

He Refused to Go In The Prodigal God, 3

Luke 15:25-32

Last week we started looking at the third parable in Luke 15. On a weekend in which we very appropriately celebrated Holy Communion, we (mostly), focused on the portion of the story that has captured the hearts of so many in the centuries since Jesus first told it – the story of the totally unexpected welcome of a wayward son. We saw once again, this beautiful, hopeful, picture of the Grace of God that is offered to each of us.

You remember, the younger son, having disgraced the family name by demanding his inheritance NOW (in essence, wishing his father dead) takes a 1/3 share of the estate that was his by law, and he wastes it away “in wild living”. He squanders everything he’s been given.

He eventually finds himself literally starving to death. He has no friends – they left when the money ran out. He has no family – he is left alone in disgrace. And he finds himself longing for the cornhusks that he was feeding to pigs. (Don’t miss the irony here – for a Jew, to feed *pigs*, and to *envy* them was about as low as a person could get).

But in that pigsty, he remembers the character of his father. He remembers the father’s response to his ungracious demand – that instead of throwing him out on the street, how his father quietly ‘divides his property’, and allows his son this choice. But his lack of anger and vengeance causes this younger son to think – think about the justice and kindness of his father. He remembers - *“He treats his hired hands better than I’m living now.”*

So he decides to go back. On the way he rehearses his ‘speech’. Here’s what I’ll say – *“Father, I have sinned against heaven and earth, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son... make me like one of your hired servants.”*

But, before he even arrived home – “while he was still a long way off” – his father sees him coming. And in a wildly undignified act for an esteemed and respected patriarch, the father runs to the son, kisses him, and throws his arms around him.

The son starts his brief ‘speech’ – but he doesn’t even have an opportunity to finish it. Dad – his Abba - isn’t even listening! Instead, he’s calling out to the servants to bring out the best robe

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(which would have been his *own* robe), and a ring for his finger. He instructs them to kill the fatted calf! He says, “Let's have a feast and celebrate!” and they do...

The Father here, obviously, represents God the Father; this feast then, represents the great Banquet of God, the gathering together of all those who belong to the Family of God. Jesus had just shared in the two previous parables about the ‘joy in heaven’ over one ‘sinner’ who returns home. We see that joy once again right here.

Most people who read and study The Parable of the Prodigal Son end their sermons, or their studies right here. They concentrate completely on the character of the younger son, his repentance, and the father’s forgiveness. Understandably – it’s a great story in itself! It’s good teaching. And yet look at the text. The Parable doesn’t end with the return of the prodigal.

Almost half of the story is about the *older* son. The story is about *two* sons; two sons who are both alienated from the father, who are both assaulting the unity of the family. Jesus wants us to compare and contrast them. The younger son is “lost”—that is easy for us to see. We get *that* kind of lostness. We see him shaming his father, ruining his family, sleeping with prostitutes, and we say, “*There’s* someone who is spiritually lost. *That’s* what lost looks like.”

But Jesus’ point, clearly, is that the *older* son is lost too. Let’s take a look at this text, and see what we can learn from it today. I want to look with you at three (perhaps new for you) understandings that we can glean from the second half of this parable.

- 1) A startling new understanding of lostness,
- 2) What the signs of it are (so we can recognize it in ourselves), and
- 3) What we can do about this condition.

1. A new understanding of lostness—verse 28.

The elder brother is out in the field – working. He hears the curious sound of music and dancing as he gets closer to home. A servant informs him that the reason for this is the return of his lost brother. This older son would have known that the day of the prodigal’s return was the greatest day in his father’s life.

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If the music and dancing didn't give it away, hearing that the father has "killed the fattened calf", an enormously expensive extravagance in a culture where even having meat at meals was considered a delicacy would have been enough in itself.

The older son realized his father was ecstatic with joy. And what does he do? He sulks! He refuses to go into the biggest feast his father has ever put on. He doesn't even go in. This was a remarkable, *and very deliberate* act of disrespect. It was his way of saying, "I won't be part of this family any more." "Nor do I respect your headship of it."

One again, the father responds with patience and grace. He has to "go out" – outside of his own party – to plead with his son to come in. Just as he went out to bring his alienated *younger* son into the family, now he had to do the same for the older brother.

Let's step back here, and consider this. Do you realize what Jesus is saying to his listeners, and to us? He's telling us that the older son is *lost*.

So, once again, the father represents God himself, and the meal is the feast of salvation – the great banquet at the end of time. A very familiar Biblical image. In the end, then, the younger son, the immoral man, comes in, he is a guest at the banquet. He, we would say, is 'saved', but the older son, the "good" son, refuses to go in and is lost.

Now, remember the Pharisees who were listening to this parable – Jesus told all three parables in Luke 15 as a response to the 'muttering' of the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. They were complaining because Jesus was eating with the scum of the earth. These Pharisees knew what the ending of this parable meant. It was a complete reversal of everything they believed. You can almost hear them gasp as the story ends.

The elder brother is left out! And what is it that is keeping him out? Look at v. 29 – "*But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends'.*" (How dare you give *him* the calf?)

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He's adding it up – the return of this son into the family, having already received 1/3 of the estate, is going to reduce *his own* inheritance. And he's thinking, I've worked myself half to death, slaving for you, but my 'brother' who has done nothing to earn *anything* – in fact, who has earned the right to be booted out of here, he is being *doubly* blessed with your wealth. *My* wealth! Where's the justice? He appeals to his record: "I have never disobeyed you! I HAVE RIGHTS!"

His anger at all this leads him to insult the father even further. Instead of addressing him in the elaborately respectful manner of the day – especially in public – he simply says "Look!" This is the equivalent of "Look here, you". Tim Keller points out that in this culture where deference to elders is so important, this behavior is outrageous!

The 'older brother', the 'good son' then, clearly places himself *outside* the family. He insults his father, demands his way, refuses his invitation, and points to his record. And we begin to understand: The 'good son' is not lost in *spite* of his good behavior, but *because* of his good behavior. So it is not his sin keeping him out, but his righteousness.

Now, what is that telling us about 'lostness'? See, the gospel is neither religion nor is it irreligion; the Gospel is not morality nor is it immorality. It is something totally 'other'. This was completely astonishing and confusing to Jesus' hearers at the time—and it may even be astonishing and confusing to you, too.

Why is the older son lost? Remember last week we pointed out that the younger brother wanted the father's wealth, but not the father. So how did he get what he wanted? He left home. He broke the moral rules. He made his own rules.

But it becomes evident by the end that the elder brother *also* wanted selfish control of the father's wealth. He was very unhappy with the father's use of his possessions— his robe, this ring, the fatted calf. (He's thinking – "That's MINE!") But while the younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, we see that the elder brother got control by staying home and being very good. He felt that because of all his years of "slaving and obedience" that now he

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has the right to tell the father what to do with his possessions. Because he had obeyed him perfectly, he feels that he has certain ‘rights’. Certain expectations.

So we see that there are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord... One way is by breaking all the laws and being bad. Another is by keeping all the laws and being good.

Would you agree that this kind of thinking reflects the elder brother’s thought process... If I can be so good that God *has* to answer my prayer, God *has* to give me a good life, God *has* take me to heaven, then in all I do I may be looking to Jesus to be my helper and my ‘rewarder’ - but he isn’t my Savior. Because I am then my own Savior. I’m doing it myself.

The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to get control over God, to get things from God, but the Christian obeys just to get God, just to love and please and draw closer to God. A true Christian wants the Father more than he wants the Father’s ‘stuff’.

2. What the signs of this lostness are—verses 29-30.

Some people are complete elder brothers. They may go to church and obey the Bible—but they do that out of an expectation that then God *owes* them something for their obedience. This is quite common, yet such people have never understood the Biblical gospel at all.

And in fact, many Christians, people who *know* the gospel, are nevertheless ‘elder-brotherish’. Despite the fact that they know the gospel of salvation by grace with their heads, their hearts go back to an elder-brother “default mode” of self-salvation. Here’s what the elder-brother attitude looks like. Five characteristics...

- A **deep anger** (v. 28—“*he became angry*”). Elder brothers believe that God owes them a comfortable and good life if they try hard and live up to certain standards. And very likely they *have* lived up to them! So they say: “my life ought to be going really well!” and when it *doesn’t* they get very angry. Of course they are forgetting about Jesus. Jesus lived a better life than any

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of us—but he suffered terribly. He ended up rejected, abandoned, poor, and on a cross. But we think we should have it better.

Listen to the words of Timothy Keller:

“Elder brothers base their self-images on being hardworking, or moral, or members of an elite clan, or extremely smart and savvy. This inevitably leads to feeling superior to those who don’t have those same qualities. In fact, competitive comparison is the main way elder brothers achieve a sense of their own significance. Racism and classism are just different versions of this form of the self-salvation project. This dynamic becomes exceptionally intense when elder brothers pride themselves above all for their right religion. If a group believes God favors them because of their particularly true doctrine, ways of worship, and ethical behavior, their attitude toward those without those things can be hostile. Their self-righteousness hides under that claim that they are only opposing the enemies of God. When you look at the world through those lenses, it becomes easy to justify hate and oppression, all in the name of truth.¹

and then this quote from Richard Lovelace:

[People] who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons...Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger.²

• **A joyless and mechanical obedience** (v.29—“*all these years I’ve been slaving for you*”). Elder brothers obey God as a means to an end – it’s a way to get the things they really love. Of course, obedience to God is sometimes *extremely* hard. But elder brothers find obedience virtually *always* a joyless, mechanical, slavish thing as a result.

Elder brothers do not serve God with joy. They serve out of duty. They not may complain outwardly (not usually) but they constantly *think about* things like the perceived ingratitude of the people they are serving. They get offended if they’re not thanked frequently enough, or ‘sincerely’ enough. They give grudgingly, and find that when the church asks for money – or, as we do here – gives opportunities to share, they feel stressed; and slightly offended, and slightly guilty.

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, p. 54- 55

² Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (Inter-Varsity, 1979) p. 212ff

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- **A coldness to younger brother-types.** We see, again, that the older son will not even “own” his brother (v.30—“*this son of yours*”). Elder brothers are very ineffective in evangelism, because they are too disdainful of others unlike themselves. Elder brothers, who pride themselves on their doctrinal and moral purity, unavoidably feel superior to those who do not have these things. As we’ve been talking on and off about the book UnChristian, we can perhaps, see some insight here as to why it is that the world so overwhelmingly looks at the church today with skepticism. Do we interact with the world as Jesus did, or do we approach the ‘sinners’ (i.e., the ones outside the church, anyway) with superiority and disdain?

- **A lack of assurance of the father’s love** (v. 29—you never threw me a party). As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through your goodness, you will never be sure you have been good enough. How can we know?

What are the signs of this? Every time something goes wrong in your life you wonder if it’s a punishment. “God must be angry at me!” Another sign is irresolvable guilt. You can’t be sure you’ve repented deeply enough, so you continually beat yourself up over what you did. You can’t let it go. Lastly, there is a lack of any sense of *intimacy* with God in your prayer life. You may pray a lot of prayers asking for *things*, but there is no sense of God’s love in the prayer life of an older brother. It’s not about love, it’s about work, and duty.

- **An unforgiving, judgmental spirit.** The elder brother absolutely does not want the father to forgive the younger brother. He does not want him back in the family at all. (Although, I can imagine that had the younger brother come back with a fortune of his own making in hand, ready to ‘pay dad back’, the older brother would have accepted him with open arms. Because he would have then been just like him!)

Keller suggests that it is impossible to forgive someone if you truly feel “I would never do anything that bad!” An interesting thought. You have to be something of an elder brother to refuse to forgive. You have to believe that you are better than that person, superior to them.

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Another way this judgmental spirit can be manifested is when we pick out certain sins that we personally do not struggle with (at least publicly), and make them the sole grounds of morality. How many TV evangelists were brought down by the very things that they publicly condemned? As we pull at the splinters out of the eyes of others we conveniently miss the ‘planks in our own eyes’. (I think Jesus said something about that!)

3. What we can do about this spiritual condition?

First, we have to see the uniqueness of the gospel. Jesus ends the parable in an amazing way. The father gives the invitation to the older brother, but he is left outside of the banquet. We don’t know what response he will make. Jesus ends with the lostness of the older brother in order to get across the point that his is the more dangerous spiritual condition. The younger brother knew he was alienated from the father, but the elder brother did not.

If you tell moral, religious people who are trying to be good, trying to obey the Bible so God will bless them – that they are alienated from God, they will just be offended. If you know you are sick you may go to a doctor; if you don’t know you’re sick you won’t go – you’ll just die.

Moralistic religion works on the principle, “I obey, therefore God accepts me.” The gospel works on the principle, “I am accepted by God through Jesus Christ, therefore I obey.” These are two radically different, even opposite, dynamics. Yet both sets of people sit in church together, both pray, both obey the Ten Commandments, but for radically different reasons. And because they do these things for radically different reasons, they produce radically different results—different kinds of character. One produces anger, joyless compliance, superiority, insecurity, and a condemning spirit. The other slowly but inevitably produces contentment, joy, humility, poise, and a forgiving spirit. One is attractive to those outside the church, the other ultimately, repels.

Unless a person and a congregation knows the difference between being a religious person and one who lives the true gospel as a follower of Jesus Christ, people will constantly fall into moralism and elder-brotherishness. And if we invite younger brothers to receive Christ and live for him without making this distinction clear, they will automatically think you are inviting them

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to become elder brothers. They will have none of it. The authors of UnChristian certainly have confirmed this!

Second, we have to see the vulnerability of Jesus. Remember, again, who Jesus is speaking to here (vv.1-2). Jesus is speaking to his mortal enemies, to men he knows will eventually kill him. On the one hand, this is an astonishingly bold challenge to them. He's talking to those who want to kill him and telling them that 'you are lost', you fundamentally misunderstand God's salvation and purpose in the world, and you are trampling on the heart of God.

But at the same time, he is also being so typically loving and tender. When the father comes out to the older brother, *that is Jesus pleading with his enemies*. He is urging them to see their error. Jesus does not scream at his enemies, or smite them, but he urges them with love to repent and come into his embrace.

And so we have a foreshadowing of that great moment on the cross when Jesus says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). This love toward his enemies made Jesus vulnerable and cost him his life. On the cross, instead of blasting them, he lovingly took the penalty of their sins on himself. "While we were his enemies, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:10).

Knowing what he did for us should drain us of our self-righteousness *and* our insecurity. We were so sinful he had to die for us. But we are so loved that he was glad to die for us. That takes away both the pride and the fear that makes us elder brothers. It gives us freedom – permission – to accept the Father's invitation, and come into his great banquet. To celebrate with him.