

Deadly Self-Righteousness!

By Mark Jarvinen

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

²⁸"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. ²⁹But 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. ³⁰But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

³¹" 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. ³²But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' " **(Luke 15:25-32)**

St. Helen's Bishop's Gate, is an Anglican church in center city London. Back in the 1740's, in the midst of a tremendous spiritual awakening in England, in which the gospel was being preached with power and people were being converted in droves, **John Wesley**, the founder of Methodism, preached a powerful sermon in that very church. According to Wesley's own memoirs, as he descended the steps from the elevated pulpit following his sermon, he was met at the bottom by the "warden of the vestry," our equivalent to the chairman of the elder board, who said in no uncertain terms, **"Sir, you must preach here no more."**

Why were the members of this church so offended by Wesley's preaching? It's always been true that the real message of Jesus is a

threat to those who pride themselves on their own goodness. In times of awakening, when Jesus is authentically preached, it's often true that the people with **"baggage,"** or with **"skeletons in their closets"** seem more open to the call to repentance and faith than the **"respectable"** and **"good"** people, who either walk out, or in Wesley's case, ask the preacher not to come back. In today's text, Jesus issues an **"in your face"** warning against the self-righteousness of the Jewish religious elite called the Pharisees and teachers of the law. I believe the warning against **"deadly self-righteousness"** also applies to **"religious insiders"** like us.

Usually it's the wayward son in **Luke 15** that receives all the attention. Most of us have heard sermons that remind us that the **"way back home"** is always open to even the most rebellious sinner. You may have already heard the story of the lost son, who had subjected his father to public ridicule and shame by demanding his share of the inheritance (about 1/3 of his father's total wealth), and furthermore, risked his family's future financial security by squandering the money in a far country. The problem is that most sermons stop right there, missing the climax of the entire chapter. The story of the wayward son only sets us up for the dramatic climax of the story - the dialogue between the father and the elder brother. This is the conversation Jesus didn't want the self-righteous Pharisees to miss. He doesn't want us to miss it either.

We know that the Scribes and Pharisees were those who grumbled at the fact that Jesus ate with the pimps and prostitutes of his day. In fact, it made them angry enough to kill. The Scribes and Pharisees were the **"elder brother"** of Jesus' parable. We meet the elder brother sulking angrily outside the house because he had

learned that his wayward brother had returned home and was being given a party (not just a goat but the fatted calf). No one would think of killing a fatted calf unless the whole town was invited. Filled with resentment, the elder brother seethed ***“How could my father do such a thing? Doesn’t he remember the humiliation my brother caused our family?”*** We’re not sure if the elder brother is more angry over the fact that he didn’t get a party, or that his undeserving brother did. What do we learn about the elder brother from this text?

I. THE ELDER BROTHER WAS LOST.

If being lost is ***“being someplace you’re not supposed to be”*** then the elder brother is also lost. The elder brother didn’t belong outside pouting. He belonged inside, joining in the celebration. After all, his rebellious brother had come home – a family member had returned! Notice that the father of our story goes out to meet his elder son in the same way he had run to meet his younger son who had been lost. This shows that both these sons were lost, just in different ways. In light of this, perhaps a more appropriate title for this story is ***“the parable of two lost sons.”***

How would you expect a brother to act at a time like this? Years ago, now, **Time** magazine carried a story about a young pilot who was shot down behind enemy lines in Vietnam and was listed as **MIA**. His American brother, hearing the news, sold most of his possessions, took with him whatever he could carry in a backpack, and flew to Vietnam. There he wandered for months in the dense jungles in search of his missing brother. The villagers and even the enemy soldiers grew to respect him for his loyalty and devotion to his family. Word of his quest spread far and wide. If he needed to pass through

a village or even enemy lines to continue his search, they willingly let him pass. He was known among the North Vietnamese simply as **“the brother.”** To them, this man was doing exactly what you would expect a brother to do.

The elder brother of our text, however, wouldn't have dreamed of going out in search of his younger brother after he left home. And now that he was home, he wouldn't so much as darken the door of his **“welcome home”** party. What anger! What bitterness! When he came home from work that day and found out his father was throwing an expensive party for his brother, that was the last straw. Do you hear the contempt for his brother and the blame toward his father as he says, **“This son of yours, who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home and you kill the fattened calf for him!”** Notice it's not **“my brother,”** but **“your son.”** Yes, the elder brother is lost too. Lost in his rage. And though he had never left home, he was far from his father's heart.

In fact, one could say that....

II. THE ELDER BROTHER WAS EVEN MORE LOST.

In one sense, it doesn't make much sense to say the elder brother was **“more lost”** than the younger brother since **“lost is lost.”** Nevertheless, ask yourself why Jesus is so tough on the religious elite of His day. Why does he eat with tax-collectors and prostitutes, while seeming so critical of the Scribes and Pharisees? Is there a difference in their lostness?

Theologian, **John Gerstner** says, **“What really separates us from God is not so much our sin as our damnable good works.”** Before you shout heresy, let me explain.

A) Goodness has a way of masking our battle with God for control of our lives.

The Bible defines sin at its root as **“trying to be our own Savior and Lord.”** Sin is what **Tim Keller** calls **“cosmic treason.”** It’s our attempt to overthrow the rightful Savior in an attempt to become our own. It started with Adam and Eve and has continued on ever since. Adam and Eve wanted to **“be like God.”** In our human nature, so do we.

The younger, wayward brother had pulled no punches. He was straightforward in his lostness. He played no games. He simply said, **“I want out.”** In effect, he said, to the father in the parable: **“I want what you have, but I don’t want you.”** By the same token, however, when his luck ran out, and the consequences of his rebellion showed forth, he just as straightforwardly went home. No one needed to tell him where he went wrong. He already knew.

In **“elder brother lostness,”** however, his goodness masks the fact that he was just as interested in controlling his own life as the younger brother was. He didn’t want a relationship with the father any more than the younger brother did. **Both wanted what the father could give, yet without the father.** The younger brother went far away from the father geographically, but the elder son, who stayed home, was far away from the father’s heart. The father was celebrating because of the younger son’s return. But there was no dance in the heart of his elder son. **The elder son was “more lost” because he thought he was more deserving than his younger brother.** That sense of pride kept him far away from his father’s heart. While his brother was inside being honored, the elder brother

was sulking outside. He couldn't see his own need any more than he could welcome home his brother. The elder son had actually done a better job of becoming his own Savior than his younger brother. He felt more entitled to his father's blessing because he had stayed home tending to business.

Not only does goodness mask our need for a Savior, but ...

B) Goodness becomes our chief weapon against surrendering to God.

Not only do people hide behind their own goodness in resisting a Savior, but they use it as a weapon against God. In effect, the elder brother said, ***"I've obeyed you, why haven't you blessed me?"*** He was using his goodness as a weapon to assert control over God and say to him, ***"I deserve better, you owe me. I am good, therefore, I have rights."*** Notice the elder brother's words in v. 29, ***"Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders."*** The elder brother thought that the way to obtain his father's favor was through his works. The father just wanted him to be a son. ***"All that is mine is yours,"*** the father said. The elder son was performing on the outside by ***"slaving"*** for his father, and obeying orders. But his heart was unaffected. He still asserted his right to control his own destiny. The younger brother had allowed his rebellion to show outwardly, which was more genuine and true to his feelings; whereas the elder brother had rebelled internally, while acting more righteously on the outside. This attitude was actually far more insidious. When you use your goodness to get your rights, you become alienated from the Father's heart. ***Many people think they've become a Christian by repenting of their badness, while***

failing to realize that becoming a Christian also means repenting of their goodness. Our goodness is as big an obstacle to getting right with God as our badness - perhaps an even bigger obstacle.

Notice that the parable ends leaving us hanging. The father has come outside to tenderly plead with his elder son. Don't assume that because Jesus was hard on the Scribes and Pharisees that He didn't still love them and want them to join in the celebration of His Heavenly Father's Kingdom. The ending leaves us hanging. The choice was theirs.

APPLICATION:

Today we've learned that it matters little whether you are a socially acceptable sinner, like the Scribes and Pharisees - or a socially unacceptable sinner - like the younger wayward son. People tend to appraise such issues by external criteria. We quickly grant that stealing, murder, rape, and violence are wrong, especially when perpetrated against us. But Jesus would say that prayer, giving, preaching, or showing charity can be just as sinful when the motive of the heart is wrong. We might be tempted to look at the hard working elder brother and commend him. But his inward attitudes and motivations were just as evil, even more evil, than the younger brother's outward rebellion. For concealed behind the elder brother's external compliance is a deadly self-righteousness.

When self-righteousness pervades a person's heart, there is no sense of celebration or joy in the Father's presence. The elder brother was in the father's house and about the father's business but he didn't

know the father. ***There was religion without relationship.*** The elder son was obedient, but his heart wasn't in it. I fear there are those in the pews of churches throughout the world in the same category. So close, yet so far away from the Father's heart.

How about our worship? Neither son was able to enjoy the father for who he was. Happily the younger son changed. But at first both sons only viewed the father in terms of the good times he could provide, not in terms of the sheer joy of being at home in his presence. We are very much the same way with God. We most often see him as the giver instead of the gift. Do we come to him in prayer, not so much for the fellowship as much as for the things he can provide? True worship is enjoying God for who He is, not just for what He gives.

The father ran to meet his younger wayward son, and went outside to plead for his elder son to come inside. ***Which son are you?*** If we're honest, we've got both tendencies in us. Thank goodness, our Heavenly Father loves us enough to come to us whatever end of the spectrum we're on. His love is real and undeterred toward us, whatever the condition of our hearts might be. The Father wants us to join in the celebration and share in His heart of love. Let go of pride. Say yes to His grace. Let His forgiveness wash over you. There's nothing like being home with the Father and celebrating with others who share the same joy. **A-men.**