

Everything I Have Is Yours

Luke 15:1-6, 25-32

This is the fourth week in our study of the story traditionally called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” I’ve been saying repeatedly that we will miss the radical message of the story if we don’t keep in mind that it is a story about two sons — one who is immoral and “bad”, and one who is very moral and “good”— but both are alienated from their father and therefore spiritually lost.

Last week we took a hard look at the elder brother in the parable, and saw how his outlook on life and religion is reflected even today in the way that many people understand the Gospel. Let me share a quote from Timothy Keller’s book that sums up what we talked about last week:

“There is a big difference between an elder brother and a real, gospel-believing Christian. But there are also many genuine Christians who are elder brotherish. If you came to Christ out of being a younger brother, there is always the danger of partially relapsing into addictions or other younger –brother sins. But if you’ve become a Christian out of being an elder brother, you can even more easily slide back into elder-brother attitudes and spiritual deadness. If you have not grasped the gospel fully and deeply, you will return to being condescending, condemning, anxious, insecure, joyless, and angry all the time.

Elder brothers have an undercurrent of anger toward life circumstances, hold grudges long and bitterly, look down at people of other races, religions, and lifestyles, experience life as a joyless, crushing drudgery, have little intimacy and joy in their prayer lives, and have a deep insecurity that makes them overly sensitive to criticism and rejection yet fierce and merciless in condemning others. What a terrible picture! And yet the rebellious path of the younger brother is obviously not a better alternative.

Most people who follow the philosophy of individual fulfillment and self-discovery do not make a shipwreck of their lives like this younger son. Most religious people who think that God will save them for their moral efforts are not nearly as heartless and angry as this older son. Isn’t Jesus exaggerating? The answer is no, he is explaining that while most people do not arrive at these extreme places, each approach to life has the seeds of its own destruction in it, which draws its adherents toward the spiritual destinations he describes so well...”¹

You can pick up that message in its entirety on our Website.

But there is much more, still, although it is easy to miss. We need to keep in mind, once again, that that this is the third of three parables that Jesus told to the same audience, meant to be considered all together. So we’re going to look at this once again in its context, and we’ll see

¹ The Prodigal God, Timothy Keller, p. 70 - 71

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specifically, three things: 1) the cost of reconciliation, 2) that there is a missing character in the parable, and 3) where we can find that missing character.

1. The cost of reconciliation—verses 29-31.

Here's a question for you: What did it cost to bring the younger brother home? What did it cost? At first glance, it seems not to have cost anything. Because, look, there is no punishment or anything like that, he is simply invited back - he is just taken in. The father opens his arms to him, hands him a new set of clothes, puts a ring on his finger, "Let's party!" And that's that. It's free. He's back - just like nothing ever happened.

This has caused some controversy within the ranks of biblical scholars, those who read this story, and are taken back by the lack of any payment, or consequence. And many people have pointed this out and then argued like this: "God in heaven is like this father. He just accepts and forgives anyone who asks." And they conclude that there is no need for the classic Christian doctrine of the atonement.

Yet most Christians, as they consider the teachings of the Scriptures together, have understood that God *cannot* simply forgive, that there must be a payment for sin. There is a price. But here in this parable it seems that reconciliation is completely free.

Well, this is a great mistake. Yes, reconciliation *is* free - to the younger brother! But, in fact, it is very costly for someone else.

The elder brother, as we saw in some detail last week, is furious with the father for receiving his younger brother back into the family. He alludes to his deep anger when he says; "You never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But... you kill the fattened calf for *him!*" Clearly, the elder brother is angry because of the *cost* of this reconciliation.

Remember—the father had given the younger brother his entire legal part of the inheritance. And now it was all spent—completely gone. The younger son came back empty handed.

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Yet now the father is restoring him into the family. He has already put a robe on him - likely his *own* robe - and has given him a ring, which was probably the signet ring with which family members ratified contracts. All clear signs that he was being *completely* re-integrated into this family. The younger brother's fair share of the wealth is all gone, but now he is back, and every robe, every ring, all the fatted calves are coming out of someone else's pocket.

Whose? Obviously, everything the father has, now is legally the elder brother's. He is the only heir of all the father has left. So every robe, every ring, every fattened calf, every cent of the father's, is *ultimately* the elder brother's. When the father says to that brother, as he pleads with him outside the party, "Everything I have is yours" (v.31) he is speaking the literal truth. It really is his.

So we see that the 'salvation' of the younger son is not "free" after all. It has already been extremely expensive — look at the feast. And it *will be* extremely expensive. The father cannot forgive the younger brother, except at the expense of the elder brother. He is the one who will bear the cost of this reconciliation.

2. There is a missing elder brother—verses 1-10.

The elder brother knows all this— surely, he knows that forgiveness and reconciliation is never free. Someone has to pay. So, either the younger brother has to come and *earn* his way back into the family, as he offered to do (that was part of his 'speech' that he planned - see verse 19) *or* he can come back in immediately, through forgiveness. In that case, the elder brother will *have* to bear the cost.

Friends, there is a spiritual principle here that has great meaning for us today: Salvation cannot be free. *Someone* has to pay, either the sinner – the one being 'redeemed' – or his elder brother. In fact, mercy and forgiveness must be free and unmerited to the wrongdoer. If the wrongdoer has to do something to earn it, then it isn't mercy. Forgiveness *always* comes at a cost to the one granting the forgiveness.

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In our story, the elder brother knows this, but he refuses to do it. So we listen to the story and see the elder brother, (we would say) “being a Pharisee,” and we are saddened. But I don’t think that this is where Jesus wants our minds or our hearts to remain.

Let’s look at the context again. Jesus told his listeners *three* parables together—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son.

In each of the first two parables we find not only a lost *object* but, remember, we saw someone who goes out, searches for that lost object, and brings it home with joy. The shepherd leaves the 99 sheep behind, goes out into the wilderness and searches until he finds that one lost sheep. The woman sweeps her house; she searches every nook and corner until she finds that lost coin. So when we get to the parable of this lost son, the third in the series, the listeners fully expect that *someone* will set out to search for the lost *brother* and bring him home – it fits the pattern!

But to our surprise, no one does. Jesus is leading us to consider the question: who should have gone out to search for this lost boy? Whose job was this? And the answer would have been quite clear to the 1st century listeners: it would have been the *elder brother’s* responsibility. From the time of Cain and Abel – where Abel asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The answer to that question has always been, “Yes!” You are. We are...

That was the reason that the oldest son got such a large share of the estate. It was his *job*, his responsibility, to sustain the family’s unity and its place in the community. It is the elder brother in the parable who should have said something like this: “*Father, my younger brother has been a fool, and now his life is in ruins. But I will go look for him and bring him home. And if his inheritance is gone — as I expect it will be — I’ll bring him back into the family at my expense.*”

The listeners would have been waiting for that part of the story. But Jesus doesn’t put a brother like that into it. Instead the younger son and the father have to deal with a resistant, angry, self-righteous, self-centered, money-loving elder brother.

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In the parable they had to deal with that, but *we* don't! Keller suggests that perhaps the elder brother in the story is there to make us long for a *true elder brother*, one who, if *we* go astray, if *we* wander off, if *we* mess *our* lives up, won't hold it against us, but instead, will seek us out and bring us back home at any risk and any cost to himself. By putting a flawed elder brother in the story, he is inviting us to look for a true one.

3. We have a true elder brother.

And that's where I want to leave us today.

Think of the kind of elder brother we need. We need one who would not just go into a '*far country*', but one who would come all the way from heaven to earth to find us. We need one who would not just open his wallet for us, and write a check and be done with us; but one who would pour out his life for us. We need an elder brother who would pay not just a one time, *finite* cost but an infinite debt, to bring us back – permanently – into God's family.

And that's what the Gospel is about. The Good News is that we do have that brother! We have one just like that! His name is Jesus.

See! When the father says to the elder brother "everything I have is yours" that is *literally* true of Jesus. Jesus had all God's glory. He had equal glory with the Father. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus was the Agent of Creation, co-eternal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But he emptied himself of all he had.

In Philippians 2: 4-10 we read –

⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:*

⁶ *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!*

⁹ *Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...*

He lost all he had, he *gave it away* – for us.

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How did we end up with the father's robe? Because Jesus was stripped of his dignity on the cross. How is it that we have been invited into the father's feast? Because Jesus took the cup of suffering so that we might have the cup of joy. Why is our invitation *free*? Why is the Father's invitation to his banquet table so *radical*? Because Jesus opened the door for *us* by giving all he had out of his great love! To us.

He is our true elder brother—and the Scriptures tell us so. Hebrews 2:11 says,

¹¹ Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.

Jesus came to earth and truly obeyed his Father and never disobeyed his orders. He truly had the right to all the Father owns. But instead of hanging on to that, instead of saying – “Hey take what you deserve”, he came out and searched for us, and found us in the pigsty, he carried us home on his shoulders singing with joy. And he gave us his robe, his ring, his place, his wealth—it is all at his expense.

Its not the repentance of the younger son that caused the love of his father – it was just the opposite! It was the Father's love that brought him home. The same father goes out to the angry, resentful elder brother, begging him to come into the feast. There is hope for everyone today, in that same love! God loves not only wild-living, free-spirited people, but he also loves the hardened religious people – in just the same way.

We are all the recipients of amazing Grace!

And in our gratitude, we live for God with joy... with humility. With patience for others who are, perhaps not at the same place on their journey as we are; people who have not had the advantages that we have had of hearing, teaching, understanding, and receiving. Thanks be to God.

Next week, we'll finish this series with a look at the new relationship that we have with God through our true older brother... and the new Community that results. Amen!