

The Prodigal God 3 Luke 15:11-32 The Elder Brother

I want to paint a few broad brush strokes, if you will excuse me.

Here we go: The world is divided into two types of people; The relativistic and the moralistic. Relativistic people divide the world into two groups; They see the free spirits with open minds and the judgemental bigots. Meanwhile the Moralistic type of people, well they divide the world into two groups as well; those who are good, moral and decent and those who are immoral, bad and licentious.

Now, therefore, both groups have an in-crowd and an out-crowd; a group they favour and a group that they disdain. For the Relativists the in-crowd are the free spirited and the open minded and they disdain the judgemental bigots. The moralists see the good decent people as their in crowd and to them the outsiders are definitely the immoral, bad and licentious.

The point is that both groups look at the other and say; "If only everyone was like me, the world would be great!" The other point is that, being honest with ourselves, all of us here fall into one or other of those groups; moralistic or relativistic and we just wish that everyone else had the same world view that we do – haven't we just seen that with the General Election? In fact, don't we take it one step further and say, "You know, I'm pretty sure that the people in our in-crowd, they are the ones who are heading for heaven, because the other people are (depending on where we start from) are either immoral or bigoted and God wouldn't want them in heaven, would he?"

The upshot is that the world has two views on how God works; The good are in and the bad are out or, The open minded are in and the bigots are out.

But God's view on God is quite different. A couple of weeks ago I attended the thanksgiving service for Mark Ashton, a friend and vicar in Cambridge who died from cancer. Mark was a remarkable man, highly educated, highly motivated, his personal and ministerial life was overflowing with achievements and success. Now, bearing all that in mind, at his thanksgiving service, one of the preachers; Christopher Ash recalled how Mark had been asked a question at a conference. The subject was Christian ministry and the questioner had asked, "Is it possible for people from less privileged backgrounds and lower educational attainment to be used by God in Christian ministry?"

Christopher Ash remembers Mark replying, quick as a flash, "The first thing that we have got to remember is that people from privileged backgrounds can only be used by God when they have been deeply humbled."

And Mark's answer there really grasps the thrust of today's talk that our views of God's in or out crowd are actually wrong, it isn't that either good or open minded is in, or bad or bigoted are out – quite simply God's way is that humble is in and proud is out.

You see, this morning we return to Luke 15 and, if you remember, most people when they read or study this parable concentrate completely on the character of the younger son; how he repents and how the father forgives him. But if we do that and that alone then actually we are missing out on a whole section of the story – it's a little like walking out of the theatre at the point where Macbeth murders King Duncan and not seeing how the play ends, because after the events with the younger son, Jesus goes on with almost the same amount of time spent focused on the elder son because, remember, this is not the parable of the prodigal son, it is the parable of the father who had two sons, both of which were alienated from him and lost.

So first of all Jesus presents us with **a startling new understanding of lostness.**

Let's be honest, lost younger brother types are easy to spot, just go into Peterborough city centre on Friday night and there they are – face down in the gutter with an enormous hangover pending; “Oh, yes!” You'll say, “There's a younger brother type. There's someone who is spiritually lost.” But Jesus' point in this story is that the elder brother is also lost.

Remember how the younger son in Jesus' story had left the family taking a third of everything. He headed off to the bright lights of a distant land and he squandered it all on wild living.

When the money ran out the younger son decided to head home and face the music, but we already know that the father was willing and wanting to be reconciled to him because he had not driven him out of the family home with violence and abuse as the father was entitled to do. Now Jesus tells us that the Father is watching for the younger son to return – he sees him, whilst he was still far off.

So what happens next? Well, that very day, when the elder brother heads home from working in the fields he hears the sound of celebrating from the house and he asks a servant what is going on and in verse 27 the servant replies, “Your brother has come.., and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

And when he heard that the elder brother would have known that this was the greatest day in the father's life. The father longed for reconciliation and now that his younger son is home he has killed the fattened calf. That alone was an extraordinary extravagance, because you didn't actually eat the fattened calf unless something incredible happened.

What the father was doing here was throwing perhaps the most lavish, over-the-top and extravagant celebration that the village has ever seen in a culture where having any meat at a meal was considered a delicacy.

So there is no doubt that the older brother realises that the father is ecstatic with joy, but how does he react? Look at verse 28, “The older brother became angry and refused to go in.”

This isn't just a sulk or a tantrum, in that society the elder brother is now performing a deliberate and public act of disrespect towards his father. By not going into the feast the elder brother is in effect saying to his father “I will not be part of this family nor will I respect your headship of it.”

And here's another shock to Jesus' listeners; against all expectations and requirements the father now chooses to go out to the elder brother and plead with him – patriarchs in the Ancient Near east did not go out and plead with disrespectful sons, but this father does, just as he went out and brought his alienated younger son back into the family.

So, do you realise what Jesus is saying to his listeners and to us? He's telling us that the older son is just as lost as the younger son. And when you see that the father is God and that the meal is the feast of salvation, the staggering conclusion of the story is that it is the immoral son who comes in and is saved whilst the older son; the good son refuses to go in and is lost!

So what is it that is actually keeping the older brother out? Well, he tells us in verse 29 when he says to the father, “Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.” The shock is that the good son is not lost in spite of his good behaviour, but because of his good behaviour – it is not his sin keeping him out, but his righteousness. Let me explain.

Why was the younger brother lost? Well, he wanted the father's wealth, but not the father. So how did he get what he wanted? He left home and broke all the moral rules.

But it also becomes clear that the older brother wanted selfish control of the father's wealth too. He was very unhappy that when his younger brother returned the father had put a robe around him, a ring on his finger, sandals on his feet and slaughtered the fattened calf in celebration of his return.

Whilst the younger brother got control by taking things and running away, the elder brother got control by staying at home and being very good. The elder brother now feels that he has the right to tell his father what to do with his possessions because he had obeyed him perfectly.

So Jesus is telling us that there are two ways to be our own Saviour and Lord;
One is by breaking all the laws and being bad but shockingly,
One is by keeping all the laws and being very good.

The latter reasons that if I work hard I can be so good that God has to answer my prayer, he has to give me a good life and he has to take me to heaven. For us that sort of attitude means that whilst we might look to Jesus to be our helper and rewarder, he isn't actually our Saviour. I become my own saviour, because I've done all the work.

In short 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, just to love God and to please him and to draw closer to him.

Now this should ring some alarm bells in us because in our first week we looked around and acknowledged that the absence of younger brother types in our churches means that we probably lean towards being moralistic elder brothers. And whilst some people are complete elder brothers – they go to church and obey the Bible simply out of expectation that God will be in their debt, many of us will know that we are not like that. However, many Christians who do know the Gospel of grace can still be elder-brotherish and we need to recognise that and address it.

So what are **the signs of this lostness**, this elder-brotherish attitude?

A deep anger. In verse 28 the elder brother “became angry” and elder brothers (because they believe that God is in their debt, that he owes them a comfortable and a good life in return for their hard work at living up to certain standards) will get angry when life doesn’t go well. Ever felt angry with God like that?

The problem is that if we are angry with God because we believe that we’re suffering unfairly, we are forgetting Jesus, because Jesus lived the most perfect life, certainly a better life than any of us and yet he suffered terribly.

Second, elder-brotherishness is marked by **a joyless and mechanical obedience.** In verse 29 the elder brother says “I’ve been slaving for you” which is a very telling way of putting things. Elder brothers obey God as a means to an end, they love the father’s things but not the father and so as a result they find obeying God joyless as they mechanically go through the motions. Is that you? Are you joyful when you worship and serve God?

Third, there is **a coldness towards younger-brother types.**

Did you notice how the elder son in Jesus' story refers to his brother? Take a look at verse 30, because there he calls him "this son of yours". He will not even recognise his own brother because elder brothers, who pride themselves on their doctrine and morals will unavoidably feel superior to those who do not share them. And that has a knock on effect in their evangelism because how can you evangelise, how can you share the Gospel of grace with someone you disdain? Are there people that you just would rather not see coming to this church?

Fourth, elder brothers **lack a full assurance of the Father's love**. It's almost a sadly pathetic cry isn't it in verse 29 when the elder brother says, "you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends." But the reality is that everything the father owns now belongs to the elder brother and yet he still believes that the father doesn't love him enough – he doesn't have total confidence in the father's love.

Look, as long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through your own goodness the reality is that you will never be sure that you have been good enough to warrant God's love. Whenever something goes wrong, do you wonder whether or not it is a punishment from God? Listen, if you are earning your salvation through good works then the flipside is that you will believe that your bad works will earn you punishment! Is that the father we see in Jesus' story? Not at all.

And lastly, an elder brotherish attitude includes **an unforgiving and judgemental spirit**. When you read through the second half of Jesus' story it becomes very clear that the elder brother doesn't want the father to forgive the younger brother. But only an elder brother, a moralist who always does right in his own eyes and who believes that he will never do wrong can think like that. Do you find it hard to forgive others and easy to judge them?

Hasn't the end of this parable always seemed odd to you? But Jesus ended his story with the elder brother refusing to go in to the celebration because he wanted us to realise that his is the more dangerous spiritual condition. The younger brother knew that he was alienated from the father, but the elder brother just couldn't see it and most elder brothers don't want to hear this story, the Pharisees certainly didn't!

But the Gospel tells us that, in contrast to the elder brother's attitude of trying to win God's acceptance by obeying him, we're actually accepted by God through Jesus Christ and therefore we choose to obey out of love. Most churches have both groups of people (those holding to moralistic religion and those following the Gospel) sitting side by side; both pray, both strive to obey the Ten Commandments, but they do it for radically different reasons. And because they do these things for radically different reasons, they produce radically different results—different kinds of character. One produces anger, joyless compliance, superiority, insecurity, and a condemning spirit whilst the other slowly but inevitably produces contentment, joy, humility and a forgiving spirit.

I know that this is not a comfortable message to hear, Jesus knew it was a bold thing to say and the people he said it to killed him! But it is important to see that Jesus is being so loving and tender here, because when the father goes out to the elder brother, that is Jesus going out and pleading with his enemies. Jesus doesn't berate them or abuse them or threaten them, he lovingly urges them to repent and to come into his love.

This is Jesus who on the cross prayed for his enemies, this is Jesus whom Paul tells us in Romans 5 died for us whilst we were still his enemies. The shocking truth is that we are so sinful that Jesus had to die for us, but we are so loved that he was glad to die for us.

Knowing what Jesus did for us must surely then drain our self-righteousness and insecurity away – the pride and fear which makes us elder brothers and so open the way for us to go into the feast.