

Lost in Religion

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[0 : 00] Can we turn again the Bibles, please, to Luke chapter 15, reading at verse 28. He was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and entreated him. There's a business in Ruffin Lane in Glasgow, and it's called the Hanoi Bicycle Shop.

The problem is, it is not a bicycle shop. It is a restaurant. There's a well-known book called Zen and Motorcycle Maintenance.

It's an interesting book, but it's not about motorcycle maintenance. Sometimes when you see a sign and the thing is not anything like what it's advertised, you feel a little bit annoyed.

One could say the same about the parable of the prodigal son, because it is very clearly, as we hinted this morning, not the parable of the prodigal son.

[1 : 15] In fact, I think there is a very strong argument to be made for the fact that the main point of the parable is not the son that was lost, but rather the elder brother.

So how do we come to that conclusion? Well, again, let me point to you verse 1 and verse 2. Sometimes sermons annoy people.

Good sermons annoy people. Good sermons get under folks' skin, and they have a reaction to it. But the good thing is, or what we hope for, is that the right sort of people are annoyed.

The task of the preacher is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. In a sense, those who feel that life is absolutely fine and may need nothing.

And so we find here that this offends. Jesus was an offensive preacher. He turned the tables upside down. He created a reaction.

[2 : 31] And indeed, the early Christians did that. The Bible says that these are those who have turned the world upside down. There was a reaction. And indeed, many of them were put to death for their faith.

And I wonder how many of us who are preachers of the modern day are even worth throwing to the lions. Because I think for many of us, there would be no difference whether we were here or not.

But yet there is this powerful thing here that Jesus shatters all existing categories. And it really is quite wonderful. The problem is that Jesus welcomed, it says here, publicans and sinners.

He receives sinners and he eats with them. There is a sense in which that's when we know when the church is getting near its gospel task.

When it is mixing with those folk that the world are really, the world seems to love. And we find that there is a separation sometimes in a wrong way between the church and the world.

[3 : 42] Whereas Jesus was in among those who were the very, very worst. And indeed, the radical nature of Christianity is this. That Christianity was seen by the early authorities as not a religion itself.

Indeed, it was seen as being anti-religion. And the early Roman persecutors saw that they said that Christians were atheists. Because they didn't worship the pantheon.

They didn't worship many gods. And I suppose they are right. Because Christianity is not a religion. It is not a question of one among many.

You go into the car world. You could have a Ford. You could have a Renault. You could have a Peugeot. A BMW. A Mercedes. They're all fine in their own way. And so people say, yes, you get Buddhism. You get Islam.

You get Confucianism. And all these other religions. And you've got Christianity. The Lord Jesus Christ did not come to found a new religion. The Lord Jesus Christ came to abolish religion.

[4 : 47] He came to abolish every other system. Because religion is man's pursuit of God. Religion is what man makes of God.

And yet the Christian faith is God's pursuit of man. It is radically different to any other religious system. So this evening, what we're going to do is, in a sense, this morning we saw, if you like, Act 1.

We saw son number 1. And that was the prodigal. But tonight we find an even just as interesting son. We have the elder brother.

And certainly as I look at the parable, as I see it as a mirror in front of my eyes, I see a frightening amount of the elder brother in my own heart.

Because he was the religious person. He was the moralist. He was a good man. And yet just as the prodigal was lost in his sin, so the elder brother was lost in his religion.

[5 : 53] Just as the prodigal was lost in terrible living and immoral lifestyle, so the elder brother was lost in a moral lifestyle.

And that is the one thing that is really revolutionary to modern eyes. And people don't understand what the gospel is. But as we look at the elder brother, we see here a very real picture about the gospel.

I just want to notice three things again this evening from verse 25 onwards. And the first thing is, there is no lostness as great as religious lostness.

There is no lostness as great as religious lostness. You see, we see the younger brother and he is the classic bad guy.

Immorality, drugs and rock and roll if you like. He has engaged in religious wild living. They are the tax collectors and sinners.

[7 : 00] But you read again verse 1, and we can't escape verse 1 because it dominates the whole passage. We find that these were the people who were gathering around Jesus.

Indeed, the tense in the original Greek says that this was a habitual thing, that they were habitually gathering around Jesus. He seemed to attract these sort of people.

Now, the moral majority really couldn't stand this. And the interesting thing is that when you look through the gospel, you see good people and bad people.

Jesus is always automatically drawn towards the bad people. No. Zacchaeus, the tax collector. The woman of Samaria, the serial marrier.

The person whose lifestyle was really not very good. Sort of Jeremy Kyle type people that you see in the Jeremy Kyle show.

[7 : 58] The folk that we tend to write off as being morally inferior to the rest of us. In fact, we read in Matthew 21, these very powerful words of Jesus, where Jesus says the prostitutes are entering the kingdom before you.

And so isn't there a problem sometimes? Is there a problem in our mission? Is there a problem in our own lives? When we are simply not connecting to the sort of people that the church doesn't normally get involved with.

Whether they are morally bad or morally good, we find that Jesus is among these people. He connects with the inner needs of sinners. And the thing is, not only does he connect with them, but they connect with him.

They see in him something that they need. They see in him something that is more precious than gold. And so you know that you're living out the gospel if you are hanging around the younger brother types.

But there is a real hardness among folk who are moralists and who look down on people like that. In fact, moralists even get to the point when they absolutely hate the gospel.

[9 : 32] Because what the gospel does, the gospel challenges people who think that they are paragons of moral rectitude. The gospel goes right into their lives and our lives and challenges who we are.

The elder son didn't run away, but he was as far from God as the younger son. He was as far away from the father as the youngest.

And it's interesting in verse 20, we read these words, that the father ran, went out. The father saw him and ran and embraced him.

And you see exactly the same idea in verse 28. The father came out and he entreated him. Two men, one a rascal, one righteous.

And yet the father went out and rescued them. What about this evening in this congregation? Here we are, we are all suited and booted.

[10:40] On the outside, we look absolutely fine. And the problem is, it could be that very togetherness of our lives, at least that very apparent togetherness of our lives that is keeping us from the Lord Jesus Christ.

You see, what is keeping him out? Verse 29 is his goodness. He says, verse, these many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your command.

He is lost, not despite of his good record, he is lost because of his good record.

Someone said this, the main thing between you and God is not your sins, but your damnable good works. These are solemn words because our good works actually become sins.

And so, it is a fact that men and women are lost in their own sin, not just because of their badness.

[12:03] And here's the irony, men and women are lost because of their goodness. very often use this at funerals.

And nine times out of ten, it causes a reaction because it goes against everything that people believe. Because there you are, gathered at funerals and folk are on their best behavior.

There's the good and the great there. And maybe it's burying someone whom they reckon as perhaps someone who's not been very morally upright. And you can almost feel the self-righteousness.

And yet the hard or the difficult part of the gospel says that you too will be lost. And it's not your badness that's taking you to a lost eternity.

But the irony is, it is your goodness. And so, there is a very powerful thing here. And I wonder, is that us?

[13:12] We are saying no to Jesus. We don't need him. Because we have been associated with a free church congregation, wherever, for the last 40, 50, 60, 70 years.

We are people who really know what it is to live with. We have offered God many things. And yet there is no lostness as great as religious lostness.

But the second thing we notice here is that there is no lostness as deceptive as religious lostness. You see, they look very, very different.

And the deceit is that in the religious or moralistic lostness, it looks very, very nice. Now, the problem there is that we do not know or we haven't faced up with the true nature of sin.

there was, like you, there was a lot, I grew up with preaching, a lot of preaching men would preach and indeed they would thunder rightly about sin.

[14:24] And there wasn't a single sermon. I don't think that the gravity of sin was not mentioned. And sin is a very grave thing. sin but it often was left undefined.

Yes, there was certain sins that were mentioned and certain themes that would be thundered upon and maybe quite rightly so.

But it was almost as if there were some respectable sins. We must confront the fact that we need God.

There's an author, a very interesting author called Flannery O'Connor. And Flannery O'Connor says this, I'll unpack it in a minute. There was a deep, black, wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin.

There was a deep conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin. You get the point?

[15:34] If you are a good person, you will see Jesus as the moral example. If you are politically aware, you will see Jesus as a social activist.

So if you want to avoid Jesus, you will avoid the idea of sin. Because the only way to meet him as a saviour is to see us in our sin.

The moralistic Jesus, the Jesus of good example, well, his example is so great, he's perfect, we can't meet that. But the example of Jesus maybe as a social activist, that is all very fine and all very interesting.

But the idea of Jesus as a saviour, what do we need to be saved from? I work in this office in Edinburgh and there's lots of folk in the office and there's girls in the office and we have a little joke in the office that there's a girl way of saying fine and a boy way of saying fine.

And we often laugh when a woman says how are you? I'm fine. It usually means they're not fine.

When a man says he's fine, he's usually fine. I wonder how are we in terms of God, are we fine?

[17:07] Or are we fine? Is there really an issue with us? You see, the problem here is that the younger son wants to control the goods he wants to share.

The younger son resents what the father does with the money, but the elder son also resents what he's done with the money. You've sold the family business and you've given a third of the money to that young rascal?

See how he approaches his father. Verse 29, there's no respect there. Look, these many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your command.

You can run from God by breaking the rules, but you can also run from God by keeping the rules. That's fascinating, isn't it?

The belief that you can become a Christian by keeping all these rules and all these commands. And so you've got all these Sabbatarian rules and they're very good, I'm sure.

[18:22] You've got all these rules about various other things, your language, you never swear, you never blaspheme, you never take the Lord's name in vain, and that is good. All these things are marvelous.

us. But we think that by joining up the dots, that we are ingratiating ourselves with God.

Legalism is the last refuge of the insecure, and we think that by keeping these rules, it is the way in which you reach God. They thought that they were controlling the old man, and we think sometimes that we can control God.

And what makes these two brothers the same? What makes these two brothers the same, and no difference between them, is that both of them wanted the money, but not him.

We wanted what God wants to give us, but we don't want a relationship with him. And so to be lost, you don't need to be wild.

[19:32] it seems to me that in our own communities here, there are more folk who are non-wild, or as many who are lost.

So there's no lostness as great as religious lostness. There is no lostness as deceptive as religious lostness. Remember, it's deceptive because it's, you really need to think and pray about it because it looks so good.

Folk often say, well, you know, the churches these days, we don't get the people in, and there's a degree of truth to that. But there are people in here tonight.

There are all of us here, and God is speaking to us, good, moral, religious people. But what are the signs of lostness?

What are the signs of the fact that you are an elder brother or I am an elder brother? How do you know that? Well, I think there are four signs.

[20:51] Number one, there is a life marked by anger. Look at verse 28. He was angry and he refused to go in.

Are you an angry person? I don't know you. I don't know hardly any of you here. But you may say, well, I am kind of angry.

angry. Are you angry about life? Are you angry about church? Are you angry about the traffic? Are you angry about the weather?

Are you angry about everything? You're the sort of person that just in a church meeting you're always angry. You meet church authorities you're always angry.

In traffic you're always angry. angry about politics. You're just an angry person. You may say, well, it's just the way I am.

[21:57] It's in the people. We're an angry folk. I've got red hair, whatever. It's the way I'm built. But does it go deeper than that? Does it go deeper than that?

Do we see that God owes us something and life has sold us short? Now, I may talk to you and I may hear your story.

And your story may be a very sad story. Maybe you have been denied something that ought to be yours. Maybe you have been denied a croft.

Maybe you've been denied a house. Maybe you've been denied money. Denied an inheritance. Maybe you've been denied health. Maybe you've been denied so many things. And it's understandable.

Of course it is. I'm not unsympathetic. But let's dig deeper under that. There is the assumption that God owes you more.

[23:01] There is the assumption that God owes you a better deal. And your transaction with God is that if you keep a certain good side of life, then surely that God owes you a bit of a break.

And there are many folk in the congregation this evening who are angry with God. Religion is such a source of misery in our lives today.

That's how I like the thing that Jesus didn't come to start a new religion. He came to abolish religion. The world is not becoming less religious.

The world is becoming more religious. And, you know, folk talk about the study of religion in schools. If you don't study religion, if you don't understand religion, you don't understand the way the world works.

If you don't understand Islam, if you don't understand Buddhism, if you don't understand Hinduism, you cannot understand geopolitics and just the way the world works. almost everywhere where you have a cold, clammy hand of religion, you've got disturbance and misery from Northern Ireland to Afghanistan to wherever.

[24 : 28] And so often it's because we've got this transactional view of God. the elder brother was angry. Is that you tonight?

Is God really speaking about your anger issues? And is he saying, beloved, please look at your anger and stop blaming God.

Stop having this controversy with God. Make peace with him. But you're angry. That's the first sign of an elder brother spirit, an angry spirit.

The second sign is a mechanical obedience. A mechanical obedience. Look at verse 29. All these years I have served you, the NIV says, I think I have slaved for you, and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you never even gave me a young goat.

You gave this man the fatted calf. But you've never even given me such a thing as a young goat, and I have slaved for you, and slaved for you, and slaved for you.

[25 : 44] Is that a description of our relationship with God? You've been slaving for him.

Look what you've given up for him. God does not need a thing. Acts 17.

God is not served by human hands as if he needed anything, for he himself gives to all men life and breath and everything. You see, isn't that the interesting thing between Jesus and between religion?

religion. If you go to a Hindu temple, you'll see a shrine, and they're giving things to the Hindu deities. If you take Islam, you've got to go in the hajj, you've got to pray five times a day, you've got to give alms, you've got to do all these things.

It's give, give, give. These are greedy gods, and these greedy gods will take everything that you can give them. They will take all the blessings and everything, and they will just take, take, take, take, take.

[26 : 54] Whereas the Son of God gives, and gives, and gives. The Son of God came to seek and to save that which was lost.

The Son of God is the one who takes the towel and washes our feet. The Son of God is the one who serves us. He is the one who left the realms of glory to serve us.

God is the one who has the elder brother has got it wrong. He wants to slave and slave. Jesus did not come to hang out a help-wanted sign.

Jesus came and hung out a help-available sign. Jesus is eating with sinners because he's a doctor with a cure, and because he's an employer with a labor shortage.

He's saying, come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. The elder brother obeys because he is a mechanical slave.

[28 : 08] Imagine your husband or significant other comes home and this non-spontaneous man who's never done anything spontaneous in the last 60 years suddenly gives you a bunch of flowers.

And you're just bowled over. And you say, why did you do that? And he says, Donald Ian at work says, I should do it because it will make you happy.

So here you are. Well, that's not a night of romance following that.

Because some man said, listen, you've got to do this. It's your duty to do it. Some things are out of duty. Don't get me wrong. A lot of marriage and things are out of duty.

Absolutely. Nothing wrong with duty. But if it's all dutiful, and you see the language here, look, these many years I have served you, I have slaved for you.

[29 : 27] And the elder brother does it just to see what he can get out of it. Are you a slave? You're an angry person.

You've got a mechanistic, mechanical view of obedience. Another sign is that elder brothers don't like younger brothers, by and large.

Elder brothers don't like younger brothers. Look at verse 30. But when the son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for them.

That's his brother. And he talks about this son of yours. It's very dismissive. The son of yours.

A believer is always someone who loves younger brothers. A believer is always someone who loves to give his life for evangelistic passion to tell other people.

[30 : 47] I was doing services in a particular place in the Highlands. And the scenario was this, that there was a particular church across the road and opposite the church was a lady who had the spirit of an elder brother.

And she was housebound but, oh, she was, she was a character. She was hard, legalistic, and self righteous.

And she used to watch people go into this particular church across the road. And one of her friends came in and she said, see that place across the road.

You should see the sort of people that go in there. She says, do you know what I called? I called the receiver of wrecks. And I thought, what a beautiful compliment for a church.

The receiver of wrecks. Garibus 3 church, whatever it is or whatever it isn't, whatever it's past, present, or future, whatever, whatever, whatever, whatever, it is the receiver of wrecks.

[32 : 19] The safe place, the place of grace, the place of forgiveness, the place where men and women find peace for their souls through Jesus.

When we used to do chemistry in school, there's a well-known chemistry experiment. You get a taper, and you light the taper, and the taper is glowing.

And you get a test tube, and you fill the test tube with oxygen, and you put the glowing taper into the test tube, and it comes a flame.

It comes a light, because the oxygen brings energy, the oxygen feeds the flame. That reminds me of a verse in the Bible, a bruised reed, he will not break, and the smoldering flame he will not extinguish.

No, we put the spirit of the elder brother out. We are a receiver of wrecks, that when men and women come in tired and bruised, who have lived lives of sin, and are tired, men and women who are far from God, and everything has been taken from them, they come into our midst, and there's an oxygen, because the spirit of Jesus is there.

[33 : 51] The spirit of the elder brother is out the door. Rather, we are saying, come in. An elder brother doesn't usually like younger brothers, whereas we love them, don't we?

And fourthly, an elder brother has an unforgiving, judgmental spirit. An unforgiving, judgmental spirit.

Do you know why we have an unforgiving, judgmental spirit? Two reasons. Number one, we lack the emotional and spiritual humility to say, I'm no different.

but by the grace of God go I. So, we lack emotional and spiritual humility, but we also lack emotional and spiritual wealth.

A wealth that says, I am so loved by the Father. I am so loved by the Father that I trust him.

[35 : 16] The elder brother must have realized that the Father's love for him was so solid that it didn't matter if he appeared to be slighted by him. Job said, though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.

That emotional wealth. Let's conclude, we've seen there's no lostness as great as religious lostness. We've seen there's no lostness as deceptive as religious lostness.

What about the way home? Is there a way home for us? There is. Of course there is. Let's get a right view of God.

people struggle with the fatherhood of God. People struggle with that.

Now, again, I don't know you. Some of you maybe have had bad models of fatherhood as you've grown up. I sympathize with you.

[36 : 28] But Jesus gives us this view of a father who receives folk with this almost abandonment. There's a book by a man called Tim Keller called The Prodigal God.

And that title is promoted a degree of controversy. You know, is God prodigal? What does prodigal mean? Prodigal means a kind of almost a reckless abandon, a carelessness.

So is it right to call God the prodigal God? Again, it's a clever title. I think it's a legitimate title in this sense that God appears to be reckless in his love.

He's not. God's perfect, but he appears to be. Why do we waste, waste all this energy on that which seems to be worthless?

you see, the economics of the kingdom of God are radically different to the economics of the world. And that's the same in families.

[37 : 55] We would do things for our children. If our child phoned us at two o'clock in the morning, I'm just realising this is a mainland illustration, but I'll continue it.

Because if a child phoned us at two o'clock in the morning and says, Dad, I need you now, we would be in the car and we would drive.

It's a little bit more complex here. You've got to wait for the ferry in the morning. It doesn't make economic sense. But that's the way it's done.

Because we've got a father. And you see, in verse 28, again, it's the father comes to us. His father came out and entreated him.

We saw that this morning. It's the father ran. It's the sovereignty of God. It's the initiative of God.

Folk used to come to me and hopefully still do and say, David, I'm looking for God.

[39 : 14] And I would often say, no, God is looking for you. There's an old chorus, I have decided to follow Jesus.

No turning back, no turning back. I have decided to follow Jesus. friends of mine in the USA have rewritten the song. And the song that they sing is, I never wanted to follow Jesus.

I never wanted to follow Jesus. He rescued me. He came for me. In fact, that's the glorious thing tonight. Then maybe you come in here without the slightest intention of even being moved in your spirit.

And God reaches out to you and draws you in. We must repent of our sins, that's obvious.

But we must also repent of our righteousness. If our righteousness is not Jesus, we must repent of that. This is a new birth.

[40 : 25] And so Jesus is entreating the Pharisees. He is entreating all of us. He's saying come in from the foreign country of misery or come in from the foreign country of religiosity and hard earned merit.

Both are deadly. But inside is a banquet of grace, forgiveness and fellowship.

There is a banquet and it is for you. has God spoken to some of us about our elder brother spirit.

He's certainly spoken to me and I pray that I will accept that love.

May you do also. Let's pray. Father, we pray. Father, we pray. Father, we pray. Father, we