

Rich Nathan
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Evangelism: The Heart of the Father
Luke 15:25-32

The Cure For Running On Empty

As many of you know, we are planning the Summer Harvest festival here at church as a major focus of Vineyard's church life for the next three or four months. The Summer Harvest is, as I have talked with you about, a time for us to really focus on reaching out to friends and neighbors, to family members, to the community around us. And to again recall that church is not simply about us and our needs. But it is also about God's heart for the lost. Any time a church just gets into institutional self-preservation, it begins to die. We always must be in touch with God and intimate with God and always in touch with the world, reaching out in evangelism.

So, we have four days planned at the end of the summer of music and events and so on. We are getting ready, vis-à-vis training, for that starting this Tuesday night. I really want to invite you to come out this Tuesday and the following Tuesday for the two evenings of training. For some of you, it will be a refresher—not a lot of new information, but stimulating stuff to get you focused on reaching out. For others of you, the information will be totally new. We are going to host it again on a couple of other occasions, but I would really encourage you to strongly consider coming. If you are married, come out with your spouse or switch off and one of you come this time and the other of you go the following session. Don't put it off. We really do want to walk together as a church.

But it is my belief that the primary work that needs to be done in preparation for the Summer Harvest is we gaining the heart of the Father for the lost. But, frankly, there

is something else that we must gain and that is the heart of the Father *for us*. Because I know that I am talking to many, many people here who are running on empty. I know that you may be a person who feels like you don't have any thing at all to give away. And so any call to reach out or to touch someone else makes you feel worse, not better. Because you are looking at the little bit of water in your glass and you are saying, "If I pour that out, there will be absolutely nothing left." You just feel like with the sick condition that you are in, what do you really have to give?

I know that many of you are running on empty. It is a result of this spiritual condition that you can't get excited about the Summer Harvest even though you say in a general sense, "Oh, this sounds good and I am glad that others are going to be involved, but count me out."

There are a number of others of you who in prior church experiences were so active, so driven, sometimes in the area of evangelism that it is very hard for you to recapture enthusiasm for the lost and for reaching out. Because, again, you just got burned out and were running on empty. In your prior church experience, ministry was a substitute for intimacy with God.

I don't believe that we need to live with the gauge on "E." I don't believe that we need to be completely exhausted, having no resources. And I don't believe that God wants us to be in a place of not being either alive in him or sensitive to those in need around us. I think that Jesus talks about folks who are running on empty and don't have anything else for others in the last half of the story on the Prodigal Son. And I am going to call today's talk *The Cure for Running on Empty*. Let's pray.

Luke 15:25-32

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’ The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ ‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

We are told in this story about a younger son who left his father’s house. If you were here last week, you recall the story. It is one that is fairly well known. But for those of you who are not that familiar with your Bible, or you weren’t here last week, in short, a father had two sons. The younger son took his inheritance and took off from the father’s house. He spent all that he had in parties and wild living. And then he dragged himself back to the father. The father, in love for this younger boy, embraces him and takes him back home.

All the while the father had another son, an older son, who had stayed at home, who had never taken off to party, who had not wasted his inheritance, and this older son, the faithful son, if you will, it says in verse 25 that the older was in the field. He is hard at work.

I would like to ask the question, first of all, who is the older son and how does he fit into the story? Now in Jesus’ day, it is almost certain that he was talking about the

Pharisees, the Jewish people who were religious leaders, because if you look back at the context of this, in Luke 15:1-2, it says: *“Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around him to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”*

And so Jesus tells a story that addresses the tax collectors and sinners as being the younger son who is away from the father’s house and then decides in repentance to come back to the father by coming to Jesus. But he also wants to address the Pharisees who have a problem with the father reaching out to tax collectors and sinners through Jesus. So he wants to address that issue. In the context of the story, the older son is the Pharisees, the religious leaders.

But, I believe that it is really important that as we read the parables we see ourselves in the parable. I don’t think you can get the impact of the parables, unless you place yourself at every point in the story. Last week, we placed ourselves in the story as the younger son. But this week, I would like to invite each one of you to see yourself as the older son, or the older daughter.

I don’t know how many of you saw the movie, *Jesus of Nazareth*—the Zeffereilli film that I just think was wonderful and really well done. But Zeffereilli captured this point that all of us, as followers of Christ, are the elder son in his portrayal of Jesus’ telling of the story. It is very interesting to see how Zeffereilli pictured the scene. He pictures this story of the Prodigal being told by Jesus at Matthew’s house where Matthew was throwing a big party for all of his tax collector and sinner friends. And so inside the house, you have Matthew and a bunch of tax collectors and a bunch of guys drinking and some women who used make-up fairly liberally. They are a little bit loud and they’re dressed in overly tight clothes. They are all hanging out together and Jesus is telling the

story of the Prodigal. Of course, they are eating it up because they know that they are the prodigals. They are the ones who have wasted the inheritance that God gave them. They discover that God will welcome them back and run to them.

Outside the window in Zefferelli's film is Peter, the disciple. And he is listening to the story and he is getting more and more upset with the telling. And then Jesus starts talking about the older son who was out in the field. And those words drilled right into Peter, because he sees that he has become the older son.

We must see ourselves in this story. Who is the older son or the older daughter? To who does this idea of older brother or sister apply?

Well, I think of three groups of people right off the bat. You know, I think first of all of second generation Christians, church kids—some of you kids who have been raised in the church. Some of you adults who were raised in Christian families. You always were a church kid and you did not or are not going out drinking or partying. You basically lived a good, clean, moral life or that is what you are living. You weren't having sex with a bunch of people. Maybe some of you adults went to your wedding day as virgins. Maybe some of you teens are committed to the same. You are planning on being a virgin on your wedding day.

Yet, you know, there is something inside of a lot of second generation Christians, faithful church kids. On occasion, they can feel like "what is the matter with me? I am not as celebrated or as rejoiced over as these new people who are coming to Christ. In fact, when people are asking for testimonies of salvations, they never ask me because my testimony is that I accepted Christ at a church camp when I was 7. Or I prayed with mom or dad when I was 3 and I became a Christian and have been growing ever since. But I don't have lots of fireworks or lots of dramatic things."

I have talked with second generation Christians who have been upset with the fact that they feel they have no testimony. I can't testify to years of living in the gutter. I have just basically lived with my parents and then got married and I have only been married once. Maybe there's something wrong with me because my family was not radically dysfunctional.

The faithful son, the faithful daughter that is an older brother or sister.

I think also of people who are so called self-made people. They would fit into this category. Maybe some of you regard yourself as a self-made man or a self-made woman. No one really ever gave you anything. Your parents didn't pay for your college, but you worked hard. You were disciplined in school. You really buckled down in your business and you made something of yourself. You are looking around at others. Often self-made men and women can be a bit critical to those who are now complaining about how people owe them things.

Or maybe folks who are getting money from the government or from charity or from their parents, self-made men and women are often quite critical of those folks. They say, "Look, no one ever gave me anything. You have all these people now who are living on the dole. All these people who are demanding money from their parents. I never asked for any of it and I never got anything. Self-made men or women could be an older brother or sister.

But most of all, when I think of the older son or the older daughter, I just think of faithful church people. You know, the person you can rely on when the chips are down to teach Sunday School. Everybody else says, "No, I really can't. That is not my gifting. Or I don't feel led. It's not convenient." But this older son in the story is out working in

the field. He is doing his duty. When I think of such a person, I think of the person who takes care of our kids. I think of the person who volunteers to clean the nursery.

I think of the person who does registrations at women's events or who plants flowers outside around the building and is just faithful. Who is doing the job? I think of the people who pay the bills so that the church can keep going. You know they are the ones, the older brothers and older sisters; they are the ones who are tithing.

Now, I am going to be going through the story today and we are going to see some rather negative characteristics of us older brothers and older sisters. What I would like to do, though, is caution us right from the start against reverse pride at being a younger son, a younger daughter. You know, older brothers and older sisters have their problems that we are going to look at in a moment. But, frankly, I think that many of us baby boomers and busters can pride ourselves in not being older brothers and older sisters in this sense. We can say regarding ourselves, "Thank God that I don't have these rigid, legalistic rules like the older brothers and sisters to live by. I thank God that I am liberated from having to have my quiet time or devotions the way that older brothers and sisters make sure that they check off the list."

Well, maybe they check off the list and maybe there is something wrong there in motivations or legalism. But on the other hand, there is no great honor in having no devotional life either.

I want to caution us against the pride of being a younger brother or a younger sister. Thank God that I don't walk around with a Day Timer like that person, making sure that I am on time all the time and getting real upset and real perfectionistic.

Or, thank God I don't weigh my money out by the penny and make sure that I give an exact 10% tithe to the church. Because, frankly, friends regarding the issue of

tithing as an example, I happen to believe that tithing is biblical. I don't believe it is legalism. I believe that tithing existed before the Law of Moses. And I believe that people in the church have always practiced tithing as they grew in faithfulness.

I have seen, however, the pride of the younger son and the younger daughter among many believers who feel like there is this wonderful honor at being liberated from giving 10% to the work of God in the church. And yet every time I have talked with one of those people who are liberated by the Spirit to not tithe (which by the way, I don't have a difficulty with—I mean, if somebody feels that they would prefer to be led by the Holy Spirit, well God bless you) but every time I have talked with one of those folks who have been liberated (and maybe you are one of them) by the Holy Spirit to not tithe, invariably that person is giving much less than 10%. It appears to me that the Holy Spirit always leads somebody to keep more of their money for themselves.

Friends, we younger sons and daughters ought not to be proud about our self-indulgence or the fact that we run up high credit card bills on ourselves or the fact that we are living beyond our means and therefore have no money to give.

So, as we look at the problems of the faithful, the elder son or daughter, let us not sit back smugly and say, "I am glad that I am not like them." Maybe your struggle is not that you are rigid or have unrealistic standards. Don't pride yourself in that. I see this, by the way, in the way couples relate to each other, and also the way folks speak about each other in the church. We have our own set of problems. Our problems really may be that we are undisciplined and self-indulgent. Far be it from any of us to say, "Thank God I am not like so and so." Because we have our own set of sins that we need to deal with, right? Amen?

Let's turn our attention, then, to us older brothers and sisters, older sons and older daughters. Let's remember to try, as much as possible, to put ourselves in this story—faithful church members, second generation Christians, self-made men and women, people who form the core of the church. What are some of the characteristics of older sons and daughters?

First of all, there is a drivenness in work. Verse 25. The older son was in the field. What is he doing when everyone else is partying? Well, working of course. That is what older sons and daughters do. They work hard. When everyone else is kicking back enjoying themselves, you are working hard. Maybe you are serving at the party. You are cleaning up. But you are hard at work. And, frankly, you feel guilty older son or daughter, when you relax. Even on vacation you have to keep on accomplishing something. There is a drivenness that forces you to feel that every minute has to have some accomplishment to it. You have to keep producing.

Older sons and daughters, in the midst of their hard work are quite concerned when they find themselves wasting time by such frivolous activities as resting or playing. In fact, one of the things that older sons and daughters just don't do real well is play and party. Because life is a serious business and life is mostly work. There is just not a lot of room for play, for rest, for reflection, even for relationship.

We see, first of all, that the older son in the story is a hard worker. And the second thing that we see about this older brother [and I am adding sisters here to include both men and women in the story] is that he was an angry person. Verse 28. The older brother became angry and refused to go in.

Generally speaking older sons and daughters have a problem with their anger. They are driven people who are running on empty. They are hard working people. They

are accomplishing a lot. They are not wasting time. They are hitting their goals. They are taking care of everything. And they are often powder kegs of anger. What you will see in you, older brother or older sister, is a very short fuse that can be triggered by any feeling that you have that someone is showing you disrespect, someone offers a little bit of criticism—you get a bit of criticism from your spouse; something gets in the way of your work; the anger will come out perhaps not physically, although it could, for some people, older brothers and sisters will express extraordinary anger verbally. Voices will get raised. There can be very vindictive statements made to a family member or friend, somebody at work.

Some older brothers and sisters can lose their cool so far that they will use profanity. Others will be explosive on the job, especially self-made men and women. They just have no problem firing someone or being incredibly ruthless on the job. Driven, driven, driven. There is just a lack of kindness toward those who get stepped on, toward the weak, toward those who are struggling in their marriages, toward those who are sick. Elder brothers and sisters often rule homes that are fueled by lots of angry explosions.

The third thing that we see here is a feeling that you are really slaving in work and in ministry, for your family. Look at the response of this elder boy to his dad in verse 29: *“His father went out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, all these years I have been slaving for you.’”* That is a strong word in the Greek. “Duleo”—to be a lowly slave. Is that the way you view your job in ministry? Older brothers, older sisters, do you sometimes feel like you are being put upon. That when you are being asked to do something it is just slavery?

This boy in the story is not working as a son. He is working as a slave. And ministry for a slave is an ever-expanding list of duties. There are more balls that need to be juggled. I have just more and more and more on my plate. More diapers. More games to go to for the children. More household chores. More times when I need to encourage my wife. Got to share my faith. Got to go to kinship. More demands. More people to make happy.

Ultimately, the older son doesn't see God as Father, allowing us the privilege of spreading the kingdom of God. The older son hears orders and demands and commands. See, if you view whatever you are doing in the Christian life as a have-to rather than a get-to, then you are not functioning as a son or a daughter; you are functioning as a slave. Often in churches run by older brothers and sisters, evangelism is communicated as a have-to—You have to do this; There is a quota to meet; Have you checked off your list today in your quiet time?; Have you given your money?; Have to; have to; have to—that is slave mentality.

The mentality of a son or a daughter is “I get to”. I can't believe, the son says, the daughter says, I can't believe that my father would allow me the privilege of working by his side in the field. My father could have just saved me and then said, “Now, get out of my way. You have no value to me. You can't accomplish anything. You are such a worthless human being who is so dysfunctional, who is so screwed up, that I have no place for you on the farm. Just try to stay out of the way while I do my job.”

You know, sometimes mothers and fathers do that with their kids. You know, kid, you are just in the way. I know you want to help, but you are in the way. I am too busy. Just clear out. Go upstairs. Go to your room. But in fact our Father in heaven

wants to partner together with us and say, “Son, daughter, help me out here. I know you want to be involved in growing the kingdom of God, and I want your involvement also.”

Friends, ministry should feel like “get-to” in your life. I get to help someone go to heaven. I get to help rescue someone's marriage. Whether it is lead a group, play some music, open up your home—you get to do it.

Fourth, older sons and daughters often live with a high degree of self-deception. All these I have been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. See, these driven people, these angry people, these performance-oriented people who are just slaving away for God, often live with a high degree of self-deception. If you ask an older brother or sister how they are doing in the spiritual lives, or martially or personally, it always will be great, doing great. You have never disobeyed your father? Really?

Do you know when your sense of identity and self comes from your performance and your accomplishments, then you always must make your performance and your accomplishments look better than they really are? You always have to maximize your sense of accomplishment and minimize your failures. See, when relationship with God and a sense of personal well being is always based on what you are doing, how much you are accomplishing, when that is where it is at, then you become a very uncorrectable person. Nobody can ever bring any correction into your life, older son, older daughter, because you are not living in relationship with God based on his gracious heart toward you.

See, folks who know the gracious heart of God, folks who understand that their relationship with the Father is just a gift from God, and that God accepts them not because of their performance or accomplishments, their drivenness, the fact that they have checked off the list, but they know that their life with God is just grace, pure

graciousness, those kinds of people can be much more honest about their failings or the foibles and their mistakes. And those kinds of people can be corrected even when they are in leadership positions. They can be approached.

But the older son, the older daughter cannot be approached because they will always minimize their own failures and maximize their own accomplishments. They live with a high degree of self-deception. I have never disobeyed a command of yours, Father. Really? I guarantee you, even though you may never have said that and you think that is the most ridiculous statement in the world to say “I have never disobeyed God”, I guarantee you, older son, older daughter, you have a high level of self-deception about your own spirituality.

When I used to teach at Ohio State, I one day had a young man walk into my office. He heard that I was a Christian. We began to chat. This fellow came from a Holiness church background. A background that emphasized accomplishment and externals and what one did for God. He began to check me out about where I was at regarding the idea of being entirely sanctified. I said, “Well, I don’t believe in that because I know that I am not.” I talked with him from the Bible, but he was arguing for being completely free from sin. As he was talking, it was like for just a few moments, I was taken to another room or something because the Father began talking to me and said, “This young man is heavily in bondage to pornography and to sexual perversion.”

And so, at a certain point in the conversation, I very simply asked him, “I know this is going to sound funny, but are you having any problems with pornography at all or any other sexual problems?”

He blushed and sat back, “Why?”

“Well, I don’t know, but on occasion, the Father speaks to me and shows me these things. And I may be wrong, but are you having any struggles there?”

“Yes, I am.”

But, friends, when our relationship with God is not based on grace, we can’t be real with who we really are and the problems we are really having. I am so glad for what I see in parts of the church where we have recovery groups and folks who can come together and say, “My life is really, truly out of control and I am not doing well. I am not going to blame anyone else for who I am and what I have done. But I have not obeyed all the commands of my father.”

Fifth symptom of the older son: “Yet you never gave me even a young goat so that I could celebrate with my friends.”

Elder sons and elder daughters always feel short-changed by God. You feel inside in your most honest moments, that your Father in heaven really is rather stingy with you. That when you look at what you have from your Father you say, “It ain’t much. I didn’t even get a kid. He won’t even give me the right job. He short-changes me on revelation, on money, on friends.”

You feel like in many ways, you’ve made a bigger sacrifice of your life for God than God has made of his life for you. Be honest. Be honest. Have you ever felt like God your father was rather stingy? Especially you who have been faithful? What have you gotten for all of your hard work? Where has it gotten you? Especially with how people treat you. What is the value of working hard for God? Of course, the only rewards we’re supposed to look for is the joy of living in fellowship with God. What’s the value of staying close to God rather than wandering in a far country? You get God, and people who indulge their flesh don’t.

And of course, there is a competitiveness in us older sons and daughters. “When this son of yours has squandered your property with prostitutes and comes home, you kill the fattened calf.” Out of our drivenness, our anger, there is always a notable competitiveness. You look at life as who is getting ahead. A competitiveness in the workplace. Concerned about somebody else getting a bit more than you – bigger office, more help. Someone else is getting your fair share. Have you ever thought that way?

I have gone through a number of symptoms that would assist us in diagnosing whether we are older sons and older daughters—our drivenness, our anger, our feelings of being cheated by God at times, a feeling of having to do ministry versus getting to do ministry, a competitiveness. But in really looking at the issue of being an older son or daughter as a pathology, that is as an illness, that there is something wrong in the soul, we need to go beyond saying, “Yes, you have a fever” or “Yes, you seem to be nauseous” or “you are having these kinds of emotional difficulties and get down to some root causes here. Well, what is creating the fever or the nausea? What is the problem?

Older sons and daughters, here is what I believe are the two root causes for the distortion in the soul. The first root cause is fundamentally that activity replaces intimacy. Busyness, hard work, he is out in the field, he is working, he is laboring, he is doing. He is not relating. He is not being vulnerable. He is not communicating with his Father or listening to dad – he is just being busy, supposedly doing his Father's work.

Faithful friend, listen to me now, you who are mostly doing your duties. You are paying the bills that other people are living on. You are being responsible. Faithful friend, do you know that you can leave your father without ever leaving the farm? Listen, the younger sons and daughters physically leave the father. They take off from

church. They go into the far country where they party and where they just walk away from the father's presence. Backsliders, they leave the father.

But you know it is possible to leave the father inside. To be in the far country spiritually even if you are not in the far country geographically. Doing the right things, active in ministry, busy with the father's work, but you are not busy with the father. All the symptoms that we described before can be rooted in a couple of things and one is that activity will often replace intimacy in the life of elder sons and elder daughters. How does this happen?

I think that for some of you are so used to being active and so habitually used to missing the father's affections and missing the heart of the father, being in the far country in your heart, that you, frankly, may not be willing to change the pattern of your life. Activity and overwork and anger and drivenness and competitiveness and slaving—all of this has just gotten to be habit for you. And you are in the place that you don't know anymore if you can change. You have thought about a lot of these issues before and you have felt guilty about your explosive tongue or the tone of your home, but you are not sure anymore if you can change.

I think, friends that sometimes at the bottom of our being stuck in a pattern is this profound fear inside of us that we don't know if we can learn any more tricks. I think of the shock to the system that Nicodemus got in John 3. He is very well respected as an expert in religious matters. He has tremendous status in the eyes of those who counted. People asked his opinion. He has a certain way of being perceived in religious circles—all of which gave him a sense of identity and security. And the Lord Jesus Christ comes and says to Nicodemus, Nicodemus, you need to learn something completely new. Indeed, you need to start all over from square 1. Nicodemus, you expert, you man of

status and respectability and religious knowledge, I want you to know you need to be born again. Go back to square 1 because there is a lesson that you never have gotten.

The shock to the system of having accomplished certain things and then being told by God that there is something very fundamental that you have missed. Faithful, older son or daughter, you need a shock to the system. You may have expertise and accomplishment. You may have the title of leader in this church or in another church or leader on your job. You may have made a lot of money out in business. You may be a self-made man or woman, but the lesson you missed is that in the kingdom of God activity is never a replacement for intimacy. And ministry is never a substitute for closeness with the Father.

Like Nicodemus, when the Holy Spirit starts pushing the button of conviction in your life regarding how much do you really know deep-down the father's affection, how close are you to the father? How much can you really hear God's voice? How much prayer are you involved in? How expert are you in personal worship? When the Holy Spirit begins to push the button of intimacy in your life, I bet like Nicodemus, older son or daughter, you recoil and say, "I don't really like to hear about this because this is an area where I am not an expert. I am not sure I can break through anymore at my age, with my track record. Better to keep going as I am even though I am running on empty. Better to keep going."

Friends, you know, part of being a Christian is continually learning new tricks. It is being teachable and correctable all of our lives. There is a whole new thing that I am not an expert in. Maybe you built up a certain amount of Bible knowledge and now you are being stretched in a whole new area. That is the Christian life. That is what it is like to walk with Jesus. To continually be reduced down to being a little child again having to

learn dependency on the father all over. Root cause #1 of the pathology of being an older son or daughter is activity-replacing intimacy.

Root cause #2 is routine replaces wonder. Older sons and older daughters are no longer surprised, shocked, awe-struck over the fact that the father would want a relationship with them. Are you just so familiar with the father's house, with church, and religious words and the Bible and the name of Jesus that the fact that you get to handle these things, these precious holy things, doesn't leave you dumbstruck anymore? I think, ultimately, in many of our lives we may have simply gotten used to it all. And that is a terrible thing to have happen to a Christian. That we have gotten used to the story of God's grace shown to us at the cross.

You can't say any longer with the hymn writer, "And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's blood. Died he for me who caused his pain. For me who caused his pain. For me who him to death pursued. Amazing love, how can it be, that thou my God should die for me?"

One of the great cures for running on empty of wonder is to try to think about what life would be like without God. Now, I am not a second generation Christian, but because I have been a Christian for 21 years, I still need to very deliberately and very consciously bring back to my mind what I felt like when I didn't know Christ. And I have been thinking about that recently in preparation for the Summer Harvest. I have been very consciously and deliberately [I would encourage you to do this exercise] remember what you felt like if you are not a second generation or third generation Christian, remember what you felt like without God. I remember and there was one word that would sum up what I felt like. I felt so unhappy. I was just deeply, deeply distressed inside. At age 18, I had basically come to the conclusion that life was really pretty

miserable. That there really wasn't much love. That people generally were really unkind. At age 18, I was already very hard, very cynical. I was in a lot of pain. Real simple. I was really hurting. I was in a lot of pain. Just a tremendous amount of emotional pain.

Now somehow you need to enter into life without God. If you have gotten used to it all, older son or daughter, if salvation seems less than incredible, if the cross seems less than something that you would just fall on your face before—that thou my God would die for me—then let yourself feel the aloneness of having no God to turn to in a crisis. Let yourself feel the dread of having no home with God to go to when you die. Let yourself feel the anxiety of living in a world where no God is in control. And let yourself feel the emptiness of having no purpose and no meaning, of being loved by no body, being that alone.

What is the root of what ails you elder son and elder daughter, you have allowed activity to replace your intimacy with God and you have forgotten the wonder of your salvation.

Well, I want to finish looking at two key relationships. The first is the elder son's response to the younger son. And the second is the father's response to the elder son.

Let's look at the elder son's response to and relationship with the younger son. In verse 30 the elder son lays out his view of the younger son real clearly when he says: "When this son of yours who squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf." This son of yours he says to his father. And his father must come back in the 32nd verse and said: "We had to celebrate because this brother of yours..."

Look at what has happened to your heart and to your view of those who have squandered and wasted the father's gifts and talents. Older daughter, older son, do you

disassociate yourself from people who have wasted and squandered the gifts of the father. Do you judge people in the world pretty harshly? The relationship of the older son to the younger son. Let me ask a question here for your consideration. What do you think would have happened if the younger son, as he was walking back, met the older son on the road first before he met his father? If on the way home, the older son was working out in the field and he spied his brother dragging himself back up the road in dirty clothes, holes in his shoes, maybe an earring in his cheek, a tattoo on his arm—the older brother runs up to meet him before the father gets to the young boy. Do you think the younger son would have ever made it home having first to listen to a lecture from his older brother? Having to have underlined for him his shame, his wrong? Would he have ever made it back to the father?

May I personalize this for us? God our Father is working through his sovereign grace all around you. All around you, everywhere you go, your father is working by his sovereign grace, drawing men and women and teenagers and children to himself. He is working, working, working. Drawing through thoughts of himself, through need, through crisis, pain, through conscience, through preaching. All around you, your father is drawing people to himself. And all around you, people are meeting you on the way back to the father. You are one of the father's children. And on the way back to the father, they are meeting you.

Now, let me ask you something, in listening to you and watching your life and your marriage, your home, your comments, your judgments about things, as a result of meeting you do people say, “Oh, I now want to go home and meet your father. Because if your father is anything like you, he is someone I would like to get to know.”

Or, as a result of meeting you, people say, “Well, I assumed your father was full of judgments and anger and would never accept someone like me. Now that has been confirmed in my life. I didn’t think your father would love me or care about someone like me. So I will just turn around here on the road and go back where I came from.”

Older son, older daughter, isn’t it the desire of your heart that when anyone who the father is drawing back to himself meets you, that instead of being a block and a wall toward them going to the father, you would be a bridge, an open door? Someone who would be the next link in the chain and they would say, “Oh man, I just got to meet your dad.”

Let’s in closing look at the father’s relationship with us older sons and daughters. We have a lot wrong in our lives don’t we older brothers and sisters? We have allowed activity to replace intimacy. We have a problem with our anger. We don’t represent the father very well. We minimize our failures. We don’t care about sharing our faith. We have been running on empty. What is God going to say to us? What do you expect to hear from God now that you are in this condition? Angry, burned-out and empty. Maybe reduced to a crisp. No life. What is God going to say to you?

Listen to what the father says to us older sons and daughters: “My son, the father said, faithful one, you are always with me, and everything that I have is yours.”

You know, I think we expect the father to make fun of us, to score points on our account, to mock us because we keep pushing even though we don’t have a lot to give. But in the same way that the father runs for his younger son, the father leaves the party and runs out for his older son. Verse 28. His father went out and pleaded with him. He pleaded with him and kept on pleading with him, entreating him and then kept it up. The same way that the father does not stand on his pride with his younger boy, he doesn’t

with us older sons and daughters either. He comes for us as well. He calls us “son”, “daughter”.

The word in the Greek here is one of the most tender words that can express that relationship of father to child. My dear son. My dear daughter. You are always with me and everything I have is yours. Where did you ever get the idea that I was holding out on you or that I was stingy or wouldn't give you it all? How did you think you got to work on the farm to begin with? It is my farm. All that you have, your talents, your opportunities, I gave you and I would be glad to give you so much more if you would just ask me.

Understand you, who are running on empty, you don't have to run on empty. If you would just go to your father and say, “Father, according to the riches of your grace, fill me up again. Out of the abundance of your affection for me, touch the dried out places of my life. Father, I need to drink deep. I don't want to be sick anymore. I don't want to be angry anymore. Oh, Father, I am not one who always obeys your commands. I have allowed myself to drift in heart, but now, Father, I come back.”

Our Father would say, “Everything I have son [or daughter], the whole thing is yours. It has never been based on your performance like you thought. If you chose to distance yourself from me and build walls between yourself and me because of fear of learning some new lesson of intimacy or because of shame or busyness or pride, don't say in your heart it was because I wouldn't give you anything. All that I have is yours.”

Older son, it is all there for you, too. It is not only for the young boy. There is enough for you as well. Now, come in and enjoy the party with your father. Just ask. You don't have because you don't ask. Well, just ask. Come to the party and enjoy it.

Well, you know this story ends very abruptly with the father saying to the son: “...We had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

The story ends very abruptly. There is an invitation to the older son to come to the party and then the scene closes. We aren’t told if the older son gave up his anger and his being upset over the way that the father had been treating the younger son. It doesn’t say that he gave up his perceptions regarding the father. We don’t know how the older son responded to the father’s invitation to come into the party and to enjoy it.

I believe Jesus leaves the question of the son’s response to his father unresolved because Jesus wanted it to be a personal question that each one of you answers for yourself. We are throwing a party this summer. The lost are going to be invited to come. Will you come? You can enjoy the party. You don’t have to be closed off or angry or cynical or bitter about what was done to you in the past. You can come to the party and have fun too. You can forgive those who have hurt you. You can lay aside your judgments. You can come.

Sons and daughters, there is plenty for you too. Will you come? Will you drink? Will you feast at the table of the Lord? Let’s pray.