

Intro: Why did Jesus put the older son in this parable? The previous "lost/found" parables ended before anything like this. It is because Jesus now appeals to another group of lost people. There are two kinds of lostness. The first, as indicated by the younger son, are bold sinners, those who flee from God and actively pursue their ways in godlessness, running away from anything having to do with the Father, following their lusts in full force. However, it is just as much lostness to run way from the Father through moralism. In other words, we can use external moral performance to distance ourselves from God, too. The older son indicates this type of moralistic distance from God which permeates every human heart. We do the things that we think make us good people, yet we do all these things so that God will owe us His things. In the end, we **wanted the same thing the younger son wanted, the Father's things**, but not the Father. This type of lostness, that of the moralist, serves God not because he delights in God or desires to please **God for God's** own sake, but rather so that God will give him what fulfills the same lusts that lead the younger son to shame his father and himself. While the younger son was bold in his disregard of the father, the older son is more manipulative but equally loveless. And at the end of this story only one son remained in the house, at the table, having come through the door: the repentant son who knew that he needed mercy. Only repentant sons who know God owes them nothing, but come solely upon His grace and mercy find a place at the table.

1. Moralists Approach God as a Master, but Not as a Father
 - a. "Slave/Master"
 - i. See how I have served you!
 - ii. When we approach the Father based upon the intensity or the perseverance of our works, we treat Him as if He owes us all His blessings and has no right to give them as He chooses
 1. The son was angry that His Father was rejoicing in the son who **didn't work as hard**, because he looked down on his brother as undeserving
 2. This comparative attitude created bitterness in the moralist, anger that ruled him, and ultimately distanced him from the Father
 - b. "Lawkeeper/Lawgiver"
 - i. I have obeyed every command you gave!
 - ii. This is surely an overstatement, but the heart behind it is that he feels that his obedience to Father garnered him certain privileges
 1. It also shows that his obedience was only slavish, not an obedience to honor the father or out of love for the Father, but it was selfish obedience to gain reward from the Father
 - c. NOT as Son/Father!
 - i. What God desires from us is not the attitude of mere slave or lawkeeper, but that of childlike faith and delight in Him!
 - ii. He wanted the Father's things more than the Father
 1. **"are you not always with ME?!"**
 2. Will you delight in what I am like? That I delight in mercy, not wrath?!
 - iii. The result of this attitude is that he refused to go in to the Father
 1. **His overdesire for the Father's blessings and his overdesire for his own honor actually harmed him and kept him from enjoying the father's presence**
 2. He is missing out on JOY!
 - a. Joy is always what is missing from the self-savior, the moralist, the self-honoring person
 - i. **Ironically, the older son is still in his "pigpen" – SELF-PITY!**
 - b. While the Father delighted in mercy toward sinners, in finding the lost one, in reconciliation more than perfect service, the older son did not delight in the **Father's mercy, but was overcome with grief at seeing it?**
2. The Father Has Mercies for the Moralistic Son, Too
 - a. Went outside to the older pouting son
 - i. He did not send a servant or issue a command to bring him in
 - ii. He treated him like he did the younger son, going out to him
 - b. Entreated the son with grace
 - i. "began entreating him"

1. He entreated, patiently speaking to his heart, with gentle words of His affirming love
 - ii. The Father didn't merely want the son to perform his duty, but he wanted to awaken him to the relational value of him as the merciful and gracious Father!
 1. He was wooing him with grace, not demanding perfection with a frown!
 - c. Calls him, "My child"
 - i. Not "my slave" or "my servant", but "my child"
 - ii. This is amazing grace!
 1. Even though the older son just accused him of wrongdoing, slandering his kindnesses and expressing his disdain for the father, the father speaks in generous terms
 2. Do you believe that God pursues sinners like this? That he delights in his sons, even when they have strayed ignominiously? That God delights in mercy!
 - d. Reminds him of his presence
 - i. "are you not always with me"
 1. He had revealed Himself and shared Himself with this older son, but the son had lost **sight of the Father's goodness and beauty**
 2. Yet, the Father was still present, still near, and still pursuing this lost boy
 - ii. He is reminding the son that he is near, yet the son speaks of having no joy in this nearness or even in being the heir, but rather in partying with friends
 1. This is the frigid response of a heart that looks near to the father, but finds no joy in him or delight in his goodness, but is inwardly self-serving and self-righteous and self-sufficient
 - e. All of this would have been surprising, too, for the Older Son has also shamed the Father by refusing to come inside
3. The Moralist Reveals His Heart's Desire
 - a. He would rather stay outside, away from the Father, than be near the Father
 - b. **There is a way in which we use "obedience" to God, religious works, religious prayers, religious promises, to get God's things**
 - i. He only works so that He can get something from the Father and party with his friends
 1. **"God, I will pray every day, tithe to the church, go to worship every Sunday for a year if you will give me..."**
 - ii. **This really shows us that we don't love God, delight in God, or worship God, but rather we use God to get something else**
 1. **That "something else" is our real God, our real delight, and this is idolatry**
 2. **We're like children on their birthdays who complain that what was given wasn't what they wanted.**
 3. Worse, yet, we refuse to rejoice at the party because of our anger, our bitterness
 - iii. Thus, the older brother, the moralist, is just as lost as the younger son, the lawless
 - c. **But when he doesn't deliver those things, we get angry and refuse to come near to him as he is**
 - i. **The moralist responds to God's "no" answer with anger, bitterness, or refusal**
 1. **This bitterness is expressed by, "not even a small goat..."**
 2. He refuses to come into the Father, to accept him as He is
 - ii. He would rather remain apart from a God like that, because he feels that God is unfair and unjustified in not granting what he thinks he deserves and should receive
 1. While the younger son remained apart from the father because he feared that he had sinned too far (and found, upon his return, that the father was far more gracious than he imagined!), the older son remained apart from the father because he is angry that **God wasn't giving him what he deserved** and thought was what his heart really needed
 - a. **"I want a party with my companions, but you won't give it to me!"**
 - b. **"My heart really needs this, but you won't allow it!"**
 2. **This feeling that "I deserve better" or "God wants me to receive better" is really a feeling that "God owes me".**
 - d. **He seeks his own joy, and his friends' joy more than he seeks to delight the Father**
 - i. This people-pleasing enslaved him and left him choosing to stay outside the door (seek Luke 12) and outside the party

- ii. He is choosing, not being cast out, but choosing to remain outside because he loves his friends more than he loves his father
4. We Are All Older Brothers at Some Point
- a. Moralism is **the drawing a line between good and bad, “big” sins and “little” sins**
 - b. Drawing this dividing line (*moralism*) between big sins and little sins is not just the way organized religion works, it is the way that the human heart works
 - i. **“Those people are what’s wrong with the world”**
 - 1. Moralists or Immoralists think the same way
 - 2. **Even the Corleone’s went to church** and thought traitors were big sinners while ordering a hit on their enemies
 - ii. The only difference between a conservative worldview and a liberal worldview is where you draw **the line between the “big” sins and the “little” sins**
 - 1. **Donald Sterling and evil racist words, Kobe Bryant’s sexual assault settlement, Jason Kidd’s spouse abuse?**
 - 2. **The demands for each are different based upon which sin is “bigger” in the eyes of the NBA constituency** – the biggest sin in the NBA, of course, is costing the NBA money
 - c. All moralism is really a means of wanting to justify ourselves before God and others.
 - i. Making God or others owe me through my obedience to the law, my sacrifices
 - 1. We feel that our sacrifices for God and to God have somehow obligated Him to us: You owe me.
 - a. **I’ve done all these things: I go to church, I read my Bible, I say “no” all over the place, denying myself things so now God owes me**
 - b. **In our prayers: “God, if I do ‘x’ will you do ‘y’ for me?”**
 - c. Then we feel that life is unfair if things **don’t go** our way, because we feel that they we been better than others and those people have a better life
 - i. You look down on **“big sinners”, while proclaiming “I would never...”**
 - ii. It is apparent that we do this when we get angry with God, irritable or anxious in life, whenever we suffer loss
 - 1. Whatever that something is that He has taken away is really why we obeyed God
 - 2. **We only obey because it’s our duty, not our love**
 - 3. Love delights to obey for the sake of the Father, not for the sake of the fatted calf or the land or the wine
 - d. **It doesn’t matter what your religion is, organized or secular, these feelings of “unfairness”** and keeping distance from God reveal the desires of our hearts
 - 2. I feel like I should have done these things, but I failed to do them well enough, so I feel condemned and worthy of all suffering.
 - a. This self-pity has the same root as the more obvious arrogance: we feel that our blessing or our curse is based upon our ability to perform
 - b. When we believe this, we lose all joy because we are working within a system of religion that we fail
 - i. **Even within a system of repentance, we get stuck “trying harder” to perform**
 - ii. **Repentance, in this sense, is really a form of penance, where we “pay down” our bad performance**
 - c. This self-pity leads us stay outside the door, **fearful of the Father’s wrath, still not believing or appreciating that He delights in mercy**
 - ii. Moralism makes us either look down on others or idolize others
 - 1. I judge others for lack of moral restraint
 - a. I look down on others in whom I see greater sin
 - b. Like the older brother here, and the Pharisees whom brought up the issue of Jesus eating with sinners
 - 2. I envy others for their righteousness and moral performance
 - a. Self-pity and Joylessness

- b. I consider my sins worse than others and *God as not that merciful to me*, so as to throw a party, kill the fatted calf, and rejoice over my return, so I mope
 - 3. Both are self-righteous religion that are based upon our performance/sacrifices
- 5. Jesus is the true Elder Brother, Entreating Pharisees to delight in the Father as Father and not Owing Master
 - a. The law is only useful for morally restraining the heart, it cannot change the heart
 - i. It is an external check to restrain the inclinations of the naturally selfish, religious, and proud human heart
 - ii. Jesus, as the true Older Brother, lived perfectly and delighted to honor and serve and love the Father perfectly, and he offers you entrance by his work and his inheritance is yours
 - b. Christianity is not simply a new moralism, whereby the line of righteousness and restraint moves to a better place, it is a complete change of heart, a rebirth by the Holy Spirit
 - i. John 3 – I did not come to teach you religion, I came to be lifted up.
 - ii. **Look away from your sacrifices and look to the mercy of God, i.e. “Look to me, the Savior of sinners. Don’t look at your sacrifices, look at mine.”**
 - c. Three Tests to Discover If We Are Living as Older Brothers:
 - i. **How do you treat other people’s moral failures?**
 - 1. Are you indignant, disgusted, maybe impatient and frustrated.
 - 2. If so, you are religious...it’s called being a Pharisee. **You don’t see that the root in them is the same root that is in you, and you’ll have nothing to offer them in joy or hope,** merely more religion which they have already failed.
 - 3. We must learn to hate our egocentricity and moral pride and see the severity of our own **sin in the eyes of God: we don’t see ourselves as the “righteous”**
 - a. We must learn to see, every day, that all the changes in our hearts that we can call “good” are a complete work of the Holy Spirit, not of us, and therefore make us no better than the “biggest sinner”
 - ii. How do you treat your own moral failures?
 - 1. Do you feel that you cannot face God; that you cannot look at yourself in the mirror? Do you beat yourself up over failure? Do you struggle with believing that God really loves you at all?
 - 2. If so, what are you basing such judgments on? You are basing them on *your sacrifices, not His*. Remember, Jesus DIED! He died for you. It is done, it has been completed. It is finished. He has done it all! Your acceptance and loveliness to God is no longer based **upon your ability to change yourself. You cannot do it! He is doing it for you! That’s good news!**
 - iii. Where is the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus in all of this?
 - d. **Learn to love God’s complete and utterly explosive** grace shown to us in his delight of mercy, complete adoption, and in the gift of His very Spirit: we see ourselves as redeemed sinners
 - i. Even our anxiety and self-loathing over our sin is really rooted in attempts at self-justification. We think that **we have not done enough...and that’s right!!** In fact, we are much worse than we think.
 - ii. But there is a greater grace, a deeper magic in the promise of God. We are much worse than we **think, but God’s love is far deeper than we can even imagine!**
 - iii. Complete Failures Who Have Complete Forgiveness in Jesus Love Others Completely
 - 1. True humility is acknowledging and grieving over my sin and always finding joy and hope in the grace of Jesus in the Gospel
 - a. Rejoicing in His sacrifice and love for me rather than basing my joy on the performance of my perfect sacrifices
 - 2. It is going to the Cross and finding mercy for the deepest failures of my heart and expecting others to struggle *as I have*
 - a. I have hope for anyone, since I am saved by grace alone
 - b. I will coerce no one, since I am saved by grace alone
 - c. I have respect for everyone, since I am saved by grace alone
 - d. I am better than none, for I am saved by grace alone

The reality is that one son is still outside the house at the end of this parable, and it is not the younger son who was far off, but it is the older son who thought God and unfair master and commander. It is a parable of reversal: the son who **was outside and way from the Father is now inside and near to the Father through repentance and the Father's great mercy**, and the son who was inside and near to the Father is now outside and far from the Father through self-righteousness **and a rejection of his mercy. At the end of the parable we are left with the question: "Will he go in?"**

Jesus entreats these older brothers, and us too, to come inside to His grace, to come near to the kind Father who rejoices to show mercy more than wrath, rather than remain outside His home thinking that we've done well and that he owes us anything or that what we really need is outside of him.

You see, this parable is not really about the two sons, but about the Mercy of the Father. The Father's commands and expectations are useful for moral restraint, but they cannot change the heart. *But Jesus Christ can radically renew and change our hearts through the gift and power of His Holy Spirit.* The transformation of the heart is His work of supernatural *grace*. It is here that we are all on the same page, in the same place, in complete and utter dependence upon the mercy of the Father and the mercy of the true Older Son: Jesus, not merely as a Teacher, but as a sacrificial Redeemer. **If you come to God saying, "You owe me a good life because of my performance," then Jesus has nothing to offer you. But, if you come to Jesus saying, "You don't owe me anything! All I deserve is wrath! I need you to save me!"** then Jesus rushes in to eat with you, to dine with you, a sinner. This is Christianity, this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is simple, yet deep and profound. The Father really is that merciful to those who draw near to him for mercy and do not depend upon their own performance, but only upon the performance of Jesus.