

May 23, 2010

I Corinthians 1:26-31 / I Timothy 1:12-17 / Luke 15:11-32

The Parable of the Two Lost Sons (#2)

Last week I spoke on this Parable of the Prodigal Son, and began by showing you what the word prodigal really means, and concluded by helping you see which of the two brothers represented you -- the free-spirited, liberal and extravagantly sinful younger brother / or the obedient, rule keeping, moralistic (and emotionally uptight) older brother.

Though as I should have pointed out last week, most people are a mixture of the two, or have some of the characteristics of both brothers (with the traits of one brother in particular predominating).

And for those who may not have a clue as to what I'm talking about (because you weren't here last week) I had some CD's of that message run off and placed in the foyer. They will help you to better understand this parable and which brother represents you!

So, before we continue, let me reiterate the basic thoughts I set forth last week (because some of you were away, and I'll be building upon those same truths again this morning):

1st) Jesus made it plain that BOTH brother's were alienated from the Father, or to put it otherwise, BOTH sons were lost -- the one who left home and the one who stayed home!

2nd) We saw that they BOTH represented the two basic ways that people go about avoiding God or avoiding Christ as Savior. The younger brother by **RUNNING AWAY FROM HIM** and **BREAKING** all His rules / and the older brother by **STAYING NEARBY** and **SLAVISHLY OBEYING GOD** (though I have found that the second group will rarely admit their obedience is a way of avoiding Christ as Savior)!

Yet Flannery O'Connor's comment was particularly insightful when she wrote of the man who had, ***"a deep, dark, wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin."*** That is, he felt he wouldn't need to surrender his life in total trusting reliance upon Christ alone if he could just offer God His attempts at obeying the rules, instead.

God calls all people to a life of unconditional trust and wholehearted commitment and absolute surrender of heart, mind, soul and strength to Him, but what people often offer Him instead is their works, achievements or outward attempts at moral compliance.

3rd) We saw that although BOTH brother's seem to be very different, at heart they are really very much the same, for they're BOTH trying to save themselves. And although most don't pick up on it at first, they're BOTH trying to do it by RULE-KEEPING! It's simply masked by the fact that they each go by such a different sets of rules!

The "rules" for the **YOUNGER BROTHER** are rules based in personal freedom -- rules that say: "Be yourself. Do what you want to do. Do what makes you feel good. Do what works for you." For him salvation comes by living in or for the moment. It's a matter of being true to yourself and what you're feeling at any particular point in time. / He's the rebel who doesn't let anyone tell him that he must do or must be other than what he himself chooses, in his heart, to do or be! For him the key to life is expressing his individuality regardless of what others may think. (He'd fit in really well in today's relativistic and postmodern society, which is why we can call him "the relativist.")

And the "rules" for the **ELDER BROTHER** are rules based in universal compliance -- rules that say: "Everyone needs to conform. They all need to adopt conservative morality and do what they're commanded to do and do it simply because they're commanded to do it! In fact, they must do it even if they never feel like doing it (and if they don't do it they should be punished!) because salvation, for them, comes by complying. / For older brothers its comply and obey or else! The key to truly being saved, they feel, is moral conformity or dutiful, military-like, "do it because you must to be acceptable" obedience to conservative values! Which is why we can call him "the moralist."

Last) at the conclusion of my message last week I tried to help you see which brother you are more like (the free-spirited, rebel against the traditional rules and go by your own, younger brother / or the more uptight, keep the traditional rules, and deny yourself older brother), and then ended my message by giving us the CURE FOR BOTH THOSE EXPRESSIONS OF LOSTNESS -- which is THE GOSPEL!

So, let's pick up again today by looking at the ROOT of BOTH problems (or both expressions of lostness) and then go on to consider how the GOSPEL is the CURE for BOTH OF THEM.

Because that is the point of the Parable! To see that the Gospel doesn't just save sinful prodigals; it saves obedient older brother types as well! The flagrantly immoral and irreligious are saved the same way as morally strict and disciplined religious people are saved. The remedy is the same because the root problem is the same (as I now hope to show you)!

So, let's consider how the ROOT PROBLEM that lies beneath the surface in the lives of both is the same, and how the Gospel heals it, starting **FIRST** with the older brother. The people I referred to last week as "moralists" or "religious people," since in the church at large they tend to be the predominant group. The church attracts, and is sometimes responsible for creating older brother types when the messages preached focus more on what we must do than what Christ has done for us (when they're more law-based than Gospel-based).

MORALISTS (or religious people in general) tend to believe that in order to be loved by God or truly acceptable to God one must toe the line morally. Which means the focus of their relationship with God is based mainly in how well they perform.

And because that's how they measure the quality of their relationship with God, it's also the way they evaluate the existence or the quality of other people's relationship with God. And usually the standard for measuring the performance of others (as in this parable) is by looking at whether or not they have adopted traditional values or comply with conservative morality (and in many cases conservative politics) and dutifully obey religious rules.

Their religion tends to lack joy, be very dogmatic or doctrine focused, be filled with lots of rules, stuffy or stifled by many fears and inhibitions, and thus lacking in Spirit prompted spontaneity. Their dominant view of God is that He's pretty darn strict, characterized by a penchant for justice, and very, very holy and unbending.

Thus, older brother types tend to wrestle with being self-critical and critical of others, often experience emotional ups and downs / are prone bouts of discouragement or depression / and occasionally wrestle with self-hatred (when they know they haven't lived up to the standard). / Either that, or they wrestle with pride, self-inflation, arrogance or "holier than thou" attitudes (when they do think they have lived up to the standards)!

That's why Tim Keller can say: *"It is ironic to realize that both inferiority and superiority complexes have the very same root. Whether the moralist ends up smug and superior, or crushed and guilty, simply depends on... how they feel they've done in terms of keeping the rules."* Do well they feel inflated and superior to others / do poorly they feel inferior and depressed.

And as Keller goes on to note (and I hope we all know this by now) within the moralistic framework, *"There is no transforming joy or power."*

Because true inner transformation doesn't come by being moral or measuring up -- it comes by the Gospel, which assures us that God accepts and forgives and loves us FOR JESUS SAKE whether we perform well or mess up!

He loves us just as much in our times of failure as He does in our times of victory (though the moralist finds that nearly impossible to believe).

That's how the Gospel works to heal older brothers. By assuring them (as Jesus does in this parable) that they are His children. *"My son,"* says the father to the older brother, *"you are always with me and everything I have is yours."* That is, you are my son simply because I gave you birth (and as God He would mean "by the Spirit") -- so you don't have to earn what is already yours by birth!

You don't have to make yourself worthy to receive what was already given to you as a gift of grace!!!

What older brothers need to hear more than anything else is the Good News that WE ARE NOT SAVED BY OUR PERFORMANCE, but by THE PERFORMANCE OF ANOTHER ON OUR BEHALF -- by the perfect, righteous merits of Jesus obedience -- Our True Elder Brother who did not "slavishly obey," but "for the joy that was set before Him (the joy of irrevocably securing our redemption), endured the cross, and scorned its shame!"

You see, what the older brother forgets is that IF his acceptance with God were conditioned on his performance, he would never be acceptable! Because as Scripture makes clear, ALL our deeds and efforts and actions are flawed at best and tainted by the sin that dwells in us!

"All our righteous deeds," says Isaiah 64:6 (not our unrighteous or sinful deeds, but the righteous and good ones!) *"are as filthy rags in the sight of God."* Even the best of the best of all the things we will ever do are stained by sin, and thus unclean or unrighteous or unacceptable to God as they are!

Which means that in order to be made acceptable to God something must happen to them to make them clean and righteous and acceptable -- that is, they too need to be washed in the blood of Jesus!

That's what the MORALIST forgets: *What makes our deeds acceptable to God is NOT the purity of motive with which they're done or the quality of performance with which they're performed, but that they, like us, have been washed in the atoning blood of Jesus by faith.*

Yet that's what the older brother refuses to see! All his many years of "slaving for the father and never disobeying" (which was really obedience done from the wrong motive as well as a self-righteous error in judgment, since Jesus is the only One who "never disobeyed"!) -- all that blinded him to the fact that his years of "slavish obedience" were in the sight of God, nothing but an accumulated pile of what? **Filthy rags!**

And if he'd just seen that, he would have known: That all his morality and obedience was just as much in need of being "washed," as the sinful younger brother was when he came home filthy and in the dried, caked on mud of the pigpen of sin!

He offers the father his obedience when he should have been offering Him repentance / the confession that he as well had sinned against Heaven and His Father by his ill-motivated obedience / and the admission that he also was just as unworthy to be called his son!

You see, as much as elder brothers struggle with the concept, there are NOT two ways of salvation! One for prodigals who have ventured deep into immorality / and another for those who have always grown up in the church and compliantly obeyed. There is only one way of salvation for BOTH:

And it comes as a gift, by grace, through faith, to those who will simply believe God / stop trusting in anything they have done or can do / and simply trust in the pure, righteous, saving merits of Jesus!

WHY? Because Jesus "never disobeyed." / His obedience was flawlessly perfect. / It was not stained by sin in the slightest way. / It was impeccable! / And what God does when we trust in Jesus is credit that perfect righteousness to us! Jesus isn't just our Example, or our Sacrifice, He's "THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS!" (Jer. 23:6 / I Cor. 1:30)

That's why those who trust in His righteousness instead of their own, can experience ongoing joy and true inner transformation and rest of soul! Because His obedience (unlike ours) never fluctuates! The indescribably good news of the Gospel is that my acceptance with God is secured and maintained by His righteous performance and not mine! Praise God!

And that Gospel alone, can save you from that persistent, hard to shake, "clean cut, clean shaven, compliant, conservative, church-going yet self-righteous, "older brother" form of lostness"!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** group of people -- the younger brother types, or what I called the "relativists" (or irreligious people) who are really, at heart, in regard to the sin under the sin, not very different at all from their older brother counterparts! Because it's not (often to their great surprise) that they don't go by rules! It's that they simply go by a different set of rules or have a different standard for measuring virtue or "righteousness"!

Most everyone noticed that during the height of the "politically correct" movement. Because when those of more liberal political persuasion gained power, they didn't do away with rules, they simply changed the rules, and replaced the more traditional rules with more current and relativistic rules!

As one simple illustration: Whereas (in the Christianized West) for thousands of years, homosexual practice has nearly always (for the most part) been seen as wrong, or sinful / the politically correct movement simply reversed that and made it wrong (and even a hate language crime that could cost one their job if voiced publically) to suggest it is sinful or wrong.

So don't be fooled! Though relativists hate to admit it (and some won't) they are NOT people who go by no rules -- they're simply people who go by a different set of rules! In fact, they frequently go by more rules than their moralistic counterparts! It's just that the rules they follow are aimed at enforcing a different goal.

Whereas the rules of the moralists sought to enforce conservative standards and restrict certain behaviors / the rules of the relativists seek to enforce the more liberal standards of tolerance and openness and acceptance of any and all beliefs, life-styles and practices.

Thus, they too can be subject to the same ups and downs for breaking the rules they've adopted for themselves. Because they too measure their worth or their value by their performance. That is, by how open-minded or accepting or transparent or uninhibited they are. By how few moral, social or sexual hang-ups they have.

Therefore they too can wrestle with failure and performance issues when someone points out in them the presence of moral hang-ups or inhibitions or hypocrisy or bigotry or prejudice or some lack of tolerance.

That's why I can say the GOSPEL is the cure for BOTH problems. Because when one looks underneath the surface they find that BOTH conditions really grow out of the SAME root!

So how are younger brother types saved? By believing the same Gospel that saved their older brothers -- a Gospel Jesus shares with us in verses 20-24.

Beginning in verse 20 we read that the father, ***"filled with compassion,"*** (that is, filled with love for His sin-loving son before he ever repents) ***"runs to his son, throws His arms around Him, and kisses him"*** (literally, "He fell upon his neck and kissed it over and over.") The Father's love is already his, and the affirmation of sonship is already his, before one word of repentance comes out of his mouth!

In fact, the repentance he does offer his father is extremely flawed at best! For we see that when he "comes to his senses," it's not because he feels remorse or conviction that what he did was sinful. It was because he thinks to himself: ***"How many of my Father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!"***

It's pure pragmatism! He simply wants food (or food to spare) and will do whatever it takes to get it. He's desperate! And his rehearsed repentance (if it's anything) appears to be little more than a ploy that will get him that very thing! It's not repentance speaking; its common sense speaking!

Notice he does not say: "I am no longer worthy to be called you son... period! And then leave it up to the father to choose what to do. No! He says, "I am no longer worthy to be called you son; make me (and it's in the imperative or command form) treat me like one of your hired servants."

At best its repentance with a selfish or self-serving agenda!

So don't get the Gospel backwards! The Father (God) doesn't run to him and love on him and kiss him all over the neck because the son has changed his heart / and cleaned up his life / and ridded himself of all his selfish and self-serving motives / or managed to make pure all his impure intentions. / He doesn't withhold His love and welcome of His son until he's absolutely sure His son is now a totally different person!

NOT AT ALL! ***That's the whole point of the parable (!) -- "Jesus welcomes 'sinners.' "***
Not "reformed sinners." / Not "repentant sinners." / Not "converted sinners." / Not "pure sinners"! / But "sinners" while they're still "sinners"!

It's not reforming ourselves that "earns us the Father's love." To say that would simply be to reinforce older brother attitudes which seek to convince us we have to make ourselves acceptable to God before He can accept us!

The Gospel here says just the opposite! It tells us that its being loved and accepted and welcomed and hugged and kissed BEFORE we even have a chance to repent, or EVEN IF our repentance is riddled with selfishness and sin that changes and transforms the heart!

"We love because He first loved us," says the Apostle John -- and it wasn't because we first made ourselves loveable!

You see, the father doesn't even let him finish his rehearsed repentance, before he says to his servants: "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him" (that is, before he showers or takes a bath or cleans himself up)!

And what does the "best robe" represent? You know! It represents the "Radiant, spotless robe of Jesus perfect, flawless, sinless righteousness"! It's the same imagery that Isaiah uses when he says: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord. My soul will exult in my God, for He has clothed me in the garment of salvation, and covered me in the robe of His righteousness!"

It's a robe of flawless righteousness which God places on him (and us) before he (or we) ever even begin to get cleaned up! BEFORE this son does ANYTHING... / BEFORE he even has a chance to finish his rehearsed repentance / or do penance / or make restitution / or progress in sanctification / or change anything about himself / the Father is having his servants get the "best robe" and throw it on him -- even though he's still covered with grime of the pigpen or the dirt of his sinful uncleanness!

Why does God do it that way? *Because if God waited till we were clean to put the robe on us, it would never happen! Because we never get totally clean in this life! In fact, if we could get clean, we wouldn't need it!!*

You see, the righteousness of Christ doesn't CLEAN UP our sin, it COVERS our sin! Which is why Paul, speaking of justification by faith, can say in Rom. 4:7 - *"Blessed are those... whose sins are COVERED!"* Covered by what? The "best robe" of Christ's perfect righteousness!

But that's not all! This parable also tells us that the Father had a *"RING placed a on his finger."* That is, a signet ring. A ring into which the family crest was engraved. It was used in sealing important documents, which were not binding even after they were signed -- they had to be sealed with a sealing wax into which the ring would be pressed, forming the seal that would make it binding. And only fathers or their sons wore such a ring.

It was the Father's way of declaring that he was to be a son, and not a servant! / A loved son, not a slave! / A cherished member of the family and not a hired laborer!

But even that's not all! The father also says, "*Put SANDALS on his feet.*" Because sons were expected to work, it's just that they worked with shoes, whereas servants or slaves worked without them, making their labor a lot easier and less painful, carried along as they were by the shoes that protected their feet and set them apart as sons! "My yoke is easy," said Jesus.

And of course, don't miss the MOST IMPORTANT THING OF ALL, where the father says:
"Bring the fatted calf and kill it."

And what does the killing of the fatted calf represent? The sin offering or the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross! Because sin isn't simply covered! / It must first be atoned for, so that it can be covered! So that it can be forgiven! / A penalty has to be paid and a life has to be sacrificed in order for sin to be pardoned.

My friends, it couldn't be any clearer: *Jesus is BOTH our PERFECTION and our PARDON!*

He supplies for us the PERFECT OBEDIENCE the older brothers can never provide no matter how hard they try or how many years they slave!

By looking to Christ for the righteousness that makes him acceptable to God the root of self-righteousness is effectually killed and the fear that he might lose God's love if he messes up is cured! Hallelujah!

And He also supplies the SINLESS SACRIFICE the younger brother types so desperately need to atone for their gross immorality and assure them they have the grace of forgiveness, and acceptance and restored Sonship.

Thus effectually killing the root of his self-righteous attempts to make up for or atone for them himself and assuring him of the unfathomable love God has for him, despite all the sinful and horrible things he's done.