



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 15:25-32
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The Running Father & His Two Lost Sons, Part 2

Good morning. I've been given the green light to go ahead and preach here for at least one more Sunday, so I'm thankful for that. Let's get started with a story. A few months before I moved from Saratoga up here to the Peninsula, a six-year-old by the name of Kit went missing from his home in Saratoga. Kit was last seen in the condo complex where my wife Taylor and I used to live. And as far as I know, six months later, Kit has still not been found. Did any of you ever hear about this up here?

When all this first happened, many people in our community were concerned and went looking for Kit. They went searching for this young, innocent six-year-old with short dark hair, green eyes, and...a silver collar. See, Kit is a cat. Or at least Kit was a cat. Kit was my neighbor's cat back in Saratoga. And when this cat went missing, my neighbor Laura let everybody in the community know that she loved this cat and that she was willing to go to great lengths to bring this lost cat back home. She was willing to spend a great deal of time, energy, and money looking for her cat.

Let me tell you what Laura did to try and find Kit the cat. Laura took the time to make at least 100 full color, waterproof "Lost Cat" signs which spread the urgent news: "Lost Cat! Help me find my lost cat! I will give you money if you find my cat." You couldn't walk or drive anywhere near where I lived without seeing one of these signs. They were posted onto the sides of fences, trees, telephone poles, coffee shops, mailboxes, and restaurants all over downtown Saratoga.

And that was just the beginning of Laura's search and rescue mission. This lady also went knocking on every door at every home in our neighborhood asking if anyone had spotted Kit the cat. She knocked on my door twice. The first time she knocked on my door, Kit had been missing for just a few hours. Both times she came to my door, she was soaking wet from the rain.

And that's not all. Actually, late one night my wife and I saw a dark figure with a little flashlight snooping around the creek just beyond our backyard. The light kept getting closer and closer, and the noises louder and louder. Soon, the prowler was just about to climb the short fence into our backyard. So, I mustered up all the masculinity I could gather at that late hour,

grabbed a bat, slammed open the sliding glass door, and rushed out into our backyard. I came outside swinging my bat and shouting in the deepest voice I could pull together. I was ready to defend my home against a large man, but...as it turned out, the intruder was only little Laura, outside in the late-night rain, searching for her lost cat.

Clearly, this cat was very valuable to my neighbor Laura. This woman went to great lengths to try and find her lost cat. Day and night, she worked hard, she even suffered, in order to find her cat. And this local story of a woman who wants her cat back helps illustrate the biblical story of a father who wants his sons back.

Last week we began our exploration of what has been for me the very epicenter of the Bible: the parable of "The Running Father and His Two Lost Sons" in Luke chapter 15. Martin Luther called this chapter of the Bible, "the gospel within the gospel." He saw that here in the parable of the Searching Shepherd, the parable of the Diligent Woman, and especially the parable of the Running Father, we have the gospel—the good news of God's love for the lost, expressed in unforgettable language.

Last week we learned that this parable is about a father and the great lengths he goes to in order to find what is most valuable to him—not his lost young cat, but his lost young son. Last week we looked at this prodigal younger son who demanded his inheritance from his father, left home, and ran off to live a reckless life in the far country. We saw that his rebellious, relativistic, "I can do it my way" way of living leads not to fulfillment, but to famine.

This week we zero in on the prodigal elder son. And we will see that his moralistic, religious, "I can do it without grace" way of living is also a failed way of connecting with the father. Though this son never runs off to the far country, he's just as lost, even more lost, than his younger brother.

We know how the father went to personally humiliating lengths to love and extend grace to his younger son. Looking at this parable in its original 1st century, Middle Eastern context, we saw that everything this father did for his younger son was culturally scandalous, outrageous, and unheard of. But our question this week is: How will the father respond to his

elder son? How will the father respond to the prodigal son who never left home, the son who's spent his years quietly, dutifully, living a different kind of sinful life? What does the Father have to say to those of us here on the peninsula who aren't living the younger son life and aren't living the Christian life either, but are instead stuck living the elder son life?

If that's you this morning, this is why you're stuck: you've either never experienced the Father's kiss like the younger son had (you've never become a Christian) or you've forgotten the Father's kiss (you're a Christian, but you've slowly forgotten what that means—you've forgotten the gospel). So, keeping in mind the heart warming first half of this parable in vv. 11-24, let's now turn to the heart warning second half in vv. 25-32.

"Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found'" (Luke 15:25–32).

I. Luke 15:25-27

Look at v. 25. Where is the elder son? Right, he's in the field. Up until this verse, the elder son's been in the background of the story. We haven't yet heard a single word about or from this son. But now, he appears on stage as a main character. And it's significant that he's introduced as being not at home, not near the father, but out in the field. This is a clue. It's a splash of foreshadowing for us, preparing us to see that the elder son is also a prodigal who's estranged from the father. The younger son was lost in the far country; this son's lost in the near country.

The elder son comes near the house. He hears "music and dancing." He hears the party. Remember, the father has killed the fattened calf, the most expensive animal this family had. Reserved for only the

most special of occasions, the fattened calf was a big deal. It could feed at least 75 people. So, the whole village is gathered in the father's house. They're feasting on fattened calf! They're partying! They're dancing! And what's the elder son's reaction? "Great! A party! My father must be happy. Something wonderful must have happened!" No, the son is suspicious. He remains at a distance. Instead of going in, he calls one of the servants and asks why songs are being sung and dances are being danced in his father's house.

He gets his answer, v. 27: your father has received your brother, "safe and sound." Standing behind the phrase "safe and sound" is just one Greek word, *hugiaino*. This word is the same word used in many of Paul's letters, like in Titus 2:1, where Paul urges Titus to "teach what accords with sound doctrine." Other translations render this Greek word as "correct" or "right" or "solid." See, the idea here in v. 27 isn't so much that the younger son has returned from the far country in healthy, "safe and sound" condition. Remember, this son has just returned from a famine. He couldn't even find pig food to eat. His physical condition was far from healthy, far from safe and sound. So the idea here is that the father has taken action to receive his lost son in such a way as to make the relationship sound again. He's made it "correct," "right," free from error. The father has seen to it that his relationship with his younger son is now "safe and sound."

That's the reason for the music and the dancing. There's a party going on that celebrates the reconciled son and honors the reconciling father. And the younger son is delighted to be at this party. He's eager to celebrate and honor his great father. But the elder son stands outside the party. He is...a party pooper.

The elder son should've been helping throw this party, but instead, the party's throwing him. This grace-saturated party is throwing off his whole concept of what it means to be a son and what it means to know the father. Some of us are in that same place this morning—a little suspicious, standing outside the party, unsure about celebrating the Father of grace and living a life of grace.

Now take a closer look at what's going on in this scene. Remember vv. 1-2 which first launched this parable? Remember how the religious leaders were angry with Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners? They were angry and so they preached the gospel without even knowing it when they complained: "this man receives sinners and eats with them." Without knowing it, these guys had declared

the good news—that the Son of God enters into relationship with and dines with sinners. Now notice this. Notice that now the father in this parable is doing exactly what Jesus was doing in vv. 1-2! The father is eating with the son that the elder brother thinks is so sinful. The figure of the father in the parable has evolved into a symbol for Jesus.

So Jesus is addressing this parable, yes, to younger son types: tax collectors and sinners—those who know they're lost and need to be found. But, the parable is especially addressed to elder son types: Pharisees and scribes—those who don't know they're lost and have no clue they need to be found. The message Jesus is sending these angry religious leaders is this: "Hey, look Pharisees and scribes, if you say I can't eat with sinners, then realize that I can't eat with you! You guys are sinners too. You guys are also lost."

How shocking this truth is to elder son types. The first prodigal was a sinner and he knew it. This second prodigal is a sinner, but he doesn't know it.

II. Luke 15:28a

Just like the Pharisees and scribes of v. 2, the elder son is angry. He refuses to go in. He refuses to participate in a public, village-wide party in honor of his father. Now enter with me into the 1st century culture: by refusing to enter the party, the elder son has also significantly shamed his father, just like his younger brother had earlier. Listen to what one commentator says: "The older son's response is crucially significant. He refuses to enter the banquet hall where the guests have already arrived. In any social situation, banquet or no banquet, the male members of the family must come and shake hands with the guests even if they don't stay and visit. They cannot stay aloof if they are anywhere in the vicinity of the house. Failure to fulfill this courtesy is a personal insult to the guests and to the father, as host. The older son knows this and thereby his action is an intentional public insult to his father... This is an open rupture of relationship between the son and his father. The situation is very serious because all this takes place publicly during a banquet. Because it is in public, this rebellion of the older son is more serious than the earlier rebellion of the prodigal."

See, the elder son is angry that his younger brother didn't pay the price for his rebellion, but that the father paid the price for him. This son sees that his brother has been reinstated into the family through the father's costly, countercultural grace. And this enrages him. So, in the most public manner possible, he breaks relationship with his father. He wants nothing to do with his grace-giving father. For certain types of people, for elder brother types of people, grace is more than just

amazing, it's also enraging. Elder brother types don't sing about Amazing Grace, they complain about Enraging Grace.

And while this son throws his own pity-party outside of the real party, the original audience of the parable is wondering, "What next? What happens next, Jesus? Jesus, tell us, what will the father do? Will he beat his son right away or will he wait until the party is over to dish out the punishment?"

Every single person in this room has been hurt before. We've all had others wrong us and sin against us. Maybe some of you are right now in just such a place. When we are wronged there are two ways we can react. We can either choose the easier path of getting even or the much more difficult path of forgiveness. Parents, you know these two options well. When your children wrong you, disrespect you, or hurt you, you can get angry and get even. This minimizes the suffering you feel. Or, you can forgive. And this hurts. Yes, it's the healing thing to do, but it still hurts. We always suffer some when we forgive. Forgiveness always comes with a cost.

In a little over two months my wife will give birth to our first child, a son. And like every other newborn, my son will come equipped with a fully functioning sinful nature. He will sin a lot and, hopefully, I will forgive a lot. Only two months from now will I begin to fully understand what I'm preaching about today: there's a great cost that comes along with being a forgiving father.

III. Luke 15:28b

So, how does this father react? How does he respond to his son who has publicly thrashed him? In that culture, a man in this father's position would have every right to, would be expected to, have his son immediately dragged into the house and beaten in front of all the guests. When I taught this parable in Cambodia, I was told that if an episode such as this ever happened in modern day Cambodia, the father would politely finish the party with his guests, but once his guests had left, the father would see to it that his son was physically punished, perhaps even disowned. But this father does what 1st century Middle Eastern patriarchs never did. For the second time in the same day, the father goes out to a lost son. See, the father loves both of his sons. This father leaves the party and again, goes out to a son. The father had already been shamed by his son's refusal to join the party. Now, the father bears even more shame by deliberately leaving his guests and humbly going outside to love and forgive his insulting son.

If the father had simply wanted a servant who dutifully obeyed all his commands, he could have seen to it that this son was beaten and taught a lesson. But this father wants sons, not servants. And he knows that grace breaks and transforms a heart better than a beating. It was grace that first broke, and is still breaking, my elder son's heart. The father goes out and "entreats" his son. He doesn't go outside to speak to his son or against his son; he goes outside to speak with his son. He gives his son an entreating, not a beating. But the son is unfazed. He rejects his father's love and instead gives him a speech. Beware of speeches in the Bible. They tell you a lot about a person's heart. And this son's stinging speech might be the most tragic speech ever given in the Bible. If this guy's speech resembles the language of your heart, I'm glad you're listening to this sermon.

IV. Luke 15:29-30

"Look!" The son begins his speech without even addressing his father. In 1st century Jewish culture, it was extremely rude to not use a title when speaking to someone who was your senior. Back in vv. 12 and 21, the younger son had the humility to address his dad by saying "Father." But not this son. With a voice of pent up pride and rage, this son raises his finger to his father and screams: "Look...these many years I have served you." This is the first "I" of the speech, the first of many first-person pronouns that dominate the elder son's speech. In these first words of his speech we're already beginning to see the faulty logic of elder son religion: "God, I've lived a life of serving you, but you've failed to adequately serve me."

Now, do you remember from last week how the younger son, when he was out in the far country, also had a speech? Do you remember how the younger son had a 2-part speech? Before he encountered the transforming kiss of the father, the younger son's speech had included a part 2 which he never spoke to the father. Once the younger son was in his father's arms, he simply confessed his sin and left off the second part of his speech, the "treat me as a hired servant" part of his speech. For his whole life, the elder son has been living part 2 of his brother's speech. He's always been a servant, never a son. He doesn't know how to be a son,... because, he's refused to be a son. Tragically, the elder son has spent his whole life working to impress the father, rather than being impressed by the father.

How have you spent your life? As a servant or as a son? As a slave or as a daughter? Why are you here at church today? Are you here because you think your Heavenly Father will be impressed? Or are you here because you are impressed with your Heavenly Father?

The speech continues: "I never disobeyed your command." The elder son thinks his relationship with his father is based on rule-keeping. The younger son had

come to see that he was lost and that he was not worthy to be called his father's son. But the elder son's speech is the opposite. He thinks he's worthy to be called his father's son. He thinks he's earned a relationship with the father through impeccable rule-keeping.

Do you identify with this son? Does rule-keeping religion describe your life? If it does, your life probably feels like a bad roller coaster ride. Some days you hate yourself because you haven't measured up to your moralistic monuments. And other days you just love and admire yourself because you've kept all your rules, and everybody else around you hasn't.

If you're someone who's living like this, I invite you to get off the religious roller coaster and come home to a way of life that's entirely different. See, the gospel, Christianity, is very, very, very different from all other "religions." All other religions fit into either elder son lostness or younger son lostness. Elder son religions: Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and others—these ask you to pull up your Silicon Valley bootstraps and earn your way to Allah or nirvana or good karma. Younger brother religions: New Age, self spirituality, and others—these tell you to let loose of your bootstraps and worship and discover yourself.

All these religions are pride-driven. They play on human pride, they appeal to what you can do, what you can earn, what you can discover, merit, or achieve. Because they have no doctrine of sin, they have no need for a Savior. Christianity is something totally different. The gospel crushes our pride and sounds the good news: we can have a relationship with the Father out of sheer grace. The gospel is the good news that the Father has, at great cost, left the party and come outside to bring us home. The younger son was transformed by this gospel. He's in the house. He's having a feast. But the elder son keeps talking.

Continuing in v. 29, he says: "You never gave me a goat so I could party with my friends." What's this guy talking about? He's got 2/3rds of his father's inheritance, remember? He's surrounded by his father's provision, his father's stuff, his father's feasts. See the tragedy: the elder son has spent his whole life surrounded by the father's feast, yet he's been living a famine! He's never come into the feast! His brother suffered a famine in the far country, but he's starved himself in the father's country. Notice that he's starved himself because he wants his own kind of feast with his own kind of friends; "my" friends he says. He doesn't want to have anything to do with his father's feasts and his father's friends. He's got his own friends. He's got different family.

The final sentence of the speech says: "But when this son of yours came...you killed the fattened calf for him!" The elder son is enraged that this guy, who he won't even acknowledge to be his brother, has received what he has not earned. The elder son is furious because he thinks that he's earned it all. He thinks he's earned what his prodigal brother received for free. He thinks he's earned the calf, the robe, and the kiss. Elder son types are always calculating and comparing. They think they have to earn their acceptance with God, and that others have to earn it too.

And this is exactly what has kept the elder son from ever experiencing the kiss. Christianity calls for us to repent not just of the pride of running off to the far country, but also the pride of thinking we've earned it all in the near country. Pastor Tim Keller puts it this way: "Irreligious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through irreligion, 'worldly' pride. ('No one tells me how to live or what to do, so I determine what is right and wrong for me!') But moral and religious people seek to be their own saviors and lords through religion, 'religious' pride. ('I am more moral and spiritual than other people, so God owes me to listen to my prayers and take me to heaven. God cannot let just anything happen to me—he owes me a happy life. I've earned it!') The irreligious person rejects Jesus entirely, but the religious person only uses Jesus as an example and helper and teacher—but not as a Savior. These are two different ways to do the same thing—control our own lives...Christians are people who come to see that both their sins and their best deeds have all really been ways of avoiding Jesus as savior."

Through this parable Jesus is calling us into a way of life that's entirely different from both younger son and elder son living. But if you're a Christian this morning, and you're like me, sometimes you forget what the Father is all about. Sometimes you forget the kiss, you forget the gospel, and you slip into behaving like the elder son.

I was just a young boy when I heard the gospel. I remember being thrilled over the good news that I could lay claim to a Savior who had saved me from my sins—past, present, and future, and who had made me a true child of my Heavenly Father. But you know what, I have so often made the mistake of thinking that the gospel is only what got me started in the Christian life and that now it's just up to me—to my own moral efforts and achievements. This is what my high school years were all about. I was the Christian guy in high school who never touched drugs, never touched alcohol, and never touched females where they should only be touched by their husbands. To this day, I've never been high, never been drunk, never been arrested, and I've

never fathered illegitimate children. Friends, I don't say this to boast. I say this to confess. My story isn't one of outward rebellion; it's one of inward rebellion. During those high school years, my heart was often very dark, full of pride and entitlement. My interior speech was the elder brother speech. My good behavior was so often motivated not from delight in the Father's glory, but from arrogantly thinking I could earn my own glory before the Father. Jesus first told this parable yes, because our world is full of younger son types, but he especially told it because of elder brothers like me.

I'm so thankful that in my college years I finally began to learn that the gospel is also what keeps us going in the Christian life. The gospel is not a starter home that we live in for a few years while we generate some moral equity and save up for something better and bigger. No! The gospel is the beginning, the better, and the bigger of the Christian life. We get into the Father's house by way of the gospel. And we stay in, mature, grow old, and party forever in the Father's house only through the gospel. The gospel is good news for the lost and the found. We never move on from the gospel. We never move on from the message of this parable.

V. Luke 15:31-32

Now we come to the conclusion of the whole parable. The younger son had shamed his father once—by demanding his inheritance. But the elder son, by refusing to enter the party and by rejecting his father's humble party exit, has now publicly shamed his father twice, twice in the same day. And what does the father do?

Yet again, the father loves his elder son. How does he love him? Well, this father has read all about The Five Love Languages. He knows what kind of love his children need. When the father ran out to his younger son, he loved him with service, touch, and gifts. But the father does something different for his elder son. Look at the last two sentences of our parable. This is the only place in the entire parable where we see the father speak directly to one of his sons. The father never spoke a single syllable to his younger son. But the father loves this son with words. Tenderly, he says: "My son, you are mine, you are always with me, all that is mine is yours. Come home, come inside, join me in the celebration." Elder son and daughter types need words. We need greater assurance of our acceptance by the Father. That's the only thing that can draw this elder son out of his sin—the father's words. And what gracious words our Father speaks.

CONCLUSION

So, what are your words? What's your speech? When you stand before the Almighty Father on judgment day, will you have an elder son speech or will you have instead placed your faith in the Father's speech? Will you talk about what you've done for the Father, or will you talk about what the Father has done for you? Hear me, if your plan is to go with the elder brother script, you'll break the Father's heart and you'll stand outside of his party, not just for a night, but forever. But, there's still time to change your speech. This parable isn't finished yet.

In v. 32 we're left wondering, what did the elder son do? Did he receive his father's words or did he reject them? Well, we actually do know what the elder son did. Jesus told this parable while he was en route to Jerusalem. And just a short while after speaking this parable Jesus arrived in Jerusalem and there the religious leaders—the Pharisees, the scribes, the elder brothers, there they called for Jesus' death. They chose to reject the father and stay outside the party. To the Savior of this parable, to Jesus the Savior—the Running Father incarnate, the ones who had cried out against Jesus' contact with sinners, these same ones now cried: "Crucify! Crucify him! And hanging, dying on the cross, how did Jesus respond? What was Jesus' speech? "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Elder prodigals, how are you going to finish this parable? I entreat you to ditch your speech and respond to Jesus' speech. Cry out to Jesus. He is your way into the Father's house.