

## ***ELDER-BROTHERNESS, LK.15:11-32***

The Prodigal God #4

◆Intro: [Video: Goodometer, (worshiphousemedia.com) A series of folks step on the scale of goodness at the entrance to heaven to see if they've been good enough to enter. Nobody is but one really bad fellow gets in anyway. How?]

### **◆1. What is Elder-brotherness?**

◆A. Its being lost although you think you are not, because you believe yourself to be very good at what you're doing. The Pharisees, to whom Jesus was speaking in our text, were sure they were right. They followed all the right flight procedures. They were proud of who they were. They were going to fly to heaven's kingdom on their own goodness. The Elder brother in Jesus parable was a picture of the Pharisees, and they would have picked it up right away. The elder brother was being good, playing by the family rules. Following procedure. But as we saw in recent weeks, he was just as lost as his brother, and worse, missed the feast. This is really central to the story. Many folks think the story is about the younger lost son. They think he was the prodigal (lavish one). In reality, the Father was the more lavish one in his love toward both boys, and the elders brother was really the most lost son, in that he stayed lost. The story ends without him being with the Father at his feast. No reconciliation!

◆B. If I am proud of my own goodness, I will very likely miss the Father's Feast. To Jews of Jesus day, any talk of a great feast and a Father meant one thing: Judgment Day, Restoration Day, the

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Final Day when God would make all things beautiful again. Lets consult the context for a minute.

◆ *"Then Jesus said to his host, ... when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.*

*Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." " Luke 14:12-15, NIV.*

◆ Feast language was resurrection language, last day language.

Right after this text Jesus responds with the parable of the Great Banquet. You know, where a man invites many guests but they all snub him, so he brings home all the beggars and bag-ladies, and jobless people he can find instead, vowing that those who got the monogramed invitations were not going to get a seat, no way, no how! (This was implicating the Jews who had the special, historical attention of the one true God, but did not recognize him in his very son, Jesus.) And then, in the very next chapter in Luke, comes the three stories of lostness: Chapter 15. So it turns out that the biggest shock of Jesus story is that the so-called "good" boy (the Jewish law-keeper) is the lost boy, the one who doesn't land his plane at the feast just because he is so lost in his own self.

◆ C. What is the opposite of elderbrotherness? It is not being proud of my own goodness. It is recognizing my need and being astonished with and thankful for the Father's love and provision in it. The penitent one makes it into the feast. A lot of very religious

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folk think they are headed for heaven, that they will make it to the feast, who will not! You see, it's possible that earthly goodness can have no heavenly value at all. We think we're chalking up points by being polite, throwing a few dollars in a boot at the intersection to support the Fire Department, or volunteering. But it's not what your knees are doing that makes a prayer. It's what your heart is doing. Keller puts it, "*The difference between a religious person and a true Christian is that the religious person obeys God to get control over God, and things from God, but the Christian obeys just to get God, just to love and please and draw closer to him.*"

◆ When you obey God is it because then you hope fewer bad things will happen to you? Or do you obey God's commands because you hope then to make more good things happen to you? From the other side, do you ignore God's clear instructions about what is appropriate and what is not in behavior *because* it seems like it's not getting you any greater benefit, or *because* it doesn't seem at least at this point to be causing you any harm or trouble to disobey? Lets make it concrete. Say you get an email asking for money for hurricane victims and rebuilding. Lets say you say to yourself, "Lots of people will help with this so it's not necessary for me to think about it. Somebody will do it And my not sharing won't mean a lick of difference." Or suppose you say, "I'll give 'em 20 bucks" which you think is generous

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even though you can't go out to lunch with your wife for 20 bucks. Or lets say you decide, "I'd better throw a little money this way, or when a tornado touches down around here, God will probably be less likely to protect my house. And while I'm thinking of it, maybe a statue of Joseph in the yard would be a good idea." Or lets say you think to yourself that if you're generous now, God will be more likely to bless your 401k so you'll be rolling down Retirement Lane for many years without having to work to eat each day, like most of the rest of the world. Or lets say you really spoiled yourself, and wasted a lot of money on some unnecessary things, and even a few sinful things –so you give the relief agency like World Renew \$100, because then you feel like God might not mind as much, or at least you won't feel as guilty.

◆ All of these approaches would be elder-brotherness. All of these approach the possible life of goodness purely from the pragmatic direction: how does it help/hurt me? What can I do (or do I have to do) to help *force* God to secure my future? None of them would be those of a true child of God. A true child of God shares because God shares, and she loves that about God. A true Christian shares even though later they may go bankrupt and need help, or never get to buy a cabin in the Rockies. (We might also observe that sometimes

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even true Christians slip into being elder-brother-ish: that is, even though they know that God's love is free, cannot be manipulated, or earned, or chased away by failure but is secure in Christ –we fall into obeying God merely out of concern for reward or punishment.)

Some Christians in First Century Galatia started down that road. They started to believe that Christ saved them from sin, AND if one or two ancient religious practices, then God would really have to like them and reserve a place at the feast for them. Listen.

◆ *“Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is required to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” Galatians 5:2-6, NIV.*

◆ It's kinda like saying you have to believe Jesus is God's son, your savior, AND you need a religious tattoo on your left arm, or you need to be have the gift of tongues, or xy... or you won't be saved. Paul says, no. Christ's righteousness *for us* is it. We

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get God's cell number as a gift through faith in Jesus and that naturally results in good. Good doesn't get us grace.

◆ *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Galatians 5:6*

◆ Ok, so elder-brothers do good to force God's hand and earn their future. True sons & daughters do good because it's what Dad does and when they do it, they feel Dad's love even more.

### **◆2. How do I know if I have elder-brother-ness and therefore am lost, or at least am living a very lost life?**

There are some clear characteristics in the Elder Brother that we can notice.

◆ A. If I have deep anger I may be living like an elder brother.(v28) Elder brothers believe that God owes them a comfortable and good life if they try hard and live up to standards—and they have! So they say: "my life ought to be going really well!" and when it doesn't they get angry. Or depressed with life, depression is often just anger turned inward. But they are forgetting Jesus. He lived a better life than any of us—but suffered terribly; so living a good life is no guarantee of pleasure and blessing on this earth.

◆ B. If I have joyless, mechanical obedience I may be a lost elder brother. (v29) Elder brothers obey God as a means to an end—as a way to get the things they really love. Of course, obedience to God is sometimes extremely hard. But

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elder brothers find obedience virtually always a joyless, mechanical, slavish thing as a result. Does your spiritual involvement feel like a duty to you? Do God's rules frustrate you?

◆C. If I have a coldness toward people not trying as hard to be good like me, I may be a lost elder brother type. (30)

The older son will not even "own" his brother. Elder brothers are too disdainful of others unlike themselves to be effective in evangelism. Elder brothers, who pride themselves on their doctrinal and moral purity, unavoidably feel superior to those who do not have these things. Elder brothers are very perturbed with people who will not get with it, and shape up their lives. They do not love people because God made them, but only when they "get it right". Baptists bother them. Democrats disgust them. Fat people fail them. Touchy people tick them off. Rude people repulse them. And to them, childish people can't change fast enough, needy people nauseate them, and sinners always smell. Any of that resonate in you?

◆D. If I can't seem to feel assured that the Father loves me, I may just be a lost elder brother. (v29 you never...) As long as you are trying to earn your salvation by controlling God through your goodness, you will never be sure you have been good enough. Instead, 1) Every time something goes wrong in your life you will wonder if it's a punishment. 2)

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When you are convicted of a wrong you will feel irresolvable guilt. You can't be sure you've repented deeply enough, so you beat yourself up over what you did. 3) In addition, you will likely not feel a sense of intimacy with God. You may pray a lot of prayers asking for things, but not sense his love. In fact you think prayer is about getting things, instead of sharing your life with a friend. You use "thee"s and "thou"s, "wilt", and "wouldst" and feel religious, but you don't feel God, his smile, or his love.

◆ E. If I have an unforgiving, judgmental spirit, it's a good bet I'm suffering from lost Elder-brotherness. The elder brother does not want the father to forgive the younger brother. It is impossible to forgive someone if you feel "I would never do anything that bad!" You have to be something of an elder brother to refuse to forgive.

◆ **Conclusion:** Why does the disease of elder-brother-ness matter? Well, mostly because elder brothers as in the parable, are lost. They miss out of the Feast and the Father. They miss heaven. But don't be too quick to put this aside. Some folks who think they're christians say to themselves, "Eh, what does it matter if I sin a little here and there. What does it matter if I fail to treat my spouse as God's word instructs? What does it matter if I screw someone over for their money and I get richer while people who work for me stay stuck? What does it matter how I entertain myself? I'm gonna be forgiven in heaven anyway



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because of Jesus. Well, first off, a person who thinks like that doesn't likely really know Jesus much. Jesus doesn't share that cavalier attitude, so there's a problem. Furthermore, the Bible is also pretty clear that we set up treasure in heaven by what we do with earth. So there must be some kind of spiritual outcome to our actions here.

◆ *"Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life." 1 Timothy 6:18, 19, NIV.*

◆ The more we live like the Father, the more we experience the Father! It is as true on earth as it is in heaven. What is your task? Look into the father's eyes today. See his invitation to come inside. Drop the fists in your heart to your side and say, "OK Dad, I receive your love, in whatever form it comes."