

## "The Prodigal God – Sermon 7"

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 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". We have seen over the past few weeks that elder brother lostness is far more insidious because first of all – it is very hard to detect – it is buried under all sorts of obedience and moral behaviour. Elder brothers feel that since they live a good life God owes them a good life. They also feel superior to others – viewing their own sins as small compared to the grave sins of others – thus they find it hard to forgive.

Another sign of those with an elder brother spirit is joyless, fear-based compliance. The elder son boasts of his obedience to his father but lets his underlying motivation and attitude slip out when he says to his father, "All these years I've been slaving for you..." (Luke 15:29)

To be sure, being faithful to any commitment involves a certain amount of dutifulness. Often we don't feel like doing what we ought to do but we do it anyway for the sake of integrity. But the elder brother shows that his obedience to his father is nothing but duty all the way down. There's no joy or love. No reward in just seeing his father pleased.

In the same way those with an elder brother spirit are fastidious in their compliance to ethical norms and in fulfillment of all traditional family, community and civic responsibilities. But it is a slavish, joyless, drudgery. The word slave has strong overtones of being forced or pushed rather than drawn or attracted. A slave works out of fear. Fear of consequences imposed by force. This gets to the root of what drives an elder brother. Ultimately elder brothers live good lives out of fear, not out of joy and love.

A friend who attended a prestigious MBA program once told me about the business ethics course he took there. The professor counseled honest business practices for two reasons... First – if you lie or cheat you may be caught and that would be bad for business. Second – if people in the company know they are working in an honest business, that will boost moral, making your employees feel they are above the competition.

Indeed these are good reasons to be honest but this appeal only arouses the motives of fear and pride. Fear that they might lose profits. And pride that they might feel superior to others around them.

Tell the truth because it's to your OWN advantage was the counsel.

What happens however when you inevitably come to situations in which telling the truth would cost you dearly? What happens when telling a particular lie would be stupendously advantageous to you? At those points your motivation for honesty will evaporate because it's based on telling the truth because it's to your OWN advantage.

Elder brother obedience only leads to a slavish, begrudging compliance to the letter of the law.

It is one thing to be honest and avoid lies for your sake. But it is another thing altogether to do so for God's sake, for truth's sake, and for the love of the people around us. A person motivated by love rather than fear will not only obey the letter of the law but will eagerly seek out new ways to carry out business with transparency and integrity.

Honesty born out of fear does nothing to root out the fundamental cause of evil in the world. The radical self-centered sinfulness of the human heart. If anything, fear based morality strengthens our self-

centeredness, since ultimately elder brothers are being moral only for their own benefit.

Here is a story that illustrates this...Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his King and said, "My Lord, this is the greatest carrot I've ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you."

The King was touched and discerned the man's heart. So as the man turned to go the King said, 'Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you freely as a gift so you can garden it all.'" The gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king's court who overheard all this.

And he said, "My, if that is what you get for a carrot, what if you gave the king something better?" So the next day the nobleman came before the king and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, "My Lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I have ever bred or ever will. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you." But the king discerned his heart and said, "Thank you." And took the horse and dismissed the man. The nobleman stood there perplexed so the king said, "Let me explain... That gardener was giving me the carrot. You were giving yourself the horse."

Elder brothers may do good to others but not out of delight in the deeds themselves, or for the love of people, or for the pleasure of God. They are not really feeding the hungry or clothing the poor – they are feeding and clothing themselves. The hearts fundamental self-centeredness is not only kept in tact but nurtured by fear based moralism.

Holy Scripture tells us in 1 John 4:19, "We love because he first loved us." God has taken away our sins through Jesus. We need not do good deeds so that we can work off our sins or earn a place in heaven. We have been set free by Christ's death and resurrection to love selflessly because we have been loved selflessly by God.

Ironically that's the last sign of an elder brother spirit... a lack of assurance of the father's love. The older son in the parable says, "you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." Luke 15:29. There is no dancing or festiveness about the elder brother's relationship with his father. As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through goodness you will

never be sure you have been good enough for him. You simply aren't sure that God loves and delights in you.

What are the signs of this lack of assurance? First, you find that criticism from others doesn't just hurt your feelings – it devastates you. This is because your sense of God's love is abstract, and has little real power in your life. You don't live out of that love and find your direction and value in it. Thus you need the approval of others to bolster your sense of value. Another sign is that you will feel irresolvable guilt. When you do something you know is wrong your conscience torments you for a long time, even after you repent. Since you can't be sure you've repented deeply enough you beat yourself up over what you did. But perhaps the clearest symptom of this lack of assurance of God's love is a dry prayer life. Though elder brothers may be diligent in prayer, there is no wonder, awe, intimacy, or delight in their conversations with God. Think of three kinds of people... business associates you really don't like, a friend you enjoy doing things with, and someone you are in love with and who is in love with you. Your conversations with the business associate will be quite goal oriented you won't be interested in chit-chat. With your friend you may open up your heart about some of the problems you are having. But with your lover – you will sense a strong impulse to speak about what you find beautiful about him or her.

These three kinds of discourse are analogous to three forms of prayer that have been called petition, confession, and adoration. The deeper the love relationship the more the conversation heads towards the personal and towards affirmation and praise. Elder brothers may be disciplined in observing certain times of prayer but their prayers are almost wholly taken up with a recitation of needs and petitions - not spontaneous, joyful praise. In fact, many elder brothers, for all their religiosity, do not have much of a private prayer life at all. This reveals that their main goal in prayer is to control their environment, rather than to delve into an intimate relationship with the God who loves them.

Why is it so important to know that Jesus exposes elder brother lostness as being as wrong and destructive as younger brother lostness? Elder brothers of the world desperately need to see themselves in this mirror. Jesus aimed this parable primarily at the Pharisees to show them who they were and to urge them to change.

As we said, the younger brother knew he was alienated from the father but the elder brother did not. That's why elder brother lostness is so dangerous. Elder brothers don't go to God and beg for healing for their

condition because they see nothing wrong with their condition – and that can be spiritually fatal. If you know you are sick you may go to a doctor. If you don't know you're sick – you won't – you'll just die.

The younger brothers of the world also desperately need to see this. When we see the attitude of the elder brother in the story we begin to realize one of the reasons why the younger brother wanted to leave in the first place. There are many people today who have abandoned any kind of religious faith because they see clearly that the major religions are simply full of elder brothers. They have come to the conclusion that religion is one of the greatest sources of misery and strife in the world.

And guess what? Jesus says through this parable that they are right. The anger and superiority of elder brothers all growing out of insecurity, fear, and inner emptiness, can create a huge body of guilt ridden, fear ridden, spiritually blind people. It is typical of people who have turned their backs on religion to believe that Christianity is no different. They have been in churches brimming with elder brother types. They say, "Christianity is just another religion."

But Jesus says, 'No – that is not true.' Everybody knows that the Christian gospel calls us away from the licentiousness of younger brothers, but few realize that it also condemns moralistic elder brotherhood. Jesus is telling us that both younger brother and elder brother lostness are spiritual dead ends. Jesus clearly wants us to take a radically different approach – but what is it? We will find the answer when we realize that Jesus deliberately left someone out of this parable – and he did this so that we would look for him – and finding him find our own way home at last. But I'm out of time and so in two weeks – we'll find out who Jesus left out of his parable.