

## Sermon Outline - Session 4

### The Elder Brother



**Text:** Luke 15:25-32 NIV

**Alternate Title:** He Refused to Go In

**Introduction:** Most people who read and study *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* concentrate completely on the character of the younger son, his repentance, and the father's forgiveness. And yet look at the text. It doesn't end with the return of the prodigal. Almost half of the story is about the older son. The story is about *two* sons, who are *both* alienated from the father, who are *both* assaulting the unity of the family. Jesus wants us to compare and contrast them. The younger son is "lost"—that is easy to see. We see him shaming his father, ruining his family, sleeping with prostitutes, and we say, "yes, there's someone who is spiritually lost." But Jesus' point is that the older son is lost too. Let's learn from the text: 1) a startling new understanding of lostness, 2) what the signs of it are (so we can recognize it in ourselves), and 3) what we can do about this condition.

#### 1. A startling new understanding of lostness—verse 28.

- The elder brother would have known that the day of the prodigal's return was the greatest day in his father's life.
  - The father has "killed the fattened calf", an enormously expensive extravagance in a culture where even having meat at meals was considered a delicacy.
  - The older son realized his father was ecstatic with joy. Yet he refused to go into the biggest feast his father has ever put on. This was a remarkable, deliberate act of disrespect. It was his way of saying, "I won't be part of this family nor respect your headship of it."
  - And the father had to "go out" to plead with him. Just as he went out to bring his alienated younger son into the family, now he had to do the same for the older brother.
- Do you realize what Jesus is saying to his listeners, and to us? The older son is lost.
  - The father represents God himself, and the meal is the feast of salvation. In the end, then, the younger son, the immoral man, comes in and is saved, but the older son, the good son, refuses to go in and is lost.
  - The Pharisees who were listening to this parable knew what that meant. It was a complete reversal of everything they believed. You can almost hear them gasp as the story ends.
  - And *what* is it that is keeping the elder brother out? It's because: "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed..." (v.29). The good son is not lost *in spite* of his good behavior, but *because* of his good behavior. So it is not his sin keeping him out, but his righteousness.
  - The gospel is neither religion nor is it irreligion; it is not morality nor is it immorality. This was completely astonishing and confusing to Jesus' hearers at the time—and it may even be astonishing and confusing to you.
- Why is the older son lost?
  - The younger brother wanted the father's wealth, but not the father. So how did he get what he wanted? He left home. He broke the moral rules.

- But it becomes evident by the end that the elder brother *also* wanted selfish control of the father's wealth. He was very unhappy with the father's use of the possessions—the robe, the ring, the calf. But while the younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, we see that the elder brother got control by staying home and being very good. He felt that now he has the right to tell the father what to do with his possessions because he had obeyed him perfectly.
- So there are *two* ways to be your own Savior and Lord.
  - One is by breaking all the laws and being bad. One is by keeping all the laws and being good.
  - If I can be so good that God *has* to answer my prayer, give me a good life, and take me to heaven, then in all I do I may be looking to Jesus to be my helper and my rewarder—but he isn't my *Savior*. I am then my own Savior.
  - 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 and please and draw closer to him.

## 2. What the signs of this lostness are—verses 29-30.

Some people are complete elder brothers. They go to church and obey the Bible—but out of expectation that then God owes them. They have never understood the Biblical gospel at all. But many Christians, who know the gospel, are nonetheless elder-brotherish. Despite the fact that they know the gospel of salvation by grace with their heads, their hearts go back to an elder-brotherish “default mode” of self-salvation. Here's what the elder-brotherish attitude looks like. It is:

- **A deep anger** (v.28—“became angry”). Elder brothers believe that God owes them a comfortable and good life if they try hard and live up to standards—and they have! So they say: “my life ought to be going really well!” and when it doesn't they get angry. But they are forgetting Jesus. He lived a better life than any of us—but suffered terribly.
- **A joyless and mechanical obedience** (v.29—“I've been slaving for you”). Elder brothers obey God as a means to an end—as a way to get the things they really love. Of course, obedience to God is sometimes extremely hard. But elder brothers find obedience virtually always a joyless, mechanical, slavish thing as a result.
- **A coldness to younger brother-types** (v.30—“this son of yours”). The older son will not even “own” his brother. Elder brothers are too disdainful of others unlike themselves to be effective in evangelism. Elder brothers, who pride themselves on their doctrinal and moral purity, unavoidably feel superior to those who do not have these things.
- **A lack of assurance of the father's love** (v.29—you never threw *me* a party). As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through your goodness, you will never be sure you have been good enough. What are the signs of this? Every time something goes wrong in your life you wonder if it's a punishment. Another sign is irresolvable guilt. You can't be sure you've repented deeply enough, so you beat yourself up over what you did. Lastly, there is a lack of any sense of intimacy with God in your prayer life. You may pray a lot of prayers asking for things, but not sense his love.
- **An unforgiving, judgmental spirit.** The elder brother does not want the father to forgive the younger brother. It is impossible to forgive someone if you feel “*I would never do anything that bad!*” You have to be something of an elder brother to refuse to forgive.

## 3. What we can do about this spiritual condition.

- First, we have to see the uniqueness of the gospel.
  - Jesus ends the parable with the lostness of the older brother in order to get across the point that it is a more dangerous spiritual condition. The younger brother *knew* he was alienated from the father, but the elder brother did not.

- If you tell moral, religious people who are trying to be good, trying to obey the Bible so God will bless them—that they are alienated from God, they will just be offended. If you know you are sick you may go to a doctor; if you don't know you're sick you won't—you'll just die.
- 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 obey."
- These are two radically different, even opposite, dynamics. Yet both sets of people sit in church together, both pray, both obey the Ten Commandments, but 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. The other slowly but inevitably produces contentment, joy, humility, poise, and a forgiving spirit.
- Unless a person and a congregation knows the difference between general religiosity and the true gospel, people will constantly fall into moralism and elder-brotherishness. And if you call younger brothers to receive Christ and live for him without making this distinction clear, they will automatically think you are inviting them to become elder brothers.
- Second, we have to see the vulnerability of Jesus.
  - Remember, again, whom Jesus is speaking to (vv.1-2). Jesus is speaking to his mortal enemies, the men he knows will kill him. On the one hand, this is an astonishingly bold challenge to them. He's talking to those who want to kill him and telling them that they are lost, that they fundamentally misunderstand God's salvation and purpose in the world, and that they are trampling on the heart of God.
  - But at the same time, he is also being so loving and tender. When the father comes out to the older brother, that is Jesus pleading with his enemies. He is urging them to see their fatal error. Jesus does not scream at his enemies, or smite them, but lovingly urges them to repent and come into his love.
  - And so we have a foreshadowing of that great moment on the cross when he says, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). This love toward his enemies made him vulnerable and cost him his life. On the cross, instead of blasting his enemies, he lovingly took the penalty of their sins on himself. While we were his enemies, Christ died for us (Rom 5:10).
  - Knowing what he did for us must drain us of our self-righteousness and our insecurity. We were so sinful he *had* to die for us. But we were so loved that he was *glad* to die for us. That takes away both the pride and the fear that makes us elder brothers.

**Good source books:**

Bailey, Kenneth. *Finding the Lost Cultural Keys to Luke 15*. Concordia, 1992.  
 Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 9:51-24:53*. Baker, 1994.  
 Ellis, E.Earle. *The New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Luke*. Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1974.  
 Wilcock, Michael. *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Luke*. IVP, 1979.

**Sessions:**

Session	Sermon	Book Chapters	DVD	Group Study
ONE - The Parable			Film	✓
TWO - The People Around Jesus	✓	Introduction and Chapter 1	Session Two Clip	✓
THREE - The Two Lost Sons	✓	Chapters 2 and 3	Session Three Clip	✓
FOUR - The Elder Brother	✓	Chapter 4	Session Four Clip	✓
FIVE - The True Elder Brother	✓	Chapter 5	Session Five Clip	✓
SIX - The Feast of the Father	✓	Chapters 6 and 7	Session Six Clip	✓