

"The Prodigal God – Sermon 2"

Based largely on "The Prodigal God" By Timothy Keller

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Preached on the Fourth Sunday of Easter

Text: Luke 15

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IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST, OUR CRUCIFIED, RISEN AND ASCENDED LORD, WHO IS NOT DEAD BUT ALIVE, WHO IS NOT IN THE TOMB, BUT IS WITH US HERE, NOW WITH HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER AS HE LIVES AND REIGNS AT THE GLORIOUS RIGHT HAND OF GOD OUR HEAVENLY FATHER. DEARLY BELOVED CHILDREN OF GOD...

We are turning to a familiar parable of Jesus in the 15th chapter of Luke that we are calling 'The parable of the 2 lost sons'. The parable's plot is very simple... There was a father who had two sons. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance, received it and promptly left for a far country where he squandered it all on sensuous and frivolous pleasure. He returned home penitently and to his surprise, was received with open arms by his father. His reception angered and alienated the older brother greatly. The story closes with the father appealing to his first born son to join in the welcome and forgiveness of his younger brother.

Two groups of people were surrounding Jesus. One group consisted of tax collectors and sinners. They are represented by the younger brother in the parable. They don't observe the moral laws of the Bible. They don't observe the ceremonial laws of the Bible that devout Jews followed. Like the younger brother – they left home – leaving the traditional morality of their families and of respectable society.

The other group of people surrounding Jesus are the scribes and Pharisees, they are represented by the older brother in the parable. They held to the traditional morality of their upbringing. They studied and obeyed the Scripture, they worshipped faithfully and prayed constantly. As we read about these two groups in the Bible a number of things become clear. First - the younger brothers are outside the church and the older brothers are the church. Secondly - the younger brothers seem to like Jesus and are attracted to him. Thirdly - the elder brothers don't like Jesus associating with younger brothers and hold this association against Jesus. Fourthly - younger brothers and older brothers don't get along.

So why do people like Jesus but not the church?

Both older brothers and younger brothers are with us today – in the same society and often in the very same family. Frequently the older sibling in a family is the parent pleaser, the responsible one, who obeys the parental standards. The younger sibling is the rebel a free spirit who prefers the company and admiration of peers.

The first child grows up, takes a conventional job and settles down near mom and dad. The younger sibling takes off to live in the hip-shabby neighborhoods of New York and LA.

These natural temper-mental differences have been accentuated in more recent times. In the early 19th century industrialization gave rise to a new middle class - the Bourgeoisie. This class sought legitimacy through an ethic of hard work, and moral rectitude. In response to perceived Bourgeois hypocrisy and rigidity, communities of Bohemians arose. From Henri Murrget's Paris, to the Bloomsbury group of London, the beatniks of Greenwich Village, and the Indy Rock scenes of today. Bohemians stress freedom from convention and personal autonomy.

To some degree the so-called culture wars are playing out these same conflicting temperaments and impulses in modern society. More and more people today consider themselves non-religious or even anti-religious. They believe that moral issues are highly complex and are suspicious of any individuals or institutions that claim moral authority over the lives of others. Despite, or perhaps because of the rise of this secular spirit there has also been considerable growth in conservative, orthodox religious movements. Alarmed by what they see as an onslaught of moral relativism many have organized to take back the culture. And these conservative groups take as dim a view of younger brothers as the Pharisees of Jesus' day.

So whose side is Jesus on? Is it the freedom loving younger brothers or the conservative obedient older brothers?

In the Lord of the Rings, when the Hobbits ask the ancient Treebeard whose side he is on, he answers... "I am not altogether on anybody's side because nobody is altogether on my side." "But there are some things of course whose side I'm altogether not on."

Jesus' own answer to this question through the parable of the two lost sons is similar. He is on the side of neither the irreligious nor the religious. But through this parable he singles out religious moralism as a particularly deadly spiritual condition. And that should make us in the church perk up our ears and listen.

It is hard for us to realize this today, but when Christianity first arose in the world it was not called a 'religion'.

It was a non-religion. Imagine the neighbours of early Christians asking them about their faith. "Where's your temple?" They'd ask. The Christians would reply that they didn't have a temple. "But how could that be? Where do your priests labor?" The Christians would have replied that they didn't have any. "But where are the sacrifices made to please your Gods?" The Christians would have responded that they didn't make those sorts of sacrifices anymore.

Jesus himself was the temple to end all temples, the priest to end all priestly classes, and the sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

No one had ever heard anything like this. Ironically the Romans called the early Christians 'atheists' because what the Christians were saying about spiritual reality was unique and could not be classified with the other religions of the world.

The irony of this should not be lost on us – standing as we do in the midst of the modern culture wars. To most people in our society Christianity is religion and moralism. The only alternative to it besides some other world religion is pluralistic secularism.

But from the beginning it was not so. Christianity was recognized as something else entirely. The crucial point here is that in general, religiously observant people were offended by Jesus. Conversely, those estranged by religious and moral observance were intrigued and attracted by Jesus. We see this throughout the NT accounts of Jesus' life and ministry. In every case where Jesus meets a religious person and a sexual outcast – the outcast connects with Jesus. Case in point: The sinful woman in Luke 7 who poured perfume on Jesus, kissed his feet and washed them with her tears, wiping them with her hair... She connects with Jesus while Simon the Pharisee looks on in judgmental horror.

When a religious person and a racial outcast speak with Jesus – the racial outcast connects while the religious person seems lost. In John 3 religious Nicodemus can't figure out Jesus and doesn't understand him. But in John 4 the Samaritan woman connects with Jesus and she reaches out to the town and brings them to see and hear Jesus – and they receive him and believe in him.

When a religious person and a political outcast meet Jesus as in Luke 19 – the political outcast connects with Jesus. Zacchaeus the tax collector climbs a tree to see Jesus – The Lord eats at his home – and Zacchaeus promises to return all monies he has stolen 4 times over and give half his possessions to the poor. Contrast that with the religious people telling Jesus that he needs to rebuke his disciples as they praise him.

In all these cases, the outcast is the one who connects with Jesus and the elder brother type does not. While in the temple of Jerusalem Jesus told another parable about two sons.

This parable was also directed to the chief priests and elders – and it has the same ring to it as our elder and younger brother parable... Matthew 21:28-32, "What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work today in the vineyard.' 'I will not,' he answered, but later he changed his mind and went." Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, 'I will, sir,' but he did not go. "Which of the two did what his father wanted?" "The first," they answered. Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him."

Jesus says to the respectable religious leaders that the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before them. Jesus' teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while consistently offending the Bible believing religious people of his day.

However – in the main – our churches today do not have this effect. The kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted to contemporary churches. We tend to draw conservative, button down, moralistic people. The licentious and liberated, or broken and marginal avoid the church.

That should concern us...If my preaching and our practice of the faith as a congregation does not have the same effect on people that Jesus had – or at least a slightly similar effect - then we need to examine ourselves and ask where our faithfulness to Jesus is lacking. If our church isn't appealing to younger brothers we must be more full of elders brothers than we'd like to think. If that's true then the message Jesus has for us in the coming weeks is critical to our life as his followers. If it doesn't concern us at all – we are deeply lost.