

There are two ways people seek the Father's things. “Younger brothers” take things by being bad; “elder brothers” work for things by being good. Both are lost and estranged from the Father, yet God lovingly and graciously receives both when they stop seeking his things and begin seeking Him.

Introduction – The popular gospel tract “Two Ways to Live” clearly explains the difference between living your own way and living God’s way. This gospel presentation is quite effective for prodigal son types: the younger brother who is running away from God. But this parable exposes the main limitation of tract. Jesus shows us the gospel is not just for the younger brothers, but for elder brothers too.

I. Two Ways to Live and be Lost

A. The younger brother way: be bad (v. 13)

This is the way of irreligion. In philosophical terms, the hard-core younger brother way is Hedonism, and the moderate way is Epicureanism. The chief virtue of the younger brother is seeking personal pleasure; the chief vice to avoid is moralism. This is one way to be lost.

B. The elder brother way: be good (vv. 25, 29a)

This is the way of religion. In philosophical terms, the hard-core elder brother way is Asceticism, and the moderate way is Stoicism. The chief virtue of the elder brother is seeking approval; the chief vice to avoid is foolishness. This is the other way to be lost.

C. Both ways seek the same things (vv. 12a, 29b)

1. Although differing in strategy, both irreligion and religion seek the Father’s things. Both see the Father as a taskmaster who owns stuff that must be earned to be enjoyed. What are the Father’s good blessings? Absolutely everything that he created if enjoyed for his glory according to his design! Family, friends, home, adventure, parties, food, sex, recreation, love, everything.
2. Younger brothers rebel and take the Father’s things. They find themselves lost in spectacular fashion far away from the Father. Elder brothers obey to earn the Father’s things. They find themselves lost without ever leaving the Father’s side. Both want the Father’s things and don’t care about the Father. Neither understands what it means to be a son. Neither knows the love of the Father. Recognize that there are younger and elder brother tendencies in all of us.

II. The God who Loves and Finds the Lost

A. Realize the Spirit enlivens you (v. 17a)

We must understand this truth because the alternatives are either pride or condemnation. Younger brothers who don’t realize the Spirit’s sovereign power in curing our sin-insanity will *pridefully* assume they came to see their lostness because they are more clever, good-hearted, or sensible than the rest. Elder brothers who don’t realize it is the Spirit alone who enlivens the lost will *condemn* them for not seeing clearly, for not stopping the sin-insanity, for not being sensible and responsible like themselves. Only by realizing the Spirit alone gives new life will we give glory to God alone.

B. Remember the Father loves you (vv. 20b-24)

It is the kindness of God that leads you to repentance (Rom 2:4). If you don’t remember that God is a loving Father and we are his children, you’ll always wonder if your relationship to God is based

fundamentally on your performance. Apart from remembering God's love, a younger brother's pains will only produce remorse and regret (2 Cor 7:10), and an elder brother's performance will only produce bitterness and resentment (Lk 15:29-30).

C. Return with the Son who seeks you (vv. 1-2)

Can you see Jesus in the parable? In eating with tax collectors and "sinners," he is acting out what the elder brother in the parable should have done. Thank God Jesus is different, even from Esau who nobly fell short as an elder brother (Gen 33:1-17). You have the elder brother the prodigal never had. Jesus journeyed from heaven to a faraway country to seek out younger brothers, reminding them of the Father's love and mercy, and brings all of God's lost children home at the expense of his own blood. In telling the parable Jesus entreats elder brothers standing on the outside (the respectable religious people) to follow him into the joy of his Father's house.

III. The Gospel Way of Life

A. Repent of being both bad and good to get God's things (vv. 18-19, 28-30)

1. The younger brother shows us repentance from the vantage point of sin's pig sty. The elder brother can't bring himself to repent. From his vantage point he's the good son who has done nothing wrong. He actually thinks dad owes him for his service and obedience (v. 29)!

2. It's pretty easy to know who the younger brother types are. If you're a prodigal at heart, chances are you know it. But most elder brother types are clueless who they are. So how do you know you're an elder brother? Look at how you react to criticism, especially when the criticism touches something that you are good at or something that is rooted in your identity.

B. Join in celebrating the lost who are found (vv. 24, 32)

Jesus concludes by tying all three of the "lost and found" parables together. We must celebrate because to not celebrate is to refuse to join the heavenly father. This is the way God prescribes we respond to prodigal sons when they are saved. For "elder brother" types to experience the benefits of sonship and fellowship with God, they must celebrate the repentance of "younger brother" types. Otherwise "elder brothers" will remain outside, estranged from the Father and his children.

C. Follow the true elder brother in seeking the lost (vv. 1-2, 4, 8, 20b)

Despite what many believe, it is not merely the love of God that saves us. It is the love of God joined to the grace of God. One way to remember what grace means is the acronym G.R.A.C.E. ("God's Riches At Christ's Expense"). Grace therefore is love that pays a price. So how was the younger son saved from himself, forgiven, and restored back to his father's family? Who paid the expense of his restoration? The elder brother who was the heir of all the father's property! The younger brother could only be restored at the expense of the elder brother. The price to bring back sinners was the cross. Only the cross satisfies the law and the wrath of God due to both younger and older brothers for loving the Father only for his things. Only the sacrifice of our true elder brother accomplishes the loving and gracious plan of God to save both younger and elder brothers to bring you back home.

Conclusion – We as children of the Father, many of whom have never strayed far from his spiritual family, are in the position of the elder brother. Will we rise up, leave the comforts of home, and celebrate with our brothers and sisters in Christ, giving the kind of loving grace that pays a price? Or will we stay put, at a distance, looking in from the outside, guarding our comfort and reputation, watching from the back of the line as our virtue is burned away in God's refining fire? There are three ways to live, but only the gospel way leads to life. May God melt our hearts to follow in the footsteps of our true elder brother Jesus, the one who saves us from ourselves.