

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON (Part Three) // Luke 15:25-32

Message from the series, Lost and Found

At the high point in the teaching content of the gospel of Luke, Jesus is dealing with the theme of lostness. He eats with sinners and tax-collectors, causing the Pharisees to grumble. He responds by sharing stories that demonstrate God's love for lost people; and in this story of the lost son, the Pharisees also play a role—as the angry older brother.

It's easy to forget about the “mad brother” in this story, but Jesus tells us from the beginning that the father of the story had two sons (v. 11). Both of these sons are lost, and they hate their father and each other. But the younger son, whose rebellion is external and upfront, repents and is reconciled to the father. The older brother, however, is outwardly religious, but inwardly rebellious. The return of his younger brother and the grace their father demonstrates causes a crisis in the older brother and his internal rebellion is going to be exposed outwardly as self-righteousness.

Four Characteristics of Self-Righteousness

1. Self-contained (v. 25-27): The older brother is found in the field, not with the father. He has sought to isolate and distance himself, not unlike his younger brother, who ran away to a far country. It is a warning sign when we seek to distance ourselves from our family and church—it prevents us from seeing what God is doing in those around us.

2. Self-absorbed (v. 28): The older brother is angry, not amazed, at the grace the father shows the younger son. But anger is not the real problem—it's idolatry. When things don't go our way, we get mad, demonstrating that we love ourselves more than God, that we worship ourselves, not our heavenly Father. But the father of the parable acts consistently with his behavior from earlier in the parable. He feels compassion for his son and entreats him to be reconciled. He is willing to take on the shame, to beg his son to be in a right relationship with him.

3. Self-deceived (v. 29): Self-absorption always leads to self-deception. The older brother sees himself as a slave rather than a son. He thinks he deserves more than he has because he has done “good things.” He sees his relationship with his father in economic, transactional terms. But this is not how God does relationships. He loves unconditionally. We don't have to obey to be loved; we are loved, and therefore we obey.

4. Self-approved (v. 30-32): Self-deception leads to self-approval. The older son sees himself as morally right and his father as wrong. People in this category are quick to blame God, to call his integrity into question. What the father is asking is for the son to live like a son.

In a sense the ending of this parable seems to be missing—structurally, there would be 16 stanzas; there are eight in the first half, but only seven in the second half. In a way, the Pharisees provide the ending—this son does not choose repentance and reconciliation. He would rather pick up a piece of wood and beat the father to death—in reality, that piece of wood looked like the wooden cross on which Jesus would die.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why is isolation, self-containment, a starting point for self-righteousness? What happens when we distance ourselves from others?
2. What idols lead to anger in your life? How can we see past our anger and recognize misplaced worship in our lives?
3. What practices or spiritual disciplines would help us to root out any characteristics of self-righteousness in our lives?