

TWO LOST SONS & THE PRODIGAL FATHER

LUKE 15:1-2,11-32

FIRST OF TWO MESSAGES ON THIS PASSAGE

MODESTO CRC

Nov. 8, 2009

INTRO Last week we began by committing ourselves to explore the gospel deeply. This is about being willing to set aside our assumptions for a bit and try to again listen as if for the first time. I believe one of the most powerful statements Jesus made about the nature of the gospel is in the parable we read this morning. I would like to take two messages to think it through together.

We need to begin by rethinking what we have thought and said about this parable. It has usually been called the parable of the *prodigal son*. My study Bible has the heading “*The parable of the lost son*.” I think closer examination will show us that it is the parable of the two lost sons. I have called this message The Two Lost Sons and the Prodigal Father because as we try to understand it from a middle eastern perspective, try to hear what they heard, our viewpoint changes. The word **prodigal** means recklessly extravagant. The most extravagant expenditure in the story is the love of the Father for his self-centered sons.

Who was Jesus’ audience when he told this parable? Luke 15:1-2 paints the picture for us.

“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathered around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered: “*This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*”

Jesus’ response to their complaint about him was to tell them a series of parables. It is the Pharisees and teachers of the law – the religious leaders of the Jews – who were his audience. **They were the “elder brother”.** Jesus’ audience had a very different response to this parable than we typically have had. We have been moved to tears by the Father’s love for the returning wayward sinner. **But the context of Luke 15 is not so much Jesus pleading with the immoral outsider as with the moral insiders.** He wants to show them where they have become blind, narrow, rigid and self-righteous – things that are destroying both their own souls and the lives of those around them. Their response was to be thunderstruck, offended and infuriated.

Close examination will reveal that Jesus wants to shatter our categories. He is clear about the self-destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother. He also condemns the self-centered, moralistic life of the elder brother. Both the religious and irreligious are spiritually lost. Both life-paths are dead-ends. Every thought the human race has had about connecting to God has been wrong. Jesus came with a third way.

The church, the religious community of Jesus’ day was rigorous in attempting to do the right things. They were determined – especially these religious leaders – to get

the people to do it right, to get God on their side, to impress God. They had 600+ laws to demonstrate their righteousness, and it was believed if they kept them all for one day God would be obliged to send the Messiah to restore the glory days of Israel.

The problem that Jesus kept pointing out was that they were religiously rigorous and spiritually dead. It was not about God and their closeness to him. It was about them. They were more than **ready to criticize** Jesus or anyone else in order to make themselves look good – even when Jesus did miracles to alleviate pain and raise the dead. They were **turf conscious** – it was all about their territory, their control, getting people to follow them and do their bidding. It was about their kingdom, not God's. They were **proud** – as opposed to being grateful or humble. It was always about *look how great we are – praying in public, giving so everyone could see, teaching in ways that would build their following without bringing people closer to God.*

My experience in churches tells me that the lack of spiritual vitality is still or is again the issue. It is not about organizational renewal. It is not about worship style or hot button issues. It is about spiritual life; that is the life we have with God in Christ.

Two Lost Sons In this parable, if we listen closely, we will hear Jesus redefine sin. He redefined lost, and he redefined what it means to be saved. Let's open ourselves to the gospel again.

The Younger Brother There was a Father with two sons. Both were alienated from the Father. The younger son demonstrated that he wanted the father's money more than he wanted the father with a disrespectful, shocking request. He asked that the Father treat him as if the Father were dead, and thus give him his 1/3 inheritance as the 2nd son. Jesus' Middle Eastern audience would have gasped. This son would certainly be flogged and disowned on the spot, if not killed. What is just as shocking is that the Father who is being rejected gave in to his request.

There are two ways of rejecting the Father and being in control of one's own life. The younger brother chose to be the bad boy, squandering his inheritance with immoral and irresponsible living. He clearly represents the tax collectors and "sinners" that offended the Jewish religious leaders. They were the younger brothers who do not observe the laws of the scripture. They left home. They were unclean and could not worship in the temple. They left the traditional morality of their families and society. They were the outcasts. To Jesus' audience the thinking of the starving, in the mud, pig feeding, younger brother makes sense. Maybe, if he were repentant enough, he could be treated like a hired hand. He wanted to be a hired man instead of a servant because the hired man received a wage, and with it he could spend the rest of his life attempting to pay back what he had squandered of his family's wealth.

I am moved to tears by the scene Jesus painted. The Father sees the younger son coming. He didn't even give him time to blurt out the whole confession. The plan was *"I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men."* Before he said a word the Father, God, was filled with compassion, ran to him (totally inappropriate because patriarchs did not run), threw his arms around him and kissed him (patriarch didn't show that kind of emotion). Before he gets through his confession the Father is disregarding any requests and gives him all the symbols of sonship: the Father's best robe, a ring, sandals (which only the wealthy wore). The fatted calf was the most expensive delicacy reserved for only the rarest and most special of occasions and parties. Jesus' message is clear: **GOD'S GRACE, GOD'S FORGIVENESS CAN RESTORE ANY AND EVERY KIND OF SIN AND WRONGDOING.** This is God's way.

Those of us who identify with the young man's rebellion and sin have to again be deeply moved by the grace that embraces us. However, it does not end here. This is grace at a very high cost.

The Elder Brother Jesus' primary audience, the elder brother Pharisees, (and again we need to identify), the church, was not moved. In fact they were disgusted. Why? The elder brother wanted the Father's wealth, not the Father. Where have we heard that before? Now it is his turn to be disrespectful and shockingly rebellious. He was angry and refused to go in to his Father's feast to celebrate the return of his son. That alone would be grounds for punishment, but again the Father is gracious. He came out to ask him to come in. He pleaded with him. The son's response again made Jesus' audience shudder. He too would have been disowned for it.

"Look! (no respect) 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. But when this son of yours (not my brother) who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fatted calf for him."

The elder brother decided to be in control of his own life, to be self-centered and not submit to the Father. However, he did it by being good, compliant. It was not because he loved the Father or his brother. He wanted the Father's wealth – his inheritance. His approach was if I do enough, if I work hard enough, if I get it right then God will have to give me what I want. **He is no more intimate with the Father than the younger brother was.**

How many of us are at least "elder brotherish"? We try to avoid identifying with Jesus real audience here. Are we the "elder brother?" How often, when things have not gone well, have we thought about our attempts at living a good life, at sacrificing financially to the church and/or the Christian school, for fighting temptation, for doing the right thing, and for believing the right thing, wondering why God hasn't noticed? Doesn't God owe us something? Isn't the deal that we are good Christian people and God is

supposed to respond by taking care of us? (*“Look how I’ve slaved for you!”*) The elder brother spent his life buying God off. How dare God just give grace to the undisciplined sinner? I’ve known people who are opposed to outreach because of that very resentment. Do you see it? Both sons were lost. Both want the Father’s stuff, not the Father. One is lost in his sin and rebellion, and the other is lost in good works done only to get his way, to buy the Father off.

As I thought about all of this the memory of a personal experience would not leave me alone. I was the pastor of my 2nd church. My dreams and prayers were being answered beyond my imagination. The church was the fastest growing CR church for several years running. My life was filled with new members, baptisms, professions of faith, new church structure to accommodate all the people, extra services. I felt burned out and depressed. I kept working more and more hours to get it all done, and I felt worse. It made no sense. This was all I had prayed for and dreamed about.

I decided to go to a counselor. I found one a safe distance from the church. After a couple sessions he showed up in church one Sunday morning. I was really upset. I wanted to work with someone separate. What was he doing here? At our next appointment I told him how angry I was at him, and he laughed. That didn’t help my mood at all. Then he explained that he came to church to check something out. He suspected that I was good at talking about God’s grace, even good at showing grace to people. Then after a pause he added, “It is too bad that there is none for you.” I wanted to be angry, but all I could do was cry. I knew the right theology, and would never say it, but I had become the elder brother thinking that if I did enough God was obligated to respond by giving what I needed. The problem is you can’t do enough. It never works. There is no real peace. That is why elder brothers tend to be super critical and unhappy.

The story ends with the Father returning to the feast after again being outrageously gracious to his sons. The younger son is basking in the Father’s grace, unable to comprehend the power that took him from feeding pigs to his Father’s table. The elder brother stands outside full of resentment. We are on the edge of our seats. Will the family all be reconciled? Will it all come out with a happy ending? And it ends. It ends because Jesus’ audience, the religious people around him hold the key to the conclusion. Will they go into the feast? Will we?

There are two human approaches – there is the rebellion against God that says I will be in control of my life and do as I please, with the disastrous results of the spiritual brokenness and poverty equivalent to feeding the pigs and wanting their food. Or there is the approach that says I will do good, I will please God, I will buy God off, I will make God need me and I will then have him in my debt and I can still be in control of my life. Both ways end in disaster because both want what the Father has but do not really want

the Father. **Jesus calls us to a third way** – the way of repentance, the way of acknowledging that we have no claim to be sons and daughters of God, the way of claiming his cross as our atonement, the way of humility and joy in just receiving his grace as we submit to him, the way of love. These are the 3 options we have. What will yours be? Spiritual renewal and revitalization is about returning again to embrace God's 3rd way.