

- upon himself.
- The death and resurrection of the Son, and the love of the Father, create a new community of men and women who regularly break bread together to celebrate the new life and common union they have through Jesus.
- It is not enough just to have an individual personal relationship with God through Christ. You have to be an active part of the feast, the new community, the family of God. That is where together we become conformed into the image of the one who did all this for us.

© 2009 Timothy Keller

### My Personal Reflection...

1. I am still searching for God.... Or do I allow God to find me, even in the worst places of my life?
2. Ultimately, this parable is about me. Where do I place myself in this parable?
3. The younger son's *'heart was distorted with other loves'*..love for his father's things. Is my relation with God based on the 'things' that God gives me, or do I really enjoy being in the house of the Lord?
4. The elder son's place in the house was a cold, calculated and joyless presence. How do I feel in the house of the Lord?
5. The father kept the door open 24/7 for the sons to return. Do I avail of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist that the Lord gives me 24/7 to return back?
6. What are *'the signs of my lostness'* that I need to address during this Youth Pasch?
7. Do I follow the 'moralistic religion principle' or the 'Gospel principle' when it comes to obedience to God and His commandments?
8. Am I really able to appreciate the *'Eucharistic wonder'* at every mass? To taste the *'pearl of great price'* as food for my daily journey? To be born anew at every Eucharist?

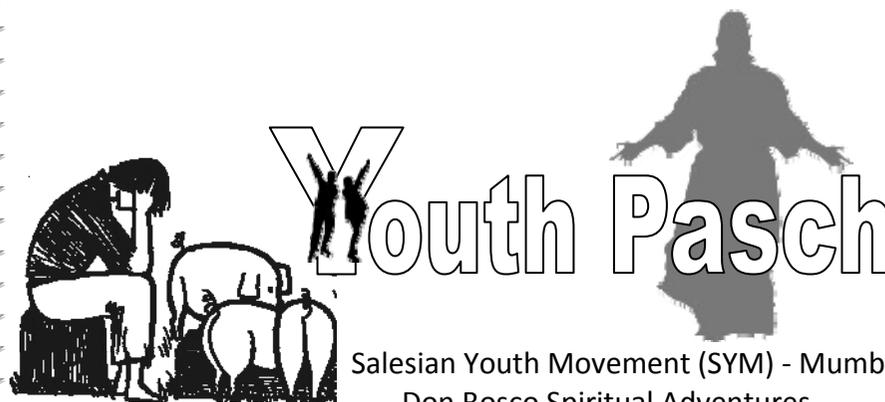
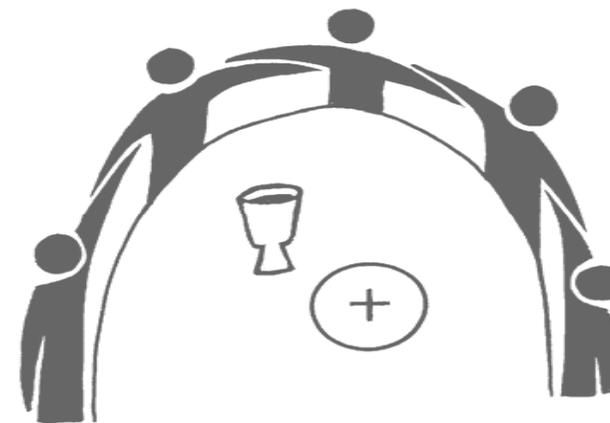


Don Bosco Youth Services (DBYS) —Matunga , MUMBAI

For private circulation only

# My Place at the Table

*Celebrating Reconciliation  
and Eucharist  
in the light of the Prodigal Son*



Salesian Youth Movement (SYM) - Mumbai  
Don Bosco Spiritual Adventures

## Celebrating Reconciliation and Eucharist: *Lk 15*

Most people think of religion as “humanity’s search for God.” We like to think of ourselves as spiritual seekers, as honest inquirers. We look at the religions of the world and, while giving somewhat different directions about how to do so, they all seem to agree that if we sincerely search for God we will find him. Millions of people the world over believe that by believing and obeying God’s law in the Bible, they can find God.



The problem is that anyone who feels they have searched for and found God will naturally disdain those who seem to be making no effort at all. They will look at “sinners” and say, “I found God! If you try, you can. I did.”



But the Biblical gospel turns this idea on its head. The shepherd (whom Jesus obviously identifies with) must go out to seek and to save that which is lost (Luke 19:10). Likewise the coin cannot search and find its owner, the owner finds the coin.

And here is the first great blow to the world’s categories. Every other religion says that we can search for and find God if we try hard enough.



Only Christianity says, no, God had to come down into the world to seek and save us. Salvation must be by his grace, not our achievement.



The end of each parable challenges not just the categories of the Pharisees but their heart and attitude. A theme through all three parables is the joy of finding the lost. God does not look at spiritually lost people the way the Pharisees do. Because the Pharisees do not see themselves as lost sinners saved by grace, they disdain “sinners”. They feel superior to them. But heaven rejoices when “sinners” are reached and found.

In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus challenges his listeners’ fundamental assumptions about God, sin, and salvation. He gives them an entirely new way of thinking about God, themselves and the whole world...  
be ready for that same challenge....to find your place at the Table

forbid believers from eating with “sinners.” To eat with someone was to receive him, virtually as family. How could you do that for someone who has rejected God? Besides that, didn’t everyone know that you become like the people you love and spend the most time with? If you eat with sinners, it was reasoned, you would become a sinner.



- The Jewish dietary laws were extremely elaborate. They were seen as quite effective in keeping Jews from being polluted by the pagan practices of their neighbors. In fact, during the time between testaments, leading up to Jesus’ day, preoccupation with ritual purity increased, as Judea came under the boot of one set of pagan masters after another. Meals more and more became boundary markers between the righteous and sinners.
- But Jesus shattered this practice, as we see in Luke 15:2. He eats with the notoriously wicked and the marginalized. How can he do this? How can sinners be included in the feast?

### 3. The new communion—

**“this brother of your was dead and is alive again.”**

- Jesus leaves his own true home (Phil. 2), wanders without a home (Matt 8:20), and is finally crucified outside the gate of Jerusalem, a sign of exile and rejection (Heb. 13:11-12). Jesus experiences the exile that the human race deserves. He is alienated and cast out so we can be brought home.
- On the cross, Jesus loses fellowship and communion with the father. He cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:45). He is forsaken and “cast out” of the family, so that we can be brought in.
  - As we can see from the parable itself, Jesus calls younger brothers to repent. He does not only eat with them for the sake of “inclusiveness” or just to defy convention—rather he calls people to change.



- And he gives us the foretaste of that great feast, what we call “The Lord’s Supper” or Communion. To sit at the Communion table you don’t have to be perfect, only repentant. So anyone can come, and anyone does come.
- Think of it like this—the ultimate son, who was dead and cut off, is now alive again. So we have to celebrate! And the way we celebrate what he has done for us, is to create a new community of forgiven sinners, in which anyone can be a part. It doesn’t matter who you are or what you’ve done, it doesn’t matter what your race or class or background is. Any repentant sinner can come and be a brother and a sister, because of the death and resurrection of our true elder brother, who took our exile and punishment

he needed to go home, but how? He realized he was an outcast, so why would they receive him? Still, he went home.

## 2. The divine solution—verses 31-32.

- The centerpiece of the parable is a feast. The father throws a feast, filled with “music and dancing” and the greatest delicacies, to mark the reconciliation and restoration of his son. He says that when the younger son came home, “we had to celebrate.” There was no choice. Why is the feast so important?
- meals ratified covenants, celebrated victories, and marked all special family occasions and transitions, such as births, weddings, and funerals. Also, a feast was established to mark the greatest event in the salvation history of God’s people to that time—the Passover. Why were meals so important?



- In ancient times, meals were prolonged affairs that lasted all evening, usually until bedtime— since there was little else to do after the sun went down and after a strenuous day of labor. So evening meals became the center of family life and therefore both a symbol and practice of intimacy.
- But we don’t need to be people of the first century to grasp all this. It is at meals that you most feel at home. In a meal your body is getting what it needs—the pleasure and nourishment of food and rest. But also, at meals your heart is getting what it needs— laughter and friendship. Even today, if you have a family reunion or some kind of homecoming—you eat. And it is at those great feasts that no matter what else is going wrong in our lives, we feel almost at home.

The feast means that God will bring us home some day.

- As Jesus says: “Many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 8:11). Because of our true elder brother, God will some day make this world home again. He’s going to wipe away death, suffering, and tears, and will give us bodies that run and are never weary.
- And when we get there, we will say something like what Jewel the Unicorn said at the end of the Chronicles of Narnia: “*I’ve come home at last! I belong here. This is the land I’ve been looking for all my life, though I never knew it!*”
- The younger brother did not expect to be brought back into the family, he did not expect a feast, since he had sinned. But that is what he gets. And the elder brother objects. Why?
- Because meals signified acceptance and relationship, the religious leaders

## 1. Give Me My Share

**Introduction:** The third of Jesus’ three parables is the longest and most famous. It is a story about a family—a father, an older son, and a younger son. The story begins when the younger son comes to the father and says, “Give me my share of the estate.”



In ancient times, when the father died, the oldest son always got “a double portion” of what any other child got. If there are two sons, the older would get two-thirds of the estate and so the younger would get one-third. So the story opens with the younger son asking for his one-third share of the inheritance. Let’s look at:

- 1) the meaning of the request, 2) the response to that request, and 3) what difference it makes for us.

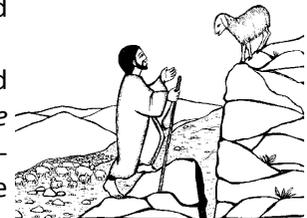


### 1. The meaning of the request—verses 11-12.

- The younger son’s request was stunning, because the inheritance, of course, was not divided up and distributed to the children until the father died.
- As Kenneth Bailey writes: “*In Middle Eastern culture, to ask for the inheritance while the Father is alive, is to wish him dead.*” The request would therefore have been a disgrace to the family name, because of the younger son’s extraordinary disrespect for his father. It would have also been a blow to the economic standing of the family, since the father would have to sell part of his estate in order to give him his share. In short, this request ripped the family apart. It was a relational and economic act of violence against the family’s integrity.

### Why would the younger son make such a request?

- In his Confessions, Augustine gives us a *theory of why we do what we do*, and especially why we sin. He makes this startling observation: “A man has murdered another man—what was his motive? Either he desired his wife or his property or else he would steal to support himself; or else he was afraid of losing something to him; or else, having been injured, he was burning to be revenged.” Augustine goes on to say that even a murderer murders because he loves something. He loves romance or wealth or his reputation or something else too much, inordinately, more than God, and that is why he murders. *Our hearts are distorted by disordered loves.*” We love, rest our hearts in, and look to things to give us the joy and meaning that only the Lord can give.
- The younger son may have lived with his father and may even have obeyed his father, but *he didn’t love his father*. The thing he loved, ultimately, was his father’s things, not his father. His heart was set on the



wealth and on the comfort, freedom and status that wealth brings. His father was just a means to an end. Now, however, his patience was over. He knew that the request would be like a knife in his father's heart, but he obviously didn't care.

- Here is a great irony, which we will return to later in our series.
- The two sons look very different, on the surface. One runs off and lives a dissolute life, one stays home and obeys and serves his father.



Yet at the end, the older son is furious with the father and humiliates him by refusing to go into the great feast. This is the older son's way of saying that he will not live in the same family with the younger son. So again the family's integrity and the father's heart are under assault—this time by the elder brother.

Why? The elder brother objects to the expense of what the father is doing, as we will see. He shows that he has been obeying the father to get his things, and not because he loves him, since he is willing to put him to shame. *Both the older and younger sons love the father's things, but not the father*

## 2. The Response to the Request—verse 12b, 20-24.

- The younger's son request to the father would have shocked Jesus' listeners, but the father's response is even more remarkable. This was a patriarchal society, in which you were required to show deference and reverence toward those older or above you. This kind of contempt and insolence would have ordinarily met with outrage. The listeners would expect the father to explode in wrath, to drive the son out with blows.
- Instead, we read the simple words, "so he divided his property between them." We need to put ourselves into the historical context. In those days, most of a family's wealth was in their land and property. Indeed, their family land was part of their very identity. It is likely that the father had to sell some of his land in order to become "liquid" and give his younger son his share.
- This is reflected in the unusual Greek word used in verse 12 translated as "property." It is the word "*bios*" which means "life." It says, literally, he divided his "life" between them. Why use that word? Probably it was a way to convey what it felt like for the father to lose his land, his family's good name and status, and the presence of one of his two sons. The father is being asked to tear his very life apart—and he does.
- The older son and anyone else in the community would have thought that the father was being foolish to give in to the younger son's request. But looking back, we know better. If the father had



your name to my brothers'."

- Jesus came to earth and truly obeyed his Father and never disobeyed his orders. He truly had the right to all the Father owns. But instead, he came out and searched for us, and found us in the pigsty, and carried us home on his shoulders singing with joy. And he gave us his robe, his ring, his place, his wealth—it is all at his expense.

**Text : Luke 15:11-32 NIV**

## Alternate Title: We Had to Celebrate

*Introduction:* We have looked at the story of the younger brother, then we put it into its context

with the story of the elder brother. Then we put the story of the two brothers into the context of the whole chapter. Each time we saw another important part of Jesus' message. But we are not quite done. We need to see the story in the context of the whole Bible. Jesus was immersed in the Scriptures, and in this story he is giving us the essence of the whole Biblical storyline in one vivid narrative. If we see that, we will get a 30,000 foot view of what the Bible is all about. We learn about 1) the human condition, 2) the divine solution, and 3) the new communion.



### 1. The human condition—verses 13-17.

- The younger brother's sin turned him into an exile from his home. He had disgraced his family and the entire community would have been outraged. He would have had to take his money and go far away, and he did.
- When he did so, he became an image of the human race. For we were made for life in the Garden of Eden. Our true home is in the presence of God. But we have lost our home. We are all exiles.
  - "Home" is the place that truly fits and suits us. We were made to know and serve God, to live in his presence and enjoy his love and beauty.
  - However, because we wanted to be our own Saviors and Lords, we lost God, and therefore we wander in the world and experience what the philosopher Heidegger called *unheimlichkeit*. The word translates as "eeriness" or "uncanniness" but literally it means "away from home." Heidegger is referring to the anxiety and spiritual nausea that comes from never feeling at home in the world.
  - This world doesn't address the needs of our heart. We long for a love that can't be lost, for escape from death, for the triumph of justice over wrong. But such things will never be found here.
  - When the younger brother "came to his senses" he realized that



shepherd searches until he finds the lost sheep. The woman searches until she finds the lost coin. So when we get to the parable of this lost son, the listeners fully expect that someone will set out to search for the lost brother and bring him home.

- To our surprise, no one does. Jesus is leading us to ask, who should have gone out to search for this lost boy? And the answer would have been quite clear to First century listeners: it should have been the elder brother.



- That was the reason that the oldest son got the lion's share of the estate. It was his job to sustain the family's unity and its place in the community. It is the elder brother in the parable who should have said something like this: "Father, my younger brother has been a fool, and now his life is in ruins. But I will go look for him and bring him home. And if the inheritance is gone—as I expect—I'll bring him back into the family at my expense."
- Jesus doesn't put a brother like that into the story. Instead the younger son and the father have to deal with a recalcitrant, resistant, self-righteous elder brother.
- But we don't. The elder brother in the story is there to make us long for a true elder brother, one who, if we go astray, won't hold it against us but seek us and bring us back at any risk and any cost to himself.

### 3. We have a true elder brother.

Think of the kind of elder brother we need. We need one who would not just go into a far country, but who would come all the way from heaven to earth to find us. We need one who would not just open his wallet for us, but pour out his life. One who would pay not just a finite cost but an infinite debt, to bring us back into God's family. And we do! It's Jesus.



- See! When the father says to the elder brother "everything I have is yours" that is literally true of Jesus. Jesus had all God's glory. He had equal glory with the Father, but he emptied himself (Phil 2:4-10.) He lost it all—for us.
- How do we get the father's robe? Because Jesus was stripped naked on the cross. How do we get the father's feast? Because Jesus took the cup of wrath that might have the cup of joy. He is our true elder brother—and he says so. Hebrews 2:11 says, "Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, 'I will declare



become embittered, and had perhaps beaten the young man or done something else severe to him, no restoration would have ever happened. The father's heart would have been too hardened to ever receive him back, and the son may never have expected or wanted the father to do so.

- By bearing the agony and pain of the son's sin himself, instead of taking revenge, instead of paying the son back by inflicting pain on him, *the father kept the door open in the relationship*. The father was willing to suffer for the sin of the child, so that some day reconciliation would be possible.

### 3. What Difference it makes for us?

**First**, it means that whether we are irreligious, free-wheeling, "younger brother" types or moral, religious "elder brother" types, we have a problem with what Augustine calls "inordinate love" or idols of the heart.



- For example, imagine a wife who has a husband who spends hours with another woman talking about all his and her problems, and he goes traveling with this other woman, and talks and thinks about her incessantly. So the wife confronts her husband and he says, "What's the problem? I married you, didn't I? I pay the mortgage, don't I? I do all my duties, don't I? If someone asks, I say you are my wife. Why are you so upset?" The wife will say (rightly) that someone else has captured his heart and imagination.

Many of us are like the elder brother. We may obey all the rules, but our real heart and passion is something else—our career, or making money, or our children, or peer acceptance. If any thing has a controlling position in our heart, if any thing is more important to our happiness than God—then that thing is a "god" to us, an "inordinate love."

- Recognize these things for what they are. Do you see them in your own heart and life?
- Once we see these things for what they are, what can be done about them?

**Second**, it means that our Lord has done for us what the father in the parable did for his son.

- When God came into this world, we would have expected him to come in wrath, to appear and drive us out with blows. But he did not. He didn't come with a sword in his hand, but with nails in his hands. He didn't come to bring judgment, but to bear our judgment.





- Jesus went to the cross in weakness, and there, voluntarily, his life was literally torn apart. And for his only property left, his garment, they cast lots.

But he did it so that, when we repent, like the younger son, forgiveness and reconciliation is now available.

And how does this help us with our “disordered loves”? Objectively, it means there is real, true forgiveness for them. Our guilt is dealt with by Jesus’ blood. Subjectively, when we see the absolute beauty of what Jesus has done for us, it captures our hearts. Money can’t die for us, popularity can’t die for us. There is nothing more beautiful in all of reality than the picture of a perfectly happy Being, leaving all the bliss of heaven, and sacrificing everything for the sake of rebellious, undeserving, ungrateful people.

The more you look at Jesus doing that, the more you will love him above anyone or anything else. He will capture your heart so that nothing matters more than he does.



*When you see what he’s done for you, it makes the worst times bearable and the best times leave-able.*

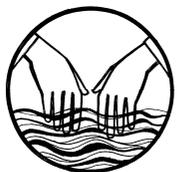
*Text : Luke 15:25-32 NIV*

## Alternate Title: He Refused to Go In

**Introduction:** Most people who read and study The Parable of the Prodigal Son concentrate completely on the character of the younger son, his repentance, and the father’s forgiveness. And yet look at the text. It doesn’t end with the return of the prodigal. Almost half of the story is about the older son. The story is about two sons, who are both alienated from the father, who are both assaulting the unity of the family. Jesus wants us to compare and contrast them. The younger son is “lost”—that is easy to see. We see him shaming his father, ruining his family, sleeping with prostitutes, and we say, “yes, there’s someone who is spiritually lost.”

But Jesus’ point is that the older son is lost too. Let’s learn from the text:

- 1) A startling new understanding of lostness,
- 2) What the signs of it are (so we can recognize it in ourselves), and
- 3) What we can do about this condition.



### 1. A startling new understanding of lostness—verse 28.

- The elder brother would have known that the day of the prodigal’s return was the greatest day in his father’s life. The father has “killed the fattened calf”, an enormously expensive

payment for sin—but here we see that reconciliation is completely free.”

- However, this is a great mistake. The reconciliation is free to the younger brother. But it is very costly for someone else.
- The elder brother is furious with the father for receiving his younger brother back into the family. He alludes to it when he says, “you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But... you kill the fattened calf for him!” The elder brother is angry because of the cost of this reconciliation.
- Remember—the father had given the younger brother his entire legal part of the inheritance. And it was all spent—all gone.
- Yet now the father is restoring him into the family. He has already put a robe on him, and given him a ring, which was probably the signet ring with which family members ratified contracts. The younger brother’s fair share of the wealth is all gone, but now he is back, and every robe, ring, fattened calf is coming out of someone else’s pocket.
- *Everything the father has, now is legally the elder brother’s.* He is the only heir of all the father has left. So every robe, every ring, every fattened calf, every cent of the father’s, is ultimately the elder brother’s. When the father says to the elder brother, “everything I have is yours” (v.31) he is speaking the literal truth.
- So the salvation of the younger son is not free after all. It has already been extremely expensive—look at the feast. And it will be extremely expensive. The father cannot forgive the younger brother, except at the expense of the elder brother. He is the one who must bear the cost of the reconciliation.



### 2. There is a missing elder brother—verses 1-10.



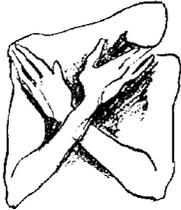
The elder brother knows all this—that forgiveness and reconciliation is never free. Someone has to pay. Either the younger brother has to come and earn his way back into the family, as

he offered to do (see verse 19) or he can come back in immediately, through forgiveness, and then the elder brother will have to bear the cost. Salvation cannot be free. Someone has to pay, either the sinner or his elder brother.

- The elder brother knows this and refuses to do it. So we listen to the story and see the elder brother “being a Pharisee,” and we are saddened. But that is not where Jesus wants our minds and hearts to remain.
- Jesus told his listeners three parables together—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. In each of the first two parables there is a lost object and someone who goes out, searches for it, and brings it home with joy. The

enemies. He is urging them to see their fatal error. Jesus does not scream at his enemies, or smite them, but lovingly urges them to repent and come into his love.

- And so we have a foreshadowing of that great moment on the cross when he says, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). This love toward his enemies made him vulnerable and cost him his life. On the cross, instead of blasting his enemies, he lovingly took the penalty of their sins on himself. While we were his enemies, Christ died for us (Rom 5:10).
- Knowing what he did for us must drain us of our self-righteousness and our insecurity. We were so sinful he had to die for us. But we were so loved that he was glad to die for us. That takes away both the pride and the fear that makes us elder brothers.



**Text : Luke 15:1-6, 25-32 NIV**

### **Alternate Title: Everything I Have Is Yours**

*Introduction:* We have been looking at the story traditionally called “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.” We’ve said that you will miss the radical message of the story if you

don’t see that it is about two sons—one immoral and “bad”, one very moral and “good”—who are both alienated from the father and therefore spiritually lost. That is a remarkable message. But there is much more—though it too is easy to miss. We must remember that this is the third of three parables, told to the same audience, meant to be pondered all together.

What do we learn if we do that? We learn:

- 1) the cost of reconciliation,
- 2) that there is a missing elder brother, and
- 3) that we have a true elder brother.

#### **1. The cost of reconciliation—verses 29-31.**

What did it cost to bring the younger brother home?

At first glance, it seems not to have cost anything. There is no punishment—he is just taken in. The father opens his arms, puts new clothes on him, and that’s that. It’s free.

- Many people have pointed this out and then argued like this: “God in heaven is like this father. He just accepts and forgives anyone who asks. There is no need for the classic Christian doctrine of the atonement. Christians have taught that God cannot simply forgive, that there must be

extravagance in a culture where even having meat at meals was considered a delicacy.

- The older son realized his father was ecstatic with joy. Yet he refused to go into the biggest feast his father has ever put on. This was a remarkable, deliberate act of disrespect. It was his way of saying, “I won’t be part of this family nor respect your headship of it.”
- And the father had to “go out” to plead with him. Just as he went out to bring his alienated younger son into the family, now he had to do the same for the older brother.
- Do you realize what Jesus is saying to his listeners, and to us? *The older son is lost.*



- The father represents God himself, and the meal is the feast of salvation. In the end, then, the younger son, the immoral man, comes in and is saved, but the older son, the good son, refuses to go in and is lost.

• The Pharisees who were listening to this parable knew what that meant. It was a complete reversal of everything they believed. You can almost hear them gasp as the story ends.

- And what is it that is keeping the elder brother out? It’s because: “All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed...” (v.29). The good son is not lost in spite of his good behavior, but because of his good behavior. *So it is not his sin keeping him out, but his righteousness.*
- The gospel is neither religion nor is it irreligion; it is not morality nor is it immorality. This was completely astonishing and confusing to Jesus’ hearers at the time—and it may even be astonishing and confusing to you.

#### **Why is the older son lost?**

- The younger brother wanted the father’s wealth, but not the father. So how did he get what he wanted? He left home. He broke the moral rules.
- But it becomes evident by the end that the elder brother also wanted selfish control of the father’s wealth. He was very unhappy with the father’s use of the possessions—the robe, the ring, the calf. But while the younger brother got control by taking his stuff and running away, we see that the elder brother got control by staying home and being very good. He felt that now he has the right to tell the father what to do with his possessions because he had obeyed him perfectly.

So there are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord.

- One is by breaking all the laws and being bad. One is by keeping all the laws and being good.
- If I can be so good that God has to answer my prayer, give me a good life, and





take me to heaven, then in all I do I may be looking to Jesus to be my helper and my rewarder—but he isn't my Savior. I am then my own Savior.

## 2. What the signs of this lostness are—verses 29-30.

Some people are complete elder brothers. They go to church and obey the Bible—but out of expectation that then God owes them. They have never understood the Biblical gospel at all. But many Christians, who know the gospel, are nonetheless *elder-brotherish*. Despite the fact that they know the gospel of salvation by grace with their heads, their hearts go back to an *elder-brotherish* “default mode” of self-salvation. Here's what the *elder-brotherish* attitude looks like. It is:

- **A deep anger** (v.28—“became angry”). 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. But they are forgetting Jesus. He lived a better life than any of us—but suffered terribly.
- **A joyless and mechanical obedience** (v.29—“I've been slaving for you”). 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 elder brothers find obedience virtually always a joyless, mechanical, slavish thing as a result.
- **A coldness to younger brother-types** (v.30—“this son of yours”). 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.
- **A lack of assurance of the father's love** (v.29—you never threw me a party). 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. What are the signs of this? Every time something goes wrong in your life you wonder if it's a punishment. Another sign is irresolvable guilt. You can't be sure you've repented deeply enough, so you beat yourself up over what you did. Lastly, there is a lack of any sense of intimacy with God in your prayer life. You may pray a lot of prayers asking for things, but not sense his love.



- **An unforgiving, judgmental spirit**. 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.

## 3. What we can do about this spiritual condition.

**First**, we have to see the uniqueness of the gospel.

Jesus ends the parable with the lostness of the older brother in order to get across the point that it is a more dangerous spiritual condition. The younger brother knew he was alienated from the father, but the elder brother did not.



- If you tell moral, religious people who are trying to be good, trying to obey the Bible so God will bless them—that they are alienated from God, they will just be offended. If you know you are sick you may go to a doctor; if you don't know you're sick you won't—you'll just die.



- Moralistic religion works on the principle, “I obey, therefore God accepts me.” The gospel works on the principle, “I am

*accepted by God through Jesus Christ, therefore I obey.*”

- These are two radically different, even opposite, dynamics. Yet both sets of people sit in church together, both pray, both obey the Ten Commandments, but for radically different reasons. And because they do these things for radically different reasons, they produce radically different results—different kinds of character. One produces anger, joyless compliance, superiority, insecurity, and a condemning spirit. The other slowly but inevitably produces contentment, joy, humility, poise, and a forgiving spirit.
- Unless a person and a congregation knows the difference between general religiosity and the true gospel, people will constantly fall into moralism and elder-brotherishness. And if you call younger brothers to receive Christ and live for him without making this distinction clear, they will automatically think you are inviting them to become elder brothers.



**Second**, we have to see the vulnerability of Jesus.

- Remember, again, whom Jesus is speaking to (vv.1-2). Jesus is speaking to his mortal enemies, the men he knows will kill him. On the one hand, this is an astonishingly bold challenge to them. He's talking to those who want to kill him and telling them that they are lost, that they fundamentally misunderstand God's salvation and purpose in the world, and that they are trampling on the heart of God.
- But at the same time, he is also being so loving and tender. When the father comes out to the older brother, that is Jesus pleading with his