

May 28, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Proverbs 14:12 The Prodigal God: The Elder Brother by Andy
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I hope that you have read and re-read and then read again Luke 15 or at least the third parable found there the one we know as the Prodigal Son.

I hope this important parable is beginning to become part of you. The story is simple just three main characters a father and two sons. The spoiled younger son demands his inheritance, Dad divides the estate, the young son goes off blows his money and ends up feeding pigs. He decides he should go home and be one of his dad's hired hands. Dad sees him coming runs to him won't hear of his being a hired hand and restores him to the family, and throws a big party to celebrate. When the older brother finds the party in full swing he won't come in. He's mad and even when the father comes out and pleads with him to come in and the story ends.

The most common thinking when we begin reading and re-reading this parable is that it is about the character that is most featured in the story. 2/3 of the verses in this story are dedicated to telling the younger brother's story.

Down through the centuries this story has been used by preachers as a way to inform wayward, immoral, depraved, sinners that should they come to their senses and return to God and he will accept them back.

And it's not hard to go down that path of thought. Jesus has set things up so that our minds would go there. Lost sheep is found and celebrated. Lost coin recovered and there's rejoicing with friends. And then Lost Son returns and there's a party.

But what has often been missed is who this parable is directed to. Into whose safe orderly world is Jesus sneaking this Trojan Horse story, this dangerous explosive stick of dynamite wrapped up in a simple story—who is it for?

This chapter of Luke 15 opens by telling us exactly who it's aimed at, at whom the main point of the parable is primarily directed.

Luke 15:1-3 Now the tax collectors and other notorious "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of religious law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." So Jesus told this parable to **them**."

Who is the "them"? It is the Pharisees and teachers of religious law.

So whatever this parable may teach to the wayward, immoral, depraved, sinners far from God, the primary message, the reason for telling the stories, the ones to whom this teaching is primarily pointed is to the moral, good, church going, Bible believing, law practicing religious people. This story is for church folk. It is for us!

The story is about two sons who are both alienated from the father, Two sons who are, from very different angles, both assaulting the unity of the family.

As we noted last week the younger brother's sin is so easy to see.

It is obvious to any onlooker.

He shames his father,

Messes up the life of the family,

Runs off to a dissolute life,

Sleeps with prostitutes

and it is easy for us to recognize him as someone who is spiritually lost. But Jesus' point is that the older son is lost too.

The day the father threw the feast for celebrating the return of his younger son was the biggest day in his life. The father was happy, thrilled, relieved, excited, proud, and filled with immeasurable joy. And this older son won't come into the party.

He's basically saying, "I won't be part of this family and I won't respect you as head of it."

Dad had gathered up his robes and had run to greet his returning son and when the boy started talking craziness of earning his way back in to the family Dad wouldn't hear it. He simply accepts his son as he is and invites him into a feast. Now Dad leaves the feast the party and goes to the elder brother and invites him in.

Catch what Jesus is saying to his original audience and now down through time he is saying to us, the older son is lost.

Most everyone agrees that the Father represents God in this story and the meal is the feast of salvation. And in the end the younger brother, the rebellious, runaway, immoral man comes in and is saved, but the elder son, the good son, the moral obedient son refuses to go in and is lost.

The Pharisees and teachers of religious law are shocked. This is one of those painful paradigm shifts. It is the reversal of everything they have been taught everything they believe. All their stories have the moral guy going in and the immoral shut out! And then there's the reality of what is keeping the elder brother from going in and it is too much for them to swallow.

What is it that keeps the elder brother from going in? He tells us in the story exactly why he won't be a part of this feast.

Vs. 29 "All these years I've slaved for you and never disobeyed."

The good son is not lost in spite of his good behavior, but because of his good behavior. It isn't his sin keeping him out, but his righteousness! Maybe that is why Isaiah 64:6 says, All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;

In this story there are two ways to be your own savior and lord.

Two ways to get control of your own life instead of letting God control you.

One is by being very very bad and immoral and irreligious and the other is by

Being very very good and moral and religious and never disobeying and obeying the 10 commandments, and going to church and praying and having your quiet time every morning.

These are two ways of try and get the Father's things.

Listen and remember it is to us that the parable is directed.

The younger brother took what the father gave him at his demand and left

The elder brother says, "Because I'm living such a good life God has to bless me, God has to answer my prayers, God has to respect me NOW!

And the sad thing that this means for the elder brother type is that Jesus might be his inspiration or her example or Jesus might be the elder brother or sister's helper but he's not their savior they are seeking to be their own savior.

There are two ways to be your own savior and lord.

One is by being irreligious one is by being very religious

One is by being immoral and one is by being very moral

But both are ways to basically reject God.

And the greater risk seems to lie with the elder brother.

The younger brother knows he's messed up, he wasn't blind to the pigs he had to feed, he knows he has no way of supporting himself,

But the trouble is that elder brothers think and claim and believe they are with God.

Look, I've stayed home.

Look, I'm doing everything you want.

And yet underneath there is no difference.

When we get to the shocking ending we are shocked.

Both the younger brother and the elder brother are alienated from the father.

In both cases the father has to come out and urge each son to come into the feast which is salvation. But when we come to the end of the parable where are we? The younger brother comes into the feast, but the elder brother does not, he refuses, he won't come in, do you know what that means? Do you get what Jesus is teaching?

It means that at the end of the parable the bad boy is saved and the good boy is lost. And the good boy is lost not in spite of his goodness, NO—He is lost because of his goodness.

At the end he won't come into the feast and as I've already noted he gives the reason: "I've never disobeyed you!" REALLY? He says, "I'm mad at you because you won't do things the way I want you to, and the reason I'm so alienated from you, so furious with you, is that I've been so good and you are not doing what I want you to do. So in the end he is lost, not in spite of his goodness but because of his goodness. He has bought into the lie of the falsehood of religion.

You see the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ is neither religion nor irreligion. It is neither morality or immorality and it is not some balanced mark on the continuum between those two either. The Gospel is something all together different.

Too often we've given people only two options. Immorality or false faith. Two choices depravity of the younger brother or the misery of the slaving older brother. Irreligion of the younger brother or the religion of the older brother.

Religion works on this principle—I obey therefore I am accepted. When I say religion I think I can pretty much include all world religions and even the bad practice of Christianity. I obey therefore I am accepted." I go on a pilgrimage, reach Nirvana, follow the 7 fold pathway, respect nature, etc. etc. and then the divine accepts me.

The Gospel works on the exact opposite principle—I am accepted by the Father because of what Jesus Christ has done for me therefore I obey.

If you don't get anything else get this contrast. See how diametrically opposed how very different religion is from the gospel.

I obey therefore I am accepted verses I'm accepted because of what Jesus has done for me, therefore I obey!

Listen right now, right here it is possible for two of you operating on these two opposite principles to have come to church today and be sitting right next to each other. Both of you are trying hard to give and serve and even love your neighbor as yourself and love them into a life-long friendship with God, for two utterly different motives, and two completely different spirits, and with very different results.

Because elder brother types are obeying God to get God's blessings. To get God's things. They have made a kind of idol out of God as they have made God a means to an end. They are obeying God and trying to serve God and trying to surrender to God as a means to get God to give them the things they want. Using God to get things.

People who believe the gospel are utterly different. The gospel is not—I give God a righteous record and then he owes me, that's how elder brothers think.

The gospel is that God through the infinite sacrifice of Jesus, gives us a righteous record and then we live for him. I heard Timothy Keller say, "And if you believe that, then that means that everything a rational being could possibly want is already yours. When you receive the father through the son everything is yours: eternal life, adoption into the family, guaranteed citizenship in the new heavens and new earth, a future of no suffering and no disease. And the knowledge that you are the delight and joy of the only person in the universe whose opinion matters! And it is already yours it is all yours!"

So why does a gospel believing person obey God? Elder brothers obey God to get things, but gospel believers obey God just to get more of God.

Gospel believers aren't sitting around saying you better do this or you'd better do that. What do you mean you'd better do this or better do that. Gospel believers want to resemble God, to delight in God, to just have more of him. They don't run off like younger brothers but sit on the porch just to be with the father. They don't stand outside the feast like the elder brother but come in because they want to be with the father. The gospel believer obeys just to love and please and draw close to him!

Some people are complete elder brother types trying to get leverage over God by their spiritual performance. This group goes to church and obeys the Bible out of an expectation that God then owes them. They haven't understood the gospel at all.

But there are also many Christians, who know the gospel, but who are elder brotherish. They know the gospel. If you gave them a gospel test they would say, Yes, Jesus Christ died for me, my salvation is because Jesus died for me, but functionally in their hearts they go back to an elder brotherish default mode of self-salvation. Functionally in their hearts their standing with God is based on their performance.

I love the gospel. I believe in grace so much. I'm in touch with my human depravity enough in my more sane moments to know that my only hope is in the gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. My performance never measures up. I get this most of the time. At one level but the problem of sin is huge. The default mode of our hearts is so persistent that we constantly are pulled to go back to religion. To I obey therefore I am accepted. It is so pervasive in our culture in our school system, in our peer groups perform and be accepted. And so we slip back so easily to being elder brothers. We go back to at least being elder brotherish!

What are the marks of the elder brother? Marks of spiritual deadness? What are some Signs of Elder Brother Lostness.

We don't have to speculate they are right in the story. Vs. 28 tells us that the elder brother became angry.

Elder brothers or elder brother types get filled with Incredible Anger when life doesn't go well.

Disappointment yes. Sadness yes. Discouragement yes. But when things don't go well in their lives, elder brothers don't just get sad and disappointed they get furious. When bad things happen to people they love or to themselves they get Angry with life and God because they believe God owes them.

When an elder brother type prays but the prayer isn't answered they aren't just disappointed they are furious with God. They believe God owes them—they've kept the Sabbath, and watched their diet, and gave offerings, and read their Bible, and prayed but what good did that do, they didn't get what they want.

And when that is our thinking we may say we believe we are sinners saved by grace but we don't believe it. WE are still acting, thinking, I obey therefore I am accepted. I obey and I can get the father's things. And so a sign of elder brotherishness is anger when God doesn't perform for us the way we want.

A second sign is Joyless Mechanical Obedience . Remember the elder brother says in vs 29 "all these years I've been slaving for you. His obedience wasn't joyful. Sure sometimes obeying is hard. Being truthful when a lie would be much more profitable. Standing alone on some principle when every peer is going down a different road is tough. But remember Elder brothers are obeying to be accepted and so the obedience is joyless and slavish and mechanical.

The third sign of an elder brother bent is a sense of Superiority and a Judgmental Spirit. If we pride ourselves in being a hard worker one of the ways we maintain that self-image is by looking down on lazy

people. We loath anyone who doesn't work as hard as we think we do. If our identity is in our race we will be tempted to maintain that by loathing those different from us. If our identity is in our ethnic group we will look down on other groups and maybe have conflict with other gangs. If our identity and self image is based on having the truth and right doctrine we will feel superior and have a judgmental spirit towards those we see as less than we are who don't quite practice all the truth.

In the story the elder brother refers to his sibling not as his brother but as, "this son of yours." Elder brothers who pride themselves on their doctrinal and moral purity feel superior to those different from themselves. They are disdainful of people not like themselves.

And the fourth sign is a Lack of Assurance of God's Love
In vs. 29 he says, "You never threw me a party."

As long as we practice religion and not the gospel we can never be sure of God's full love. As long as we are trying to earn our salvation by controlling God through our goodness we can never be sure we are good enough. Have I obeyed enough to be accepted.

If we are on this track every time something goes wrong we wonder if its some kind of punishment for not having obeyed enough. We interpret everything in a tit for tat manner with God being some repressive father figure instead of a gracious God.

If you are practicing religion there's just no way to ever know if you've obeyed sufficient to be accepted.

So what do we do? What can we do about the practice of religion and the spiritual deadness to which being an elder brother type inevitably leads?

First we must hear again the good news of the gospel You are accepted by God through Jesus Christ, therefore you obey.

Religion ends up producing anger, joyless compliance, superiority, insecurity, and a condemning spirit where the Gospel produces love, joy, humility, poise, and a forgiving spirit.

The love of Jesus draws us to repentance not just sorrow for doing wrong. The Pharisees repented when they knew they'd done wrong but they were just proud of how much they repented!

We must come to see a need to repent for the things we do right, for our obedience that is done to try and control God or get leverage over him. Repentance for the reasons we do right stuff.

Without coming to this place of knowing we are accepted in Jesus that ALL of our righteousness, all of our good doing, all of our obedience is in him, we may think we are doing God a favor by following him. That he's lucky to have us on the team. How insane. How elder brotherish (Dad you'r lucky to have me on the farm)

Remember to whom Jesus is speaking this story of the prodigal son. He's talking to his mortal enemies the men he knows will crucify him. He wants them to see they are lost. He wants them to see they fundamentally misunderstand his Father and salvation.

He's inviting them into the feast, pleading with his enemies.

And he's inviting us into the feast as well. He took our sin.

While we were his enemies, Christ died for us. Romans 5:10

Right now Jesus invites us to lay down any pride in our performance to lay down any fear of not measuring up. To recognize we are accepted by the Father through Jesus Christ's great gift therefore we obey and come into the feast on his free ticket, one we could never earn through our obedience.