

SERIES: FAMILY ON PURPOSE

PART 5B: THE EXTRAORDINARY LOVE OF A FATHER

One of the leading metaphors that Jesus uses to communicate the ideas of sin and salvation is the metaphor of being “lost” and “found.” Kenneth Bailey, a Middle Eastern New Testament studies expert, has identified that where Jesus begins His final journey to Jerusalem, where He will be crucified, begins in chapter 9 and ends in chapter 19. Luke’s gospel lists three parables that Jesus tells the religious elite. The first is about a shepherd who discovers that one of his sheep is lost. The second parable is about a woman who discovers that one of her coins is lost. As we began to look at last week, the third parable is about two sons who, in different ways, are both lost. Jesus best summarizes His ministry as a rescue operation. Throughout the Gospels and especially in Luke, Jesus was seen to take great delight in eating with those the Pharisees perceived as the scum, the lowlifes and the know-nothings in their culture. Verse 2 in the NLT says that Jesus was associating with such sinful people. In the GK language of this text the word, *prosdechomai*, means to “welcome into fellowship.” It means that Jesus took great delight to be willing to sit down and take time to talk with these people that the religious elite despised. The second aspect of this word means that Jesus received them as His friends. Jesus so accepted them, He treated them as His family. He gave them a sense that they belonged to Who He was and to His Kingdom purpose. In Luke 19, Zacchaeus, a hated tax collector because he cheated the

people in charging them too much, was so taken by Jesus that he invited Jesus to come and eat a meal at his house. The crowning blow for the Pharisees was that Jesus did sit and eat with him and people like him. They considered Jesus unclean by such contact. What did Jesus mean in saying He came to save the lost? Who are the lost? In the parable of the father and his two sons, the younger brother's lostness was clearly seen when he ends up in the pigsty. He had depleted and exhausted his friends, money and resources because of his hedonistic, self-indulgent, undisciplined, and foolish behavior. This narcissistic lifestyle had led to his complete collapse of his life. In the pigsty, Jesus says he had the ability to be honest and come to his senses and realized he had lost his way and needed to return to his father.

In this parable, Jesus wants us to realize that there is a more subtle and devastating form of lostness. As we discovered Jesus' deeper definition of what sin is, we're able to discover just how damnable this devastating form of lostness really is. We noted last week that most people, whether believer or unbeliever, define sin as breaking a list of rules. I have talked to many people in my 32 years of ministry who will say, "I don't need to repent of my sins, because I am a good person. I haven't done anything that is really that bad. I have kept my list of rules." It is deeply disturbing to realize, as Timothy Keller has written, **"You can avoid Jesus as Savior by keeping all the moral laws. If you do that, then you have 'rights.' God owes you answered prayers, and a good life and a ticket to heaven when you die. You don't need a Savior who pardons you by free grace for you are your**

own Savior.” We saw last week that the older brother by his moral behavior, “I have slaved for you, I have never refused to do a single thing you told me to do,” sought to control his father through his obedience. Religious people use their own rules and morality to use God to give them the things they think He owes them. You can see and feel his resentment and anger towards his father when he says, “You have never even given me a young goat for a feast with my friends.”

Jesus defines what it means to be lost

What I want to do today is take a closer look at how Jesus defines lostness in his story of THE EXTRAORDINARY LOVE OF A FATHER AND HIS TWO LOST SONS. Let's look at four of the leading traits of “older brother lostness.” Please follow along as I read Luke 15:1-3, 11-32, **“Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. ²This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that He was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them! ³So Jesus told them this story:… ^{11b}‘A man had two sons. ¹²The younger son told his father, “I want my share of your estate now before you die.” So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons. ¹³A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. ¹⁴About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶The young man became so hungry that**

even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything. ¹⁷When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, “At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will go home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.’” ²⁰So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹His son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.” ²²But his father said to the servants, “Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. ²³And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.” So the party began. ²⁵Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷“Your brother is back,” he was told, “and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.” ²⁸The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹but he replied, “All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰Yet when this son of yours comes back

after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!”³¹ His father said to him, “Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.”³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!””

I. When life doesn’t go the way you want, you get deeply angry and bitter

“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him.” Luke 15:28

A. Older brothers believe if they live a good life, they should get a good life

You can see and feel the bitterness and resentment from the older brother with how he treated his father and how he spoke to him. As reprehensible as it was for the younger son to ask and demand from his father for his part of the inheritance while he was still alive, and the fact that he took his inheritance and went into a far country, and through waste and extravagance wasted his inheritance, and ended up attaching himself to a gentile farmer, and ended up in the pig pen eating pig food, the fact that the older son forced his father to come out to where he was because he refused to come to his father was deplorable. The first evidence that I have an older brother attitude is when my life doesn’t go the way I want, I’m not just sad—but I become angry and bitter. The older brother believed in what he said to his father that,

“I have lived a good life according to my rules of morality, so you owe me a good life.” So if you have the attitude or perspective of the older brother, a religious person, you will end up being angry with God because you have been good according to you, and it is God’s fault that your hurting right now. That you’re sick. That you are struggling in any area of **S.E.R.F.V.I.P.**, which stands for your Spiritual, Emotional, Relational, Financial, Vocational, Intellectual and Physical, you blame God.

B. Older brothers, when they fall short of their own standards, they’re filled with self-hate and self-loathing

When you realize that your life is not going the way you want it to, and it is your fault, you become livid with yourself, and you express self-hatred and self-loathing towards yourself. As Keller writes concerning when evil circumstances overtake us, and you think your life has not been good enough, **“You swing miserably back and forth between the poles of ‘I hate thee,’ and ‘I hate me.’”** The problem for the older brother, the religious person, is that their own morality is results oriented. Living a moral and righteous life for the older brother is not for the purpose of loving God and thriving on doing good deeds, but it is a way to try to control God and their own environment. Elizabeth Elliot tells a story that is not in the Bible, but it demonstrates the difference between a result-oriented selfishness and a faithfulness that is birthed in a true love for God. It has to do with exposing what is our true motivations. “One day Jesus said to His disciples: ‘I’d like you to carry a stone for Me.’ He didn’t give any

explanation. So the disciples looked around for a stone to carry, and Peter, being the practical sort, sought out the smallest stone he could possible find. After all, Jesus didn't give any regulations for weight and size! So he put it in his pocket. Jesus then said: 'Follow Me.' He led them on a journey. About noontime, Jesus had everyone sit down. He waved his hands and all the stones turned to bread. He said, 'Now it's time for lunch.' In a few seconds, Peter's lunch was over. When lunch was done Jesus led them to stand up. He said again, 'I'd like you to carry a stone for me.' This time Peter said, 'Aha! Now I get it!' So he looked around and saw a small boulder. He hoisted it on his back and it was painful, it made him stagger. But he said, 'I can't wait for supper.' Jesus then said: 'Follow Me.' He led them on a journey, with Peter barely being able to keep up. Around supper time, Jesus led them to the side of a river. He said, 'Now everyone throw your stones into the water.' They did. Then He said, 'Follow Me,' and began to walk. Peter and the others looked at Him dumbfounded. Jesus sighed and said, 'Don't you remember what I asked you to do? Who were you carrying the stone for?'" This fable about Peter is instructive, because, like older brothers, religious oriented people expect their goodness to lead to good results, and, when it doesn't, there is confusion, anger, disappointment, and despair. There is this deep sense that I am owed more from God because of how I act than what I am getting. The anger, resentment and bitterness comes from my own effort to control life through my performance. This is the first trait of those who think they earn, merit or deserve God's blessings, love and salvation.

II. Older brothers perceive themselves as superior to others

“Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate.” Luke 15:30

The older brother refuses to come in to celebrate with his father, then he points out that he is morally superior to “this son of yours.” He was so arrogant, he wouldn’t even admit that he was his brother, and, in a way, he was denouncing his relation to his father. The elder brother mentality bases their image of themselves on being moral, hard-working or members of an elite tribe, or that they’re extremely smart and shrewd. This ultimately leads to a feeling of superiority to those who do not have the same skills, talents, financial status, intellectual capabilities, and anything else they can find to compare themselves with others. Keller puts it perfectly when he writes, **“In fact, competitive comparison is the main way the elder brothers achieve a sense of their own significance.”** Church, classism and racism are just different versions of this form of ‘salvation by your works’ in which you deserve and earn salvation. This dynamic becomes heightened when elder brothers take great pride in believing that their religious view is the only right way. When a group adamantly believes that God favors them because they have the right doctrine, the right teaching, they worship the right way, and their ethical behavior is the best, their attitude towards those who are not in their group can get intensely hostile. You see this with the Jews towards Jesus and then towards the early Christians. Before Paul became Saul, he

was charged throughout the N.T. world to put those who believed in the way of Jesus in jail and to death. Their self-righteousness is camouflage by the deception that they are opposing the enemies of God. It allows them to kill those who don't believe, act and live the way they do, and through this lens it becomes easy to justify hate and oppression all in the name of truth. Richard Lovelace in his powerful book, **Dynamics of Spiritual Life**, writes, **"People who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons. Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger."**

This sense of superiority, where a person or persons feel they're superior to others, not only creates classism and racism, but, on an individual level, it forges an unforgiving, judgmental and critical attitude and perspective in their lives. You can see how this work for the older brother in this story because he could not forgive his brother for how he lowered his family's place in society, brought disgrace to their name and decreased their wealth. Notice he brings to the fore that, while he was slaving for his father and living a chase life, his no-good lowlife brother squandered his family's wealth on prostitutes. What he was saying in his heart was, "I would never do anything that bad." He can do this because he does not see himself as part of the community of sinners, and he

has trapped himself in his own bitterness, anger and rage. It is a prison he has made for himself. The self-righteous are blinded from understanding that it is God's grace, mercy, forgiveness and kindness that leads us to the cross of Jesus. Paul writes in Romans 2:4, **“Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that His kindness is intended to turn you from your sin.”**

III. Older brothers demonstrate a fear-based, joyless compliance and stubbornness

“All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to.” Luke 15:29

Again remember Jesus is telling this story to the Pharisees and religious teachers who were absolutely threatened, envious and jealous of Who Jesus was and by His lifestyle and how the people were attracted to Him. The older brother brags to his father about how obedient he had been all these years, but what was lying deep within his heart was, “All these years I have slaved for you.” Friends, it is true that being faithful to any commitment that you make involves a certain amount of dutifulness. It is often we don't feel like doing what we know is the right thing to do, but we do it anyway for the sake of our character, integrity and love. But the older brother betrayed the fact that he did not serve his father because he loved, valued and cared for him. He slaved for himself for what he could get out of it. In the same way the older brother attitude is to take painstaking care to comply

to their ethical norms and to fulfill traditional family and community responsibilities. But they feel forced to do it. The word “slave” has strong overtones of being forced to do something rather than doing it out of love, commitment and care. A slave works out of fear that they will be punished and hurt if they don’t do what they are told to do or expected to do. What drives a religious-spirited driven person is fear not joy, love and commitment. This kind of attitude can never deal a deathblow to the radical self-centeredness that is in the human heart. If anything, fear-based morality only strengthens this attitude, because the older brother is only being moral and ethical for his own benefit. Here is a story that demonstrates this truth powerfully. “Once upon a time there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. So he took it to his king and said, ‘My lord, this is the greatest carrot I’ve ever grown or ever will grow. Therefore I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.’ The king was touched and discerned the man’s heart, so as he turned to go the king said, ‘Wait! You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land right next to yours. I want to give it to you feely as a gift so you can garden it all.’ And the gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing. But there was a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard all this. And he said, ‘My! If this is what you get for a carrot—what if you gave the king something better?’ So the next day the nobleman came before the king, and he was leading a handsome back stallion. He bowed low and said, ‘My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred or ever will. Therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.’ But the king

discerned his heart and said, ‘Thank you,’ and took the horse, and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was perplexed. So the king said, ‘Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse.’” Elder brothers can do good to others, but the motivation is not out of love for God and for people and for the delight of doing good on the behalf of others. They are not really feeding and clothing the homeless, but they’re feeding and clothing themselves. It is exactly the attitude that Paul was confronting the Corinthians with in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. In vs. 3 Paul writes **“If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it, but if I didn’t love others, I would have gained nothing.”**

IV. Older brothers lack a sense of assurance of the Father’s love

“You have never given me a young goat and a feast with my friends.” Luke 15:23

The older brother created a double-bind for his father. Of course there was no feast, party and dancing, because the son never gave him a chance. He revealed that he truly didn’t love or respect his father. He perceived himself as a slave. Slaves don’t experience love, because they are forced. Listen, loved ones, where there is no freedom to be who God created you to be, there will be no love. I don’t have time to go into this, but this happens in so many marriages, families and friendships. People are slaving for their spouses and friends and the people they are supposedly doing this for can sense

their anger, resentment, the feelings of superiority, and they are relating to them out of fear, joylessness, compliance, and stubbornness. “I love you even if it kills me.” It does just that. It kills any love, joy and care there might have been in the relationship. Please hear me, friends, as long as you try to earn your salvation by controlling God through your own goodness, you will be assured that you have done enough or been good enough. You can never be sure or convinced that God delights in you and that you love Him, because you know in your heart you have been trying to earn it. You block your heart from the truth that He has given His all for you in sending His Son, the true eldest Son who was willing to leave His glory in heaven and came to earth and was mocked, slandered, hated, betrayed, and ended up being nailed to the cross naked in shame and humiliation, so that could be accepted, forgiven and placed in right relationship with God, in which we are loved and can be all that God has created us to be. Here are three clues that show you might struggle with a lack of assurance of God’s love for you: **1) When things go wrong and your prayers don’t get answered like you think they should or you wanted, there is this lingering doubt in your mind that there is some unconfessed sin in your life or you are not performing like you should.** God is answering your prayers or He is not caring for you because you lack. **2) Criticism doesn’t just hurt your feelings—it devastates you, and you then doubt how much God loves you and how much you matter to Him.** You then depend on others’ approval to bolster your sagging sense of worth. **3) You will deal with irresolvable guilt.**