

“Meanwhile The Older Son”

The Prodigal God 2020, Pt. 6

We’re going to look at this great parable – this great story – one more time. And let’s start the ending by remembering the beginning. Because at the very beginning of Luke 15 we find Jesus speaking to religious leaders and teachers of the law who look at him hanging out with pimps and prostitutes and what they call “sinners” and they say to him basically, “Why would you hang out with all these lost people? They are spiritually lost – they are far from God. They are *alienated* from God. So why, Jesus, would you associate with them?”

And in response, Jesus tells three parables – we reviewed them last week – but they are all about lostness. The first parable was about a lost sheep; the second was about a lost coin and then the third of course is about the lost son. And I am going to read you that one – one last time – right now...**(Luke 15:11-32)**

“Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. 13 Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.

14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

17 When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’

20 So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

25 Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.

27 “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.” 28 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.

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. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

31 “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

So what is Jesus saying? What is the point of this story? He’s basically trying to get across a *new* idea – a *better* idea than the Pharisees had – about what it means to be spiritually lost. And here at the climax of the final story, we have the most amazing, shocking, category-busting message from Jesus about what it means to be spiritually lost. All the people who were listening to him would have been absolutely astonished. Jesus is giving us a new understanding of what it means to be spiritually lost and that’s what I want us to look at this morning as we bring this series to a close.

So let’s look at what it means to be spiritually lost, how you can determine if *you* fall into that category – because we all want to think about *others* when we think about lost, but that’s not why Jesus told this story – and then what you do with it if it *is* you and finally what are some of the implications for Southwest Family Fellowship, for our life together as a community of believers in this city.

So **first** of all, **what does it mean to be lost?** And the first thing you’ve got to understand – I hope you’ve seen it by now – is that Jesus’ brilliant storytelling is showing us that *both* of the sons are alienated from the father. Remember way back we said the younger son wanted the father’s things? He didn’t really love the father, he loved the father’s things and so to get *control* of them, he just left. But now, look at the older brother, how different is he? Not really different at all.

Notice for example that the elder brother refuses to go in to the *greatest* feast that this father has probably ever given. This is the greatest day of the father’s life. His son who he thought was lost to him forever is back. And the elder brother knew how important this was to his father – and yet he doesn’t care. He won’t go in; he argues with him; he humiliates him. He doesn’t care about the father – what does he care about? What has got him so upset? It’s the father’s things. It’s the estate.

He's all upset about the fattened calf. And that's understandable because meat was not a normal dish at that place and time – it was a delicacy – and a *fattened* calf was an extremely pricy way to hold a feast. I mean think about today even; when you go to a banquet, if they serve beef you're like "Oo-la-la". Usually it's what? The "cheaper chicken." So this was the most lavish feast the father could throw and that's what this son is upset about. He says "Why couldn't it have been pizza and HEB brand cola?" He's all upset about the father's things and he doesn't care a *bit* about the father's heart.

Which means, what we actually have here is two sons and one of them looks very bad – broken the father's rules, gutted the family fortune, run off and wasted his life. And then there's a son who looks very good – he's stayed with the father, hard working, obeys the father, helping – literally – grow the family fortune out in the fields. So here's a very bad son and a very good son...and they're both alienated from the father. They both really care about the father's things more than they care about the father. And the father has to go out to each one. He goes out to the younger brother and showers him with love to bring him into the feast of salvation. But now he has to do it with the elder brother – the "good" son, the one who's not disobeying the moral rules at all.

He goes out and he says (**Luke 15:31**) "'My son,'" – which by the way, the Greek word there is *technon* which means "my child", very tender, he's not furious with him, he's not angry with him – though he has every right to be – but he goes out and says, "my child" - "~~the father said~~, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.'" Isn't that amazing? He says, "I *do* appreciate all your hard work." He's being so tender, so sweet. He's pleading with the son to come back in – get rid of his anger and resentment and come to the party.

So what is Jesus showing? That both the bad son and the good son are cut off from the father – both are trying to control the father's things in a way that hurts the father – but one does it by running away and the other does it by staying home. One of them is trying to get control of the father's things by *breaking* the rules, but the other one is trying to get control of the father's things by *keeping* the rules. So Jesus is showing that they're both alienated from the father.

But the most stunning thing about this whole story is how he ends it. Jesus ends the story with the younger brother – the "bad" son - repenting, humbling himself and coming in to the feast of salvation and therefore is saved. But the older brother – the "good" son, the moral son – remains lost.

And by the way, I've had people say to me, "Well, you don't *know* that, because maybe after this story ends, he comes in." Ahhh, but don't forget, this is not an historical account, this is fiction. This is a story, which means that if Jesus, who made the story up, ends the story here, nothing else *could* have happened after the story ended. They don't exist outside the story. You can imagine Dumbledore didn't die if you want to, but it's not your story. What? You didn't know that? Seriously, it's been like 15 years.

So you can't say, "Who knows?" We *do* know! Jesus is making a point; the bad boy is saved and the good kid is lost. And look carefully, the good boy is not lost *despite* his goodness, but *because* of it. See, why is he so angry? Why is he staying outside of the father's feast? Why is he alienated from the father? You know why? He says so; "I have never disobeyed you." In other words, "Because I have been good, because I have been working hard for you, you should be doing things my way. And because you are not doing things my way, I'm not coming in."

The younger son was alienated from the father through his wrongdoing...but the older son was alienated from the father through his *right*-doing and his pride in his self-righteousness. And therefore Jesus says there's two way to be lost – two ways to be

going to hell – one is by being very bad and one is by being very good.

And you say, "What the *what?!?*" That's right. I told you this was startling. I'm glad you're startled. "Well, how could that be?" I'll tell you; the Bible says that you can either look to Jesus as savior or you can look to something else. You can either look to Jesus to justify your existence...or you can look to something else.

Everybody looks at something to justify their existence. I'm a good mother, I'm a good father. I'm a good child. I've worked very hard. I've succeeded in certain ways. I'm pretty smart. I'm attractive physically. Everybody looks to *something* to justify that they have value and their life has meaning. Everybody looks to something.

And the Bible says you can either look to Jesus to be your justifier, or you will look to something else. And if that's the case, you're looking to yourself to be your justifier and you're trying to be your own savior – you're into self-justification. And now we see, there's two ways to be your own savior; there's two ways to try to get control over the father's things and not really love the father. One is to be very, very bad and the other is to be very, very, good.

Because if in your heart of hearts you say, “I have worked so hard, I have obeyed, I have come to church, I have kept the 10 Commandments, I’ve prayed, I’ve tried hard to be like Jesus and therefore, God, you *owe* me. You owe me an answer to my prayer. You owe me a relatively good life and to take me to heaven when I die. We had a deal.” And if that’s the case, Jesus is your model, he’s your example, he’s maybe your boss, but he’s not your *savior*. You’re your *own* savior. And therefore there’s two ways to be lost – two ways to be your own savior – one is by *breaking* all the moral rules and one is by *keeping* all the moral rules and saying, “Now God you owe me.”

And Jesus ends the story with the bad boy being saved and the good boy remaining lost. And I don’t think he’s trying to say that being a bad boy – breaking the rules and squandering money on prostitutes and gambling – that’s all fine. Of course he’s not saying that, you can tell by the story. But what he’s saying is, in the end, younger brother lost-ness at least let’s you know you *are* lost. You know you’ve got a problem because you’re in trouble.

The problem with older brother lost-ness is that you don’t know you’re lost. You don’t know you’re alienated from the father. In fact if someone were to say that you’re lost, you’d say “Are you kidding? Have you *seen* the size of my Bible?” And therefore it’s a more dangerous place to be spiritually.

Now, here’s the problem with this; we know what younger brother lost-ness looks like, don’t we? You can see it. If you wake up hung-over in a pigsty and you’ve gambled away all your money and you’ve got an STD...these are the signs of younger brother lost-ness, ok? “I’m a mess, I’m broken, I’m in rehab, all the problems, fine.”

But what are the signs of elder brother lost-ness? That’s tricky. Younger brothers are out in the pigsty, but elder brothers are *here* – they’re in church! Elder brothers are praying and working and being obedient...so we have a problem - that’s the first point - that’s what it means to be lost. **Second** point though, **how do you know if you’ve got elder brother lost-ness?**

And actually, Jesus in his story gives us three signs – three ways you can know if you are an elder brother – and by the way, there’s more than three, but that’s what we have time for. And you can see them here in v.28-30. The first one is; **elder brothers have an undercurrent of anger.** (v.28) “*The older brother became angry and refused to go in...*” And why was he angry? Because “I’ve never disobeyed you!” And that thought pattern *right there* is what makes an elder brother heart run.

If you believe in your heart of hearts that because of your goodness and your decency, that God owes you a good life, you're going to spend most of your life angry. You know why? Life *never* goes the way you want it. And if you think God owes you, you are going to be angry. Great example of this that I'll never forget even though it's been a decade now. During the the NFL season back in 2010 – you remember professional sports? - Buffalo Bills wide receiver, Steve Johnson – who is a Christian - had a perfect pass in his hands that would have given his team an overtime victory over the heavily favored Pittsburgh Steelers.

Instead of walking off the field the hero, however, he dropped the ball and had to watch as the Steelers then drove the field for the game-winning field goal. After the game, Johnson laid out the blame on Twitter. It went viral, “I PRAISE YOU 24/7!!!!!! AND THIS HOW YOU DO ME!!!!!! YOU EXPECT ME TO LEARN FROM THIS??? HOW????!! ILL NEVER FORGET THIS!! EVER!!! THX THO...” Now I've always maintained that we should go easy on the guy, he was only only 24-years-old and was heart-broken. And actually, his tweet kind of sounds like some of the things I read in the prophets if you ask me.

But this is elder brother language all the way. When we think God owes us and yet things don't go our

way; “You never even gave me a young goat!” AND THIS HOW YOU DO ME!!!!!! See, elder brothers are constantly angry – sometimes at themselves, since they believe that if they're good and decent and hardworking that means that God owes them a good life, then maybe if things aren't going well it's because they're not being good enough. So sometime they're angry at themselves, but mostly they're angry at God – even if they won't come right out and admit it. So first there's an undercurrent of anger.

The **second** mark of elder brother lost-ness is what I'll call, **duty without beauty**. Because notice, he lets his true nature show when he says (v.29) “*Look! All these years I've been **slaving** for you...*” “Slaving?” You know there's a great irony here. Remember the younger son came back and said “I'm not worthy to be called your son, make me like one of your servants...”one of your slaves if you will.

But when he says “Just make me a slave” the father makes him a son. But then here is a man who thinks he's a son and yet, because of his spiritual condition, is actually a slave. When he says “I've been slaving for you” what he means is “I've been obeying you, but it's all been a grind.” Elder brothers obey; they pray, they do all the right things...but it's a *grind*. There's no joy in it at all. They fulfill the duty without the beauty.

I know I've used this illustration several times before, but when I was at UT, I needed a fine-arts course and I took Jazz Appreciation because I heard it was an "easy A". And so in the course, I had to go over to the library and listen to a bunch of tapes – yes, *tapes*, it was a long time ago! But on the test you had to be able to identify between Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk and Charlie Parker – which is not as easy as you'd think.

So I listened to a lot of jazz...why? So I'd get an A. Why? So I'd get a better GPA. Why? So I'd get a better job. So I was listening to jazz in order to make money. But now, 25 years later, I'm very happy to spend money to listen to jazz. I payed \$250 for a record player this week – why? So I could listen to a classic jazz album that I paid \$5 for at a thrift store the week before. And we all know how this is going to end, that record player is going to cost me a whole lot more money. By the way, I *already owned* that album on CD, but I was happy to buy it again on vinyl. And the reason is because jazz used to be a duty, but now it's a beauty. What is the difference?

See, elder brothers find God *useful*. But gospel believing Christians find God *beautiful*. What does it mean to find something beautiful? It means it's an end in itself. I don't listen to John Coltrane with an ulterior motive. I listen because I like how John Coltrane moves me – I like how it makes me feel - it's an end in itself, not a means to some greater end.

And see, elder brothers are obedient and they're faithful and they're diligent and they care for the poor and the read their Bible, but it's totally results oriented. And as a result it's a *grind*. "I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go." But gospel believing Christians obey just to get God. One of the ways you can tell the difference in the two is in prayer. Elder brothers pray and ask for a lot of things – they will even confess - but they do very little adoration. They don't spend lots of time contemplating God and enjoying God – because prayer is a means to an end, a results oriented thing. It's something I *have* to do in order to get things. It's a duty...but it's not beauty.

Elder brothers are always saying, "I've been obeying and obeying and I'm not getting anything out of it. AND THIS HOW YOU DO ME!!!! My life isn't going any better." But see, a gospel believing Christian thinks about Jesus Christ. He was *completely* faithful to God and because he was *completely* obedient, life was a disaster for him. Everything went wrong *because* he was so faithful and obedient. And *why* should it be different for us? Jesus said, "In this life you *will* have trouble." You will. You don't serve God just to avoid trouble. You serve Him to bring Him delight and to become like Him and because of His great beauty...not just duty.

So elder brothers tend to be angry, and all duty but no beauty; and then **thirdly**, elder brothers are **marked by superiority** – religious and cultural and class superiority. Why won't the elder brother come in? (v.30) "*But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home,*" If you justify yourself in your performance – if you find value in your strong work ethic, for example – then you *have* to look down your nose at people you consider to be lazy. And if you are proud of – you root your value in the fact that you are successful – then you *have* to look down your nose at people who you see as failures.

And see, this elder brother looks at this younger brother and first of all, he's poor, he's penniless. And not the deserving poor, the less fortunate – no, he's a poor person who got himself into this mess. And on top of that, he's immoral. And so religiously and economically and in every way, the elder brother does not want to lower himself to have *anything* to do with "*this son of yours*" – won't even acknowledge him as his brother.

And that's because he doesn't understand that you can only be saved by grace. He's filled with works-righteousness; he believes the father owes him because of all he's done. And here's how you can tell if you're an elder brother; if you look at people of different races, if you look at people of different classes, if you look at people of different educational levels, and you feel superior to them – in fact, you feel creeped out by them – then you're an elder brother.

Richard Lovelace writes, "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."

So there are some signs of elder brother lost-ness, but **what do we do if we find evidence of elder brother lost-ness within us?** And before I tell you the solution, here's something I need to say first quickly; listen, there are people in every church who are baptized, who believe the Bible doctrines, they've come into the church and they're living Christian lives.

And neither I nor you have the right to look at any individual like that and say “I think you’re just an elder brother. I see this smugness and the self-righteousness, this air of superiority, this undercurrent of anger, I don’t see you growing in spiritual fruit – love and joy and peace - I just think you’re an elder brother.” You don’t have the right to do that. I don’t either. How do *we* know? I believe two things to the core of my being; there is a God...and I’m not Him. It’s not my place – not your place – to label others.

But I *do* know that there are very likely some people here who they themselves say, “You know what, I’ve never seen in my heart the things that the Bible say should be happening in the life of a follower of Christ. And I’m realizing just now that I’ve never clearly understood what the gospel was really all about. I’ve been killing myself with works but now I’m seeing it really has been grace all along. And I’m humbling myself to accept that and ask God to take me back into the feast.” *They* can do it...but *we* can’t do it for them.

But there’s plenty of people by the way who are born-again, regenerated Christians, but are characterized by what let’s call “elder-brother-*isness*”. You’re elder-brother-*ishtic*. You know what I mean? We have the spiritual paradigm and though we are saved by grace, we keep sliding back into it.

You see the superiority, you see the lack of joy, you see the underlying anger because life’s not going right. You see yourself sliding back into elder-brother-*isness*. So what do we do about it?

Here’s what you’ve got to do. You’ve got to look at the radical **vulnerability** of Jesus Christ for you. The very end of the story is absolutely wonderful.

Because what you’re seeing in this picture is not just a father pleading with his older son. You’re actually hearing Jesus Christ pleading with his enemies. He’s saying this to Pharisees and other religious leaders – these are the people who are going to *kill* him – and what does he do? Does he say “You bastards!” No. Does he yell and scream at them? Does he denounce them even? No.

Listen to it, “My son, my child, I know you’ve tried hard, I know you’ve worked very hard.” What is he doing? On the one hand, this story is a punch right in the nose. He’s saying “You don’t understand the very *purpose* of the Father. You think that you’re close to God but you don’t even understand the very basic purpose of God. Don’t you understand *everybody’s* lost here. You don’t have good people and then lost people. We’re *all* lost! The good people are lost; the bad people are lost; and God has sent me to seek and save the lost. He *loves* the lost.”

“And only people who *know* they are lost have any hope of being found. And therefore the people who think they are *not* lost are lost, lost, lost, lost, lost. And that’s you, you are alienated from your father, you are lost.” So that’s a shot to the nose. He’s not pulling any punches with these guys. And yet, he’s so tender...he’s so patient...he’s not screaming at them and denouncing them. He’s saying, “My child.”

Well, that’s wonderful. Look how nice he was with his enemies. Hold on now, are we forgetting something? Paul says, in **Romans 5:10**, “...*while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son...*” And if you see Jesus dying on the cross *for you*, he’s doing the very same for you that he’s doing for the Pharisees. We have the very same challenge they did.

The cross says to you and me, “You’re so messed up, you were so lost, you were so hopeless that nothing less than the death of the Son of God could save you.” But at the same time he’s saying from the cross, “And I’m glad to do it.” See, there’s challenge *and* tenderness. There’s humiliation *and* affirmation. And only when you hear Jesus Christ speaking to you the way he’s speaking to these elder brothers, will that blast you out of your elder-brother-ishness.

Only when you see this incredible humiliation and affirmation through Jesus Christ dying on the cross for you. Only when he humbles you so much you can’t possibly earn your salvation anymore...and yet he affirms you to the stars so that you don’t need to.

One last thing. I’ve been telling you this whole series – “teasing” some might say – that I don’t really like the name that has historically become attached to this parable; “The Prodigal Son.” But I haven’t told you why. Well, let me close us out by doing just that. First of all, who do most people mean when they refer to the “prodigal son” in this story? It’s the one who ran away right? It’s the “bad son”. But Jesus started the story with “There was a man who had *two* sons...”

It’s not right to single out only one son as the sole focus of the story. And as we’ve seen today, this parable is *every bit* as much about the elder brother as it is the younger – maybe more so since he is the punch line you might say. So maybe we should call it “The Parable of the Two Prodigal Sons.”

But even that doesn’t quite fit I think. Let’s talk about that word “prodigal” for a minute. What does it mean? We don’t even know apart from this story, do we? When is the last time you’ve heard anyone use the word “prodigal” when they weren’t referencing this parable? Have you ever?

The word “prodigal” does not mean wayward. It doesn’t mean runaway or scallywag or whoremonger. According to *Merriam-Webster’s Colligate Dictionary*, “prodigal” means “recklessly extravagant”. It means to spend until you’ve got nothing left. And that means that “prodigal” then is just as much an appropriate description of the *father* in the story as it is of his youngest son.

The father’s welcome of the son was literally “reckless” because he refused to “reckon” or count his sins against him. And of course it’s that prodigal action of the father that insulted the older brother and most likely the whole community. So maybe we should call it “The Parable of the Prodigal Father”.

But of course, Jesus clearly meant for the father in this story to represent our Heavenly Father. This is the picture that Paul paints for us when he writes (**2 Corinthians 5:19**) “*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.*” Jesus is showing us the God who is “recklessly extravagant”. And whether you see yourself in the younger son or the elder son - or a little bit of both – your Heavenly Father is willing to spend it all on you.

And if you have experienced God’s reckless grace in your life, how could you not want to be generous to others in the same way? You’d want to join Jesus’ search party and go out to seek and save the lost. How could you not want to share the good news of the Father’s welcome and the Father’s feast that’s awaiting them as well? You’d share it with everybody – prostitutes and presidents. It’ll change your life, that kind of reckless grace. So maybe - in light of the great scheme of this simple story – maybe we should call this parable, “The Prodigal God.” Maybe we already did.

Let’s pray...