

Introduction: Jesus' "Lost Sons" parable we studied last time ends with unresolved questions. Will the brothers be reconciled? What will be the elder brother's future status? Will the elder brother be reconciled with his father? These are questions of interest, but Jesus answered none of them.

Why: No one knows for certain what Jesus had in mind. But there are clues, especially in the description of the crowd in Luke 15:1-2, "*Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.* ² *And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."*"

This mixed crowd includes prestigious Pharisees and scribes recognized as the most "religious" people of the nation. Pharisees are proud of their rigorous, detailed keeping of the Law. Scribes are important people who study and teach God's Word as well as write documents for people.

Other people are present, some considered disreputable, unacceptable for religious people to associate with. These "unacceptables" included tax collectors and recognized sinners. They were looking to Jesus for help and sought Him out, gathering close to Him. The Pharisees and scribes were most likely there to judge Jesus. They grumbled about being in the presence of unsuitable people. To this mixed group Jesus spoke three parables about God's interest in the lost. The first two involved intense searches for what was lost and joy when the lost was found. The third was different, involved voluntary lostness, and no one searched for the lost.

Jesus addressed both the Pharisees and the tax collectors. The younger brother represents the tax collector and known sinners. The elder brother represents the Pharisees and scribes. Like the elder brother, Pharisees claim to have never disobeyed the Father. The elder brother was convinced his younger brother was a proven sinner who walked away from his duties on the estate, and squandered his portion of the estate with prostitutes. When the younger brother returns home, the elder brother refuses to associate with him. Like the elder brother Pharisees refuse to associate with those they believe to be sinners.

As the parable ends, Jesus leaves open the question of whether the elder brother will be reunited with his father and younger brother. Perhaps He does this show the Pharisees and scribes that they face a similar issue. Will they repent and be restored

to the Father and to their “sinful younger brothers” or will they not? The issue is undecided.

Both brothers have problems with disrespect for their father. When things went wrong for the younger brother, he “came to his senses” and realized he had brought his problems on himself. He repented his life of open sin, resolved to return to his father, and set out to travel the long journey home. He recognized his faults and intends to confess them to his father. He will be saved.

The elder brother stayed home working the estate. He is convinced he has always been obedient to his father. He has remained consistently in the father’s presence working on the estate. But he has an attitude and motivation problem. He is focused on mechanically doing the needed estate work. Since the estate will one day be his, he is actually working on his own behalf. What did he think and do when his younger brother took his 1/3 of the estate and left home? Was the elder glad or sad to see him go?

We see no sign the elder brother was concerned about the fate of his younger brother. If he was, it was probably over splitting the estate which most likely meant selling land. Unlike the shepherd in the “Lost Sheep” or the woman in the “Lost Coin,” the elder brother makes no effort to keep the younger brother from leaving or, when he left, to track him down and bring him home. The elder brother sits tight on the estate doing his duty.

Two Ways of Being Lost: The younger and elder brother represent two different ways of being “lost” to the father. The younger brother was lost in open sin. His behavior was wicked. To change, he needed a new spiritual heart which only God can provide. All people in open sin should recognize their plight, come to their senses, repent, return to the father, and be saved. On the other hand, the elder brother is lost in mechanical obedience without love. His behavior seems good on the surface, but is he behaving from a heartfelt love for his father?

Many Pharisees and scribes are lost in pride grounded in their mechanical obedience to the Law and doing “what is right.” They examine their lives and are pleased with what they see. They know the Law and externally obey it. They know their duty and do it in such a way they can check off accomplished obligations from their list of things to do. They consider themselves better than people who are not like them.

Mechanical religious behavior and mechanical obedience to rules of good behavior block people from recognizing the truth that, they, like everyone else have fallen short of the glory of God. All are sinners in need of a savior. Their problem is not their outward behavior. Their outwardly obedient behavior camouflages their failure to put first things first.

Jesus said if you love me, you will obey my commands. The elder brother's obedience is not based on a love-driven desire to please his father. That becomes clear when he refuses to go into the celebratory feast even as his father pleads with him.

Likewise, the religious observances, including prayer, of many Pharisees and scribes were not driven by a desire to please God. Their desire was more to demonstrate their holiness to other people and to prove to God their holiness. They took pride in being "holier than thou."

Such people have a "why" problem, not a "what" problem. They need a "spiritual heart" transformation to change their motivations. They can certainly be saved, but they must come to their senses and recognize that outward religious behavior does not necessarily signify a "heart for God." They need internal transformation into Christlikeness. Only God can give them a new spiritual heart and draw them to Himself.

Mathematicians speak of necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. Something can be necessary without being sufficient. Good works are necessary for Christians (James says faith is always accompanied by good works), but not sufficient. Non-Christians can do good works. To become a Christian means being regenerated by the Holy Spirit, given faith, justified by the Father, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, beginning the transformation into Christlikeness through sanctification, and ultimately becoming like Christ in holiness through glorification. Good works, by themselves, are not sufficient to verify salvation.

The Impact of This Parable on Those Listening: The tax collectors and other sinners were likely filled with joy when they heard how the younger brother was received by the father at his repentant return. The father received him with joy, honored him with a ring and robe, and gave him a celebratory feast. But best of all, he was restored to the family. As a full member of the family, he again had all the rights of a younger son including being heir to 1/3 of the remaining estate. The tax collectors and other recognized sinners know they are sinners and are amazed to hear

that if they turn from sin and return to God, He will receive them with joy and blessings.

On the other hand, the Pharisees and scribes must have been furious. Jesus leaves them in a bad light. Though the openly sinful younger brother has repented and been restored by his father, the outwardly obedient elder brother, in whom they recognize themselves, is left in an awkward position. He has worked hard on the estate and, in his view, never disobeyed his father. Outwardly he was a perfect son. What is going on with him?

The elder brother is left in an astounding, bewildering situation. He had been embarrassed and frustrated by the father's exuberant expression of delight in the return of the younger brother. Now the Pharisees and scribes are enraged that the sinful younger brother has been restored, but the obedient elder brother is left hanging with no resolution. What will be the elder's position in the family? Will the father continue to accept him as rightfully in charge of the estate? Will he be disgraced? Does Jesus think about the Pharisees in that way?

Jesus tells another parable in which we can easily recognize the way the Pharisees looked down on other people. We also see that mechanical obedience to God does not work. Obedience must be from the heart. This parable is about a Pharisee and a tax collector at prayer (Luke 18:9-14). Their approaches to prayer are very different. The Pharisee prays listing what he considers his "good works." He looks down on the tax collector. On the other hand, the tax collector prays based on his understanding of his need for God's mercy. Jesus' conclusion is that a person is justified only through the approach of the tax collector.

^{NIV} Luke 18:9-14 (The Tax Collector and the Pharisee): *"To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰ "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' ¹³ "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' ¹⁴ "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*

The Pharisees were recognized as the most religious people in Israel. They had enormous personal prestige with the power that accompanies it. Tax collectors were at the opposite end of the spectrum. They were the lowest of the low. They collected taxes for Rome. Anything collected above that required by Rome, they could keep, so they always collected something extra. They were “hated” by the people as extortioners.

The parable unfolds through the prayers of the two contrasting men. Jesus uses the parable to convey the proper way for sinners to approach God. The heart of Jesus’ teaching is found in the tax collectors prayer – ***‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’***

The conclusion Jesus draws about the two men is shocking to the Pharisees. Jesus says, ***“I tell you, this man (the tax collector) went down to his house justified, rather than the other (the Pharisee).”*** To be justified before God means to be at peace with Him and accounted righteous before Him. Can it be that a despised tax collector was justified before God while an admired religious expert was not justified? The Pharisee’s are totally shocked.

What happens when people come into the presence of God? When the Apostle John saw the risen Lord standing in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, ***“he (John) fell at his feet as though dead.”*** John was able to get up only after experiencing something like a resurrection (Revelation 1:17). At least before their glorification, people are overwhelmed in God’s presence.

The tax collector knew God and came to Him in utmost humility. The Pharisee did not see himself as a sinner but as upright and obedient, meticulously keeping the Law. He came before God declaring his strengths. The tax collector was so aware of God, he would not even look up to heaven. Beating his chest, he prayed, ***“God have mercy on me, a sinner.”***

The right way to approach God is not to tell Him your view of your good points. The right approach is to admit you are a sinner and any good in you is there only because of God’s grace.

What’s Next: A tale of two sons (Matthew 21:28-32)

