

The Prodigal Sons

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[0 : 00] The parable that we just heard read is very famous, and it's almost always called the parable of the prodigal son, but Jesus does not call it that.

Notice he starts the parable by saying, there was a man that had two sons. And if you read this parable, mainly concentrating on the younger brother, if you think of it mainly or completely in terms of a story about that younger brother, the younger son who went off and squandered his money with riotous living and then came back, if you think mainly about him, you turn the parable into a very, very sentimental thing.

And you can imagine the original hearers were weeping tears from their eyes as they heard about how God accepts us, no matter how we live, no matter what we've done.

But actually, if you really look at the parable and you realize it's as much about the older son as the younger son, there's as many verses about the elder brother as the younger brother.

If you understand that Jesus himself calls this parable a contrast and comparison between these two sons. If you read it like that, as we will, you're going to begin to see that the earliest hearers, the first hearers, were not at all moved in a warm sort of way.

[1 : 33] They were confused and they were probably offended. Because this parable is not told to warm our hearts, but to explode every normal human category that the world has about how to approach God.

This particular parable teaches us that everything we've ever heard about coming to God is wrong. Let's look at the parable under three headings.

Number one, it shows us there's two approaches to God that the world knows about and they're both wrong. Secondly, it says, therefore, there's two ways to be lost.

There's two ways to be alienated from God. There's two ways to be away from God. And then thirdly, but there's still only one way home. Two approaches to God that are wrong.

Two ways to be lost and alienated from God. But only one way home. Let's look at the first. Let's look at these two approaches. And to understand that, you have to realize the two groups of people that were surrounding Jesus as he tells this parable.

[2 : 36] Now, Willie wisely read the context of the three parables. And chapter 15, verse 1 and 2, we're told the tax collectors and the sinners were gathering around to hear him.

But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. And then Jesus told them this parable. And he tells them three parables. And the third one is the parable of the prodigal son.

There are two groups of people present. In fact, when you read the Gospels, there's almost always these two groups of people present. You have the tax collectors. You have the sinners. You have the Pharisees.

You have the religious leaders. And they are represented by the two sons in the parable. Tax collectors, sinners. These are younger brothers.

They've left home, quote unquote. They have left their parents' values. They've gone off to live immoral, irreligious lifestyles. Then on the other hand, you have the Pharisees and the religious leaders and the religious people, the moral people.

[3 : 36] They are represented by the elder brother. They are the people who have stayed home, as it were. They are people who are living morally and they're living religiously and they're following the tradition of the elders.

Now, what's interesting about reading the Gospels is these two groups are always turning up and ordinarily, just as it says here, the tax collectors and the sinners were gathering around to hear him.

The Greek tense there indicates that that was something that happened regularly. The tax collectors and the sinners, the immoral people, the irreligious people, they're always gathered to Jesus.

They're always attracted to Jesus. And whenever these two groups show up, whenever they are contrasted with each other, you know what happens? For example, when Simon the Pharisee is in the same room in Luke 7 with the fallen woman, when even Nicodemus in chapter 3 of John has an interview with Jesus and then in John 4, there's the woman with five husbands and now living with a man, has an interview in John chapter 4, when you have even the Pharisee and the publican in the parable of Luke 18.

Every time you see an elder brother and a younger brother anywhere in the Gospels, it's the younger brother who understands grace fastest. It's the younger brother who understands Jesus fastest.

[4 : 57] It's the younger brother who gets it. And it's the older brothers who are always confused, grumpy, and offended. That's why Jesus at one point actually says to them in Matthew 21, 31, the tax collectors and the prostitutes enter the kingdom of God before you.

Now, this is why the religious leaders are always nervous about Jesus. Can you understand why? They look at the people who come to Jesus and they say, these people never come to our services. These people never come to our meetings. Why are they coming to yours? Because he must be telling them something they want to hear. And so they're very upset. And this is, by the way, I know it's a little early in the sermon to be this challenging, but let me suggest a challenging point.

When the Gospel message is clearly proclaimed, immoral people, irreligious people, people outside the mainstream, broken people, are attracted to it.

And buttoned-down people, conservative people, traditional people, moral people tend to be confused by it. That's what you see all the way through the Bible.

[6 : 11] That's not how our churches operate. The kind of people that were really attracted to Jesus don't like us in general. The churches, the evangelical churches.

Why? My only suggestion would be that there's more of the elder brother in us than we'd like to think. And there's less of Jesus in us than we'd like to think.

But, now that you understand that these two groups of people are represented in the parable by the younger brother and the elder brother, what do we learn about these two approaches? These two boys, these two young men, represent the basic two approaches to the moral, to the spiritual, to God that the world understands or knows about.

First, the elder brother represents what I'll call the moralistic grid, or the moralistic approach, the moralistic approach to God. The Pharisees and the religious leaders of the time believed that while they were part of a people chosen by grace, the Jews believed they were chosen people by grace, but they believed they could only maintain their blessing, that they could only attain to the salvation and the resurrection by living an absolutely morally pristine life.

They believed they had to morally perform and spiritually perform and pray and worship and read the Bible. They had to live up to God's standards or they wouldn't be saved. And, of course, they expected to sometimes fail, but they believed that even though they might fail, as long as they repented intensely, as long as they repented quickly and strongly, and as long as they didn't have to repent too often, they would make it.

[7 : 47] So they had to measure up to their own goodness, and that's the moralistic approach to God. Then, the younger brother represents what we could call the relativistic or the individualistic approach to God.

The relativistic or individualistic approach. Salvation to this group, though they don't use the word salvation, doesn't mean submitting my desires to some moral standards. It means finding what I want to do.

It means getting out there and being true to myself, determining what is right or wrong for me, and living that life, and that's what they mean by living authentically. So you have the moralistic approach, you have the relativistic, individualistic approach to the spiritual, to the moral, to God.

And our society is completely divided along those two lines. Now, I mean, in the United States, they're kind of right now equally powerful, and our society is very, very divided by these two.

But every society is divided by these two. And here's how you know. If you tell an individualistic, relativistic person to receive Christ, to come to Christ, they automatically believe that you're calling them into the moralistic approach.

[8 : 57] They automatically believe you're saying, believe certain doctrines, do certain practices, live in a certain way, clean up your life in a certain way, and then God will bless you, answer your prayers, and take you to heaven. They automatically believe if you're looking at a relativistic, individualistic person and calling them into Christ, they automatically think you're calling them into the moralistic approach because the world only knows those two.

If you're not in one, you're in the other. And each one of these approaches divides the world straight down the middle into two groups. The moralistic approach says, the good people are in and the bad people are out.

But the relativistic approach says, the open-minded people are in and the bigoted, judgmental people are out. So the moralistic approach says, the trouble with this world, the trouble with our society is these bad people.

And the more liberal, the more relativistic, secular approach says, the trouble with the world, the trouble with our society is these bigoted, judgmental people that think they have the truth. So each group, in a sense, is moralistic.

But in other words, it's the moralistic approach, the relativistic approach, they divide the world in half. And as far as they know, this is the only approaches to the moral, the spiritual, and to God we know. So Jesus takes both of these approaches apart.

[10 : 17] Now first of all, it's rather obvious by looking at what happens to the younger brother, that Jesus is saying that the approach that says, live your own life, rebel, riotous living, prostitutes, he shows in the parable that that leads to devastation.

He shows that leads to poverty. He shows that leads to very, very bad things. He shows it's destructive. But we have to keep in mind that the purpose of this parable is actually aimed at the moralistic grid.

Because in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 15, it's the Pharisees who are grumbling and angry about all these people coming to Jesus, the tax collectors and the sinners. And Jesus is actually devoting this parable to them.

And this is what is so astounding about this parable. And this is the reason why when you understand this as a comparison and contrast of the two boys, the two brothers, you'll see that this wasn't heartwarming at all to the original hearers.

There are two men. There's a moral young man and an immoral young man. And they are both alienated from the father. That comes out because in verse 20, the father has to come out to the younger brother to urge him to come into the father's feast.

[11 : 33] And in verse 28, the father has to go out to the older brother and urge him to come on in. Both of them are alienated from the father. Both of them are alienated from the father's heart.

As we're going to see in a minute, both of them want control of the father's wealth without the father. Both of them are alienated. Both of them are away from the father. Both of them are invited to come in. But here's the astounding part.

In the end, it's the good son that's lost and the bad son that's saved. It's the good son that repents, sees his situation, embraces the father and comes in, and the bad son that's not.

And don't you think that the hearers were stunned by this? Because they realized this was a contradiction of everything that they'd ever been told.

The lover of prostitutes enters the kingdom of the father, and the moral young man does not. But here's what's really stunning. It's what is keeping the elder brother out?

[12 : 31] What keeps him from going in? He is not lost despite his goodness. He's lost because of it. Because what he says here in verse 29 is, all these years I've been slaving for you, and I've never disobeyed.

He won't go in. He's angry at the father, not because of his badness, but because of his pride and his goodness. He believes his obedience, he believes his righteousness means that the father owes him, and the father needs to listen to him.

He's not lost because of his badness, he's lost because of his attitude toward his goodness, his pride in his goodness, his self-righteousness. And now we begin to see that what Jesus is doing here is he's trying to show us something amazing.

The gospel is not religion per se or irreligion. It's not morality all by itself, and it's not immorality. And it's not something halfway in the middle.

You see, the moralistic say the good people are in and the bad people are out. The relativistic say the open-minded people are in and the bigoted, judgmental people are out.

[13:40] But the gospel says the humble are in and the proud are out. The gospel says the people who know they're not good are in. And the people who think they are are out.

And that's not halfway between the two. It's not halfway between the moralistic and the relativistic. It's off the spectrum of human opinion altogether. It's something completely else.

Other. It's something completely different. And the people who heard this parable must have been absolutely astonished and confused. And maybe some of you are too.

So let's move on. Jesus is telling us through this parable that both of the natural, both of the ordinary human categories for how you approach the moral and the spiritual in God are wrong. Now, the second thing we learn here from this parable is that therefore there's two ways to be lost. There's two ways to be alienated from the Father. There's two ways to be alienated from God.

[14:42] Now, when you think of being alienated from God, you think of sin. All right, what is sin? And ordinarily, I think, most of us think of sin, whether we say it overtly or out loud or not, most of us think of sin as breaking God's rules for behavior.

Sin is breaking God's rules for behavior. And the Bible goes deeper. Jesus goes deeper. And let me show you why. What we have here are two young men who both want the Father's wealth but resent the Father's control of the wealth.

So, for example, the first young man, the younger brother, wants the Father's wealth without the Father. He wants the Father's things without the Father. In other words, he wants to be his own father. But unfortunately, his father's still alive.

So, how do you get the Father's things? How can you be the head of your own estate? How can you be your own father when the Father's still around? He rebels. He says, I want, liquidate the estate, at least my part of the estate, give me my entire inheritance now so I can live as I want. In other words, this young man wants to be his own Savior and Lord. That's the essence of sin. And the way in which he acts that out in his life is he breaks all the moral rules, he leaves his father's values, he goes off and uses prostitutes and so on.

[16:04] But, look at this older brother. It's very clear as the parable goes on that the older brother is just as resentful of the Father's control of the wealth as the younger was.

He's very unhappy with the way the Father's using the robe, the rings, the calves. He's very unhappy with all these things. He's just as much out to be his own Savior and Lord.

But, now look. There's two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. There's two ways to be your own Savior. There's two ways to do self-salvation. One is by being very bad and breaking all the moral rules.

And one is by being very good and keeping all the moral rules. See, the elder brother is trying to get control of the Father's wealth by being absolutely good, by being totally obedient.

And saying, because I'm totally obedient, you must listen to me now. There are two ways to be your own Savior and there's two ways to be your own Lord. One is by being very good and one is by being very bad.

[17:03] And the reason you're being good in self-salvation is so that God has to bless you, so that God has to do the things you ask, so God has to answer your prayers because you've been so good.

If you're living a life right now and you feel like, because I've tried so hard, I've tried so hard to obey God's moral law, I pray, I do everything right, therefore my life needs to be going right. And it's not. If you think God owes you a good life because of the life you're living, you are an elder brother. And Jesus may be your helper and Jesus may be your example and Jesus may be all sorts of things, but he's not your Savior.

You're your own Savior. Flannery O'Connor, an American writer of the South, has in one of her novels a character named Hazel Motes.

And at one point, she describes him like this. She says, there was a deep, dark conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin. Does that sound odd to you?

[18:04] Not at all. He's an elder brother. If you are really good, Jesus is your helper. Jesus is occasionally the person you pray to and so on. But he's not your Savior.

You're your own Savior. Now listen, this is really, really, really subtle. Because if you're a Christian, you obey the God's law. If you're a Christian, you pray. If you're a Christian, you go to church.

If you're a Christian, you try tremendously hard to please God. But you try to please God for a completely different reason and a completely different motivation than an elder brother. And that makes all the difference.

The religious motivation is to say, I obey, therefore, God accepts me. The gospel is, I'm accepted by God through sheer grace, therefore, I obey. Religion motivates completely out of fear and insecurity.

I always have to work really hard because I don't know if I'm being good enough. The gospel motivates completely out of joy and gratitude. Or put another way, the religious moral person obeys God to get things, to get blessing, to get prayers answered.

[19 : 09] But the gospel motivates us to obey God just to get God, just to please him, just to resemble him, just to be closer to him, just to give us, just to get out of joy.

Now we see why we have here a deeper definition of sin than breaking God's moral rules for behavior. Of course, breaking God's rules for behavior is sin.

But it's possible, unless we understand this, we're really going to be tripped up. It's possible to be living a life of terrible sin and self-salvation yet obeying all the rules. The elder brother did it.

And now that we see this new definition of sin, this deeper biblical definition of sin, now we can begin to see that there's actually two forms of lostness. Now, younger brother lostness, we know. Addiction. Pigsty. Alienation. Skepticism. Brokenness. Okay. We know younger brother lostness. Everybody knows what it looks like.

[20 : 10] But do you know about elder brother lostness? Elder brother lostness. The elder brother lostness in many ways is much more dangerous than the younger brother lostness because you don't see it in yourself.

See, if you're really sick and you know you're sick, you go to the doctor and generally you get better. But if you're really sick and you refuse to know, to see you're sick, to refuse to believe you're sick, and you don't go to a doctor, then you die.

And the younger brothers know they're alienated from God. They may not believe there's a God, but they know they're alienated from God. But it's so hard to tell an elder brother who's trying to read the Bible and trying to obey and trying to be good that they're alienated from God.

They'll just be offended. This is one of the reasons why in some ways elder brother lostness is really worse. Let's just say it's more deadly. And, keep this in mind, not only in every church are there elder brothers, every single revival in the history of the world has shown that our churches are filled with elder brothers.

And when the Spirit anoints the preaching and when the gospel is proclaimed clearly, there's always lots and lots of people who thought they were Christians and realized they were elder brothers under the preaching of the gospel.

[21 : 28] And then they very, very embarrassingly said, hey, you know, I've been this and I've been that in the church for years, but I had no idea what the gospel really was. So, the church has always got elder brothers in it.

Every church has got elder brothers in it. But, more extensive is elder brother-ishness. Now, by the way, that's a new word and it's been coined here.

So, you can write this down because you can say, I was there when it happened. You see, most people, if you're a younger brother and you become a Christian, you know, out of the riotous living and all that, there's always a danger to sliding back into it.

I mean, you know, there's wonderful people who've been drug addicts and that sort of thing. They become Christians and sometimes they start to slide back in it. Well, they can repent. We can bring them back.

That's fine. But, you see, if you become a Christian out of elder brother-ishness, out of the superiority, out of the, well, we're going to go through it here, out of the hardness of heart, out of the insecurity, out of the irritability, out of the touchiness of elder brother-ishness, then when you start to slide back, you'll hardly even know you are sliding back some of our churches are so filled with elder brother-ishness that we even think it's normal.

[22 : 42] It means you're really a Christian, but you've got elder brother-ishness in you and you need the gospel, which you might know enough with your head to save you, but it hasn't worked itself down into every fiber of your being in order to deal with the elder brother lostness, deadness, let's say, the elder brother deadness that still clings to so many of us.

Now, what is elder brother lostness, elder brother-ishness? It's here because, actually, when you look at how the elder brother responds, you see several traits.

Let me give you five. Five traits before we get to the final point and how to get home. One side of being an elder brother is that when your life doesn't go as you want, you get very angry.

See, verse 28, he became very angry because the father wasn't arranging things the way he thought they should. Now, what this means is, a sign of elder brother-ishness is that you have worked very hard in life and you expect your life to go well and if your children start to go off the rails or you start to have health problems or you have financial problems or something else goes wrong in your life and you've worked so hard to be a good person, you get mad because you have been trying to control God through your goodness and you think, therefore, God owes you a good life.

Now, sometimes you may get mad at God. Sometimes you may decide, I'm not living a good enough life so you hate yourself. Either way, the anger because you've been trying to control God with your goodness. See, we think with our head.

[24 : 16] We say, I know I'm a sinner saved by grace but down deep in our heart, the elder brother deadness doesn't really believe it. We really believe, if I've lived a good life, my life ought to go well. You're forgetting Jesus who lived the perfect life, by the way, and whose life did not go very well.

You think you're better than him. Some years ago, I met a woman who was coming to Redeemer, our church, and she wasn't a Christian yet. She became a Christian later. So maybe she actually had become regenerated by the Spirit by then anyway.

But at that point, she hadn't professed faith in Christ but I was amazed at her wisdom because she was saying to me that she had never come, she'd been at many Presbyterian churches and she'd always been told, she thought, that God accepts us if we're good and ethical.

If you're a good person, then God will accept you. And at Redeemer, she came up against the teaching that you're saved by sheer grace through the work of Christ.

You're saved by sheer grace through the work of Christ. And she said, I'd never heard this before. So I said, well, what do you think of it? She said, it's scary. Now, I don't know about you, but an awful lot of people over the years have told me, well, Pastor, if I believed that I was saved by sheer grace, not by works, then I could live any way I want.

[25 : 27] I'd have no incentive for living a good life. But she immediately said, no, if I thought I was saved by sheer grace, it'd be scary. I said, well, why would that be? And here's what she said.

She said, if I was saved by my good works, there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with rights. I would have done my duty, so I deserve a certain quality of life.

But if I was saved by sheer grace, at infinite cost to him, there would be no limit to what God could ask of me. And I could never complain no matter what circumstances I was in.

Isn't that amazing? She wasn't even a Christian yet, and she realized the radical edge of grace is not that I'd be less subject to the sovereign lordship of God, but more. She realized that she would not be her own.

She'd be bought with a price. You know, at the very end of that old movie, I think it was back in the 60s, the John Huston movie, The Bible, George C. Scott plays Abraham offering up Isaac.

[26 : 31] Very, very moving into that movie. And at the very end, as Abraham is lifting the dagger up over Isaac, in the movie, Isaac looks up and says, is there nothing he cannot ask of thee?

And Abraham says, nothing. And this woman understood that already, that her elder brotherishness was being drained out of her before she even became a Christian.

The anger of her feeling like, I've got things that, you know, God can't do this to me, and how dare he, and I've lived a very good life. It was going. She wasn't even a Christian yet, because she understood grace in all its truth.

She did become a Christian. So the first sign of elder brotherishness is you're always angry and irritable because things aren't going your way and you live a pretty good life. Second mark of elder brother, lostness, deadness, is a kind of mechanical, joyless obedience.

I'm not saying here that there aren't some times in which obeying God isn't hard, but elder brother deadness means you're always doing what I'm supposed to do strictly out of a sense of duty.

[27 : 42] There's no joy, there's no gratitude in it. It's always a grind, always a grind. You can see it here when he says, I've slaved for you, verse 29. So he's letting his slip show.

He's been obedient, but he's been slaving. And because when you are in elder brother deadness, you're using God to get to something else.

You might be saying, I'm trying to obey God so I have a good career. I'm trying to obey God so I have a happy family. I'm trying to obey God so my life will go very well. In other words, God isn't the end. He's a means to the end. He's the instrument.

And there's something else that's the joy of your heart. But, you know, years ago, when I was in undergraduate days, I had a music course in which I had to learn, I had to listen to Mozart so I could answer questions on a test, so I could get an A, so I could get a good degree, so I could get a job. In other words, I listened to Mozart to make money. But today, I spend a lot of money just to listen to Mozart. Why? Because Mozart has become an end in himself.

[28 : 52] To listen to Mozart is an end in itself. It's satisfying in itself. It's not a means to an end. It's an end. Elder brother deadness, God is not the end.

God is something I'm doing just so I feel better about myself so things will go well because my parents make me. Elder brother deadness. But gospel says, do it for him.

Think of what he's done for you so that your obedience becomes a joy. It's not slavish and mechanical anymore. Elizabeth Elliot tells a story which I always have to start. Elizabeth Elliot was the famous missionary to the Alca Indians in Ecuador.

Her husband had been killed before by the same Indians that she reached with the gospel. Very well known. In one of her books, she tells a story which is actually an apocryphal story of Jesus and the disciples.

It's not in the Bible. I always have to say that before I use it. Over the years, I've said, well, why use a story that didn't happen except it's just too good not to use? She tells the story that Jesus was with his disciples one day and he got up and he said, let us go, follow me, and he says, I want you to pick up a stone for me.

[30 : 02] Pick up a stone and carry it for me. So Peter says, pick up a stone and carry it for me. Didn't say how big it had to be. I guess it could be any size stone at all.

I'm still under the standards. So he looked around and saw a very tiny stone, put it in his pocket, pretty much a pebble, and Jesus said, follow me. So they went along for a certain period of time and around lunchtime, he said, let's sit down.

We all sat down. He said, get out your stone. Get out the stone. He waved his hand and all the stones became bread. He says, lunch. So, after Peter had his hors d'oeuvre, you know, everybody else was having a full lunch.

very grumpy. What's going on here? Jesus says, let's go. Stand up. I want you to carry a stone for me and then follow me.

And Peter says, ah, now I get it. Now I get it. So he goes and he finds this boulder, you know. And he lifts it up practically. He puts it on his, he knows he's going to get two hernias.

[31 : 07] He knows it's going to be very difficult, but he says, ah, this is really going to hurt, but I can't wait for dinner. And so around dinner time, Jesus leads them to the side of a river and he says, come here. And he stands them on the river.

He says, now throw your rocks into the river. So everybody threw the rocks into the river and then he says, now follow me. And they're all staring at him and he says, who are you carrying the stone for?

Who are you carrying it for? Elder Brother Deadness is always economically thinking about what am I getting out of this? I remember one of my professors at seminary said he was a pastor of a Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh and he remembers one woman who had been in the church for years one day came in and said, I have worked my finger to the bone in this church for years and I never get any thanks.

So that's it. That's why you're doing it. I mean, we need to be thankful to the people around us, but see, Elder Brother Deadness is always adding it up and as a result, our obedience is always slavish and mechanical.

Thirdly, I need to run faster here. Thirdly, another sign of Elder Brother Spirit, Elder Brother Deadness is you're lousy at evangelism because you look down at younger brothers. You're lousy at evangelism, oh Elder Brothers, because you look down at younger brothers.

[32 : 25] See, if you are proud of being a hardworking person, see, if you are really looking to being a hardworking, moral person, that's why God blesses me, then you have to look down your nose at people that you think are lazy, or you have to look down your nose at people that you think

are immoral.

But if you know you're a sinner saved by grace, sheer grace, then you can't look at anyone else as superior to you at all. If you know the radical gospel understanding, and that is the good people out there and the bad people out there are both trying to be saviors in their own way, and therefore there's ultimately spiritually no different, they're all lost, how in the world could you ever look down your nose at anybody?

Ever, anyone. And therefore, the gospel turns you into people that gives you humble appreciation of others, which is the basis on which you can build winsome relationships.

But if you're just always looking down your nose at people, you have too much disdain to be evangelistically effective. It's one of the marks of elder brothers, and that is they can't reach younger brothers. When the younger brother gets home here, and you see what the elder brother is like, you immediately realize why the younger brother left.

Why aren't there younger brothers in our churches? If there's no younger brothers in our churches, we have too many elder brother-ish people in it. Okay, so first of all, angry when your circumstances aren't going right.

[33 : 52] Secondly, slavish conditional obedience. Thirdly, looking down your nose at people so you're evangelistically ineffective. Fourthly, a lack of assurance of the Father's love.

There's a lack of intimacy here. He says, you never gave me a feast. You never gave me a dance. You never gave me a party. There's a sense in which if you're an elder brother, you're working very hard, but you don't have much of an assurance and a sense of God's love on your heart.

If you did, you could take criticism better. If you did, you'd be more intimate in prayer. One of the marks of elder brother deadness is that you do a lot of petition in prayer, but there's not much of a sense of intimacy in prayer.

There's not much of a sense of God's love on your heart in prayer. You know, Dr. Lloyd-Jones, at one place, he says, he used to ask people, are you a Christian? And if a person said, of course I'm a Christian, I go to church, I receive Christ as Savior, of course I'm a Christian.

He always thought that was a very bad sign. If there's an of course to your answer, he says, when he heard people say, yes, yes, I'm a Christian and it's a miracle.

[35 : 02] It's an absolute miracle. Who would have thought me, a Christian? There should be a wonder about it. There should be a joy about it. There should be a sense that, yes, I don't know how he did it, but he's chosen me.

If there's an of courseness about it, there's not a sense of intimacy. And actually, Dr. Lloyd-Jones used to say, you could tell whether a person had intimacy with God by how they prayed. Elder brother deadness means there's not a lot of intimacy.

And lastly, and most important, I guess, in some ways, elder brothers hold grudges. Here's the father who's really been sinned against pretty badly, bringing the son back and forgiving him, but the elder brother cannot forgive.

The elder brother will not. And why won't he forgive? If you are holding a grudge against somebody, it's because you think you would never do anything like that.

you've got to be elder brother-ish to a degree, or you wouldn't be able to keep that grudge. The humility of the gospel takes that away. So, here's the elder brother spirit that brings so much deadness to our lives.

[36 : 04] Elder brothers hold grudges, they're terrible at reaching out to those who don't believe, they look down at people of other races, classes, and religions, and lifestyles, and behaviors, they have little adoration and joy in their prayer life, they always feel insecure and are stung by criticism, they have a continual undercurrent of anger about how their life circumstances are going.

So, how can we get home? How can we get the gospel into our lives, not only so elder brothers are converted and younger brothers are converted, but also so that we can actually pull out the elder brother deadness that's still in us, and here's what we need.

Number one, we see it, the initiating love of the father. Do you notice that the father comes out to both sons? And I love that. Of course, we know the father comes out to the prodigal son, the younger son, and kisses him, and notice, notice, the younger boy wants to repent.

The father doesn't stay up here on the porch tapping his foot saying, if he repents, I'll kiss him.

Look, he kisses him, and that makes it easier to repent. Because we believe in the initiating grace of God.

You're never going to repent without the initiating grace of God. So, God comes after the younger brother, but what I love is how he comes after the older brother. And Dick Lucas has a sermon on this passage in Luke 15, which he entitles, Jesus Pleads with His Critics.

[37 : 29] Because, don't forget, Jesus is speaking to Pharisees, and he has put a Pharisee in the parable. The Pharisee is the elder brother. And at the very end, you see this father going out to the Pharisee and pleading and saying, please come in.

Please get rid of your pride. Please get rid of your self-righteousness. I want you. Isn't that amazing? Here's Jesus, not just going after younger brothers, but older brothers. Jesus is not an elder brother about elder brothers.

He is not self-righteous about self-righteous people. He goes after hardened Pharisees, and he goes after, you know, broken people in the gutter. He's different than either conservatives who despise the bad people or liberals who despise the judgmental people.

What a Savior. So, the first thing we need is the initiating grace of God. Secondly, we have to repent. And please, I'm going to say this carefully, and you must listen carefully.

What makes you a Christian is not just repenting for your sins. Now, I'm saying this carefully. Of course, if you want to become a Christian, you must repent for your sins. But I want you to think for a minute. Don't you think Pharisees repented for their sins?

[38 : 38] Pharisees were trying to obey the law of God, and when they disobeyed the law of God, they repented. They repented. When they did something wrong in some of the areas, they repented, and yet they still were Pharisees.

When you just repent of your sins, you can stay a Pharisee. Here's what makes you a Christian. Here's what gives you the relationship with God. You don't just repent of your badness, but for the reason that you did your good things.

Only when you come to realize that not only when I was bad was I trying to be my own savior, but when I was good, I was trying to be my own savior. And when you repent for the sin underneath both your goodness and your badness, only when you repent for your self-righteousness, only when you see that all the things you've been doing have been to try to get God to owe you, only when you repent of that, you begin to see the elder brother deadness start to go away.

Listen, Wesley, Whitefield, Luther, all of them were good people. All of them were incredibly moral people. But when the gospel struck them, it wasn't that they started repenting of their sins.

They'd been repenting of their sins for years. They repented of their self-righteousness. They repented of their works-righteousness. They repented of the very reason that they were being righteous. And that's when they had the new birth.

[39 : 53] That's what reorganizes your identity, the very basis of your trust, the very basis of your life, the way in which you look at everything. You've got to not just repent of your sin, but you've got to repent even for the very reason that you've done your righteous things.

That's the reason why my old friend John Gerstner used to say, the main thing between you and God is not your sins, but your damnable good works. Now, lastly, you have to be melted and moved to the depths by what it costs to bring you home.

The thing that's going to really change us out of being younger brothers or elder brothers is you've got to be moved and melted by the depths of what it costs to bring you home. When you first read this passage, especially when you read it just as a younger brother, it looks like there's no atonement.

Here's younger brother. He's out. He's sinned terribly. He comes back. No punishment. No penalty. He's just brought back in.

He gets a robe. He gets a ring. He gets right back into the family. And it looks like God just received you no matter what. No atonement. But look more carefully. Think about this.

[41 : 00] The father had two sons and something like, it's hard to know because every culture was a little bit different, but probably the elder son was going to inherit two-thirds of the wealth or something like that and the younger son was going to inherit a third of the wealth.

But when the father gives the younger son his inheritance, it means he must have liquidated part of what they owned. Maybe some land or something like that. Gave the younger son all the inheritance and so when he comes back it's all gone.

Everything is gone. And therefore, there's no way he can be brought back into the family except at the expense of the elder brother. He can be received back but at terrible cost.

Huge cost. Because see, now every robe, this is why he's mad by the way, every ring, every fatted calf belongs to the older brother because he's the only heir of the father.

That's the reason why the father comes out at the end and says to the older brother, everything I have is yours. That's literally true. Everything I have is yours now.

[42 : 06] The only way we can bring the younger brother in is at the expense of the elder brother and the elder brother hates it. And see, what Jesus has done is he's put a Pharisee into the place where you should have had a searcher.

In the first of the three parables he tells in Luke 15, you have a lost sheep but a shepherd goes to look. And you have a lost coin but a woman goes to look. And then thirdly, you have a lost son and there should be an elder brother going to look.

A true elder brother would have said, Father, my younger brother is out there. I think he's dying in a pigsty. I'm going to go and search for him. I'm going to bring him home and if he squandered all this inheritance then I'm going to bring him back into the family at my expense.

But we don't have a true elder brother. We have a Pharisee. So is there no hope? No. There's all kinds of hope because we have only a Pharisee in the parable but in reality we have the ultimate elder brother, the true elder brother.

In fact, Jesus by giving us a bad elder brother makes us long for the true elder brother. What do you and I need? We would need an elder brother who would come all the way from heaven to earth.

[43 : 16] We would need an elder brother who is absolutely obedient to the Father and we would need an elder brother who comes, picks us up out of the pigsty and at infinite cost to himself gives us his place in the family.

And that is exactly what Jesus did and he even says so. Hebrews 2.11 Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family for Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers.

He has said to God, I will declare my name your name to my brothers. Do you know why we Christians can have the robe of God's righteousness because Jesus was stripped on the cross? Do you know why we can have the Father's feast because Jesus Christ took the cup of God's wrath? Do you know why we can have a place in the Father's family because Jesus Christ on the cross lost his relationship with his Father?

Do you feel in your heart your heart melting a bit as you think of that? That is what's going to turn you into not an elder brother-ish person but someone who gets over your insecurity, gets over your irritability, gets over your disdain, gets over your looking down at younger brothers.

[44 : 33] We will never stop being elder brothers in our heart until we see the work of our true elder brother Jesus Christ. Amen. Let's pray. Thank you Father for giving us the true elder brother that our hearts need, Jesus.

And we pray that you would help us understand the difference between the gospel and religion. We pray that you would by your Holy Spirit and by our thinking about the gospel in this church that we might get rid of those parts of our heart that are still clinging, that still have works righteousness clinging to them.

Make us a revived church, make us a renewed church, make us a church radiant in the way in which we reach out to the people around us who are broken. Make us people who are so changed by the work of our true elder brother Jesus Christ that we really look like him and our attitude toward the world, toward others, and toward you.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.