Two Lost Sons and One Loving Father
Part 2
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

This morning we are going to look again at what is probably the best loved of Jesus parables, which is traditionally called The Parable of the Prodigal Son, but which I am calling the Parable of Two Lost Sons and One Loving Father. Last week we looked at the first son, the younger brother, and this week we are going to look at the Older Brother.

Luke 15:1-3; 11-32

As I explained last week, to properly understand this parable you have to understand why Jesus was telling it in the first place. And the reason he was telling it in the first place was that the Pharisees and scribes, in Luke's words in v2, 'grumbled.'

Now these were the ultra religiously observant people of the day. These were the morally upright, the people who obeyed the rules, who conformed to traditional morality, who did the right thing. We might even say, they were the Bible believing people of their day. And yet they were offended by Jesus, because people who they thought were outside the bounds, tax collectors and sinners, people they thought were socially and religiously beyond the pale were coming to Jesus and he received them and ate with them. And in that culture, to eat with someone was to accept them, to welcome them into your circle. And the Pharisees and scribes couldn't stomach the fact he was doing that.

And so Jesus tells this story which he begins in v11: 'And he said, "There was a man who had two sons." So this parable isn't just about the younger prodigal son who throws off the rules and wastes his life, but then comes back to the father and is welcomed back and restored and everyone lives happily ever after. It's a story about two sons and a father. And whilst the younger son represents the tax collectors and sinners who have abandoned traditional morality and so separated themselves from respectable society, the older brother represents the Pharisees: the ones who prayed and studied the bible, the moral conformists.

And it's to them that Jesus is telling this parable. They are his audience. An audience of older brothers. And through this parable Jesus is telling them, and us, that both these sons, the younger AND the older are lost. Both of them are alienated from the father. Both these ways to live are dead end roads. Both self-centred hedonism, the if-it-feels-good-do-it kind of life AND moralistic religion are dead ends. Both irreligion and religion, both throwing off the rules and obeying the rules end in lives alienated from the father. Neither give us what the human heart is really seeking.

But through this parable Jesus is also saying there is another way and it's the way of grace, the way of the Father's feast.

Let's take a closer look then, at the older brother.

Always Working
Well, Jesus paints this picture of a wealthy landowner and straight up he tells us in v11 that this man has two sons. But at first all the action centers around the

younger son. We don't meet the older son until v25, when Jesus says, 'Now his older son was in the field.'

But what's he doing in the field? His younger brother who was as good as dead has come home, and the first his older brother hears of it is when he is coming back to the house from the fields and he hears the sound of the party. Now remember the Pharisees are complaining that Jesus is partying with sinners, and the first thing the older brother hears is the sound of partying coming from the father's house. But what has he been doing in the field? The answer is, he's been working. He's *always* working.

Later on, when his father comes out to him he says to his dad, v29, "These many years I have served you." These many years, day in and day out, I've served you. No – I've slaved for you, (which is how we could translate that verse).

Whilst his younger brother squandered his life, this elder son always did his duty, he always did what was right, he served, he slaved for his dad, so when his brother comes home, of course he's in the field, working. He's always working.

But what drives that work? What motivates his service - his *slaving*?

Is it love for his father? Hardly. Jesus says, v28, 'His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look…' Now, you have to understand that culturally no one would speak to their father the way he does, especially not to a wealthy, patriarchal landowner. The older son insults his father and by making his father come out to him and refusing to join the feast, he humiliates his dad in front of his guests. V29 again, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." There's no joy or love for his father there. He sees his father as a slave master who must be obeyed, whose will must be done. It's interesting isn't it, that what the younger brother would have considered himself fortunate to become – a slave of his dad, the older brother so bitterly resents.

So it's not love or gratitude for his father that has motivated these years of service. He demonstrates no more love for his father in his staying and obeying than his younger brother showed in his leaving and squandering. But if it's not love for his father, what has motivated him? What has driven these years of service?

It's love for himself. He's been motivated by self-gain, by what he hopes to get from his service. V29: 'I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.' You're giving him a banquet but you've never even taken me to McDonalds! Ah, so that's it! He thought that by serving and working he would get something in return from his dad. He thought that the way to his inheritance, to getting his hands on his father's stuff was by *obeying* the rules, by being the good son. His claim upon his father is based on his hard work, his service, his obedience, his morality.

And that, Jesus is saying to the Pharisees – is the dead end of moralistic religion. You see, the Pharisees, and every previous and subsequent reincarnation of moralistic religion, thinks that you can earn favour with God, you can deserve your young goat, you can merit your salvation, you can earn your place in heaven, get in God's good books by working, by obeying the rules, by conforming, by serving. That's what was motivating this older brother, and it's what motivates every older brother.

And it's not just the Pharisees who struggle with this. We all do. In one sense we are all older brothers. If you are anything like me, or those in our homegroup, or like my girls as we have discussed this around the dining table, we all feel at least a twinge of sympathy for this elder brother. His younger brother *doesn't* deserve this feast, and he *does* deserve his young goat. Deep inside each one of us is this feeling that we have to earn and merit and deserve our heavenly Father's favour. We are all, at heart, older brothers.

But there lies the danger.

The Dangers of the Older Brother

1. When doing the right thing costs you
The older brother is motivated to do the right thing because he will gain by doing it. But what happens when, rather than bringing you gain, doing the right thing costs you? What if you are motivated to be scrupulous in your business dealings or faithful in your marriage, or observant in your religion because you stand to gain by behaving like that, but then you are faced with a situation that if you do the right thing, it will cost you: what does the older brother do then? What do you do when marriage is more 'in sickness' than 'in health', when being honest at work costs you your job rather than earns you promotion. If the older brother mentaility is at work in your heart, then you'll find a way to internally justify doing the *wrong* thing, because that's what brings you gain. You see, we need a higher motive than self-gain and self-interest.

2. Suffering
The second danger for the older brother is when he faces personal suffering. You see, the older brother in the parable thinks that his father owes him. And if we think we can earn God's favour and blessing and rewards by the way we live, then when things don't go our way, and life doesn't turn out the way we want it, we get bitter and resentful against God. When the older brother heard the music and the dancing, and the servant told him the reason, Jesus tells us his response was anger.

And the danger for you and me is that we think God owes us. And then, if suffering comes our way, we think: I don't deserve this, God. How could you treat me like this when I have always obeyed the rules, when I've been faithful and served and obeyed and tithed? This shouldn't be happening to me.' And like the older brother, we can be eaten up by resentment and anger and bitterness. You see, there is this hidden assumption that if you live right, you can control God. That he exists to bless you. That you are the king and he is the servant, and that

by living right, you can put him in your debt. And if that's the case, when suffering comes your way, you rail against God. It's interesting to me, that for the younger brother it was the famine, suffering outside his control, adverse circumstances that weren't directly his fault, that began to turn him back to the father. But for an older brother, or someone with older brother tendencies, someone who thinks God owes him, such a famine might just turn him away from God.

3. When you go unrecognized

The third danger for older brothers is what happens when you are unrecognized. In the parable, the older brother contrasts the young goat he never got with the fattened calf served up for his brother. As far as he's concerned he's not been treated anywhere near as well as he deserved. All his years of service have gone unrecognized by his father, there's no credit for all he's done. Now, do you ever hear just the faintest of echoes of similar thoughts in your own heart? 'I went to all that trouble and no one said a word.' You see, when you serve to be seen you resent it when you're not seen. It's the heart of the older brother.

And coupled with that is a resentment of others when they get recognized or honoured or treated better than they deserve and we don't. The older brother cannot accept the way his father wipes his brother's slate clean. He bitterly resents his dad's lavish, gracious treatment of his brother. Why? 'Because he doesn't deserve it and I do!' So an older brother mentality can not only make us bitter and resentful toward God, when things don't go our way, it can also make us bitter and resentful to others when things go their way.

4. Pride.

But the fourth danger for older brothers is pride. This son, even as he angrily insults and humiliates his father in front of his guests makes the startling claim in v29, 'I never disobeyed your command.' He thinks he has no sins to confess. And if this older brother mentality is at work in your heart then you can think of yourselves, as he does of his younger brother, as simply better than others. Look how he compares himself to his brother: v30 'this son of yours…who has devoured your property with prostitutes.' He can't even bring himself to talk of him as his brother. They are not on the same moral plain. There is only this sense of disdain, of moral superiority. As with another of Jesus' parables, 'thank God I am not like this tax collector.'

So older brothers ultimately put their trust in themselves, in their moral record, they and not God are their savior. And they don't see themselves as belonging to a community of sinners, to a community of those who can only enter in because the Father has been gracious to them. Rather, there is a critical, judgmental, and unforgiving spirit towards those who fail. Ironically, as Tim Keller points out in his book Prodigal God, it is precisely because of older brothers that so many younger brothers leave religion behind them.

But lest you are sat there thinking about all these people who you know who are just like this, and who really need to hear this, remember: you can even be older brother like about older brothers. We can be pharisaical about Pharisees.

5. It's a joyless life
When the younger brother comes home, all the years of the older brother's pent up anger and frustration pour out. His life has been one of service without celebration. Working but no feasting. V29: 'You never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.' But from what the father says, he could have had a party anytime he wanted. It is the emotional repression of the religious legalist. There is no assurance that the father loves him, no joy at being about the father's business. Why is that? Because if you think that God's acceptance and love for you is conditional on your performance and your doing, you will always be worrying: have I done enough? Do I make the grade? There is no conviction, no inner assurance that your father loves you in-spite of your failings, there is no rock of grace on which you can stand, only a flimsy rug of your own performance, which can so easily be pulled out from under you. So there is no overflowing joy. No skip in the step of service.

And so, thinking its all about serving and earning his way with his father, and deserving his inheritance, the older son ends up outside the feast, while his younger brother, who accepts his father's free, underserved grace ends up inside. And that is the greatest danger of all.

Loved but lost
With his eldest son standing outside, angry and refusing to come join the party, the father is reduced to going outside and trying to persuade him to come in. And culturally you need to understand the disgrace and public humiliation that would mean for the father.

But how does the father respond? With love! It's the father who takes the initiative, who goes out to his angry son. And his response to his son is as gentle and tender as the older son's was harsh: v31: 'And he said to him, "Son" – child. And he expresses his love for him. The father loves the older brother just as much as he loves the younger brother. He loves them both and he wants both of them at the feast.

Amazingly, the harsh older brother isn't met by an equally harsh rejection, but by a gracious father pleading with him to come and join the feast, to turn from his self-righteousness and accept his father's grace. And Jesus is saying to the Pharisees and every other older brother, God loves you. He loves the younger brother who squanders his life, but he also loves the older brother, the hardened and self-righteous Pharisee.

But whilst this older brother is just as loved as his younger brother, Jesus is also saying that he is just as lost. We might look at these two brothers – one throwing off the rules and doing his own thing, and the other doing his duty and obeying the rules and think one is good and the other bad, but Jesus is saying both are lost. The older brother whose life is under control, who is self-disciplined, who obeys the rules, is just as alienated from his father as his wayward younger brother. Both sons resented their father's authority. Both sons were more interested in their father's stuff than their father. Both wanted control of their

lives. And you can rebel against God just as much by keeping all the rules meticulously, as you can by throwing them all off. Neither son loves the Father for himself.

And in the end, incredibly, it's the older brother's pride, his pride in his moral record, in his uprightness, that keeps him outside. It's his righteousness that keeps him from the feast that is going on under his nose. And all the time he, and the Pharisees and every older brother, thinks he's the insider, when actually he's the one on the outside. His refusal to receive and share in his Father's joy and grace leaves him an outsider.

And as the story ends, we're left wondering, Will he go into the feast, or will he stay outside? What will he do? And the answer is, we don't know. Jesus deliberately leaves the story hanging, because only the Pharisees can finish their own story. And only you can finish yours. But in leaving this brother outside, Jesus is leaving them with this loving warning: whilst they are just as loved as the tax-collectors and sinners, the younger brothers, their position is more precarious. The younger son knows he's lost, he knows he needs to humble himself, he knows he needs to come back to the father and throw himself upon his mercy. And he comes. But the older brother refuses to acknowledge his lostness. He can't see it, just as religious people generally can't see their need to be rescued and found. After all, why should they? - they are good enough already.

So through this powerful parable Jesus is telling us that the gospel is not legalism or licentiousness. It is not moral conservatism or liberalism. It's not throwing off the rules or obeying the rules. Both those ways of living end in dead ends, in lives alienated from God. The gospel is something totally different. It is about God's lavish grace, to both older brothers and younger brothers, to Pharisees and tax collectors, to you and me, people who don't deserve it and could never earn it. It's about the Father's joy and his wanting you, whoever you are, to come and join the feast.

But as we close, just ask yourself, where's the seeker? You see, this parable is one of three Jesus tells the Pharisees in response to their grumbling at him. It's the third in the trilogy. But in the previous two, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin each had a seeker. The shepherd went in search of the lost sheep, the woman went in search of the lost coin. But in this parable, no-one went in search of the lost son. So where's the seeker?

The Missing Seeker

Now, on the one hand, of course, Jesus tells the parable as it is: God the Father stands waiting for us prodigal sons to come to our senses. He gives us the choice: will we return to our Father or not? But on the other hand, the absence of a seeker is puzzling. Well, who should have gone? Wasn't it the older son who should have gone looking for his younger brother? I mean, if the older brother had loved his brother and his father, if he had cared for his father's name and honour, and his younger brothers safety and future, shouldn't he have gone out and sought for his brother, and scoured the countryside for him, and found him hungry and naked and broken in his pigpen and tried to persuade him to come

home? Shouldn't he have been the seeker? But instead of a self-sacrificial older brother, who comes looking for him to bring him home, the younger brother has a self-righteous Pharisee as a brother.

And now the younger brother is back, the older brother can't even bring himself to acknowledge him as his brother: v30: 'this son of yours'. You see, there would have been a cost to going and finding his brother and there would be a cost in forgiving his brother. If the younger son is to be fully reinstated as a son, it means less for the older brother. There is always a cost to forgiveness. And the younger brother had a Pharisee for a brother, who wasn't prepared to pay the cost.

The good news of the gospel is, we don't. In Jesus we have an older brother who willingly takes the cost of our failure upon himself. What the older brother wasn't prepared to do, *the* Older Brother, our Older Brother, Jesus was prepared to do and through his death he paid the price for us, he took our shame and our debt and our guilt upon himself, he paid it, so that we can be restored to the Father, that we might be welcomed home.

So where is the seeker in the story? Where is the Brother who goes out and finds the lost son? He's the one telling the story. The Son of Man has come, Jesus said, to seek and to save the lost. Thank God he has.