



“THE TWO PRODIGAL SONS”

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

by Tim Keller, *Senior Pastor,*
Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York

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)--so 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 he 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 running from God and lostness, but still just one way home.

1. What is the name of this parable by Jesus?
2. How did the original hearers actually feel when they first heard it?

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 to come. 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 to come. 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.

3. So, which brother corresponds to which group of people in Jesus’ day? Which would correspond with what groups of people in our own day and time?
4. In verse 2 it says, “so he told *them* this story.” Who’s the “them”? If that’s true, then at whom is this parable more directed? And if that’s true, then which type or life approach is more meant to see themselves through this parable? Is that the way this parable is commonly understood?
5. The world only thinks in terms of 2 categories to categorize mankind, good people and bad. But Jesus is suggesting that his way is a third way. However, most people confuse Christianity with which of the world’s two ways.
6. We often give the religious people of this time a bum rap because we’ve heard so many sermons against the Pharisees, but the truth is that in our day they would be the respectable, upstanding people in our community. How should this change our thinking of what Jesus is saying?

The religious and moral elder brothers were so shocked at Jesus’ ministry. The Greek tense of the verb (“*were gathering round*”) and the context indicates 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 ('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.

7. Why do you think that it might be true that grace is more offensive to successful performance oriented people and very religious people than it is to failing performance oriented people and immoral people?

Jesus is continually saying to the respectable and upright "*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 be just telling them what they want to hear!"

8. Legalistic people can sometimes hear a clear teaching on grace and conclude that it's just saying what?
9. The "leveled house" illustration: when Jesus offers salvation, it's the offer of our record not counting either for or against us ever again, but only his record counting for us. Who does this offend more? If Jesus was going to come and level two house wives' houses, which one would be angrier, the lady who has worked so hard at trying to make the house nice, or the one who has been a total slob with her house? Grace says that all your works, good or bad, don't count at all. So then, would you guess that it is the person who has worked hard at morality or the very immoral person that is more offended by the grace approach? Grace cuts more against the pursuit of 'self-salvation' than it does 'pleasure seeking freedom.'

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 of Jesus is that "younger brothers" are more attracted to you than "elder brothers." This is a very searching test, because almost always, our churches are not like that. The kind of people 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 that 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 like to think.

10. How indicting would you say this should be for the average evangelical church in our day?
11. This can also be asked on the individual level as well. Are you the kind of person that attracts mainly buttoned-down, moral and successful people who feel more comfortable around you, or do really bad people feel safe and secure around you? Which did Jesus attract?

Two Kinds of Approaches

Jesus' story of the two sons demolishes the natural human categories for how to approach God and salvation. 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. Second, there 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.

12. Would you agree that these two categorizations for mankind are true and descriptive of all of mankind in one way or another?
13. So what is the main pursuit in the relativistic grid? What is the main pursuit in the moralistic grid?

And 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 was 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. On the one hand, the story mightily challenges the urban “liberated” grid that sees evil as mainly just 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.

On the other hand, 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 is just as much a stranger to the father. The father must “*go out*” to each of them to urge them to come in (v.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, and the moral man does not.

14. Would you say that religious people generally accept that the moralistic grid is just as alienated from God as the irreligious grid is? Do you personally agree with this perspective?
15. If that’s true, then in one sense you might say that it’s almost an advantage to be from the immoral grid rather than the religious one because at least the immoral person is less likely to think what about their closeness to God’s than the moral person usually thinks?
16. How does the Father at the end of the parable display equal grace toward these two brothers?

But see--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). So 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 in 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.*”

17. Who was the older brother really doing his “goodworks” for? What was the real treasure of the Older Brother that he shows here which he really was pursuing and wanted?
18. Was that essentially different from what the younger brother wanted?
19. Their desires were the same, but their strategies of how to get them were very different. What was the Older Brother’s strategy for how to have and secure his stuff?

20. When we're just doing something only to get something else, then that action isn't its own virtue or privilege. We're just using it to get something else. We need to consider the "large pumpkin for the king" illustration:

Imagine a gardener who loved the king so much that he grew the largest and best pumpkin that he could for the king. He brought it to the king and said, "Dear King, because I love you and because you mean so much to me, I wanted to grow this for you."

The king gratefully replied to him, "Look out that castle window and see all the countryside? All that is now going to be yours because of your generosity towards me."

Meanwhile, the overseer of the stables over hears this and thinks to himself, "Well!....if he gets that for a pumpkin, what would I get if I bring him my shiniest, best black stallion?!!"

So he brings it to the King but the king dismissively says, "Thanks, that will be enough. You may leave now."

To which the stable overseer retorts, "What!!....but....I thought!...."

And the king quickly responds to him, "No! ...the gardener, gave ME a gift. You, however, gave YOURSELF a gift."

When there's something that we do for God which we WOULDN'T do if we didn't have to, then it's actually not a goodwork, in God's perspective. In fact, not only does that action not count FOR us, it actually counts against us because it's really only done out of selfishness.

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

21. This is why the gospel/grace grid is so difficult and complex to explain to people. For example when the world looks to Christianity to hear your stance on issues like homosexuality. The world can only imagine the two grids of religion or relativism, so when it asks if you or your church are accepting of them, then any answer you give them will simply allow them to pigeon hole you into one of those two grids. That's why we have to try to answer people in a way that doesn't allow them to think that. Instead, we have to attempt to respond in ways that will make them begin to rethink what they THOUGHT Christianity was and see how fundamentally different it is from the religion, moralistic grid. That it's as essentially different from that as it is from irreligion and relativism.
22. Grace is so completely UN-intuitive and not natural, while the religious grid and the relativistic grid are so completely human and natural. We all just naturally sync with them. Irreligion just makes sense to us naturally. We resonate with the idea, "I want to cast off religion and church and just indulge....now!" ...makes sense to us deep down. The religious grid does too. "If I obey God, He'll be happy with me! If not, I deserve what I get!" ...that just makes sense as well! But, this gospel grid, grace approach just doesn't "stick." We throw it up against our hearts....and it falls off...because it's so opposite to our nature. That's why it's so easy to confuse and to forget. If all this is true of the gospel grid and grace approach, then what would you say we need, a lot of, when we go to church?

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 very concept of sin than either of the other two grids has. 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”—though they differ in what the rules are! But the governing theme in this parable (and in all of the stories of Luke 15) is that sin is running from God—avoiding, escaping, saying: “I don’t need you!”

23. So what is the common, shallow explanation for what sin is?
24. What then, in the relativistic grid, would you say might be the ultimate sin, if the ultimate virtue is the pursuit of personal freedom to believe like you want and live like you want?
25. This also really develops further in the moralistic grid to result in there being “big sins” which are not okay to commit, such as sexual sins or not attending church, and there being “little sins” which are acceptable to commit, such as social injustices or self-righteousness.

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 that 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 listen to my prayers, to protect me and reward me.

26. Put in your own words then what a better, deeper definition of ‘sin’ would be?

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 get control of his wealth. But 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, the other did it by keeping all the father’s rules.

27. Is what these brothers were both ultimately wanting really very different?
28. An irreligious person and a religious person are really pursuing the same thing, ...the “stuff” or “blessings” of life. The irreligious person insists on getting it now, by casting off church and God, while the religious person is seeking to get it...how? ...and when?

Now we see why “running from God” is a deeper definition of sin than “breaking the 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 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 on a position where he owes them. Therefore, despite their moral and religious fastidiousness, they are actually being their own saviors. Christians, who know they are only saved by grace and can never control God obey him out of 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 dawns on us and changes our hearts, the basic reason is exactly the same. The younger brother and the elder brother had as their main goal to have the wealth and things of the father. They wanted his things, but not him. The younger brother’s sins were all so that he could get his money and the freedom to do what he wanted with

it. But the older brother's righteousness was all done for the same reason. Thus their real trust was not in the father, but in the things that were the ultimate joy of their hearts. Their real joy and sense of worth resided in these things, not in the father. Thus, at bottom, sins against the father's will and "good deeds" done to get control over the father are both ways to other things rather than God, your true joy and to become your own Savior and Lord.

29. Would you say that most religious-grid people would be willing to accept that the reason they have obeyed is the same reason that we sin?
30. But after the younger brother comes home and sees all that grace, when it begins to dawn on him what his Father is really like, would you suspect that what the younger brother "treasures" might start to change? ...from what...to what?
31. Lots of people think the younger brother started "getting it" in the pigsty. But what approach does he reveal that he's actually, really considering when he wants to go back and "work" and "earn" and be a "servant"? ...it's like people in prison who have tried the liberated, pleasure seeking life and see that it's really a dead end life which doesn't work. They often then turn to consider religion. They figure that though they haven't tried religion yet, it has to be better than what they've known so far.

But in the pigsty has the younger brother really considered *grace* or *the gospel* yet? ...the grace approach is never something that WE turn to. It has to come out to us...or it would never dawn on us. ...because it is so UN-natural to us and beyond us. It's not until AFTER the younger brother gets home and sees what the Father has for him and who the Father is that he begins to realize that it ISN'T the system that he thought it was. He begins to learn about grace only after he's been already receiving it. Praise our humble Father for showing us the gospel and for bringing it out to us!

Now we can see one more reason why in general younger brothers are more open to the gospel than elder brothers. Younger brothers have literally "run from" the father—physically and morally, but older brothers have not. They are "running away" from God though 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.

32. So then you could almost think it would be an advantage to come from which of the two non-gospel grids?

So the gospel does not agree that there are spiritually two kinds of people in the world—"good" and "bad". Rather, it says there are just two different kinds of "running from God". You can run away by breaking the rules or by keeping the rules. But they 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 being very wild and out of control. And there is a kind of person whose body and spirit is very broken through wild and riotous living. It would be possible 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 two sets of "lostness" traits. There is also "elder brother lostness". For our purposes, we will concentrate here. Why? Because this kind of lostness is much more insidious (as we have seen) and misunderstood. Not only are there many, many people in churches who are not Christians at all because they are "elder brothers", there are many Christians who are deeply effected by the elder brother-spirit. These are people who still have not grasped the gospel well, who maintain a very 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 touchy, unhappy, and insecure. We need to recognize the marks of “elder brother lostness”.

33. ‘Justification’ is the theological term which refers to the one time act of God making us perfectly right in his eyes once and for all which happens the moment we first believe and accept the goodnews. ‘Sanctification’ refers to the long process God makes happen over the life of a believer of growing that person more holy and more in the image of his son.

1) One sign of the “elder brother” spirit is he is filled with anger about how his life is going.(v.28--*became angry*). One of the signs of a moralistic spirit is a feeling that God owes me a comfortable and good life if I live up to standards. Now that will continually lead to anger anytime your life takes a bad turn. The anger can have one of two forms. 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.

34. There are a number of forms of this. Some really “nice” people can be passive aggressive deep down in their heart and act nice on the outside but they are actually angry down deep. Others can be really depressed and angry with themselves for not achieving some level of success in some all important area of life, but it's still an Older Brother (failed) attempt to save yourself through some performance.but it's anger nonetheless. Do you have any anger in your heart? ...if so, then let's pray for God to bring this older brother operative in the heart to the surface and help us to repent of that and turn to grace instead.

2) A second sign of the “elder brother” spirit is joyless, mechanical obedience. Notice that the older son lets his slip show when he says, “*I've been slaving for you*” (v.29). There are two ways to listen to Mozart. You may listen to Mozart because it is instrumental to something else you love for its own sake. You may listen to Mozart to get an “A” in a music appreciation class so you can get your degree and a good job. Or you may listen to Mozart so you can feel you are (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--you don't do good out of delight in the goodness for itself or for the pleasure of God. You do it, therefore, joylessly, slavishly. But Christians are filled with amazement at the grace of God and so obey out of delight in pleasing God for his own sake.

35. If there's not a joy in your obedience, then it's an older brother spirit deep down. If you aren't doing the things you do for God freely, if you wouldn't do them if you didn't have to, then not only does this not count in your favor, it actually counts against you as selfishness. If you don't have a joy in your duties of life, then there is very possibly an older brother mode of operating in your heart and let's pray for God to remove that and replace it with a living faith.

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” his brother--“*this son of yours*”(v.30). The person changed by the real gospel is always disposed toward evangelism. First, 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). Second, if you understand the gospel, you will treat them 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 all that tied to what people think of you, or to your reputation.

36. Is there someone that you honestly feel is “unwashed” down deep in your heart? Is there some person that you honestly wouldn't want them taking a bath in your tub? If so, then you're still not really believing that you are a true sinner, in total need of God.

And then those people, who aren't as good as you at what you're putting your identity in, will be able to sense this inside of you and will feel like they are not truly accepted by you and you will be every ineffective in reaching them with Christ. You won't long for their salvation because they won't be as precious to you and they will “smell” your condemnation on you though you won't be intending this. Paul Miller once said that self-righteousness is like bad breath. You can't smell it, but everyone else can.

You need to take the aspect or quality of some person whom you think is “unwashed” and try to be willing in your own heart to be just as guilty as they are, and just as in need of Christ's mercy, about THAT guilt, and then build your identity ONLY on his grace, and then pray for a deep love for that person which will give you God's heart for that person and all people in your life.

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 about the elder brother's relationship with his father. As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through goodness, you will never ever be sure you have “made it.” There will always be anxiety and fear and uncertainty in your relationship. There is thus 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.”)

37. Like a little boy who is so secure in Daddy's love that he can just act silly and dance around in front of him, the gospel will make us so secure in his Fatherly affection, that we can be goofy and free and joyful in front of God, like King David when he danced in the street before God with most of his clothes off. Can you have this kind of assurance in your Father's love? An older brother spirit can never be this free, because their security, just like an orphan's, is based mainly on their own performance.

5) A fifth sign of the “elder brother” spirit is an unforgiving, judgmental spirit. If you are an elder brother, you lack two things necessary to forgive. On one hand, you lack the emotional humility to say, “I'm no different.” You instead look at the sinner and say, “I would never do that!” On the other hand, 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?”

38. If you're holding a grudge toward someone, then your heart has to be operating in the older brother mode of living. And the merit that you are unconsciously standing on, to allow you to look down your nose at that person then has to be your own better performance in that category, that you're finding your identity in rather than on the righteousness of Christ. You couldn't hold a grudge on that person if you were MORE guilty of that same trait. Your conscious wouldn't allow it. Therefore, you ARE standing on that merit of your own in order to hold that grudge. Let's repent together of all of our unconscious self-achieved identity traits that we might be standing on without realizing it.that Christ's merit would be our ONLY boast and security, so that we can forgive even very painful offenses toward us.

One Way Home

Now if there are two kinds of running and lostness, are there two ways home? No--there is only one, though it must be applied in different cases. There is not only one way home for both “younger brother”

and “older brother” non-Christians, but there is one way to grow out of the immaturity and old “false grids” that still bedevil us as believers.

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 a facilitating cause. For the older brother he must come out and plead with him (v.28). The father pleading with hardened religious people! We all need the initiation of God’s grace. 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 must change not so much the amount as the depth of our repentance. This means that we must recognize that the reasons for our righteous deeds have been the same as the reasons for our sins. It means that 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 of self-salvation, at trying to be your own Savior. Admit that the reason you did right was so you could put God in your debt, to have some say in what kind of life you deserve, to keep control of your life.

Third, you must rely and rejoice in what the father has provided for our salvation. We said above 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 you whatever you do, as long as you are sorry? No. Think. How did the younger brother get put back in the family? He got a robe, a ring—he got a place back in the inheritance. But see, the only way the father can do this *is* at great expense. It is at the expense of the elder brother. The younger brother took away his rightful portion of the inheritance, and now every cent of the father belongs by right to the eldest. 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 brothers. 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.

39. What it WOULD have cost the older brother is what Christ IS saying that our salvation cost him, to reinstate us back into God’s family and his wealth. The true elder brother actually WANTED to leave his home and go to the far country of this fallen world and pick us up on his shoulders and sing as he carries us all the way home. Christ indeed had to give up his rightful possessions and status for us to get to have them and get them back. He literally was robe-less on the cross, and we instead get his ring of status, and sandals, and robe of righteousness. And he himself is our fattened calf that we feast on at the party, which the Father throws for us every Sunday!

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. Heb. 2:11 says, “*Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. For Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. He has said 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--it is all at his expense. We’ll never stop being elder brothers until we rejoice in the work of our true elder brother.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Have you been more of a “younger brother” in your thinking and living or an “elder brother?”**
- 2. What convicted you the most in this sermon?**
- 3. What helped you the most?**
- 4. What questions did it raise?**