

Two Ways to Be Lost

It's called the parable of the Prodigal Son. You've heard it once again this morning. It is definitely one of Jesus' most famous stories. What you may not realize is that it was told in response to a complaint.

You see, many of Jesus' opponents were quote-unquote good people. Rule keepers. Law abiding citizens. People you would probably respect if you knew them. And they want to know, "Jesus, why are you hanging out with all these lost people?"

Jesus replies by telling a story, the story you heard in the Gospel Reading today. But what you're going to see in this well-known tale is that it's really about two lost brothers and the Father who loves them both. Two lost brothers. Two ways to be lost. One is obvious. The other is shocking to quote-unquote good people.

When you listen to Jesus' story from beginning to end, what you discover is that both sons—the one who blew his father's money in fast living AND the older brother who stayed home and did his duty—**both** are alienated from their father's heart. The twist in the tale is that the bad kid is saved and the good kid is lost. At least that's where we leave the older brother at the end of the story. He's mad because his father is being gracious to his bad brother. He comes right out and says, "Because I've done good, because I've worked hard, because I've never disobeyed you, you should do things my way. You owe me." Jesus created the character of the older brother to show that a person who brings that attitude into their relationship with God is just as lost as the person who goes out and commits every sin in the book.

How can that be? Well, listen. Jesus is telling this story to a group of people who are offended that He would hang out with lost people, and through the story he is saying, "If that offends you, then you are just as lost as they are. It might be worse, because you don't even realize you're lost!" It's like this: A person who finds the grace of Jesus distasteful; the person who is offended by the idea that Jesus would want someone "like those sinners;" a person who is scandalized by the mercy of Jesus towards someone else doesn't really believe that mercy is the foundation of their own standing with God. In other words, you either look to God to save you, or something else. You either look to Jesus to justify you, or something else. The older brother in the story was looking to something else, and it was his own work. He was saying, my hard work, my dedication, my loyalty justifies me to my Father—therefore he owes me. The older son doesn't understand the grace being shown to the younger son because he doesn't believe in grace for himself.

So right away I have to ask: do you look to Jesus to justify you, or are you looking to something else? There's a scene in the movie "Chariots of Fire" that speaks to this. In "Chariots of Fire" the Olympic sprinter Harold Abrams is asked why he puts himself under such pressure

in his training. And do you know what he says? He says, “When that gun goes off, I have 10 seconds to justify my existence.” The race for him is everything. It’s his reason for being. Running well and winning justifies his existence. That’s Harold Abrams. What about you?

Some try to justify their existence by being a great husband or wife or a good parent. Some try to justify their existence by having a successful career. Some try to justify their existence by carrying out big philanthropic projects that change the world. Some try to justify their existence by intense religious practice, trying to prove it to God that they’re faithful and true and doing all the right things. But what happens in life? The athlete justifying their existence by the race, by the contest, gets to a point where the body breaks down, they’re not winning anymore—what happens then? The wife justifying her existence by trying to keep her husband happy only to be ignored and her efforts unvalued—what happens then? The worker justifying his existence by career achievement receives word that his services will no longer be needed—what happens then? The religious adherent justifying her existence by saying all the prayers, doing all the steps, giving big offerings, devoting herself to good deeds and she still doesn’t get her prayers answered the way she wanted—what happens then? This always, always happens when we try to justify ourselves. It’s never enough. It’s never satisfying. We become older brothers, truly believing that we’ve worked hard, kept our noses clean, done things the right way, so doggone it, the Father owes me something. And Jesus says that’s what it looks like to be lost.

There are two ways to be lost according to Jesus, two ways to be alienated from the Father’s heart. Way Number One is to be like the younger brother and be very bad. Go against conscience, break God’s Law, live it up. Way Number Two is to be like the older brother and be very good, so good that you justify yourself. So good that you say, look, I’ve done all the right things, Father. The deal is, I do for you, so you do for me. The least you can do is give me a goat.

What’s the solution? If we’re lost, what’s the key to being found? The younger brother discovered it there among the pigs. It’s simple. Admit your lost-ness. If you can admit that by yourself you are lost, then you are ready for the Gospel. And the Gospel is that Jesus justifies your existence. You don’t have to justify your existence to God because He has already justified your existence in Jesus. The mission Jesus accomplished means that you are loved already! You don’t have to earn it, nor could you. God thought you were so valuable that he sent his Son to the cross to purchase you. You don’t have to make yourself more attractive to him, nor could you. This is the undeserved kindness of God. When you return to him sincerely admitting your lost-ness, out come the gifts. The fattened calf. The ring, the robe, the party in your honor. That’s what it means to have a new life. The Father runs to lost children who return to him.

The biggest hurdle that “older brother” types have to overcome is they don’t think of themselves as lost. They’ve followed the rules, so they don’t see themselves as guilty, at least not in an obvious, irresponsible younger brother way. So how do you know? How do you know if you fit the older brother profile? Let me suggest a few things. You might be an “older brother” if

there is an undercurrent of resentment to your personality. It's that spirit of the older brother saying, "I've never disobeyed you, and yet I'm getting the short end of the stick." That's one.

You might be an "older brother" if your life with God could be described as duty without beauty. Notice what the older brother says to the Father as he's complaining outside the party tent. He says, "All these years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command." The word that is rendered here as "served" really means the actions of a slave. The older brother is saying I've been slaving away for you, Father, and this is the thanks I get? Do you see that? There's no talk of love here. There's no talk of relationship between Father to son. The older brother says staying here and working for you has been a grind!

If your relationship with God seems like a grind, like you are slaving away with nothing to show, chances are you tend toward older brother-ness; older brother syndrome. If your life with God is all duty and no beauty, watch out. Here's the deal: Older brothers find their Father useful for things. People who admit their lost-ness find their Father not useful, but beautiful. If Jesus is your reason for being, you will find yourself thinking about Him and talking to Him and praising Him just because. Grace does that to a person.

If you're sitting there thinking that maybe there's more "older brother" in you than you'd like, there is hope. Look at the Father in the story. He doesn't yell at the older brother, he pleads with him. He tries to lead his son to an understanding of grace. "Everything I have is yours," he says. That's the Father's choice, and it's not based on the hard work of the older brother.

It's as if the Father is saying, "My son, I know you've tried hard. But don't you understand? We're all lost." Through this story Jesus is saying to you, look at me. Look at my cross. Look at the torment and suffering I experience there. You are so lost that nothing less than this can save you. And I willingly do it. I do it so that you can have peace and share grace. This gospel is the only force that can blast you out of older brother-ness. There are two ways to be lost. This is the way to be found. Amen.