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The Parable of the Two Lost Sons

If you've ever felt looked down on by 'holy' people, don't worry. Jesus knows what it's like. The religious purists of his day accused him of being too friendly with 'sinners', even though he was the only truly holy person around.

Jesus came to a world that was lost, and this is the good news of the gospel: it's the good news that the "lost" can be "found".

But what does that really mean? It sounds offensive to tell someone they are actually "lost", especially if they don't like to think they are, but it primarily means that you are separated from God; you've lost God and He's lost you. In Jesus's parable of the prodigal son, Jesus challenged what nearly everyone has ever thought about God, sin, and salvation. He showed us what being "lost" really means, and we should all pay attention to it.

The Parable

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, *"Father, give me my share of the estate."* So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, *"How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."* So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, *"Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no*

longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, *"Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."* So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. *"Your brother has come,"* he replied, *"and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."*

The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, *"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!"*

"My son," the father said, *"you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*

Jesus' purpose in this parable is not to comfort our hearts but to challenge our categories. He shatters our traditional thoughts about how to connect with God. His story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, but it also powerfully condemns the elder brother's pride in his moralistic life. Jesus is saying both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends.

It is hard for us to realize this today, but when Christianity first arose it was not called a religion. It was the non-religion. The Romans called followers of Jesus 'atheists' because they didn't believe in the gods. For example, imagine the friends of early Christians asking them about their faith. *"Where's your temple?"* they'd ask. The Christians would reply that they didn't have a temple. *"But then where do your priests work?"* The Christians would have responded that they didn't have priests like them. *"But then where do you offer sacrifices to your gods?"* they would have replied. The Christians would have explained that they did not make sacrifices anymore and they only believed in one God. Jesus himself was the temple to end all temples, the priest to end all priests and the sacrifice to end all sacrifices. Jesus was the end of religion as they knew it. That's why religiously observant people were generally offended by Jesus, but those estranged from religious and moral observation were intrigued by him. In every case where Jesus meets a religious person and a sexual outcast (as in Luke 7) or a religious person and a racial outcast (as in John 3-4) or a religious person and a political outcast (as in Luke 19), the outcast is the one who connects with Jesus and the religious / elder brother type does not. After all, Jesus says to the respectable religious leaders, *"the tax collectors and the prostitutes enter the kingdom before you."*

So who does Jesus prefer, the religious or the irreligious? The older brother or the younger? To be technical, he doesn't prefer either, but he singles out religious moralism as a particularly deadly spiritual condition.

Jesus uses the younger and elder brothers to portray the two basic ways people try to find fulfilment: the way of self-discovery and the way of moral conformity. The younger brother in the parable illustrates the way of self-discovery. This paradigm holds that we must be free to pursue our own desires and self-actualization regardless of custom and convention. In this individualistic view, the world would be a far better place if tradition, prejudices, hierarchical authority, and even traditional moral barriers to personal freedom were removed. This sort of person, like the younger brother, says *"I'm the only one who decides what is right and wrong for me. I'm going to live as I want to live and find my true self and happiness that way. I'm not going to let society, tradition or others tell me what I ought to do in life. This is my life, I'm going to live it my way."* The elder brother in the parable illustrates the way of moral conformity. The Pharisees (religious leaders of Jesus' day) believed they could only maintain their place in God's blessing and receive final salvation through strict obedience to the scriptures and that achieving moral purity would lead to a fulfilled life. This sort of person, like the older brother, says: *"I'm not going to do what I want but what tradition and community wants me to do. My duty is more important than my desires."* Our western society is so deeply divided between these two approaches that hardly anyone can imagine any other way to live. The message of Jesus's parable, however, is that both of these approaches are wrong.

Both sons are lost. First, the younger brother who lives a hedonistic, self-indulgent, dissolute life, is totally out of control and living an immoral life. He is alienated from his father, who represents God in the story. The focus then moves to the older brother. He is fastidiously obedient to his father and, therefore, by analogy, to the commands of God. He is completely under control and rather self-disciplined. So we have two sons, one "bad" by conventional standards and one "good," yet both are alienated from the father. The younger son expects to have to work his way back into his father's graces but the older son is also thinking like a servant, expecting payment for what already belongs to him as a son. Neither of them expect the Father to be throwing a free feast. Neither of them are acting like sons, so there is not just one lost son in this parable, but two. What comes as a surprise, however, is that it is the older brother who remains in his alienated state. The bad son enters the father's feast but the good son will not. The lover of prostitutes is saved, but the man of moral rectitude is still lost. But why doesn't the elder brother join? He himself gives the reason: *"Because I've never disobeyed you."* In other words, he says *"I'm a good person, you should treat me better."* The elder brother isn't left out of the party because of his goodness, but because he places his pride in his own good work. He wants to hold a party with his friends paid for by his own good service, but that's not how his father works. It is not a reckless life that creates the barrier between him and his father, it's the pride he has in his moral record that is keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father.

How could this be? The answer is that both of the brothers' hearts, and the two ways of life they represent, are much more alike than they first appear. What did the younger son most want in life? He chafed at having to partake of his family's assets under the father's supervision. He wanted to make his own decisions and have unfettered control of his portion of the wealth. What did the older son most want? If we think about it he actually wanted the same thing as his brother. He was just as resentful of his father as his younger brother. He, too, wanted the father's goods rather than the father himself. His unspoken demand is, *"I have never disobeyed you! Therefore, you ought to do things in my life the way I want them to be done."* The hearts of the two brothers were the same. Both sons resented their father's authority and sought ways of getting out from under it.

Do you realise, then, what Jesus is teaching? Neither son loved the father for himself. They were both using the father for their own self-centred ends rather than loving, enjoying and serving him for his own sake. With this parable, Jesus gives us a much deeper concept of "sin" than any of us would have if he didn't supply it. Most people think of sin as failing to keep God's rules of conduct, but, while it's not less than that, Jesus' definition of sin goes beyond that. People who place their

“salvation” in their own moral efforts often assume that God owes them a blessed life and a ticket to heaven when they die. In this view, you don’t need a saviour who pardons you as a free gift, for you are your own saviour. In the same way, religious people commonly live very moral lives to put themselves in a position where they think that God owes them. They believe that gives them security and they can control God through their own efforts. Therefore, despite all their ethical fastidiousness and piety, they are actually rebelling against the father’s authority. If, like the elder brother, you believe that God ought to bless and help you because you are a ‘good’ person, then Jesus may be your helper, even your inspiration, but he is not your saviour. You are trying to be your own saviour.

Underneath the brother’s sharply different patterns of behaviour is the same motivation and aim. It was wealth, not the love of the father, that they believed would make them fulfilled. The older brother is simply using his morality as a way to force God to give him the things in life he really wants. Those like the elder brother are doing good things for selfish intentions. They don’t obey God to get God himself - in order to resemble, love, know and delight in him. Here, then, is Jesus’ radical redefinition of what is wrong with us. Nearly everyone defined sin as breaking a list of rules. Jesus, though, adds to this and shows that sin is not just breaking rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Saviour, Lord, and Judge just as each son sought to displace the authority of the father in his own life. Here Jesus shows us that true sin lies in selfishness, putting ourselves as the centre as if to subconsciously tell ourselves that truly we are the ultimate authority of our lives. Jesus does not divide the world in the moral “good guys” and the immoral “bad boys.” He shows us that everyone is dedicated to a project of self-salvation. We are just going about it in different ways.

Jesus speaks of sin and salvation under the metaphors of being “lost” and “found.” But what does it really mean to be spiritually lost? In the parable, the father has lost his son and so his son has lost his way. He ends up in the pigsty with no support, money or resources because of his self-indulgent, undisciplined and foolish behaviour. It has led to a complete life collapse. At that point, the younger brother realises that he has “lost his way” and returns to try and rebuild his life.

However, in the parable Jesus wants us to discern another, more subtle, but no less devastating form of lostness: that of the elder brother. He “became angry” and started complaining. The first sign you have an “elder-brother” spirit is that when your life doesn’t go as you want you aren’t just sorrowful but deeply angry and bitter. Elder brothers believe that if they live a good life they should get a good life in return and that God owes them a smooth road if they try hard to live up to His standards. What happens, then, if you are an elder brother and things go wrong in your life? If you feel you have been living up to your moral standard you will be furious with God. You don’t deserve this, you will think, after how hard you’ve worked to be a decent person! Elder brothers’ inability to handle suffering and loss arises from the fact that their moral observance is results-orientated. The good life is lived not for their father or for the delight in good deeds themselves, but as calculated ways to control their environment. It is often said that people do good deeds, not primarily to help and support the needy, but primarily because it brings a sense of satisfaction and reward that makes one feel better. Sure this is a good benefit, but it certainly shouldn’t be the drive. This is a selfish drive rather than a selfless one, although it may appear selfless on the outside. In the same way, if you think goodness and decency is the way to merit a good life, you will be eaten up with anger, since life never goes as we wish. You will always feel that you are owed more than you are getting. This resentment is your own fault. As you see your own moral performance as a way to control life, the delusion here is that you are not the one ultimately in control and this reality will drive you insane.

We also see that the elder brother has a strong sense of superiority. He points out how much better his own moral record is than the lover of prostitutes. Elder brothers base their self-images on being hardworking, or moral, or members of an elite clan, or extremely smart and savvy. This inevitably leads to feeling superior to those who don’t have those same qualities. In fact, competitive comparison is the main way elder brothers achieve a sense of their own significance. Racism and

classism are just different versions of this form of the self-salvation project. If a group believes God owes them because of their particularly true doctrine, ways of worship, and ethical behaviour, their attitude toward those without these things can be hostile.

The elder brother's self-righteousness creates an unforgiving, judgemental spirit. This elder brother cannot pardon his younger brother for the way he has weakened the family's place in society, disgraced their name and diminished their wealth. *"I would never do anything as bad as that!"* he is saying in his heart. Because he does not see himself as being part of a common community of sinners, he is trapped by his own bitterness. It is impossible to forgive someone if you feel superior to him or her. A classic example of this is the marriage of an alcoholic. The alcoholic repeatedly lets down his family in dramatic ways. As a result of her suffering, the addict's wife often develops an enormous amount of self-pity and self-righteousness. The spouse bails him out and yet holds the record of his sins constantly over his head. This leads to more self-loathing on the part of the alcoholic, which is part of why he drinks. It is a destructive cycle. When the younger son comes out of his denial, and the father welcomes him, the older brother should have said, *"my brother's back? Whoopee! And here I am, just as much slaving away, though at home, trying to earn my inheritance like I'm not my father's son. I have no right to feel superior to my younger brother, we've both lost our way in different ways."* Then he would have had the freedom to forgive his brother just as his father did. But elder brothers do not see themselves this way.

Why should you do good?

In this parable we begin to question the very reason why the older brother maintains his discipline towards his father, and likewise, we may ask what reason drives us to pursue moral disciplines? In the finance world (which I work in), we are often told by those working in business ethics that we should adopt honest business practices for two reasons. Firstly, if you lie, cheat or commit fraud you may be caught, and that would be bad for your business and reputation. Also, a reputation of acting ethically can give a competitive advantage therefore improving profits. Secondly, if people in the company know they are working in an honest business, that will boost morale, making your employees feel they are above the competition. Now sure, these are good benefits to being honest and fair, but this appeal only arouses the motives of fear, that they might lose profits, and pride, that they would feel superior to others around them. *"Tell the truth because it's for your advantage"* is really the message. What happens, however, when you inevitably come to situations in which telling the truth would be costly? What happens when telling a particular lie would be massively advantageous to you? It often can be! The point is that it is one thing to be honest and avoid lies for your own sake, but it is another to do so for God's sake, for truth's sake, and for the love of the people around us. The person motivated by love and grace rather than fear or self-seeking will not only obey the letter of the law, but will eagerly seek out new ways to carry out business with transparency and integrity. So, if we are living under grace, then we shall live a life which reflects this, seeking to do good for the love of it, not for the benefit of ourselves and how we feel.

Older brother types are fastidious in their compliance to ethical norms and in the fulfilment of all traditional family, community, and civic responsibilities. But it can be a slavish task. There is no joy or love, no reward in just seeing good moral standards lived. A slave is forced or pushed rather than drawn or attracted. A slave works out of fear, fear of consequences or even fear of losing control. Ultimately, elder brothers live good lives not primarily out of love but fear of an alternative in which they don't feel on top. Elder brothers are being moral for their own benefit. They may be kind to others and helpful to the poor but at a deeper level they are doing it either so they feel better and in turn see themselves as virtuous. They are not really feeding the hungry and clothing the poor, they are feeding and clothing themselves to dress over their perceived lack. Underneath the seeming unselfishness is great self-centeredness. In this sense even *"their good deeds are filthy rags."*

The ultimate problem with elder brothers is that they don't go to God and seek healing, restoration and forgiveness from their condition. They see nothing wrong with their condition, they see themselves as "good people" and that can be fatal. If you know you are sick you may go to a doctor but if you don't know you're sick you won't. You'll just die. Now, most who pursue the philosophy of individual fulfilment and self-discovery do not make a shipwreck of their lives like this younger son. Most religious people who think that God will save them for their moral efforts are not nearly as heartless and angry as this older son. Isn't Jesus exaggerating? The answer is no, he is explaining that while most people do not arrive at these extreme places, each approach to life has the seeds of its own destruction in it. He exposes both as dead ends. He clearly wants us to take a radically different approach, but what is it? And before we ask that, what do we need to do to escape the shackles of our particular brand of lostness, whether it be younger-brother or elder-brother?

The first thing we need is God's initiative. Notice how the father comes out to each son and lavishes his love on him in order to bring him in. Even the most religious and moral people need the initiating grace of God because they are just as lost. Neither Jesus nor any author of the Bible ever implies that any human being other than Jesus is flawless, without sin or fault. For the older brother it was his pride in his good deeds, rather than remorse over his bad deeds, that was keeping him out of the feast of salvation. His spiritual problem was the radical insecurity that comes from basing his self-image on achievements and performance. Living like that we have to endlessly prop up our sense of righteousness with more and more good deeds. This is slavery. What, then, must we do to be saved?

First, we need to give up. Give up trying to earn what already belongs to us through sonship. It is only when you see the desire to be your own lord that lies beneath both your sins and self-righteousness do you realise you've been on the wrong track, a lost son. To find God we must repent not just of the things we have done wrong, but we must admit that we've put our ultimate hope and trust in things other than God, and that in both our wrongdoing and right-doing we have been seeking to get around God. Then once we've got over ourselves we need to reconnect with the father - who in our story is God Himself. Giving up and turning away from our old approach is repentance, and reconnecting is faith - they're two parts of the same process.

Now, one of the key messages of the gospel is the significance of God's forgiveness. What's vital to understand is that forgiveness comes at a cost. For example, if someone scratches your car, you could demand they pay for it. The alternative is that you could forgive and pay for it yourself. The point is that forgiveness always has a cost to it. Mercy and forgiveness must be free and unmerited to the wrongdoer. If the wrongdoer has to do something to merit it, then it isn't mercy, but forgiveness always comes at a cost to the one granting the forgiveness. Our Lord, our true saviour Jesus Christ was willing to pay not just a finite amount of money, but the infinite cost of his own life to bring us into God's family, for our debt is huge.

We have all rebelled against the father, some as elder brothers, some as younger brothers. But on the cross Jesus was stripped naked of his dignity so that we could be clothed with an undeserved dignity - his robe of perfect sonship. Jesus went hungry so we could be fed, he endured being forsaken so we could be accepted and he welcomes us like a perfect elder brother. It was on the cross that Jesus was treated as an outcast so that we could be brought into God's family freely by grace. There Jesus drank the cup of eternal justice so that we might have the cup of the Father's joy. This is the gospel, and understanding it is what sparks the heart to be changed, moved by the sight of what it cost to bring you home. In the life of Christ, I see the marvel of forgiveness as a starting point for rebuilding one's own life. Jesus Christ, who had all the power in the world, saw us enslaved by the very things we thought would free us. So he emptied himself of his glory and became a servant. He laid aside the infinities and immensities of his being and, at the cost of his life, paid the debt for our sins, purchasing us the only place our hearts can rest, in his Father's house. Knowing and believing he did this will transform us from the inside out.

That is the gospel. Do you accept it?

This essay is inspired by "The Prodigal God" by Timothy Keller.