

## Luke 15:11-24 – The Return of the Prodigal Son pt 2: The Elder Son

[SLIDE Spot the ball](#) – anyone ever win? (Still going, by the way.)

[SLIDE Where's Wally?](#)

Love finding things that are lost.

Also use phrase to describe people – not physically lost, but 'lost souls'...

Who are the lost souls? ([SLIDE](#)) Could be anyone – most of us naturally assume it's the wild child, but could be respectable person. (Extreme example: quite a lot of terrorists we hear about on news come from stable middle-class families.) Reminds us not to presume... and takes us back to parable to ask the question:

Who's lost? – back to painting ([SLIDE](#)) Younger son – obvious – but first surprise is that could be us too. Respectable, but far from home. Need to put ourselves in place of younger son, receiving father's embrace in humility and trust.

But want to take theme on further this week by looking at other son, **the elder son** (right of painting) – develop theme of surprising 'lostness' – point is that he's just as lost, in a different kind of way.

**Reprise story – two sons** – younger blows inheritance and returns, Dad welcome him home. Famous story, retold 1000 times in stories and films. But story then turns to older son who has been out in the fields and gets back to find a party going on. Is he happy that his brother has returned? No he isn't! He's furious, he's fuming that the younger son has been welcomed, not punished or sent packing. He's jealous that the Father has lavished generosity on him and complains that he's been neglected. In other words, to the outside world he might appear like a model son. But inside, he's just as lost, just as distant from his Father. It's a kind of cold, brooding resentment isn't it?

Note the Father has to go out of the house to find him – important detail, this son is outside the home just like the younger son. Tries to welcome him back in. Crucially we never hear the ending to this story as Jesus is telling it to challenge the Pharisees, who complained at the love and attention he was showing to the outcasts of their time (v1-2). The ending of the parable is like an invitation to them, and of course he can't make up the ending to the story, as he leaves it to them to decide whether to accept it, or remain angry and resentful.

But one thing to distance ourselves from story and think about Pharisees. But like last week, I want to **make it more personal**. Just like I wanted us to reflect on whether we were more like the younger son than we cared to admit – so this week, let's examine the elder son, and try and enter the story. ([SLIDE – close up](#)) Truthfully, I'm definitely more like the elder son – literally, eldest of 4, but also in my natural mentality – think there are probably a few other elder sons here today. And Father wants to meet us, too, just as much as the younger son.

But what's the mentality of the elder son? First, need to note resemblance to the Father in the painting – but crucially, also the differences. Return to Henri Nouwen (explain book): [READ INTRO quotes pp68-69](#).

So the son looks outwardly like his Father – but inwardly things have gone very sour haven't they? And this is the point, isn't it? The younger son got imprisoned by his self-centred, debauched lifestyle – he obviously needed rescuing. But the elder son is in a different sort of prison: the pressure to conform, meet expectations, be respectable, be the mature, responsible one. Again, Nouwen describes it spot on (long extract, but worth listening to): [READ CAUSE excerpts p69-71](#).

Remember finding this quite uncomfortable reading when I first read this book, but it's powerful stuff. Reminds me that word 'resentment' literally means 'to feel again' – sense of wallowing, replaying of dark thoughts. Elder son probably stored them up over the months and years the other son was away. And Nouwen describes the outcomes of this kind of lingering resentment: we become habitual complainers, always resentful of others' joy.

And he admits that this kind of lostness is especially hard to deal with because it's not the obvious wrongdoing of the younger son, it's hidden, it even looks like model behaviour most of the time. One more paragraph from Nouwen: [READ CHALLENGE quote pp75-76](#).

Ultimately what we're dealing with here is that *deep sense of being less loved than the other son, being taken for granted, overlooked*. It's that basic insecurity that fuels our resentment, our complaining.

So how do we deal with this? Is there hope for the elder son? Yes! That's the good news. We've already noted that this son is outside too, and like younger son, Father has to go outside to invite him in. But that is also a hopeful detail, because it shows us that the Father takes initiative with elder sons as well, He doesn't leave him in his anger and resentment.

**Elder son has forgotten his sonship, in 2 ways** – good news is derived from what Father says to the son, and each phrase holds a wonderful truth:

**1. 'You are always with me' – forgotten how good it is to be with Father.** Not so much taken for granted by his Father, but perhaps the other way round – he's taken the great privilege and blessing of being with the Father for granted. My story of meeting guys in prison – 'wish I had your testimony'

Key to remembering this is to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. Quote Stott ([SLIDE](#)) 'Our favourite attitude should be gratitude.' Not just spontaneous emotion, also a discipline, as Nouwen comments: [READ QUOTE p85](#).

How do this? Practical tips: keep a praise diary; wake up and say thank you for 10 things every morning. Amazing how easy it is to remember a lot of things we can be thankful for. We can choose resentment or gratitude. Let's choose gratitude.

**2. 'All I have is yours' – i.e. the elder son has full inheritance:** true literally – younger son already has his. But not just a future thing, has it now. He is the one managing the farm, with his Father looking after him all the time.

So often we forget our inheritance – not just many blessings, also authority we have now. Father gives us all his resources, and we can choose to live in those, and enjoy those. This time the key = trust. To believe that those resources are ours. To trust the promise of our Father.

And, as I close, to remember that **Jesus is true elder son** – dwelt with Father and Father shared everything with him. He invites all resentful sons and daughters to share the joy of the Father's presence, and the Father's blessing and resources.

Look a painting: the light is shining on elder son too. Will we receive it? Will we allow it to warm us, and draw us into the beautiful love of the Father for *all* his children?