When I was in High School, I was fascinated with the Left Behind series of books. They are books with terrible theology, but a fantastic storyline. If you aren’t familiar with them, they are novels that tell the story of what things might be like for a group of people who don’t make the cut when Jesus comes back. One character in particular that always intrigued me was a pastor named Bruce Barnes. When the rapture happened in the story, the rest of Bruce’s church made the cut, but Bruce himself did not. The man who everyone else thought had it together, the man that taught his church how to follow Jesus, wasn’t following Jesus himself. That always stood out to me as a really sobering thought, that even people who think they are doing a great job of following Jesus might one day find out that they are not.

Today we are going to talk about someone who was a lot like Bruce Barnes. Someone who thought they had it all together, but in the end, they had missed the mark. We’ve been talking about the parable of the prodigal son that Jesus tells in Luke 15 for the last few weeks, and I would say for much of my life I never really connected with the story of the prodigal son. I never understood the prodigal, why he would choose to stray from his father, why he would want to leave his home. Because I was a rambunctious kid. When Beth first went with me to my home church while we were dating, the lady who was my Sunday School teacher as a kid was talking to her, and I think her exact words were that I was a “hellion” when I was in her class. I’m not sure if she was trying to warn Beth off, or what. But I also grew up in the church and I had no intention of ever leaving that behind. I grew up knowing what was right and wrong, and not that I never sinned or did the wrong thing, because I obviously did, but I could never understand people like the young man in this story who knew the major life choices they were making were wrong and yet chose to make them anyway.

So, I never really connected with this parable, never connected the leaving of the prodigal with my own sin and rebellion against God. Like a lot of people, I thought this story was for other people who didn’t know Jesus yet. That is, until I read Henri Nouwen’s book that introduced me to the idea that there were more characters in this parable to identify with than just the prodigal himself. That’s when I started to connect with this story, because I found that I connected deeply with this story through the character of the older brother. The one who stayed behind, did what he should have, and yet had still become a lost son himself.

When we think of this parable our first instinct is often to put ourselves in the place of the prodigal and leave it at that, but there is a lot more to this story than just the prodigal himself, and Jesus was a much more masterful teacher than that. We’ve talked about the father in this story, and his younger son, how the younger son rejected and betrayed his family, and then experienced the unconditional love and grace of the father when he came back home. His father threw him a celebration, and all seemed well. It’s the happily ever after that we want it to be, the Disney ending to this story. But there is more to the parable than that, a part that we usually read, and then promptly ignore, because we are still looking at Jesus’ teaching from the perspective of the prodigal.

But I’d like to challenge you today to look at this story in a new light, not from the perspective of the prodigal son, but from the perspective of his older brother. Because this is actually what I think Jesus wanted one of the main points of his parable to be, the one that, ironically, we miss most of the time

Jesus told this parable to begin with because the Pharisees were grumbling and complaining that Jesus spent his time with sinners and tax collectors. Jesus was speaking to people who were exactly like this older brother. People who were faithful, who did all the right things, at all the right times, and yet still had a long way to go in loving other people. They looked at others the way that this older son looked at his younger brother. When we look at it in that context, this becomes one of the most important lessons we could learn from this story. And if you are anything like me, maybe this will be where this story hits you the most, where you finally connect with the parable of the prodigal son.

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”

Luke 15:25-32 ESV

When we look at this story from the perspective of the older brother, it puts a whole new spin on things. What is not obvious right from the beginning is that both brothers are in exactly the same position. Both brothers are lost, and need to come back home. Both brothers need healing and forgiveness that only comes through the father. Both brothers are thinking incorrectly about themselves and other people. And both brothers are offered the love of the father and have the choice to either accept it or reject it.

See sometimes even those who stay home can be lost, even those who consider themselves faithful. And that’s a difficult thing to recognize, maybe an even more difficult thing to admit. When we think about being lost, especially in terms of this parable, we often think about rebellious actions that are very visible, very public. Like the younger brother’s very public break from his family. What the older son reminds us is that we can become lost even if we are still at home, even if we sit in these chairs every week.

The younger brother’s sin is very blatant, very obvious. What he did was wrong and everyone knew it, including himself. But the way the older brother is lost is much harder to put your finger on. He did all the right things, he followed the rules, did all the things that were expected of him in his culture. It looked like he was in the right place, like his life was on track. He was one of those guys that if you asked everyone who knew him, they would tell you he was a model son, not like that punk brother of his, poised to take his father’s place and carry on the family business

He was very much like his father, at least on the outside. The difference between the father and his oldest son was not their actions or how they spent their time, it was in their hearts. The older brother had his father’s work ethic, his commitment to doing his duty to his family. But on the inside, in his heart, he looked very different from his father. Instead of the unconditional love and forgiveness that his father had, this older brother had a lot of judgment, resentment, and bitterness

He had a lot of pride in himself for all that he had done. He had done all the right things, always followed the rules. But he had done it out of obligation, not from the heart. This older brother was self-righteous. He clearly saw the sin of his younger brother, but he could not recognize the sin in himself, he could not recognize that the state of his heart had caused him to be far from his father even though they shared the same roof.

There is also a certain envy here toward the younger brother, and there are two parts to that. First, he was jealous of the fact that his brother still got the love of the father, he still got this celebration after everything he had done, and the older brother did not. He was angry because his father had thrown a celebration for his brother, who in his eyes did not deserve any of it. His younger brother got the feast that he had always wanted for himself and his friends. His brother got something his father had never given to him, even though he had been faithful, and always obeyed.

The second part of the older brother’s envy is that he was jealous of all the things his brother got to experience while he was stuck at home. That sort of jealousy crops up every time we see other people doing something we would never do ourselves, and yet they seem to have so much fun doing it.

While I was still in Jr High there was another young man who was several years older than me that started going to our church, started coming to youth group, and he had an amazing testimony. He was maybe a sophomore in high school at the time, and he had been into drugs and alcohol for years. He had gone down a really bad road for a long time. But then he was introduced to Jesus, and his whole life turned around. He became a Christian and started to use his past as a tool to help people realize how lost they were and to help them come to Christ.

I remember him standing up and giving his testimony at our youth group during worship once, and it was powerful. How Christ had grabbed hold of him and gotten his attention, he had people sobbing by the end. And I remember thinking, “That is a really awesome testimony. If I went and told my testimony up in front of everyone, it would last about 30 seconds and everyone would be bored out of their minds.”

And then I realized I was jealous of him. Looking back, I can see that was for three reasons. First, he had a really powerful conversion to Christ. I always wondered how my relationship with Jesus would be different if I had had some powerful conversion story. It always just felt kind of boring to have just grown up in the church. Second, he had a really awesome testimony, and I was jealous of that for a long time. I always wished I could stand up and wow people with my testimony like he did. And finally, I realized that I was jealous that he got to experience things I knew I never would. Just like the prodigal, he got to go out and have some fun, break some rules, and be wild for a while before he came to Christ. We both ended up in the same place at the end, he just had some wild experiences first, and I wondered what that would be like.

That’s exactly where the older brother was at. He stayed at home, he was the good son, he didn’t go out and do all of that stupid stuff his brother did. And yet, they still ended up at exactly the same place at the end. Do you ever find yourself wanting to be a prodigal for a while? Do you ever find yourself jealous of those who get to go out and do whatever they want, and you end up resenting them because you have to do what God says? Have you ever made a statement like, “Well I would if I wasn’t a Christian”? It makes me think about a little kid who says to his friends, “Well I want to go play, but my mommy said I can’t”. Do you ever wish you could go play, but God says you can’t? Longing for the things of the world, but staying away because you know it goes against God’s will for your life? If you have ever felt that way, then you have been in the position of the older brother before. We are like the older brother when we are faithful in our actions, but not in our hearts.

In the older brother’s complaint to the father, we see what life was really like at home for him. Or at least what his attitude toward it was.

But he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’

Luke 15:29-30 ESV

That word there in Luke 15.29 is actually the root word for slave. From the perspective of the older brother, he had served his father like a slave for years, and never had a celebration like his younger brother, had never gotten a reward. What he wanted was the same kind of celebration, the same kind of recognition that his younger brother got. But he wanted it as a reward for all the hard work he had done.

Let me ask you a question: has working for God ever seemed like a burden to you, some chore that you end up resenting? Have you ever been upset that you did some kind of work or service for the church and didn’t get recognized for it? If so, you have been right where the older brother was the moment he made this complaint to his father. His work for his father and the family farm had become a burden to him, it became something he did begrudgingly instead of doing it with joy. An obligation instead of something done from the heart.

When we have been faithful, when we have stayed home, when we try to do what is right, and yet we become resentful, judgmental, angry, bitter, jealous, condemning of others, that is when we can tell that we are lost the way that the older brother was lost. When our actions match what God desires of us, but our hearts do not.

In the older brother’s resentment, he could not join in with the joy that was going on. His resentment kept him from being able to experience that joy, and he allowed himself to stay an outsider, he allowed himself to stay lost. Did you notice that he can’t even bring himself to call the prodigal his own brother? Instead, he calls him “this son of yours”. The older brother has an opportunity to experience joy with his family, but the resentment in his heart made it impossible. Because joy and resentment cannot coexist. And if we are not careful, it can be really easy to travel down a road of resentment ourselves.

Sometimes we look at ourselves as good Christian people, while turning up our noses up at people who are not just like us. People who are not Christians, who have run away from God, or maybe who have simply not been a Christian as long as we have. Sometimes we end up looking a lot more like the Pharisees Jesus was speaking to than we do like Jesus.

Being lost like the prodigal was is a really easy thing to see, it’s easy to put a name on, and it has a very straightforward resolution. We know exactly what needs to happen to make things better, even if we don’t choose it. But being lost the way the older brother was is a lot harder to see, it’s hard to put a name to it, and it’s hard to figure out how to come home from it. Because being lost the way the older brother was lost almost always goes hand in hand with wanting to do good, wanting to do the right thing, wanting to please God, but having the wrong heart and attitude about it.

There is another story in the Bible where someone, interestingly enough, went through the characteristics of both the younger brother and the older brother. It’s the story of Jonah. Most of you probably know the first part of the story of Jonah, where he was running away from God because he didn’t want to take God’s word to the Ninevites, he was swallowed by a great fish, and finally went to Nineveh to tell them what God wanted them to hear. That’s the part where he acted as the prodigal.

But the part we don’t talk about as much, that doesn’t make it into the kids’ stories as much, is the last part of the story. We tend to end the story when he went to Nineveh and they repented. But it’s a lot like our parable, where the happy ending isn’t the end of the story

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. And he prayed to the LORD and said, “O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” And the LORD said, “Do you do well to be angry?”

Jonah 4:1-4 ESV

Jonah never gave God an answer, so God gave him an object lesson. He made a plant grow one day so Jonah had shelter, then killed it the next. And this was their conversation afterwards:

But God said to Jonah, “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” And he said, “Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.” And the LORD said, “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”

Jonah 4:9-11 ESV

And that’s where the story of Jonah ends. We never know if Jonah got God’s message through his head, just like we don’t know what the older brother ended up doing. But they were both upset about the same thing: mercy being shown to someone other than themselves. They both saw themselves as ones who have done what is right, who have stayed the course, who deserve mercy and grace. And they are both upset when others receive the love of the father as well.

The deeper lesson here is that God values us not because of what we do, good or bad, but because of who we are. When we forget that lesson, when we become more concerned with what we do than whether our hearts are in the right place, we become lost, even if we are still going through all the motions

The younger son needed to learn that lesson. He needed to learn that no matter what he had done, the father still loved him unconditionally because of who he was. The younger son had lost all of his dignity, all of his humanity, and the one thing he had left was his identity as the son of his father. That’s what brought him home, and that is what formed the bedrock of the father’s unconditional love for him.

Some of us still need to learn that lesson. That God does not stop loving us because of our sin. He loves us and values us because we are his children, made in his image. That’s a really easy thing to get into our heads, but sometimes that’s a really difficult thing to get into our hearts.

Some of us though, need to learn the lesson that the older brother needed to get into his head. His lesson had two parts. The first is that, just as the younger son, he was not valued for what he had done. In his case it was all the good he had done, all the work he had done for the father and for the family farm. He too, just like his younger brother, was loved unconditionally by the father because of his identity as the son of his father.

We fall into that trap far too often. We think we need to earn the love of God, that we need to earn our place as his child. Working hard for the kingdom of God is a wonderful thing, and God certainly desires that we use what he has given to us for his glory and to build his kingdom. But it has absolutely no bearing on whether or not God loves us or values us, and it is not what secures our salvation. We let ourselves fall into a works based faith sometimes, where we feel we are only good enough if we do enough good works. But God loves us and values us not for all the work we do in his name, but because of who we are: children of God made in his image. Paul makes it clear that the grace of Jesus is not something we earn, it is a free gift from God, so that no one can boast that they earned it. The older brother needed to learn that his father didn’t love and value him because of the work he had done, but simply because of his identity as his son.

The second part of the older brother’s lesson was not about himself, but about other people. The older brother needed to learn that he wasn’t the only one who the father valued simply because of his identity and not because of his actions, but that his younger brother held the same value and was loved just the same in his father’s eyes. We can see the older brother start to come out in us when we start to look down on other people who we don’t see as our equals, who we think are worse sinners than us, who we don’t think are as good of Christians as we are. The older son looked down on his younger brother, and didn’t even consider him a brother anymore, all based on his actions. The father, on the other hand, treated both sons the same, loving and valuing both of them simply because they were his sons, not because of anything they had done.

One of the professors at Lincoln once put up pictures of people from around the world one at a time and asked us to say the first thing that came to mind. A lot of things were said, like different nationalities, different religions that were apparent from the clothes the person was wearing, or the setting they were in. But at the end of the pictures, he said, “Not once did I ever hear someone say, ‘That’s a human being, made in the image of God, loved and valued by him.’” When God looks at each and every person on earth, you can be sure that is his first thought of them, and it should be ours too. If we let ourselves fall into the trap of thinking that God loves and values people based on anything other than the fact that they are his children created in his image, then we are headed down the road of the older brother.

Whether you connect with this story through the perspective of the prodigal, who made a huge break from his family, a huge break from his father, and needed a wakeup call to come back home. Or whether you connect more with this character of the older brother, who was faithful and obedient, and yet allowed his heart to stray far from the heart of his father. What I want to leave you with is that this story is all about the redemption that our Heavenly Father offers to us. No matter where you are in your walk with God, whether you are far away from him right now, on your way back home, or whether you haven’t missed a week of church in 30 years. This parable of Jesus is a call for each one of us to examine our hearts, to make sure that our hearts are truly in line with the heart of our Heavenly Father. And no matter where you are at, he offers redemption and forgiveness that only comes through the grace of Jesus Christ. We’re going to have the band come back up, and if you are far from God today and need that grace and forgiveness, if you need to come back into the arms of the Father, then we invite you to do that right now.