

SERMON BY IVAN BROWN
READING LUKE 15:1-3,12b-32
“DEAD OR ALIVE”

This parable that we read this morning is surely one of my favourites. I come back to it again and again. I come back to it because it challenges me... it challenges me to think about my faith and perhaps by the time I have finished some of you may be challenged in the same way as I am. But before I launch into it I must thank Tim Kellar for his guidance in interpreting this parable.

Some time ago I attended the funeral of a lady of whom I had become extremely fond; a lady of deep, deep faith, infectious faith. She shared her faith and love for the Lord so freely and so naturally that you could not help but be affected by it. I last visited her in the hospital where she spent the last few weeks of her life. Even there she continued to share her faith and love for the Lord in the same way with the nurses and other patients... with some effect, I might add. However, over the last week her strength was such that she couldn't make herself understood. Then one morning when a nurse was attending to something near her bed she heard her say 'lift me up.' Thinking that she was speaking to her the nurse turned around to see the lady's eyes cast heavenward, her hands outstretched toward Heaven, and saying quite clearly 'lift me up'. Then she closed her eyes and passed from this life. Such faith! Such faith! I tell you, if more people had such faith, this world would be a better place.

And I thank the Lord that such faith exists in the church today. However it is by no means universal; in fact there is an element of spiritual deadness in many churches today. I can't comment on any particular church – that's not for me to say as I cannot see into people's hearts. But Jesus could, and he didn't shrink from confronting spiritual deadness whenever he came across it and he does so in this parable that we read this morning – the parable of the Prodigal Son.

I say Prodigal Son, because it is traditionally known to us as the parable of the Prodigal Son although modern translations of the Bible call it the parable of the lost son. The word prodigal means recklessly extravagant. It is associated with words like 'child prodigy', and 'prodigious'. Nowadays we think of it negatively as meaning wayward and wasteful, but it wasn't always so. When Charles Spurgeon first preached on this parable, it was 29th March 1891 and his sermon was entitled, 'Prodigal love for the Prodigal son', and I suspect the reason he expressed it that way was because we need an extravagantly loving God to deal with our reckless sin.

When most people think about this parable they tend to focus on the younger brother and his greedy and sinful nature. Indeed you may think that the sentiment expressed in our Psalm reading this morning mirrored the thoughts of the younger brother. But I'm going to suggest to you today that this story wasn't addressed to younger brother types and it's not mainly about the younger brother. In fact by the end of this sermon you may consider that the psalm reflects more accurately the thoughts that the elder brother should have!

Let me set the scene... At the very beginning of this chapter of Luke, Jesus was surrounded by two groups of people – there were the sinners and tax collectors, (the Good News translation calls them simply 'outcasts' because that's how they were thought of.) Then there were the Pharisees and teachers of the law – the religious types. He told them 3 parables – the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son. He told *them* it says in v3 – he addresses it to the religious types who were muttering against him welcoming and eating with outcasts. So this is a parable addressed to religious types – people who go to church, pray, read their bibles, have daily quiet times for the Lord.

In this parable we have three figures – we have the younger brother who takes his part of the inheritance and runs off to spend it on prostitutes and riotous living, but the elder brother who stays home and obeys the father; he is like the Pharisees, he represents the religious types. And in fact the last part of the parable is all about him. At the end the father is addressing the elder brother, not the younger brother and that's how the parable ends. The point of this parable is to address us in the church, the religious people, the moral people, not the dissolute, the outcasts. The second point about the parable is – and this is just shocking – the parable shows that both the younger brother and

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the elder brother are both alienated from the father, who represents God. They're both alienated from the father's heart. In both cases they are lost – that means that the father has to come out and invite them in.

In the case of the younger brother, he doesn't love the father; he just wants the father's money; he just wants to go off and spend the father's money anyway he wants.

By the end of the parable we see that the elder brother also doesn't really love the father. When the father is giving this great feast for the return of the younger brother, this is the greatest thing in the father's life. And the elder brother knows that but he doesn't care; he won't go in. He doesn't love the father. He's upset with how the father is using the estate, how he's spending the money, what he is doing with the possessions of the family. So we see that the elder brother, just like the younger brother, loves the father's things, but not the father. What both of them want is the father's money – not the father.

Look how the younger brother gets the father's money – by being very bad, by grabbing it and running off. But look at how the elder brother tries to get the father's money – by staying home and being very very good; by being utterly compliant, by being very obedient. In v29 he says, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.'

Wait a minute – do you know what that says? It says that there are two ways to be your own saviour and lord; there are two ways to try to get control of your own life instead of letting God control you. One is by being very, very bad and being immoral and irreligious and the other – and this is the shocking bit – the other is by being very, very good and moral and religious and never disobeying, and going to church and praying, having your quiet time every morning. Those are two ways to get the father's things.

You see the elder brother says, 'because I'm living a very good life God has to bless me, God has to answer my prayers, God has to take me into heaven, God has to respect me now.' You know what that means – for the elder brother type Jesus might be his inspiration or her example, or Jesus might be the elder brothers' helper but he's not their saviour. They are being their own saviour.

So there are two ways to be your own saviour and lord; one is by being very irreligious and the other is by being very religious. One is by being very immoral – the other is by being very moral. Both ways are basically ways to reject God. The trouble is the elder brothers think that they are with God. 'Look I've stayed home, I'm doing everything you want'. Yet underneath there is no difference.

So when you get to the shocking ending and this is the shocking ending to this parable. We've seen how both the younger brother and the elder brother are alienated from the father. In both cases the father has to come out and urge each son to come into the feast, which is salvation. So at the end of the parable where are we? The younger brother comes in to the feast but the elder brother does not. He won't come in, he is angry with his father because he hasn't done what he wanted him to do.

It means that at the end of the parable the bad boy is saved but the good boy is lost. And the good boy is not lost in spite of his goodness – he's lost because of his goodness, because in v29 the reason he won't go in to the father's feast, the reason he rejects the father is because he says 'I've never disobeyed you'. 'I'm mad at you because you're not doing things the way I want you to. I won't come in because I've been so good and you're not doing things the way I want you to do.' So in the end he's lost, not in spite of his goodness but because of his goodness.

This gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, it's neither morality nor immorality; it's not even something in the middle; it's something altogether different. So how does this play out in the church. It's very simple – religion operates on the principle 'I obey, therefore I'm accepted.' The gospel operates on exactly the opposite principle – 'I'm accepted because of what Jesus Christ has done for me on the cross, therefore I obey.' 'I obey, therefore I'm accepted' versus 'I'm accepted because of what Jesus Christ has done for me on the cross, therefore I obey.'

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Two people operating on these directly opposite principles can be sitting right next to one another in church. They're both coming to church and they're trying very hard to give their money and to pray and to obey the commandments and to love their neighbour as themselves, for two utterly different motives; in two utterly different spirits and with two completely different results. And here's why – elder brothers are obeying God to get things – they're actually trying to make God a means to an end.

But people who believe the gospel are utterly different. The gospel is not – I give God a righteous record and therefore he owes me – that's how elder brothers think. The gospel is – God, through his infinite love and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and the sending of his Holy Spirit gives us a righteous record and then we live for him.

And, if you believe that, that means that everything that a rational being could possibly want is already yours. When you receive the Father through the Son, everything is yours, eternal life, adoption into the family, guaranteed citizenship in the new heaven and the new earth, with no suffering, no disease and the knowledge that you are the delight and the joy of the only being in the universe whose opinion matters.

And it's already yours, it's all yours. So why does a gospel-believing person obey God?

Elder brother types obey God to get things, but Gospel believers obey God just to get more of God. Gospel believers want to resemble Christ, want to delight God just want to have more of Him.

And therefore, here's the source of spiritual deadness.

Elder brothers, because they are trying to make God compliant, through their obedience, and their spiritual performance and their commitment and how good they are to people and what good family members they are; they believe they're getting leverage over God. And because they believe that, on the one hand they are self-righteous toward anyone else who's not living a good life; on the other hand they're insecure inside because they're not sure they're being good enough.

Functionally, in their hearts their standing with God is based on their performance and as a result you do not see the things that Paul says should be growing. You do not see the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, humility, self-control. Instead you have self-centredness and pride, you have back-biting.

What are the marks of the elder brothers – 1. Elder brothers get incredibly angry when their life doesn't go well. With life, with God – and that shows they believe God owes them. 2. Elder brothers respond to criticism in one of two ways; they either respond with vicious counter-attacks or they are completely devastated. That's because the self-regard of elder brothers is not rooted in who they are in Christ; it's rooted in their self image and reputation of being a good person. 3. Elder brothers pray. Pharisees prayed; but their prayers are mostly petitionary – when things are tough there are a lot of prayers and when things are good, well the prayers dwindle away. They don't take the opportunity simply to enjoy God's presence; there's no adoration, no intimacy. 4. And probably worst of all, elder brothers just can't forgive. In the short term anger is right, normal, natural, but in the long run you just can't stay angry and bitter towards someone unless you feel superior to them.

To get right with God, what do elder brothers need to do? They need to repent to achieve renewal. But not repent for the things they do wrong – the Pharisees did that and they were still Pharisees. It was just one more thing to do, one more way of obeying in their eyes. But, as a result they were even more Pharisaic. Elder brothers need to repent for the reasons for the things they do right. Because the reason for the things they do right is to ensure that God owes them. It has been said that what separates us from God is not our sins but our damnable good works.

So, what is the moral of this parable? We read it and we see that if we do wrong we need to repent and really be sorry and return to the Lord.

That's right, we need to do that. But that is just one more thing to do, just like the Pharisees. But if that's all we see, we miss the point. We need to see what it cost to bring the sinner home. You may say it only cost a robe, a ring and the fatted calf. But think about it. When the younger brother left he took half the inheritance and spent it. Therefore what was left, every robe, every ring, every fatted calf actually belonged to the elder brother.

Atonement was going to be costly and the elder brother was angry about it. He wasn't a true elder brother. A true elder brother would have gone to the far off land found his younger brother in the pigsty, embraced him and brought him back away from the pigs and the starvation and brought him home to the family at his expense. That's a true elder brother. But the point of the parable is that that young man didn't have a true elder brother, he had a Pharisee – what a tragedy.

That young man didn't have a true elder brother – but we do. We do. If it's really true that the father can only bring us back in at the expense of the elder brother we don't just need an elder brother who would go to a far country to save us; we would need someone who would come from heaven to earth. And we just don't need a brother who would save us at the cost of his money; we would need a true elder brother who would save us at the cost of his life.

And we have him! The only reason we can be clothed in the father's robe, the only reason we can drink from the cup of salvation is because Jesus Christ was stripped naked on the cross and drank the cup of judgement and wrath, for us.

The only way we can chase the elder brother in us away is to focus on our true elder brother, Jesus Christ, and the love that the Father showed at his expense. It's the only way we can truly appreciate the Gospel message - God, through his infinite love and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ gives us a righteous record, sends his Holy Spirit into our lives and then we live for him. That means that everything that a rational being could possibly want is already ours.

The elder brother in our parable got angry with God because things didn't go his way. God says "Have you any right to be angry?" I think not. What do you think?

Please pray with me...

Father God, we are heartily sorry for the wrong things in our lives. You know that already. Today we come to you in penitence for the reasons for some of the right things that we do. We are so easily caught up in the comfort of our goodness that we are tempted to think that you owe us something. But in reality you have already given us more than we could ever deserve. Guide us always to be alive to the truth that we have a true elder brother in Jesus Christ, a brother who has saved us at the expense of his life for our sins; a brother whose goodness makes ours seem so insignificant; a brother whose reasons for his actions were supremely pure in comparison with ours. Loving Father, help us always to appreciate that through Jesus Christ you have given us a righteous record so that all that we could possibly want is already ours. Guide us then to chase away the elder brother in us and to live for you in all our actions. In the name of our true elder brother, Jesus Christ.

Amen.