

## "The Prodigal God – Sermon 6"

Based largely on "The Prodigal God" By Timothy Keller

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Preached on the Sixth 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...

For the past four weeks we have been studying Jesus' parable of the two lost sons from Luke 15. 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.

What is the message of this parable? In short – Jesus is redefining everything we think we know about connecting to God. He is redefining sin. He is redefining what it means to be lost. And he is redefining what it means to be saved.

Last week this parable taught us that there are two ways to be your own Saviour and Lord. One is by breaking all the moral laws and setting your own course – the younger brother. And one is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very, good – the older brother.

The point of the parable is that both were wrong and yet both were loved. Jesus does NOT divide the world into the moral good guys and the immoral bad guys. Rather he reveals to us that every one of us is dedicated to a project of self-salvation. Everyone uses God and others in order to get power and control for themselves. We are just going about it in different ways...

Even though both sons are wrong however, the father cares for them and invites them both back into his love and feast. This means that Jesus' message, which is the Gospel, is a completely different spirituality. The Gospel of Jesus is not religion, or irreligion. The Gospel of Jesus is not morality or immorality. It is not moralism or relativism, conservatism or liberalism. Nor is it something half-way along a spectrum of two poles... it is something else all together.

In the Gospel's view – everyone is wrong – everyone is loved – and everyone is called to recognize this and change. Jesus died on the cross for the sins of all mankind. All are loved – all have sinned – all are called to recognize this and change. All are invited into the Father's feast.

By contrast Elder brothers divide the world into two... The good people like us – are in. And the bad people – who are the real problem – are out. Younger brothers – even if they don't believe in God at all, do the same thing saying, "The open minded and tolerant people are in, and the bigoted, narrow minded people – who are the real problem with the world – are out."

But Jesus says – the humble are in and the proud are out. Luke 18:14 he says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The people who confess they aren't particularly good or open minded are moving toward God. That's because the prerequisite for receiving the grace of God is to know you need it. The people who think, 'They are just fine thank you' are moving away from God.

When a newspaper posed the question, "What's wrong with the world?", The catholic thinker G.K. Chesterton reputedly wrote a brief letter in response... Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely yours, G.K. Chesterton. That is the attitude of someone who has grasped the message of Jesus.

Although the sons are both wrong and both loved the story does not end on the same note for each. Why does Jesus construct the story so that one of them is saved and restored to a right relationship with the father and one of them is not? It may very well be that Jesus is trying to say that while both forms of the self-salvation project are equally wrong, each one is not as equally dangerous. One of the ironies of the parable is now revealed. The younger son's flight from the father is obvious. He left his father literally, physically, and morally.

Though the older son stayed at home he was actually more distant and alienated from the father than his brother because he was blind to his true condition. He would have been horribly offended by the suggestion that he was rebelling against the father's authority and love - but he was deeply. Because the elder brother is more blind to what is going on, being an elder brother Pharisee is a more spiritually desperate condition.

"How dare you say that!" is how religious people respond if you suggest that their relationship with God isn't right. "I'm there every

time the church doors are open." Jesus says, in effect, "That doesn't matter." No one had ever taught any thing like this before.

Jesus is redefining what it means to be spiritually lost. Jesus often speaks of sin and salvation under the metaphors of being lost and found. Chapter 15 of Luke's Gospel contains 3 parables that Jesus tells to the religious leaders. The first is about a shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is lost. The second is about a woman who discovers that one of her coins is lost. As we have seen the third parable is about two sons who are in different ways both lost. Jesus summarizes his ministry as a rescue operation in Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

What does it mean to be spiritually lost? In the parable the younger brother's 'lostness' is clearly seen when he ends up destitute and in the pig sty. He has run out of money, friends, and resources because of his self-indulgent, undisciplined, and foolish behaviour. It has led to a complete life collapse. At that very point the younger brother realizes that he has lost his way and returns to try to rebuild his life.

However in this parable Jesus wants us to discern another, more subtle, but no less devastating form of 'lostness.' We will call it "Elder Brother Lostness".

A closer look at the elder brother helps us discern its features. We see that the elder brother became angry. All of his words are dripping with resentment over the father's treatment of his younger brother.

The first sign that you have an elder brother spirit is that when your life doesn't go as you want, you aren't just sorrowful, but deeply angry and bitter. Elder brothers believe that if they live a good life – they should get a good life. They believe that God owes them a smooth road if they try very hard to live up to standards.

What happens then, if you are an elder brother and things go wrong in your life? If you feel you have been living up to your moral standards you will be furious with God... You don't deserve this – you will think - after how hard you've worked to be a decent person

What happens however if things have gone wrong in your life when you know that you have been falling short of your standards? Then you will be furious with your self – filled with self-loathing and inner pain. And if evil circumstances overtake you and you're not sure whether your life has been good enough or not you may swing miserably back and forth between the poles of "I hate God" and "I hate me". Elder brother's inability to handle suffering arises from the fact that their moral observance is results oriented. The good life is lived, not for delight in good deeds themselves – not for love of God -

but rather – the good life is lived as calculated ways to control their environment.

Elizabeth Elliot recounts an apocryphal story that is not in the Bible. It's a story about Jesus and it conveys the difference between a results oriented selfishness and a faithfulness born of love.

One day Jesus said to his disciples, "I'd like you to carry a stone for me." He didn't give any further explanation so the disciples looked around for a stone to carry. Peter, being the practical sort, sought out the smallest stone he could possibly find – after all, Jesus didn't give any regulations for weight and size - so he put it in his pocket. Jesus then said, "Follow me." He led them on a journey and about noon time Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hands and all the stones turned to bread. He said, "Now it's time for lunch." In a few seconds Peter's lunch was over

When lunch was done Jesus told them to stand up. He said again, "I'd like you to carry a stone for me." This time Peter said, "Ah ha!!! Now I get it." So he looked around and saw a small boulder. He hoisted it on his back and it was painful and made him stagger. But he said, "I can't wait for supper." Jesus then said, "Follow me." He led them on a journey with Peter barely able to keep up.

Around supper time Jesus led them to the side of a river and said, "Now everyone throw your stones into the water. They did. Then he said, 'Follow me.'" And began to walk. Peter and the others looked at him dumbfounded. Jesus sighed and said, "Don't you remember what I asked you to do? Who were you carrying that stone for? Twice I asked you to carry a stone... for me. Like Peter, elder brothers expect their goodness to pay off. If it doesn't there is confusion and rage. If you think goodness and decency is a way to merit a good life from God, you will be eaten up with anger since life never goes as we wish. You will always feel that you are owed more than you are getting. You will always see someone doing better than you in some aspect of life and will ask, "Why this person and not me? After all I've done!"

We also see that the elder brother has a strong sense of his own superiority. He points out how much better his own record is than the lover of prostitutes. In disdainful language, "This son of yours", he won't even own his brother and a brother anymore. Elder brothers base their self-images on being hard working, moral, members of an elite clan, 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 that elder brothers achieve a sense of their own significance.

This dynamic becomes exceptionally intense when elder brothers pride themselves above all for their right religion. If a group believes God favours them because of their particularly true doctrine, ways of worship, and ethical behaviour, their attitude towards those without these things can be hostile and condescending. Their self-righteousness hides under the 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. As Richard Loveless has written: "People who are no longer sure that God loves them 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."

Elder brother self-righteousness not only creates racism and classism – but at the personal level creates an unforgiving, judgmental spirit. This elder brother cannot pardon his younger brother for the way he has weakened the families place in society, disgraced their name, and diminished their wealth. He highlights the fact that the younger brother has been with prostitutes – while he has been living a chaste life at home. "I would never do anything as bad as that" – he is saying in his heart. Because he does not see himself as being part of a common community of sinners he is trapped by his own bitterness.

It is impossible to forgive someone if you feel superior to him or her. If you can't control your temper and you see someone losing theirs in exactly the same way that you do – you tend to forgive them because you know that you are no better a person than they. How can I hold this against them when I'm just as bad? You think.

However – because elder brother sin and antipathy to God is hidden beneath layers of self control and moral behaviour, they have no trouble feeling superior to just about anyone. If they see people who lie, or cheat on their wives, or don't pray to God they look down on them. If such people wrong them elder brothers feel that their spotless record gives them the right to be highly offended and to perpetually remind the wrong-doer of his or her failure. Ask yourself this week if you have ever felt this way. Search your heart to see if you harbour the elder brother spirit.

