

The Prodigal God – The True Elder Brother Luke 15:11-32

The children in a prominent American family decided to give their father a book on their family's history for his birthday, so they commissioned a professional biographer to do the work, carefully warning him of the family's "black sheep": Uncle George.

Uncle George had been executed in the electric chair for murder, but the biographer assured the children that he could deal with it, "Don't worry," he said, "I can handle the situation so that there will be no embarrassment. I'll merely say that Uncle George occupied a chair of applied electronics at an important government institution. He was attached to his position by the strongest of ties and his death came as a real shock."

Well, I wonder how you would deal with the "black sheep" in your family? Over the last few weeks we've been looking at the story in the Bible which Jesus told – the story which many people regard as being about a family dealing with only one "black sheep", a story commonly called the "Parable of the Prodigal Son", but actually, we've seen that it is "The Parable of the Father who had Two Sons" both of whom were alienated from him and both of whom were lost.

But we're not done with that story yet, because I wonder if we have lost something in the process of focussing in on Luke 15 verses 11-32? It's all too easy to lose the rest of Jesus' teaching here because this parable was in fact the third of three stories told. Jesus told them one after each other to the same audience and they are meant to be considered together – so what was Jesus saying to his listeners then and now?

Well (as we shall see) we discover three things; the cost of reconciliation, that this story has a missing elder brother, but that, in contrast, we do have a true elder brother.

The cost of reconciliation

Now let me ask you, what did it cost to bring the younger brother home? Well, at first glance - nothing at all, no cost, no punishment, the younger son simply rolls up, back at home and the father throws his arms around him, clothes him, puts a ring on his finger and that's it – it's all free.

When I go round the supermarket “free” is my favourite price. We all love “free” because its, well, free – it costs nothing. And many people have read this parable just like that and then argued something like this; “OK, this parable clearly says that God in heaven is like the father in this story and clearly that means that God just accepts and forgives anyone who asks. Therefore we don't need any doctrine of the atonement because reconciliation with God is completely free.”

Alright, a couple of big words there; what people claim this story gets rid of is the doctrine of the atonement, “doctrine” meaning the basis of belief and “atonement” being the act of Jesus dieing on the cross in our place, the innocent paying the price for the guilty – Jesus, the innocent, holy and righteous one being a sacrifice for sin so that we (the guilty, unholy and unrighteous) may be forgiven. Literally it is the means by which we might know “at-one-ment” with God.

So people use this story to argue that Jesus didn't need to die on the cross for our sins and that all we need to do is say sorry to God and we will be welcomed back. Simple. Well, at first glance it seems a pretty good argument, don't you think? Let's look a bit closer.

You see, it is true that the reconciliation is free to the younger brother, but, having said that, it is incredibly costly to someone else.

Who is that? It's the elder brother. Remember last week? Last week we saw how the elder brother was furious that the father was receiving the younger brother back into the family.

Listen again to what the younger son said to the father when he refused to go in to the celebration; "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

Now, why is the elder brother so angry? Is it because he's had to do all the washing up and lawn mowing chores? Is it because he has had no-one to play football with? No.

When the younger brother left he took with him one third of all the family's wealth – the father gave the younger son the entire legal part of that sons' inheritance and now the younger son has returned with nothing. It's all gone, all spent.

But look what the father is doing; he's restoring the younger son to the family. He has put a cloak around him, sandals on his feet, he has given him a ring and this was probably a signet ring – a ring used only by family members to seal contracts with and not only that, he has also slaughtered the fattened calf to celebrate with!

And the point is this; the younger brother's inheritance has all gone, so whose pocket is all of this coming out of? What does the father say to the elder son when he goes out to plead with him? "My son...everything I have is yours."

Do you see? Everything the father has is now legally the elder brother's, he is going to inherit everything.

And so every robe, every pair of sandals, every ring and every fattened calf is ultimately the elder brother's. The salvation of the younger brother is not free at all, it is extremely expensive and it will be extremely costly because the father cannot forgive the younger brother, except at the expense of the elder brother – he is the one who must bear the cost of the reconciliation.

But all this reveals our second point – that **there is a missing elder brother.**

What do I mean? Well, look again at the story. When all the money is gone, the younger brother comes to his senses – the mist clears from his mind and he realises that he will be much better off at home, so he comes up with a plan, there it is in verse 19, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”

What's he doing? Well, you see, a domestic servant was someone who lived on the estate, they had a room there, but a hired man, the job the younger son was going to apply for was simply someone who lived in the local town and who was nothing more than a day labourer paid a basic wage.

So do you know what the younger son's plan is? He's not going to ask for forgiveness or grace, or mercy, he is going to say, “Father, I'm going to pay it all back. I don't want any special treatment from you, I don't even want to be a domestic servant. I'm going to work my socks off until I have paid you back every single penny and then we'll be straight.” In other words, the younger son wants to earn his way back in to the family.

And the important distinction that we need to make is that because this is a story – not a real event – some of the normal conventions don't apply. If you have really offended someone then this is quite acceptable isn't it?

But if in this story the father is God (and he is), then the younger son has got his plan completely wrong hasn't he?

Think back to what we were talking about last week with religion in contrast to the Gospel; how religious duty always thinks that it can put God in its debt, but it never can. Our forgiveness and reconciliation with God can only come as an act of grace – by God alone bearing the cost on our behalf.

You see, salvation can never be free, someone has to pay – either the sinner, or the elder brother – but do you think that the younger son could ever have really earned enough as a common labourer to repay his father? No, of course not, so it was the elder brother who had to bear the cost.

But in Jesus' story the elder brother knows this and he refuses to do it. Now we might be sad about that, but Jesus doesn't want us to leave it there. Remember, this is one of three parables, three stories all told together, all meant to be heard together, all interlinked.

In each of the first two parables there is a lost item (a lost sheep and a lost coin) and there is someone who goes out looking for that item and who brings it home with joy – the shepherd searches high and low until he finds the lost sheep and the woman turns the house upside down until she finds the lost coin.

So when we get to the third story and we encounter a lost son, what are we waiting for? What do we expect?

Someone to go out and search for him and bring him home rejoicing!

Jesus is leading us to ask, "Who should have gone out to bring the younger son home?"

And in Jesus' day there would have been no contest – the elder son was going to inherit the lion's share of the family estate, in his society it was his job to maintain the family's place in the community as well as its own internal unity. The elder son should have said something like this; "Father, my younger brother has been a fool, and now his life is in ruins. But I will go and look for him and bring him home. And if the inheritance is gone—as I expect it is—I'll bring him back into the family at my expense."

But Jesus doesn't put an elder brother like that into the story does he? The elder brother we read about is angry, stubborn, selfish, proud and self-righteous.

But, look, are you the same as me when you watch some TV programmes or films? You find yourself thinking, "Don't go into the cellar alone! Don't walk home alone down that dark lane! Don't trust him – or her – or them!"

You know that if they took your advice the film would be pretty dull, because those events are there in the story to make you wish for something else and Jesus tells us about an unsatisfactory brother to make us wish for a true elder brother and here is the good news – the elder brother in the story might be unsatisfactory, but he is not the elder brother that we have to deal with.

The elder brother in the story is there to make us long for a true elder brother, one who, if we go astray, will willingly and lovingly and joyfully come and seek us out, no matter what it costs him.

We have a true elder brother.

Now we are not simply younger brothers who have travelled to another country, we don't just need an elder brother who would travel across the earth to bring us home.

No our Father is God in heaven, so we need an elder brother who would come down from heaven to earth to bring us home, and one who would not only open his wallet, but who would freely give his life to rescue us, who would not just pay a fixed penalty, but an infinite debt so that we could be restored to God's family.

Well, we do have an “elder brother” like that; Jesus – Jesus who shared all of God's glory, who was secure and established in heaven as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, but listen to how Paul describes him and what he did,

“Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

How do we get the father's robe? Because Jesus was stripped naked on the cross. How do we get the father's feast? Because Jesus took the cup of wrath in order that we might have the cup of joy.

He is our true elder brother—and he tells us that he is. Listen to Hebrews 2:11, “Both the one who makes men holy [that's Jesus] and those who are made holy [that's us] are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.”

Did you catch that? “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.” Jesus says, “You are my brother and I have come from heaven to earth and given up everything – everything, I have even died on a cross, so that I might bring you home, rejoicing, to our Father.”

That is the wonderful reality that Jesus wants us to grasp, because in contrast to this story with its inadequate elder brother, there is hope for us.

Our salvation is not free, our restoration into God's family has an incredible price which we could never pay and yet because Jesus is our true elder brother he has come looking for us, he has found us and he has willingly brought us home rejoicing at his expense.

So celebrate – if you have placed your faith in him Jesus has made you holy and is not ashamed to call you his brother, he washed the black sheep white with his blood on the cross!
Amen.