duties, even as his soul slowly deteriorates. The tragedy of the older brother is not moral failure; it's the loss of joy in the father's house.

Why We Miss Him

The older brother generally prefers to remain in the background and avoid public spectacles whenever he can. Even in the parable his anger was not openly voiced; his resentments were only revealed after his father sought him out. He's not the one to quickly confess struggles, seek counseling, or do anything that might cause public embarrassment. He's stable and helpful and usually rewarded with any number of leadership positions within our congregations. He might even be on the frontlines responding to immediate crises of others - ever willing to sacrifice his blood, sweat, and tears for years without uttering a complaint. It's easy to assume then that he's okay. We assume he would say something if he was truly bothered, but this is the prodigal's approach, not that of the older brother.

Prodigals demand attention. This is not always a personality trait, as many times the gravity of their story simply cannot be hidden and must be dealt with publicly. There's nothing external in the older brother's story that immediately demands attention. He says he's doing fine, and genuinely believes it, because everything on the outside is relatively good and this is his primary means of orientation. His external stability often disguises the stagnation of his soul. While he goes through the normal ups and downs of life, he remains focused on working and serving others, yet his heart soon atrophies and he loses his ability to receive joy.

If he would only ask we would help in any way we could. But he doesn't know he needs help and we assume he does not. He then spends years outside of the intimate life of the church and is also distant in his life with God. Of course, he still shows up, because this is what is expected of him, but his heart is miles away. The prodigal at least knows when he has left the father's house. But the older brother is lulled into turning his heart from the father and he doesn't even realize it because he's faithfully doing everything he's supposed to do.

The Cost of Ignoring Older Brothers

It is true older brothers are not prone to scandal, but this does not mean there is not a cost for ignoring them. Rather than a major blow up, the older brother experiences the quiet and slow erosion of his soul. He functions, but grows increasingly distant in his relationships, and becomes a stranger to joy.

In marriage, this leaves many wives lonely. Part of them might even wish their husbands were a prodigal because then at least others could understand and rally support around her. But her loneliness is harder to explain when everyone is praising her husband for being such a good and hardworking man, who regularly shows up and perhaps even leads various church events. She doesn't deny any of this and can start to feel crazy for still wanting a deeper connection. On the one hand, she's grateful her marriage and family are relatively stable and drama-free. She knows her husband loves and that he's a respectable man in the community. But it still feels like they're mere roommates or business partners in raising their kids rather than true lovers on mission together in God's kingdom.

As fathers, older brothers are likely physically present but emotionally absent as well. They're rarely harsh or mean, but they are prone to be strict - expecting their kids to show up and follow the rules as they themselves have been for years. And flashes of anger are more likely whenever it seems their kids are getting away with luxuries they do feel they get to enjoy themselves. This primarily stems from his own buried resentments rather than anything objective his children are doing.

Over time, his dry sense of duty can lead to secret sins rooted in entitlement. Having done the right thing for so long, he feels now justified in indulging his hidden vices. He still doesn't see himself as a prodigal because he's not adopting a sinful lifestyle. He just believes he deserves something for all the good he has done without complaint.

The Invitation to the Feast

The older brother presents a challenge for discipleship because he is blind to his own need for growth. As "the faithful one," he is not drawn to ministries focused on "struggling men." He recognizes the need for such help in others but not in himself. Any attempt at correction or direct accountability is likely to be met with quiet, passive resistance. The father in the parable didn't accuse, blame, or otherwise try to label the heart condition of his eldest son; he simply expressed his deep desire and extended the invitation to him.

Both sons are estranged from the father's heart in different ways. The older brother's distance is best addressed through a call deeper into formation rather than the more common support and recovery methods applied to the prodigal. The older brother will engage in programs focused on discipline, accountability, and duty, but his underlying motivation will remain that of

the older brother. Such initiatives are just redoubling the very efforts that keep outside of the feast and away from the Father's heart. What is needed is relational restoration, integrated strength, wholehearted participation, and regular moments of joy. We as the church have learned how to manage sin, but we have not always learned how to cultivate delight. We must help the older brother to R.I.S.E.

A Framework for Formation

Recognize. Older brothers must first recognize their unnamed resentments, their hunger for more, and that obedience without intimacy is not the fullness of life Christ came to give us. And this requires an acknowledgement that there is more to them than their unwavering commitment to duty. They usually feel something is off even when they don't know why. Instead of dismissing these deeper movements of his heart, he must learn to cultivate them. This is not for him to become self-indulgent, but it is the necessary ground for his strength to take root. He cannot offer himself well if he is not aware of his inner world and his life beneath the surface.

Initiate. While older brothers are excellent at duty, they're often passive relationally. Initiation is then moving toward his wife, kids, and trusted others - risking vulnerability and allowing himself to be fully known in their presence. He takes the deep desires and identity he discovered in Recognize and courageously offers them relationally - willing to stay engaged, ask hard questions, and pursue joy instead of waiting passively for it to just come to him. His strength becomes a relational blessing and not merely a means to get things done.

Sacrifice. Older brothers are perpetually on the verge of burnout. They give and give and give, but with a type of martyrdom that leads to entitlement. Sacrifice for them is learning to surrender all such pride, scorekeeping, and comparisons. He learns how to give himself freely and wholeheartedly - not begrudgingly and full of resentments, which allows him to live life *with* God and not merely *for* God. And this is the shift needed to finally enter and enjoy the feast. Only then can he step inside.

Enjoy. The feast is joy. This is not like the secret indulgences fueled by his entitlement, but rather the full and free participation in the Father's delight. His formation cannot be just through discipline and restraint. It also calls for him to bask unapologetically in all the holy pleasures God has for him - in part for the just rewards of his hard labors in this life, and in part

simply because he's a beloved son of God. And it's this last point that brings him back to Recognize - understanding more fully his sonship and all he has received by God's grace. Indeed all that the Father has is his because he is a true son of God.

A Word to Church Leaders

Our churches are rightly structured to rescue and support prodigals. But who is inviting the older brother into the feast? Who are the men among us faithful in duty but still quietly drifting spiritually? He might stay in the back and be the first one to leave after worship, or he might be on staff - leading others with great charisma. He might even be us.

For years, I served faithfully and assumed that was enough. As a son of a preacher, ministry was second nature to me. From Bible classes to camp counselor to providing moral guidance to others, I showed up wherever I was needed. From the outside, everything was good. But over time the weariness in my soul grew, as it became easier to feed others than to admit I was hungry myself.

Perhaps many of us also know that quiet fatigue. The kind that hides beneath reliability and that keeps working while our hearts slowly fade inside. Like us, the older brother is often the most dependable man in the room, but he might also be the loneliest.

Our call is not to give up on prodigal. Our service toward him is needed work that must continue. But we must not neglect the older brother as we do. If our discipleship is only at the level of moral crisis, we should not be surprised when spiritual maturity remains shallow. Milk sustains infants, but it does not form fathers.

By now, many of our men should be mature fathers in the faith, steady and wholehearted. But too often they remain dutiful servants rather than joyful sons. This is not a call to replace recovery ministries with formation ministries, but to recognize that both are essential to a mature body.

The Door is Still Open

The prodigal has returned home. The music is playing and the feast is prepared, but someone is still missing. The older brother is standing just outside of the celebration. This position must be viewed with spiritual eyes, as he remains a dutiful servant - doing everything

expected of him here while his heart resides in a far away country. He's faithful, responsible, and yet his soul is exhausted. He believes the feast is just for his brother who was lost and is now found, and doesn't realize it is also for him. Joy, celebration, and delight are his birthright as well. But who will let him know? Who will invite him to participate in the true feast - to bask in the Father's love and not be the one who just serves?

The invitation still stands. It is time for the faithful son to come inside.