

Redefining Lostness
Luke 15
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Throughout the Gospels Jesus often speaks of sin and salvation using the metaphor of being “lost” and “found.” As we’ve seen, chapter 15 of Luke’s gospel contains three parables that Jesus tells to a group of religious leaders. The first is about a shepherd who discovers that his sheep is lost. The second is about a woman who discovers that one of her coins is lost. The third, of course, is about two sons. Clearly, the younger son in the story is lost. After shaming his father, ruining his family, sleeping with prostitutes, and running out of both friends and money, he wakes up one morning in a pigsty. It’s hard to be more lost than that.

But this story isn’t just about the younger son. It turns out that one of the key points Jesus is making is that the elder son is just as lost as his sibling which begs the question, what does it mean to be spiritually lost? Let’s return once again to Jesus’ famous parable. As we saw last week, the father is overjoyed at the return of his younger son and to celebrate, he prepares an extravagant feast. The religious leaders hearing Jesus tell this story would have recognized immediately that the father represents God, and the meal is the feast of salvation. In a complete reversal of the religious understanding of the day, it is the younger son, the immoral one, who comes into the feast and is saved, while the older son, the “good” moral son, refuses to go in and remains lost.

And what is keeping the elder brother out? Look again at what he says to his father: “All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed...” (v. 29) You see, the good son is not lost *in spite* of his good behavior but *because* of his good behavior. It is not his sinfulness that is keeping him out, but his righteousness. What Jesus is saying is that the gospel is neither religion nor is it irreligion; it is not morality nor is it immorality. This would have been a confusing and scandalous statement to Jesus’ 1st century audience, and it is no less confusing and scandalous to many people today—often those inside the church even more than those outside it.

As we touched on last week, the younger son was really after his father’s wealth, rather than a relationship with his father. He got what he wanted by leaving home and breaking the moral rules. The elder son also wanted control of his father’s wealth. He was deeply unhappy with the father’s use of his

possessions—the robe, the ring, the fatted calf. But while the younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, the elder brother got control by staying home and being “good.” He felt that he then had the right to tell the father what to do with his possessions because he had been the obedient one.

So, there are two ways to try to be your own savior, the lord of your own life. One is by breaking the rules and being very bad. The other is by keeping the rules and being very good. Like the elder brother, if we can be so good that God *owes* us an answer to our prayers, *owes* us a good life, then we may look to Jesus to be a helper and a rewarder, but he isn’t a Savior. We’ve become our own saviors, putting our trust in our own ability to do what’s right and measure up. The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to control God, to get something from God, but a person of genuine faith obeys just to get God—just to love and enjoy and draw close to the God who loves us.

I think it’s safe to say that most people in church don’t intentionally set out to control God. I mean, elder brothers will be the first to say that we are justified by grace, not by works. Yet, many of us who agree with the Apostle Paul’s theology still have a default mode of the heart that is “elder brotherish.” We are like the elder brother in attitude, if not in action, and there are some tell-tell signs of the elder brother syndrome that will help us see and more clearly identify our own lostness. The first of these tell-tell signs is that:

1. A deep anger runs as an undercurrent through our lives. This is an anger that comes from a sense of entitlement and resentment when expectations go unmet. The self-talk goes something like this: “I’ve played by the rules, lived a clean life, been a responsible and upstanding citizen, and done everything that’s been asked or expected of me. I’ve been in church regularly, I’ve given generously to the church budget, and I’ve even taught Sunday School unlike *some* people. My life ought to be going really well.” And then, of course, the inevitable happens. Life doesn’t go really well. Things don’t go according to plan. Life veers off-course. And you’re mad. Sometimes you’re mad at God; sometimes at yourself; and sometimes just mad, period. In our angry elder brother moments, we forget about Jesus. We forget that he lived a life of total love and forgiveness, yet that did not exempt him from hardship or suffering, none of which he “deserved.”

2. A second characteristic of elder brothers is that they experience life as duty without beauty. The elder brother in Jesus’ parable characterizes his service to his father as slavery. His obedience is joyless and mechanical. He was obeying his

father as a means to an end—as a way to get what he was really after which was his father’s “stuff.” Isn’t it ironic that the younger brother returns ready to say to his father, “make me a slave” and the father makes him a son again instead. The elder brother has been a son all along, but has felt like a slave. Being at home with his father has been a dreary, grinding duty. He found his father useful. Gospel Christians find God beautiful, delightful, fun; a relationship full of meaning, totally apart from anything they might receive from God.

3. Elder brothers look down on younger brother types. Notice how the elder brother identifies his sibling as “this son of yours” when he speaks to his father, to which the father in turn replies, “this brother of yours.” The elder brother wants to avoid having to own this young man as his family. You can almost feel the moral outrage and superiority oozing out of every pore. That’s what happens when we base our justification on our own performance. Then, anyone who doesn’t quite have it together as well as we do, well, they don’t measure up. The hard-working person has no use for someone’s who lazy. The strong are dismissive of the weak. In the church elder brothers who pride themselves on their doctrinal and moral purity feel superior to those who don’t believe the same.

4. Elder brothers lack an assurance of the father’s love. We hear it in the elder son’s accusation towards his father: “you never threw *me* a party.” (v. 29) As long as you are trying to justify yourself with God, trying to earn salvation by your own goodness, you will never be sure you are good enough—and that produces feelings of deep insecurity because there is never a way to be positively, absolutely sure that you’ve been enough or done enough. Every time something goes wrong, you’ll wonder if it’s a punishment. You’ll struggle with unresolved guilt which will leave you no choice but to beat yourself up. And in the process, you will miss any sense of real intimacy with God. You may pray, you may ask for things, but you won’t share a sense of delight—God’s delight in you and your delight in God.

5. Finally, elder brothers are characterized by an unforgiving, judgmental spirit. Here’s the crux of it—the elder brother does not *want* the father to forgive his younger brother. He wants his brother to grovel his way back into the family, which means the elder brother has totally missed the point about the love and grace of the Father—not just the love and grace being offered to the wayward younger son, but also the love and grace being offered to him.

The challenge Jesus is issuing to the Pharisees and to us is to recognize our lostness. Younger brothers know they are lost. They know they are alienated from God, from their families, even from themselves. Their lostness is easy to identify—

their lives are a littered trail of addiction, rehab, money problems, broken promises and broken relationships. But try telling the moral, good, religious people that they are alienated from God and they will be offended. If you know you are sick, you go to the doctor. If you don't know you're sick, you don't—you'll just die. And that's the real problem for the elder brother. He doesn't know he's lost which makes his the more spiritually dangerous condition.

Moralistic religion works on the principle, "I obey, therefore God accepts me." The gospel works on the principle, "I am accepted by God through Jesus Christ, therefore I want to obey."

Why is this distinction important for the church? Or, to ask the question we're asking each week, how does knowing the difference impact our ability to become a unique kind of community formed by grace? On any given Sunday we gather as the Body of Christ called Calvary Presbyterian Church, and we are a motley collection of younger siblings and elder siblings all being invited by God to come to the feast of salvation. We are not good people and lost people. ***We are all lost.*** Every last one of us. And that means that we come together not as moral superiors and inferiors, as spiritual "haves" and "have nots." We come as equals. The father is approaching each of us, younger and elder brothers alike, and inviting us to the feast. We all receive an invitation we don't deserve, and so we celebrate together that we can all join the party.

Remember again who Jesus is speaking to. He is addressing those who oppose him, the very ones who want to kill him. It is incredibly bold for Jesus to confront them with the news that they are lost, that they fundamentally misunderstand God's salvation plan and purpose in the world, and that they are trampling the heart of God. Yet notice his tone. The father in the story is loving and tender. When he comes out to the older brother, that is a picture of Jesus pleading with his enemies, urging them to see their fatal error. Without demeaning them in any way he issues them a loving invitation. It is a foreshadowing of that great moment on the cross when Jesus will say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Jesus is the embodiment of God's love and grace in action.

So what kind of community are we to be? We are to be a family formed by God's radical, prodigious, extravagant love and grace and so formed, we offer the same to one another and to our world.

May it ever be so. Amen.