

June 5, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Colossians 2:15-23 Prodigal God: The True Elder Brother by Andy
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I'm so glad that we are here today. I don't believe it is by accident, just some happenstance. Maybe you just wandered in here today. Maybe you were dragged here by friend or lover. Maybe you find yourself in this place at this moment because it is your habit to be here. However you got here from your perspective I believe we are all together in this place right now because God has something he wants us to hear. I don't know about you but I find that energizing, exciting, invigorating.

If you've been here for the past several weeks you know that we are digging into one of the most famous chapters in all of the Bible. You heard the major portion of that chapter read while ago—it is most often called the story of the Prodigal Son!

Those who are familiar with this story do with it what our minds easily do with the familiar—we are sure we fully understand the story. Having familiarity with story, facts, pictures, places creates assumptions of understanding. But the truth is we only understand from one angle. We see just our side, the view from our window, that which our paradigms will allow. And often if not always there is so much more than our assumptions assume.

It is true with your spouse, with your children, you boss, teachers, co-workers, and it is true with Jesus story.

So in our investigation so far what assumptions have we uncovered and what true meanings have we found?

I think one of the first assumptions made is that this story is about the younger brother who runs away. That the heart of the story is that rebellious run-a-way's can come home. Of course the story includes this character and the truth that rebellious run-a-ways can come home,

but we have clearly discovered that this story is not primarily about him.

We came to this conclusion by realizing to whom the story is told. It is told to the Pharisee's and teachers of religious law. These are the "most religious" of their day. They are concerned that Jesus is hanging out with tax collectors and other notorious sinners, younger brother types, and that is why Jesus tells this story as part of a three parable teaching.

The second common assumption is that this is a story about one lost son, when in fact further careful observation makes it clear that both sons, both the younger and the elder brother are lost. One is lost and wanders far from home, the other is lost right in the Father's home.

Both are alienated from their father. Both want the advantages that come with the Father but not the Father. The younger more openly rebellious son is more transparent in the story. He makes it clear that he wants to control his own life, find himself through living with abandon, and he demands his inheritance and goes off and wastes it living badly—but, at least for a while he feels in control.

The elder brother stays home and from his perspective believes as he actually says in the story, "I've never disobeyed you." He has acted loyal but his heart is much like that of his younger brother. He doesn't want his father he wants his father's stuff. And his method to get it is more politically correct than his brothers but just as harmful and just as insulting and manipulative. He says to his father, "all these years I've slaved for you."

So our new understanding is that the story is about more than the rebellious run-a-way and his return.

The story isn't about one lost son but two.

One is lost by being immoral and bad and one is lost by acting very very moral and good.

Both are simply trying to manage God, manipulate circumstances so as to assume God's authority and power as the younger brother does through rebellion or like the elder brother, behave, obey so as to seek if not deserve the father's sanction and blessing. Either path will end in spiritual bankruptcy.

And the third assumption captured in paintings and plays is that the Father, representing God, is so gracious and so generous that there is no cost for the run-a-way to return and be welcomed back into the family.

What did it cost for the younger brother to be brought home?

Our first response to that might be that it cost nothing.

Oh sure there were the intangible costs of humbling himself, of having to eat crow.

But when we first read the story it seems there's no real cost.

No scolding

No demand for restitution to be made

No punishment

No probation even he's just welcomed back into the family.

And our neurological pathways want to tell us, of course there's no cost that's the whole point of the parable. Sinners are welcomed home by a gracious Father who accepts and forgives anyone who asks. No need for the classic Christian doctrine of atonement—that somebody has to pay for sin. We might reject all of that based on this story's seeming to demonstrate that reconciliation is completely free.

Our fuller understanding of scripture though challenges our mental path of least resistance. We know that reconciliation is free to the younger brother but there is cost to be born by someone.

So far then at least three assumptions about this story have been cleared up.

It is a story about more than the rebellious run-a-way and his return
It is not a story about just one lost son but about two lost sons.
It is not a story to cheapen the cost of our salvation.

The story doesn't give us the exact facts and figures but it does tell us
that someone is upset because of the cost of reconciliation.

It's the elder brother!! No big shock.

He complains to his father, "You never gave me even young goat so I
could celebrate with my friends But...you kill the fattened calf for
him!"

When the father is pleading for the elder brother to come into the feast
he reminds him of a very literal truth. He says to his elder son,
"everything I have is yours." Vs.31.

Remember that early in this parable after the younger brother told his
dad he wished he was dead but since he's not he demands that his
father divide the estate Jesus says, "So his father agreed to divide his
wealth between his sons."

What does this mean? It means that everything the Father is now
doing for the younger brother is at the expense of his older brother!
The robe dad gives his younger son comes right out of the older
brother's closet. It is the elder brother's grain that has been fattening
that calf they just slaughtered for the party! Oh, yes and the calf is
really the older brother's too. The father says it clearly and directly
everything I have is yours!

Legally it's all the elder brothers, even though Dad seems to still be
controlling it, legally it's the elder brother's ranch!

So the salvation, restoration, return of the younger brother is not free
after all.

There's the cost of the robe, the ring, the sandals, and the feast
for the whole community it is all extremely expensive. The father

cannot forgive and welcome home his rebellious run-a-way except at the expense of the elder brother.

And the elder brother knows all this—he knows forgiveness and reconciliation are never free. Someone has to pay. Either the younger brother has to come and earn his way back into the family—and the younger brother recognized this as the option he was choosing when he asks to be one of his dad's hired hands. It was so he could earn a seat at the family table. That was one option. Self pay.

The other option was what the Father was doing. Adopting the son back into the family immediately. Offering forgiveness means that somebody else has to pay up, for there is always a cost to be paid, and the elder brother is clear that he will have to bear the cost.

The elder brother knows all of this and he refuses. The elder brother is a hard hearted, selfish, self-protective Pharisee who is unwilling to suffer any personal loss for the sake of his younger brother.

At this point it is important to remember that Jesus told three parables in Luke 15.

In the first two parable something is lost and someone goes in search of the lost and brings it home with joy and rejoicing.

The first is one sheep lost whom the shepherd goes in search of until he finds that lost sheep. The second is the woman who searches for her lost coin and she rejoices. So when we come to the third story of the lost son, and the listeners had been set up. The first two stories make first time hearers expect that someone will set out to search for the lost brother and bring him home.

But no one does that in this story. Jesus is leading us to ask, "Who should have gone out to search for this lost boy? The answer may or may not be obvious to us but it would have been blazingly clear to those listening to Jesus that day.

The search and rescue team should have been led by the older brother.

That's the role of the older brother.

That's why he got 2/3 of the estate while his brother only got 1/3

The oldest son was to be the new patriarch.

He was destined to sustain the family's unity

He was responsible for the family's standing in the community.

He should have said something like:

"Father, my younger brother has been a fool, and now his life is probably in ruins. But I'll go look for him, I'll find him and bring him home. And if he's spent his entire inheritance, which I expect is the case, I'll bring him back into our family at my expense."

He could have been like Donald Dawson. During the war in Vietnam, Army Lieutenant Daniel Dawson's reconnaissance plane went down over the Vietcong jungle. When his brother Donald heard the report, he sold everything he had, left his wife a little money and bought passage to Vietnam. There he equipped himself with a soldier's gear and wandered through the guerilla-controlled jungle, looking for his brother. He carried leaflets picturing the plane and describing in Vietnamese the reward for news of the missing pilot. He became known as –the brother of the pilot and eventually spent four months as a Viet Cong prisoner. Willing to risk it all in search of his brother.

But that isn't the elder brother in this story! Instead the younger son and the father have to deal with a recalcitrant, resistant, self-righteous, selfish elder brother.

Timothy Keller suggests that Jesus puts this kind of elder brother in the story to make us long for a true elder brother, one who, if we go astray, won't hold it against us, but sees us and bring us back at any risk and any cost to himself.

And that is exactly what we have in our true elder brother, Jesus. You and I and all humanity are lost. Whether it's a lostness that presents itself in rebellious living like a younger brother or self-

righteous religious elitism we need a true elder brother and we find one in Jesus.

One of the most powerful passages of scripture tell us the story of our true elder brother. In Philippians 2 the apostle Paul writes about Jesus: “Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven and gave him a name that is above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” Philippians 2:6-11

Jesus is just the kind of elder brother we need. Willing to empty himself and pour out his life to bring us back into the Father’s family.

I don’t know whether you are pulled more toward being lost like a younger brother or being lost like the older brother in our story but what I do know is regardless of which side of the boat you fall out of Jesus is the answer.

Today the requirement to be in God’s family is exactly the same as it was on the day God created the first humans! God is perfect holiness, perfect righteousness and to survive in his presence, to gain entrance into his presence it won’t work to say we never disobeyed we really need to have never disobeyed. Perfect obedience, perfect holiness is the cost of admission back into God’s family.

But we don’t have that to offer nor the ability to muster it up. But Jesus said he came to seek and to save that which was lost. That’s us. We’ve earned some wages but the wages of sin is death, but the GIFT of God is the righteousness of Christ put to our account.

By his stripes we are healed.
He got a crown of thorns and we get a crown of life as a result.

Hebrews 2:11 says “So now Jesus and the ones he makes holy, have the same Father. That is why Jesus is not ashamed to call them his brothers and sisters.”

We have the true elder brother we need. No longer slaves we are God’s children. We come to obey not out of a sense of some duty but because of his grace it is our choice to honor the one who loves us so.

Jesus has rights to everything that is the Father’s and he freely gives it to us.

If you do not resist God’s love he will draw you to him. Ephesians 2 says

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so very much, that even while we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. ...God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”

Can you again or for the first time acknowledge your need of true elder brother, rest by faith in his completed work of salvation and fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and the one who brings our salvation to completion.

I want you to hear something true. It is the essence of the gospel. Let the words sink in. Abandon your assumptions and let the truth of these words you are about to hear sink into your heart. True words about your true and faithful elder’s brother. Listen now to the very essence of what matters.

When we hear the word “prodigal” today we almost assume it to mean wayward, or gone astray. But the reality is that the word’s first dictionary definition as an adjective is—“characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure”. Its second definition is recklessly spendthrift, and the third yielding abundantly. As a noun it is defined as One who spends or gives lavishly and foolishly!

And while the prodigal son in the story does recklessly and wastfully spends his inheritance defining him as a prodigal. We named our series after Timothy Keller’s book, “The Prodigal God” because the father in the story representing God is one who gives lavishly what some might even term foolishly.

As a point of review what have we learned so far from this great story?

And what happens is that those younger brother types who are living so obviously outside the will of the Father don't want to come home for fear of their older brother. And older brothers, puffed up on their own obedience, live miserable lives of slaving to earn what the Father wants to give them and on one hand they look with envy on the younger brother's freedom and on the other they despise his rebellion.

Listen if the only two options in this world are immoral younger brother living or the repressive, proud, controlling elder brother way what appeal would the gospel be. If younger brother types see the gospel as only turning them into elder brother types who wants that? And if the elder brother wakes up to the reality that he cannot earn a seat at the table, he's at risk of joining his younger brother's rebellion.

What we need, and what we can find hidden by its absence in this story is the better answer. In fact as we put the three parables of Luke 15 together we can discover the cost of reconciliation, that the story is missing an elder brother, and the really good news that you and I have a true elder brother.