

The two prodigal sons

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32
(A Sermon by Tim Keller)

Introduction

This parable is nearly always called, “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” but not by Jesus. When he begins the story, he says, “A man had two sons” (v.11); the story is a comparison and contrast of both brothers. We have sentimentalized this parable because of our almost complete concentration on the middle of the story regarding the younger brother. We imagine that the hearers eyes welled with tears as they heard how God will always love and welcome us, no matter what we’ve done. But if we truly come to understand why Jesus told this parable and what he meant, we will come to see that the listeners were actually thunderstruck, offended, and furious. For Jesus’ purpose here was not to warm hearts, but to explode the normal human categories of how to approach God. He does this by showing us two kinds of people, and thus two kinds of “lostness” and running from God, but still just one way home.

Two Kinds of People

At the beginning of the chapter, Luke gives us the setting of the parable. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were muttering and complaining about Jesus (v.2) but tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him (v.1). These two kinds of people correspond to the two brothers later in the parable. Tax collectors and sinners are like the younger brother in the parable. They have engaged in immoral, irreligious wild living(v.13). They have left the traditional morality of their families. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law, however, are like the elder brother in the parable. They have stayed with the traditional morality of their upbringing. They are deeply devoted to studying and obeying the Word of God. They pray and worship constantly.

The religious and moral elder brothers were shocked by Jesus’ ministry. The Greek tense of the verb (were gathering round) and the context indicate that the prevailing trend and pattern in Jesus’ ministry was to attract the very people who most hated and despised religion! Moral people were put off by Jesus, but those socially and morally out of the mainstream were strongly attracted to him. We see this continuously in the gospels. When there is a religious person with a political outcast (Zaccheus-Luke 19), or a sexual outcast (the “fallen” woman-Luke 7) or a racial outcast (Samaritan woman-John 4), it is always the “younger brother” who connects with Jesus and the “elder brother” who does not.

Jesus is continually saying to the respectable and upright, “The tax collectors and the prostitutes enter the kingdom before you”(Matt.21:31). Thus, the puzzled and angry reaction of the moral and religious people is not surprising. They are saying, “Why, these kinds of people never come to our services! They despise our meetings and organizations. They are completely turned off to religion. Therefore, there is something wrong with this. He must just be telling them what they want to hear!”

The point? When the message of the gospel is clear, moral people tend to dislike it, while irreligious people are intrigued and attracted. The way to know that you are communicating and living the same gospel message as Jesus is that “younger brothers” are more attracted to you than elder brothers. This is a very searching test,

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because almost always, our churches are not like that. The kinds of people that were attracted to Jesus are not attracted to us. We only attract conservative, buttoned-down, moral people. The licentious, the “liberated,” the broken, the people out of the mainstream very much despise us. That can only mean one thing. We may think we understand the gospel of Jesus, but we don’t. If we don’t see the same effect Jesus saw, then we lack the same message Jesus had. If our churches aren’t filled with younger brothers, then we must be more like the elder brother than we’d like to think.

Two Kinds of Approaches

Jesus’ story of the two sons demolishes the natural human categories for salvation and how we are to approach God. The world has only two “grids” through which it understands spiritual issues (though there are an infinite number of variations on each one!). First, there is a moralistic grid. This says that “salvation” is finding God by obeying his law, or by living up to standards of some kind. Though God may forgive if the repentance is very sincere, we must measure up with our goodness. The second grid is a relativistic grid. This says that “salvation” is finding ourselves by following our hearts. In this view, there may be a God or there may not, but if there is, he will accept us as long as we are sincerely seeking what we feel to be our principles.

Both grids then divide the world into two basic groups, one seen favorably and the other unfavorably. The moralistic sees the religious people as “in” and the immoral as “out.” But the relativistic sees the free spirits as “in” and the judgmental people as “out.”

How does Jesus’ story address these views? Well, if the last eight verses were left out, if the story were mainly about the younger brother, this parable could be taken by either moralists or relativists as confirming their grid! The relativistic grid could appropriate it for itself, saying, “Ah, see! The son returned home after all that sin, and he was just accepted! There was no need for punishment, no need for atonement, no need for payment. There’s the ticket — God accepts us no matter what we do.” The moralistic grid could appropriate it for itself, saying, “Ah, see! The son ruined his life when he didn’t do the father’s will, but when he came back to live a good life, then he was received. There’s the ticket — God only welcomes you if you are good.”

But the parable’s ending completely changes all that. For one thing, the story mightily challenges the urban “liberated” grid that sees evil as mainly a lack of personal freedom. We see the ruin of such a life. And there is a final, hidden argument against the relativistic view that we will get to later.

However, Jesus’ main target here is the moralistic grid. And here is the shocking heart of the parable. Jesus shows us a father with two sons, and actually both are equally alienated from his heart. One has expressed alienation by running far away, but the elder brother is just as angry and just as much a stranger to the father. The father must “go out” to each of them to urge them to come in (vv. 20, 28). But here’s the remarkable part. One of his sons is a very good person, one is a very wicked person, but in the end, it is the evil son who comes in to the father’s feast and dance, and it is the good son who absolutely will not. The listeners knew what that meant. They were utterly stunned. It was a complete reversal of everything they believed. You can almost hear them gasp as the story ended. The lover of prostitutes enters the kingdom of God,

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and the moral man does not.

But notice — what is keeping the elder brother out? Why does he stay out when the younger brother goes in? He tells us: It is because all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed... (v.29). It is not his badness keeping him out, but his "goodness." It is not his sins that are keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father so much as his "righteousness." The elder brother in the end is lost, not despite his good record, but because of it. Now we are getting to the heart of how the gospel differs from the moral grid. As one writer put it, "The main thing between you and God is not your sins, but your damnable good works."

The gospel is neither simply religion nor irreligion; it is neither simple morality nor immorality. Most everyone thinks that the moralistic grid seems to be the Christian one, yet the gospel is a radically different approach. The moralistic grid says, "The good are in and the bad are out," and the relativistic grid says, "The liberated are in and the oppressive are out," but the gospel says, "The humble are in and the proud are out." And Jesus is telling us here (as we see throughout the gospels) that when the elder-types and the younger-types clearly hear this new gospel "grid," the younger types are generally more open and less offended. That is why the real gospel faith is one that religious people by definition do not like.

Two Kinds of Running

So what is this gospel "grid" for approaching God? The parable of the Two Prodigals gives us several important planks.

First, we learn that the gospel provides a radically deeper view of the concept of sin than either of the other two grids. Of course, the relativistic view of sin is well known to be shallow, yet ultimately it does not really differ from the moralistic. They both think of sin as basically "breaking the rules" — they just differ in what the rules are! But the governing theme in this parable (and all the stories of Luke 15) is that sin is running from God — avoiding, escaping, saying, "I don't need you!"

This is a much more profound concept than "breaking rules." Why? Flannery O'Connor grasped this when she said of one of her characters, "There was a deep, black, wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin." How could that be? Here is a man who knows that the only way to avoid Jesus as Savior is to avoid sin. If I feel I am a good person, I may look to Jesus as Example, or as Helper, or as Strength — but I won't need to utterly rely on him for every breath and obey him unconditionally. If I am a good person, then I have rights — Jesus owes it to me to listen to my prayers, to protect me and reward me.

This is clearly the attitude of the elder brother. Why is he so angry with the father? He feels he has the right to tell the father what he should do with his robes, rings, and calves. It shows that he is just as resentful of the father's control of his goods as was the younger brother. The younger brother went away to get out from under the father's control of his wealth, but the older brother stayed home and "never disobeyed" as his way to do the same thing. At heart they were absolutely the same. Both were trying to escape the authority of the father, both resented his control and rebelled. But one did it by breaking all the father's rules, and the other did it by keeping them.

Now we see why "running from God" is a deeper definition of sin than "breaking the

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rules of God,” because you can run from God either by breaking his rules or by keeping them. The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to get control over God, and to get things from God, but the Christian obeys just to get God. Religious persons obey to get leverage over God, to control him, to put him in a position where they think he owes them. Therefore, despite their moral and religious fastidiousness, they are actually attempting to be their own saviors. Christians, who know they are only saved by grace and can never control God, obey him out of a desire to love and please and draw closer to the one who saved them.

Another way to understand this is to ask, “Why do we obey or sin?” Until the gospel changes our hearts, the basic reason for either is exactly the same. The younger brother and the elder brother had the wealth of the father as their main goal. They wanted his things, but not him. The younger brother’s sins allowed him to get his money and do what he wanted with it. The older brother’s righteousness was motivated by the same thing. Thus their real trust was not in the father, but in the things that were their ultimate joy. Their real joy and sense of worth resided in these things, not in the father. So, sins against the father’s will and “good deeds” done to get control over the father, are both ways to obtain things other than God. They are both ways to become your own Savior and Lord.

Now we can see one more reason why younger brothers are generally more open to the gospel than elder brothers. Younger brothers have literally run from the father physically and morally. It’s easier for them to see their need. Older brothers have not. They are running away from God while they have physically and morally stayed close. See how hard it is for religious people to believe they are running from God! But they are.

The gospel does not agree that there are spiritually two kinds of people in the world — “good” and “bad.” Instead, it says there are just two different kinds of “running from God.” You can run away by breaking the rules or by keeping them. But you are running nonetheless.

Two Kinds of “Lostness”

Not only does the gospel give us a deeper definition of sin, but it also provides a deeper understanding of “lostness.” It is typical for people to think of “lost” people as wild and out of control. And there is a kind of person whose body and spirit are very broken through wild and riotous living. It would not be difficult to take this text, look at the breakdown of the younger brother’s life, and spend time showing the signs and remedies for “younger brother lostness.”

But because there are two kinds of “running from God,” there are also two sets of “lostness” traits. We will concentrate here on “elder brother lostness” because it is much more insidious (as we have seen) and misunderstood. Not only are there many, many people in churches who are not Christians because they are “elder brothers,” there are also many Christians who are deeply affected by the elder brother spirit. These are people who still have not grasped the gospel well, who maintain a moralistic grid through which they look at themselves and read the Bible. Richard Lovelace says that many Christians “base their justification on their sanctification” and thus are very

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touchy, unhappy, and insecure. We need to recognize the marks of “elder brother lostness.”

(1) One sign of the “elder brother” spirit is that he is filled with anger about how his life is going (v.28 — became angry). One sign of a moralistic spirit is a feeling that God owes me a good and comfortable life if I live up to his standards. Now that will continually lead to anger whenever your life takes a bad turn. If you feel you have been living right, you will be angry at God; if you feel that you have not been living right, you will be angry at yourself. Either way, your life will be filled with anger because you have been trying to control God through your goodness.

(2) A second sign of the “elder brother” spirit is a joyless, mechanical obedience. Notice that the older son “lets his slip show” when he says, “I’ve been slaving for you” (v.29). Look at it this way: There are two ways to listen to Mozart. You may listen to Mozart because it is instrumental (a means) to something else you love for its own sake. For example, you may listen to Mozart to get an “A” in music appreciation class so that you can get your degree and a good job. Or you may listen to Mozart so you can feel (and look) like a cultured person. But you can also listen to Mozart because it is beautiful for its own sake. It gives you pleasure just for what it is in itself. Elder brother obedience treats God as instrumental means to an end. You don’t do good out of a delight in goodness for its own sake or for the pleasure of God. Instead, you do it joylessly and slavishly. But Christians are filled with amazement at the grace of God and so obey out of a delight in pleasing him for his own sake.

(3) A third sign of the “elder brother” spirit is a coldness to younger brother-types. And especially, elder brothers are disdainful of or ineffective in evangelism. The older son will not even “own” or acknowledge his brother — “this son of yours” (v.30). The person changed by the real gospel is always disposed toward evangelism. For one thing, if you believe you are a sinner saved by grace alone, you will not feel superior to anyone else, not to other cultural or racial groups, not to other faiths, not to immoral people. You will treat them with respect because you know that your morality has been as sinful and “God-escaping” as their immorality. Secondly, if you understand the gospel, you will treat others with hope. You will never look at anyone and say, “Here’s someone who could never become a Christian,” because now you know that all “types” of people are equally unlikely to find God. Thirdly, if you understand the gospel, you will be very courageous in your witness. You will not be bound by what people think of you.

(4) A fourth sign of the “elder brother” spirit is a lack of assurance of the father’s love. The son says, “You never threw me a party” (v.29). There is no dancing or festiveness in the elder brother’s relationship with his father. As long as you try to earn your salvation by controlling God through your goodness, you will never, ever be sure you have “made it.” There will always be anxiety and fear and uncertainty in your relationship. No wonder there is no intimacy in the prayer life of the “elder brother” — no joy or closeness — though the elder brother may be very diligent in “saying his prayers.”

(5) A fifth sign of “elder brother” spirit is an unforgiving, judgmental spirit. If you are an elder brother, you lack two things necessary to forgive. First, you lack the emotional humility to say, “I’m no different.” You instead look at the sinner and say, “I would

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never do that!” Second, you lack the emotional “wealth” to say, “I am so loved and forgiven by my father, what does it matter that I was slighted or wronged by him?”

One Way Home

If there are two kinds of running and two kinds of “lostness,” are there two ways home? No — there is only one, though it must be applied in different ways. Not only is there one way home for both younger-brother and older-brother non-Christians, but there is one way for believers to grow out of the immaturity and old “false grids” that still bedevil us.

First, we need the father to come out to us. Even the younger brother gets the father’s kiss before he repents (v.20). The father’s kiss is not a response to our repentance, but the action that brings it about. With the older brother, the father must come out and plead with him (v.28), just as he pleads today with hardened religious people! We all need God’s grace to come to us first. We need him to seek us, or we will never seek him.

Second, we must repent, not just of our sins, but also of our righteousness. We need a deeper, more comprehensive repentance. We must recognize that the reasons for our righteous deeds have been the same as the reasons for our sins. We must admit that other things besides God are operating as our functional trusts and joy, and that our main sin has been our efforts at self-salvation, at trying to be our own Savior.

Repentance means to admit that the reason we did right was to put God in our debt, so that we could have some say in the kind of life we “deserve,” and keep control of our lives.

Third, we must rely on and rejoice in what the father has provided for our salvation. We said earlier that, at first glance, the welcome of the younger brother seems “cheap.”

There is no punishment, no atonement — he is just taken in! Does this mean that the relativists are right, that God just accepts us whatever we do, as long as we are sorry?

No. Think: How was the younger brother put back in the family? He got a robe, a ring, he got a place back in the inheritance. But the only way the father could do this is at great expense. It is at the expense of the elder brother. The younger brother had already taken away his rightful portion of the inheritance, and now every cent of the father belongs by right to the elder. When he says, “Everything I have is yours”(v.31), he is speaking the literal truth. Every robe, every ring, every fatted calf is the elder brother’s.

The salvation of the younger son is not free — it will be extremely expensive. The father cannot do it, except at the expense of his other son.

So are we stuck? No, we are not stuck. We have a different elder brother. That is the point of the parable. Jesus has shown the Pharisees what they look like; absolutely stuck in their self-righteous spirit, absolutely alienated from the gracious heart of the father. But Jesus is not. Hebrews 2:11 says, “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family.” So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says [to God], “I will declare your name to my brothers!” Jesus Christ is the true elder brother. By way of contrast with this elder brother, he is revealed to us. He came to earth and truly obeyed his father and never disobeyed his orders. He truly has the right to all the father owns. But instead, he came out and searched for us, and found us in the pigsty, and carried us home on his shoulders singing with joy. And he gave us his robe, his ring, his place, his wealth — all at his own expense.

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Understanding this truth is essential and will transform you. We'll never stop being elder brothers until we rejoice in the work of our true elder brother.