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**The Two Lost Sons:
The Older Son-Part2
Luke 15:11-32
September 21, 2014, Jeff Germo**

This is sermon number three in *The Parable of the Two Lost Sons*. There are three main characters in the parable and we have been attempting to profile all three. Two weeks ago we looked at the younger son who represented what Luke called the sinners and the tax collectors. These were the people who were attracted to Jesus. They gathered around Him in droves to hear his teaching. Last week we started to look at the older son and we're going to try to finish him up today. The older son represents the religious people who had judged Jesus and those he spent time with, the sinners and the tax collectors. Next week we will take a look at the third character in the story – the father – who corresponds to God.

Now, like I said last week, this parable is usually called *The Prodigal Son*, and typically we focus on the younger son, as if he is the only one who is lost in the parable. And usually when we hear teaching about it the story becomes a very heart-warming narrative about a wayward son who comes home to the welcoming arms of a loving father. And the story tugs at our sentimental hearts because we all long for those kinds of relationships. But when you do that, you miss the main point that Jesus was trying to get across.

Remember, Jesus didn't tell stories to entertain His listeners. He told them for a very specific reason – to get a response from certain people who were listening. And so it's really important when interpreting the parable to try to ascertain whose heart He was targeting with the parable. And we've already noted that this story and the two preceding parables were aimed directly at the hearts of the Pharisees and teachers of the law – the religious people – because of their high and mighty, holier than thou, hoity toity, judgemental attitude.

Timothy Keller, in his book, *The Prodigal God*, writes;

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“...the original listeners were not melted into tears by this story but rather they were thunderstruck, offended, and infuriated. Jesus' purpose is not to warm our hearts but to shatter our categories. Through this parable Jesus challenges what nearly everyone has ever thought about God, sin, and salvation.

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His story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, but it also condemns the elder brother's moralistic life in the strongest terms. Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends, and that every thought the human race has had about how to connect to God has been wrong.”¹

This parable should shake us to our core. If we let Jesus speak to us, and allow his sharp probe to enter our hearts we will be changed in every way. In order for that to happen though we will need to humble ourselves. It will take more courage than we have ever had to muster up to allow the Holy Spirit to make those necessary changes. But, let me tell you that is where true joy and freedom are found.

Let's read the opening scene again before Jesus begins to tell the parable.

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Luke 15:1–2 (NLT)

¹ Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ² This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

So, again, we can see clearly that there are two distinct groups within earshot of Jesus telling this story. There are the “sinners and tax collectors” in one group, and then the “Pharisees and teachers of the law” who were the religious types in the other. The sinners were the ones who were attracted to Jesus. The religious people hated him and were always trying to trap Him up in His words.

Now, remember the last couple weeks we saw that both brothers in the parable were equally lost. Both had distanced themselves from their father. Neither of them wanted a relationship with him. They wanted what they could get from him, but not him. And then we went on to describe what each of the brothers was like by how Jesus represented them in the parable. So, today we are going to finish our profile on the elder lost son.

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God*, (Dutton, Penguin Group), p. 10

Now, just so we're all on the same page, let's quickly summarize the story one more time and then we'll pick it up from Act 2 where the older son enters the scene. The story begins with Jesus saying that there was a man who had two sons, and the younger of the sons goes to the father and asks for an early inheritance. He was basically saying, I don't want a relationship with you. I just want your stuff so I can do my own thing without you. The father graciously grants his request. The younger brother then packs up all his belongings with his newly acquired wealth and moves as far away from his family as possible so that he can become his own man.

Well, he quickly squanders all his wealth ends up literally living with the pigs and then finally, in desperation, and in deep humility crawls back home, expecting rejection, but instead is welcomed by the open arms of his father who quickly throws a party to celebrate that his lost son has finally returned home safe and sound. There is no condemning, "I told you so," from the father, only open loving arms.

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Luke 15:25–32 (NLT)

²⁵ “Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶ and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷ ‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’

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²⁸ “The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.

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³⁰ Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’ ³¹ “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’ ”

So, again, we began last week by acknowledging that we usually feel sorry for the older brother because he seemed like a well-disciplined, hard working, obedient young man. And so we asked the question, “Why did Jesus peg the older brother as the bad guy or at the very least equally lost?” He seems like the good guy to us. He worked hard for his father. He didn't do anything wrong. He always did the right thing, never argued, and was always at home safe in close proximity to his father. Well, we noted that the first reason was that,

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1. He cares little for the lost

We already covered this point last week, so we won't spend too much time on it this morning, except to say that all three parables in Luke 15 about lost things tell the story about God's heart for lost people, and this older brother didn't care at all if his brother would ever be found, and as a matter of fact was ticked off that his father welcomed him home.

Another reason that the older brother is depicted as lost is that,

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2. He cares more about doing than being

²⁹ but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends.

All his life the older brother had been doing the right thing, in his eyes at least. He, along with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, the religious people who this parable was targeted at, were more concerned with doing what they thought were the right things than they were about being the people God wanted them to be. They had missed one of the main points of life, and that is that we are human beings, not human doings. Life is about relationship. Sometimes we purposefully keep ourselves so busy doing good things so we don't have to face the change God wants to perform in our hearts.

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Isaiah 29:13 (NLT)

¹³ And so the Lord says, “These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.

God, of course, wants us to do right things, but the right things we do should come from a heart that has been transformed by walking with Jesus.

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Romans 8:29 (NIV) says,

*²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined **to be conformed to the likeness of his Son**,...*

God chose us to be conformed to the image of Christ. It's about becoming. That is why He set us apart. This is why He called us. And this older son was so busy trying to keep his life in order and manage his sin that he missed the point. He thought it was all about him. And when you think your life is about doing you will reduce it to a competition. You will look at others and measure them against yourself and feel good if you think you are doing better than them and bad if you aren't.

The older brother in this parable looked with contempt at his younger brother who had come home safe and sound and all he could think about was, "Oh no, now he's probably going get some of **my** inheritance." This leads us to the **third reason** that Jesus pegged the older brother as lost.

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Why was the older brother obedient to his father? ***'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.'*** What did he want? What was his reason for obeying his father?

3. He obeyed in order to manipulate his father.

"I have never disobeyed you, so now you have to do what I want." He thought that his father owed him if he obeyed. That's the only reason he obeyed. His father didn't ask him to do those things he was slaving after. And **our heavenly Father's way is not for us to work for his love either**. He wants to freely give it. When the younger son came back to the father with the intention of working his way back into his father's graces what did the father do? He would have nothing to with it because **God wants children not slaves**. "No, you can't come back as my slave. But, you can be my child."

The older son was all about fear, obligation, law and self-righteousness. All these things take us away from God. They tell Him that we don't need Him. We can do it on our own. We'll be our own saviour, thank you very much. We just want His stuff, and we deserve it because we did the right things.

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Timothy Keller again writes,

With this parable Jesus gives us a much deeper concept of 'sin' than any of us would have if he didn't supply it. Most people think of sin as failing to keep God's rules of conduct, but, while not less than that, Jesus' definition of sin goes beyond it.

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In her novel, Wise Blood, Flannery O'Connor says of her character Hazel Motes that 'there was a deep, black, wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.'

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This is a profound insight. You can avoid Jesus as Saviour by keeping all the moral laws. If you do that, then you have 'rights.' God owes you answered prayers, and a good life, and a ticket to heaven when you die. You don't need a Saviour who pardons you by free grace, for you are your own Saviour.²

The Pharisees and teachers of the law were obedient for one reason, to get something from God, to save themselves so they wouldn't need God, and so that God would owe them a favour. **How many of us have not had thoughts like, "Why are these bad things happening to me?"** I've been a good person. I've been faithful to the church. I tithe, I read my Bible, I pray, I give to the poor. God owes me an easy life." Or, another common thing that people do is to make bargains with God. "If you get me out of this mess – that I got myself into – I'll be good. I'll serve you faithfully in the church." That is very faulty thinking. God's economy does not work like that. He cannot be manipulated into doing what we want Him to do. He is not about making sure that our lives are exactly how we want them to be so that we can live a comfortable life. This leads us to our next point.

Jesus has the older brother painted as the bad guy because...

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4. He cared little about relationships

He didn't care about his relationship with his brother. And he cared very little about his relationship with his father. You get a clue to this in verse 29 when he says,

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'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.'

² Keller, p. 37

What does that say about him? He's totally misunderstood the nature of the relationship that he was supposed to have with his father. Look at how his father answers him.

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31 "His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.'

Can't you just hear the love in the Father's voice as he says those words? What a tragic story. The older son missed out on a beautiful relationship with his father because his whole life was based on performance. He was trying to work for things that his father had already freely given him. "If I am the best son," he thought, "then maybe my father will love me." He didn't realize that his father would love him whether or not he performed.

Did you know that God loves you not only when you are good, but even when you aren't? That doesn't give us the freedom to sin, but it shows us that we don't have to work for his love. **"While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** (Romans 5:8)

Friends, how many people miss out on a wonderful relationship with their heavenly father, or with people, because they have spent all of their time, money, energy ... all of their resources trying to do things so that God or people will love them? Which of the two sons in this parable wasted their life? The older one did. This may come as a surprise to you but, I think that ...

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God couldn't care less whether or not you are an expert at anything except loving Him and loving people.

God is not impressed with our attempts at becoming successful. The father in this parable offers himself to both sons. He tells the older son that everything he has is his to enjoy. He pleads with him to come in and celebrate and enjoy his presence. But, the older son let his resentment, unforgiveness, and blind arrogance keep Him from entering into the joy that his father had for him. What a sad, sad story.

We have so much to celebrate at CRBC. God is doing some amazing things. The angels in heaven are rejoicing over people who are coming to Christ, being freed from bondage, and publicly professing their faith through baptism. I hope that we can all celebrate together when the lost come to Christ.

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There is another reason Jesus pegged this older brother as lost. And this is probably the most important one so please don't miss it.

5. He did not see his own depravity.

When we live like older brothers we are blind to our own depravity and need. We only look at others and see how **they** fall short of the standard we set for them. We see everything painted in black and white. We see two groups of people – good and bad, those in the in-group and those in the out-group, and we are in the good group, which means that everyone who doesn't see things our way is in the bad group. And when that happens we miss the life that could be ours. Friends, God has so much more for us.

Neither son in this parable loved the father for the father's sake, or for the sake of relationship. They both distanced themselves from their father, but in different ways. The younger brother's sin took him away from his father. That one is easy to see, but ironically, **it was the moral goodness of the older brother that distanced him from his father.**

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Someone once wrote, **"The main barrier between Pharisees and God is not their sins, but their damnable good works."**³

Good works are not wrong, of course. As a matter of fact, Ephesians 2:10 says that we were created to do good works. The point is that if we think we can earn God's favour by doing good things we have missed the whole point of the Gospel of Jesus. One of our big problems that keeps us from seeing our own need is how we define sin. Here are a couple quotes from **The Prodigal God** again.

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"The gospel of Jesus is not religion or irreligion, morality or immorality, moralism or relativism, conservatism or liberalism. Nor is it something halfway along a spectrum between two poles—it is something else altogether. The gospel is distinct from the other two approaches: in its view, everyone is wrong, everyone is loved, and everyone is called to recognize this and change."⁴

³ Ibid. p. 77

⁴ *The Prodigal God*, p.45

Both sons in the parable were equally wrong in how they distanced themselves from their father. But the way of the elder brother is, by far, more dangerous, because the younger brother was able to see his depravity and eventually come back to the father. The older brother stayed lost because of his blindness. He didn't see just how lost he was. And the prerequisite to receiving Christ is to know that you need Him.

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“What must we do, then, to be saved?”, Timothy Keller asks, “To find God”, he continues, “we must repent of the things we have done wrong, but if that is all you do, you may remain just an elder brother. To truly become Christians we must also repent of the reasons we ever did anything right. ...it is only when you see the desire to be your own Savior and Lord—lying beneath both your sins and your moral goodness—that you are on the verge of understanding the gospel and becoming a Christian indeed.”⁵

One final thought before we close this off.

There is a glaring difference between the first two parables in Luke 15 and the parable of the Two Lost Sons. In the story of the lost sheep, and the story of the lost coin the person that lost something frantically searched for the lost thing until it was found. In the story about the two lost sons nobody searches for the younger brother. The father in the story pleads with **the older lost son**, so in essence he searches hard after **him**. He pleads with him twice for him to enter into the celebration for his lost brother. But, nobody searches for the younger lost son. Why? Why does Jesus leave this out? As I was summarizing the parables in my own mind scanning them for similarities it was so obvious that this was missing. It certainly wasn't an oversight on the part of Jesus. He was quite intentional in omitting the search. The question is why?

Well, for the answer to that we have to again go back and ask who the parable was targeted at. There are only three possibilities. It wasn't the sinners and the tax collectors that the younger brother represented. It most certainly wasn't God who was represented by the father in the story. The parable was aimed very purposefully at the religious people who were judging Jesus and the sinners that he was hanging out with. So, why didn't the last story have anyone desperately searching for the younger lost son? What was Jesus saying by this glaring absence?

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I think what it was is this: **A true elder brother would have gone out and searched for his lost brother.** He would have left everything and searched long and hard and desperately until he found him and then he would have lovingly restored him into relationship with the family.

Friends, that is what God has called the church to do. That is the very reason that Jesus came to earth 2000 years ago, to seek and save that which is lost. CRBC is not just about what we do on Sunday mornings. It is all about restoring relationships with God the father through Jesus Christ. That is our mission. We are ministers of reconciliation. And when you walk out those doors today you are entering the mission field. Experience the Father's unconditional love and then enter into the his joy and bring it out into the world with you so they will see Jesus. That is our reason for existing.

Let me just pray Ephesians 3 over you in closing.

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Ephesians 3:16–21 (NLT)

¹⁶ I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will empower you with inner strength through his Spirit. ¹⁷ Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. Your roots will grow down into God's love and keep you strong. ¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

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¹⁹ May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God. ²⁰ Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. ²¹ Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

⁵ Ibid. p. 77



The Parable of the Two Lost Sons: The Older Son II

Luke 15:11-32

Week of September 21st, 2014

Objective of this study: To understand our own need for Jesus.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 51 meditatively to the group. (After each phrase, or paragraph if it's a long Psalm, pause and let the Lord speak to you before reading the next.)
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

Describe your most embarrassing moment.

Word (20 - 30 minutes)

1. Read Luke 15:11-32.
2. Have there been any surprises for you in the parable or from the sermons thus far?
3. If there is anyone in your group who is new or unfamiliar with the story, briefly review what's going on in Luke 15, who the key players are, who Jesus is talking to, and why.
4. In this passage Jesus is communicating through parables, stories specially crafted to communicate a message and elicit a response from his listeners. Let's look at some other ways God uses to communicate in the Bible. Read each of the following passages and after reading all of them, talk about what the message is and how it relates to what Jesus is communicating in Luke 15.

Deuteronomy 6:4-6 and Leviticus 19:17-18. Here God is giving commands to Israel through Moses, as He is forming Israel into His nation.

Isaiah 29:13. God, through the prophet Isaiah, is communicating to his people. What is he saying?

Matthew 22:36-40. Jesus, in response to Pharisees who were testing him, gets to the heart of the matter, reminding them about what God really cares about.

Luke 7:36-47. What's going on here? What is the setting? Who is speaking to who(m)? Why? Communicating what? Jesus said: "He who has been forgiven little loves little." How does this relate to Simon in this passage? ... to the older brother in Luke 15? ... to the Pharisees? ... to the passages from Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Isaiah? Keep in mind point 5 from the sermon: "He did not see his own depravity."
What was the sin of the older brother, Simon, the Pharisees? How did their depravity evidence itself?

Luke 18:9-14. What's the problem here, and what is the solution?

The bad news is that none of us can save ourselves. The good news is that God has mercy and grace for all of us. Without experiencing God's grace, we cannot be transformed or truly love God or others. We all need to recognize and experience God's grace.

Work (30 - 40 minutes)

What is a good response to all of this?

How can we stay conscious of our need for God's grace?

What's the connection between humility and love?

Read Psalm 25:8-9. God is gracious to us even in showing us our sin and teaching us his way.

How would you like to respond to him?

Spend some time thanking him, and worshipping him for his goodness to us.

PRAYER TIME/HOMEWORK

In your quiet time with God, ask him if he wants you to adjust your priorities or attitudes to be in keeping with the two most important commands (see Matt. 22:36-40). Also meditate on Psalm 51 this week.