

# Stories that Change the World

## **“On Love: The Parable of the Prodigal Sons”**

Luke 15.11-37

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on June 18, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Luke 15.
- This summer we are looking at the parables of Jesus. Since it is Father’s Day I thought we would look at what is perhaps the most famous of Jesus’ parables on the Fatherhood of God, though we often call it ‘the parable of the Prodigal Son.’ This is very misleading however because this is a parable about two sons, not just one. Jesus begins the parable in verse 11 by saying, **“there was a man who had two sons.”** There is an elder son and a younger son and if you miss this you miss Jesus’ entire point.
  - Jesus point is that every thought the human race has ever had about how to connect with God, whether in the east or in the west, whether religious or secular, modern or postmodern, has been wrong.
    - In this parable Jesus shatters all human categories for how we think about connecting with God.
- This is critical for in the last 50 years there has been a huge reaction against religion. Westcoast people are well known for rejecting organized religion. People say, **“I’m spiritual but not religious.”**
  - But we will see that Jesus says, **“What I bring is neither religion, nor irreligion, neither spirituality, nor secularity. It is something completely different.”** Here in this parable Jesus redefines everything.
    - Let’s divide this message into four parts: first, we will define the parable and then we will watch as Jesus redefines God, redefines, sin, and redefines salvation.
- Have you ever thought that you knew something about a subject only to read a book that completely reshaped all your thinking? A few years ago Dr. Timothy Keller released a book entitled *The Prodigal God*.
  - This book and its accompanying sermons so transformed my understanding of the parable that I am going to borrow large chunks of his thoughts.

### ACT 1 – THE LOST YOUNGER BROTHER

- So let’s begin then by defining the parable. **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** This parable is clearly broken down into two acts each corresponding with one of the sons. Act 1 can be called ‘the lost younger brother’ and Act 2 can be called ‘the lost elder brother’ making this the parable of the two lost sons. **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** Act 1 begins with the younger brother making a startling demand of his father. **READ 12a – And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’**
  - Technically the division of the estate only happened at death so by asking for it now the younger brother was basically saying to his father, **“I wish you were dead. I want your things but I don’t want you.”**
- The father’s response is even more startling. Jesus’ listeners would have expected the father to beat his rebellious son for this disgrace. But we simply read in verse 12, **READ 12b – “And he divided his property between them.”** Although he has been rejected the father still loves his son.
  - And so we read in verse 13. **READ 13 – Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.** Thomas Huxley once said, **“A man’s worst difficulties begin when he is able to do just what he likes”**<sup>1</sup> With seemingly limitless money the younger brother could do what he liked. He bought the yacht, drove the fast cars, and partied with beautiful women but it all came crashing down when the money ran out.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Warren Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 234.

- **READ 14-16** – *And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.* <sup>15</sup> *So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs.* <sup>16</sup> *And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*
- Lying in the mud he comes up with a plan. **READ 17-20a** - *But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.” <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father.*
  - The Rabbis taught that if you had violated one of the community standards the only way back into the community was not just to make an apology. You had to make restitution. The younger brother knows he cannot live with the family and so his plan is to say, *“Father, I know I cannot be your son but if you will apprentice me, I can at least try to pay you back over time.”*
    - But then one of the most dramatic scenes in all literature takes place. Look at verse 20. **READ 20** - *But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*
- This is shocking because as scholar Craig Blomberg reminds us, *“No older, self respecting Middle Eastern male head of an estate would have disgraced himself by the undignified action of running to greet his son.”*<sup>2</sup>
  - The son stops his father’s display of emotion to launch into his business plan for restitution. **READ 21-24** - *And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.*
- Not only does the father totally interrupt him he contradicts him. Slaves went bare foot while a son would wear sandals. The robe would have been the father’s robe and the ring was the family ring. The father is saying, *“I will not wait for you to earn your way back into my family or make sure you grovel for awhile. I simply bring you back and cover your nakedness, poverty, and rags with my robes.*
  - All these things powerfully show that there is no evil that the father’s love cannot pardon and no sin that his grace cannot cover.

## ACT 2 – THE LOST ELDER BROTHER

- **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Act 2 begins in verse 25. **READ 25-27** - *“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’”*
  - Now I have been to some big parties but when you can hear people dancing a mile away that house must have been rockin’ - and in the words of the great blues guitarist Stevie Ray Vaughn, *“When the house is rockin, don’t bother knockin’, come on in.”*
- But we read in verse 28, **READ 28** - *But he was angry and refused to go in.* Now it is his turn to disgrace his father. He refuses to go into what is probably the biggest party his father ever had thereby publicly saying he opposes his father.
  - Although the father has been shamed, he goes out to his eldest son pleading with him to come in but he refuses.
    - **READ 28-30** – *His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this*

<sup>2</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 176.

*son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’*

- Why is he so upset about the fattened calf? The fattened calf was the most expensive meat reserved only for the greatest of celebrations.
  - But the elder brother is saying, *“How dare you use our wealth like this. I should have a say here. I’ve worked myself to death to earn what I have but he has done nothing.”* It is then that he refers to his record. *“I have never disobeyed and therefore I have rights here. I should have been consulted about this.”*
    - His anger leads him to further insult his father. In verse 29 he does not address him as, *“father,”* but says, *“look”* which is like saying, *“Look you.”* In a culture that where respect and deference to elders was all-important this is an outrageous act.
      - He utterly shamed his father.
- But look at the grace the father extends to him. He not only ignores the disrespect but he goes out to him and then calls him endearingly ‘my son.’ **READ 31-32** - *And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’*
  - Every other Middle Eastern father would have disowned his son on the spot but this father is saying, *“My son despite how you have publicly insulted me, I still want you in the feast. I am not going to disown your brother, but I don’t want to disown you either. I challenge you to swallow your pride and come into the feast.”*
    - The listeners are on the edge of their seats. What will the elder brother do? Will he apologize to his father? Will he reconcile with his brother? But Jesus does not end the story. We will say why later on but the question is left open.
      - There you have it – the parable of the two lost sons. Now watch with me how in this parable Jesus completely redefines God, redefines sin, and redefines salvation.

## JESUS REDEFINES GOD

- **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** First then, Jesus redefines God. Jesus says that God is a Father. Among all the world religions and spiritual paths Jesus is the only one to define God in this way. And yet this is a concept that I have seen many people struggle with because they have had bad fathers – fathers who were aloof, angry, capricious, unemotional, hardly around, or controlling.
  - This is exactly how the gods of history are defined. The Greek gods like Zeus are capricious, angry, and controlling. In contrast, Jesus says that although God is the all-powerful creator of the universe he is a good father who lavishes love on his children, seeks out a relationship with them, and is full of emotion toward them. Powerful yet tender. Majestic yet loving. No other religion or spirituality has ever defined God in this way.
    - God is the father that many of us longed for but never had. In this parable Jesus completely redefines God.

## JESUS REDEFINES SIN

- Next we see that Jesus completely redefines sin. **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** To understand how Jesus redefines sin you have to see that he is speaking to two groups of people. **READ 1-2** - *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”* These two groups of people are represented in the parable.
  - The younger brother represents the tax collectors and sinners. The elder brother represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law.
- In Act 1 Jesus gives us the traditional picture of sin. We can call this **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** ‘the path of self-discovery.’ The younger brother lives a self-indulgent wild life filled with all the obvious sins like sexual immorality and so is alienated from the father. He is anti-authority and breaks all the rules.

- The Westcoast is filled with younger brother types. The Canadian census revealed that British Columbian people are the least conventionally religious in the whole country. Pollster Michael Adams says, ***“British Columbian baby-boomers are the most likely in Canada to be ‘autonomous rebels’ who prize individuality and are skeptical of traditional authority.”***<sup>3</sup> We are anti-establishment younger brothers who chaff at authority and organized religion saying, ***“I will do whatever I think is right and live how I want to live. Life is about self-actualization and should not be bound by tradition or custom.”***
  - But Jesus says younger brothers are lost. The Pharisees would have been giving Jesus a standing ovation at this point.
- But in Act 2 Jesus completely redefines sin. To the total shock of all His listeners, Jesus ends the parable with the younger brother being restored to the father while the elder brother is left in a state of alienation from the father. What is this? The good, moral, and upright elder brother is lost while the lover of prostitutes is saved? Yes.
  - How can this be? The elder brother unknowingly supplies the answer from his own mouth in verse 29 when he says, ***“all these years I’ve worked for you and never disobeyed you.”*** So he views his relationship with his father in employee/boss terms. He has worked hard and in his view done a good job. Therefore he believes his father owes him.
    - If younger brother types follow the path of self-discovery then elder brother types follow **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** ‘the path of moral conformity.’ Elder brother types say, ***“I will not live recklessly and indulge in whatever I want. There are standards and rules and I will responsibly follow them. I will be good.”***
  - The Westcoast is also filled with elder brother types. They say, ***“Of course God accepts me. I have always lived responsibly and ethically. I am not a younger brother. I am a good person.”*** Shockingly Jesus says moral and good elder brothers are lost too.
- Why? For this reason: both types of people are trying to be the own Saviour and Lord.
  - The younger brother wanted to be his own Saviour and Lord. He showed that he was his own Lord by rejecting his father and living in flagrant disobedience. The elder brother also wanted to be his own Saviour and Lord but he gained control in a very different way. He followed the rules and lived responsibly so that his father would owe him and give him what he really wanted.
    - Both of them wanted the father’s things but neither of them actually wanted the father.
- So one way to be your own Saviour and Lord is by going off and living how you want in total disregarding God. The other is by being very religious: reading the Bible, praying, obeying the Ten Commandments and being good.
  - But both forms of lostness are terrible. Younger brothers bring misery into the world through addictions while elder brothers are angry and judgmental. Elder brothers look down on all those who do not conform to their rules and when God does not give them what they want they get angry at him.
    - This parable reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother but it also condemns the elder brother’s moralistic life in the strongest terms. The younger brother is lost in his badness but the elder brother is lost in his goodness. You can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by trying to keep them to earn his favour.
- Jesus says the irreligious are lost *and* the religious are lost. But what is striking is that he singles out religious Pharisaical elder brother type thinking as a particularly deadly spiritual condition.
  - Most people know that Christianity calls us away from a life of sin-pursuing younger brotherhood but few realize that it also calls us away from moralistic elder brotherhood.

## JESUS REDEFINES SALVATION

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Todd, *Cascadia – The Elusive Utopia*, 23.

- So having redefined sin Jesus now brings us good news as he redefines salvation.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** In redefining salvation Jesus says we need three things:
- **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** First, we need the initiating love of the Father. Oh glory in this with me: when the younger brother comes towards home the father does not see him and think, ***“He better grovel. He is on probation with me until he can shape up his life.”*** No, the father runs to him, hugs him, and kisses him. And notice that in verse 20 the father saw him while he was a long way off and ran to him. Oh the glory of the gospel – God embraces sinners who repent and grants them immediate and complete acceptance.
  - But notice the father also goes out the elder brother. Even the most religious and moral people need the initiating grace of God because they are just as lost. God not only loves the wild-living, free-spirited person but also the hardened religious person.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** Second, we need to learn how to repent for more than just blatant sins.
  - Most people agree that we need to repent like the younger brother, meaning that we get out our list and confess how bad we have been. But what many people do at this point is they try to make up for being really bad by being really, really, good. But that is to simply move from being a lost younger brother to being an lost elder brother.
    - The elder brother teaches us that we cannot earn God’s favour by being really good. We must repent of our goodness because we often use it to try and be our own Saviour and Lord. Pride says I do not need a Saviour and I can be my own Lord.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** Third, we need to be melted by what it cost to bring us home.
  - But it seems that it did not cost anything. The father just forgave him. That is not true. There is a great price that had to be paid for the younger brother to come home. Jesus gives us the clue in verse 31. **READ 31** – ***And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.’*** This is literally true because now everything belonged to the elder brother. If the younger brother is to come back into the family the elder brother must give up his inheritance to fund the younger brother. The younger brother’s restoration was free to him but it would cost the elder brother dearly. For this, the elder brother is furious.
    - Why does Jesus put in a nasty elder brother? He is showing the Pharisees what they look like in how they treated sinners. What would a true elder brother do? He would go out and look for the younger brother and bring him home at his own expense. But sadly this elder brother is not full of such grace.
- By putting a flawed elder brother in the story Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn for a true elder brother. An elder brother who would not just go in search for us in the neighboring town but who would come from heaven to earth to seek out lost sinners. We need an elder brother to pay the price so we can come back to the father’s house.
  - The good news of Christianity is that on the cross Jesus was stripped naked so we could be clothed in the honour we do not deserve. At the cross he cried out, ***“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”*** the only time he did not call him “father.” Jesus, our true elder brother was forsaken by the Father so that we might never be forsaken by the Father.
    - On the cross, Jesus paid that debt that deep down we all know we must pay. Jesus, our true elder brother, gave up all he had in order to restore us back to the Father.

## APPLICATIONS

- Let me speak to all you younger brother types. Stop running away from God in pursuit of self-discovery. Sin promises pleasure and in the short term it does deliver. But at some point you will find yourself in the pig’s trough.
  - At that moment the temptation will be to think that God could not love you until you clean up your life. You will be tempted to become an elder brother and try to earn God’s favour or you will give up in despair.

- Don't do it for the moment you humble yourself and turn back to God you will find a loving father grabbing you in a giant bear hug, covering you with kisses, and giving you riches like you could never have dreamed.
- But let me also speak to you elder brother types because your lostness is far more subtle. Why does Jesus not end the story? From a technical standpoint Act 1 has 8 stanzas but Act 2 has only 7.
  - Why? Because Jesus was leaving it open for the Pharisees to decide how they would respond. The father has come out and pleaded but now the Pharisees and you are left to write the last verse. So how does it end?
- For most of my life I never saw that the Pharisees did write an ending to this story. They did fill in the missing 8<sup>th</sup> stanza. And what they wrote screams to us to listen carefully for it reveals how dangerous it is to be an elder brother.
  - I would like to tell you that the story ends with a verse like this: ***"The elder son seeing his father's love, compassion and grace came to his senses about his wicked heart and said, 'father I am no longer worthy to be call your son.' But the father embraced him, kissed him, and brought him into the feast where the elder brother reconciled with the younger brother and everyone rejoiced in the grace and love of the father."***
- But that is not the ending is it? We know what the ending was because the Pharisees wrote it. Here is how it goes: ***"And the elder brother being outraged at his father said, 'you are an evil father and someone needs to end the shame and bring honour back to this family by getting rid of you.' And so the elder brother picked up a piece of wood and brutally beat his father to death in front of everyone at the party."***
  - Is that not what happened? Just a few months after Jesus challenged the Pharisees to give up their moral conformity, they had Jesus publicly and brutally put to death on a wooden cross. And they congratulated themselves that they had done a good thing in preserving the true and good order of things.
    - Oh heed the warning – moral conformity as a means to earn God's favour is perhaps the most dangerous form of lostness.
- So stop trusting in your goodness to get right with God. Stop trying to be your own Lord and Saviour and humble yourself saying, ***"Jesus, I repent of thinking I could earn God's favour through my goodness. Forgive me and receive me."***
  - Religion says, ***"I obey, therefore I am accepted by God."*** Those embrace Jesus' radical gospel say, ***"I am accepted because of what Jesus did and therefore I obey."***
    - In the words of the old hymn, ***"Lay your deadly doing down, down at Jesus feet. Stand in him, in him alone, gloriously complete."***