

Death to Religion: No Elder Brothers in Canterbury please

Luke 15:11-32

The party was in full swing and everybody (with the notable exception of the fatted calf) was happy. The music and the sound of dancing could be heard from quite a distance.

Outside the house, a man stood alone, listening, no smile rested upon his face. Suddenly he demanded an explanation - What was all the fuss about?

The answer served only to heighten his anger. His features twisted with rage, his fists clenched knuckle-white, he spat out his command, and "I want to see the master, Out Here NOW!" The servant scurried off quickly to find the head of the house...

The last five or ten minutes had been rather difficult for the Pharisees who listened from the back of the crowd. They were shocked to the core as Jesus described the God who loved sinners and welcomed them with open arms but they'd seen nothing yet. Now the spotlight focused on them as Jesus finally got to the reaction of the Elder Brother.

These last seven verses of the parable are vital and key in the teaching of Jesus. As the Elder Brother arrives, the Lord uses him to unmask something as heinous as sin itself: **RELIGION**

Those who are careless about their Christianity invariably get entangled in sin - and those who are careful and keen often get snared by religion. We begin our Christian lives with loving intensity, thrilled with God and committed to our relationship with Him. Sadly, that fervour can denigrate into a mere religiosity; we are passionate about our doctrines, opinions and traditions, and lose sight of the Living God in the process. The zeal is still burning but it is a religious zeal. Religiosity is a subtle enemy as well: it appears to be very pious and devout, but despite the disguise, religion is the sworn enemy of the Spirit of God.

It was the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Religious Experts, who hounded and heckled Jesus - not the Sinners: the

irreligious listened and often received the truth with joy but the religious tried to catch Him out with awkward questions. They were the ones who tried to put division between Jesus and His Disciples (Matt Ch9v11). It was the Pharisees who, even in the early stages of Our Lord's Ministry, began to plot how they might kill Him (Matt Ch12v14). At what seemed like every turn, they opposed what God was doing, finding fault and undermining the work of the Messiah. No wonder Jesus warned His Disciples to beware of Religion. His instruction concerning the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees was simple: stay away from it. (Matt 15:1-2)

Religion and Religious people persistently snapped at His heels as He went about living the Good New - And Nothing Changed! Religion is still the major opponent of the Spirit of God. It opposes change and renewal; it criticizes freedom and spontaneity in Worship, and screams with discomfort when traditionalism is challenged. It is Religion that hollers when the Holy Spirit does something fresh and creative and that wants to lock men and women up in the dreary dungeons of legalism. Perhaps that's why the word 'Religion' is only used six times in the New Testament... and most of the time it's used in a negative sense. The Pagan Festus, in his conversation with King Agrippa (Acts Ch25v19) described Paul's Christian faith as his 'Religion' but in the next chapter Paul uses the word 'Religion' to describe his condition as a Pharisee before meeting Jesus (Acts Ch26v5). Elsewhere both Paul and James use the term somewhat negatively: "People should learn first of all to put their religion into practice!" Paul advises Timothy (1TimCh5v4). James uses the term 3 times to describe the worthlessness of mere religion. He tells the religious to put their actions where their theories are (James Ch1v26-27). The arrival of the Elder Brother is more than a tidy postscript to end the story neatly. He is the lone protester outside the party, and an ironic transformation has taken place, for a new prodigal has emerged. The Older Son never left home. He

worked hard, and could boast that he had avoided the overt debauchery of his kid brother, but he is now the new prodigal. He is miles from the pigs, but miles from the father's heart as well. Religion can cause us to become prodigals in the pews; our bodies in the Church Building once or twice a week, our behaviour fairly conservative, but our hearts in the far country. We need to examine this big brother closely and strip off the Sanctimonious veneer of Religion as we do so. Religion is just like sin - it needs to be exposed for what it really is. God is never to be found at the heart of Religion. Self in the form of Self-righteousness, pride and bigotry are invariably at the centre. Jesus taught that the Pharisees were full of self-indulgence (Matt Ch23v25). "Look here" yells the brother to his father - and then proceeds to try to tell Dad what he should and shouldn't do in his own household! Religious people still try to boss God around in His own Kingdom today e.g. (Watson 'Now look here Mr Watson, we don't want anything supernatural in our church!'). Such an example seems almost too absurd to be true, but religious control is a major problem in many churches today. The Holy Spirit begins something new in the local church and so change (which is here to stay when the Holy Spirit is in control) is inevitable. Suddenly the sound of murmuring voices can be heard: "I don't like what is happening in our church, it's not like it used to be". Stop right there! Who's Church? The Church belongs to Jesus. He died to redeem this outfit; the title deeds are in His possession. Who are we to tell God what to do? As Isaiah says, "Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?'" The Pharisees didn't like what Jesus was doing so they frantically tried to harness and bind the Son of God and what happens when religious people find themselves unable to control the divine agenda? They move Church or crucify someone. If Revival is ever to come, then we must lay ourselves open to the as yet unknown divine agenda. God has

this recurring habit of being God - and He won't change or abdicate for you or me.

"You never gave me even a goat", bleated the son. We must not think that religion confines itself to weighty issues. Often it will rear its head in order to scream about minor matters. The Elder Brother was unable to see the wonderful truth that his family was complete again; he couldn't see past his own sense of discomfort at the apparent unfairness of the situation. Of course it is rank immaturity. (It's not fair! It isn't only tots who cry over non-issues). Adults are rather good at playing spiritual Trivial Pursuits. The Pharisees played that game when Jesus healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. A deformed man gloriously healed, the Kingdom of God broke out in power and the religious crowd screamed, "But He healed him on God's day off". Petty thinking caused them to focus on the insignificant and ignore the magnificent. The ability of the religious to make mountains out of molehills is legendary. The story is told of a Church that split over a cake! A chocolate cake sale was held to raise money for the Church Building. One of the congregation (who had been a member for about 300 years! And should have known better) baked a cake and brought it along on the day of the sale. But, horror of horrors no one bought her cake! Hell hath no fury like a woman who baked a cake that no one wanted to eat, so she got all her relatives together who attended the Church and poured out her complaint. They were furious and split the Church and formed their own. Perhaps they called it the First Reformed Assembly of the Blessed Chocolate Cake!

"You didn't give me even a goat, so there", was the snivelling attitude of the aggrieved older brother. Where religion is in charge, petty trivia becomes important, like the Hebrews who complained to Moses that they were without cucumbers or leeks, but conveniently forgot how they'd recently walked through a parted sea and been delivered from infanticide and

slavery, the religious see only that which causes them personal discomfort.

The Elder Brother had a problem with his Dad's theology - as far as he was concerned, grace was too good. How could dad throw a welcome party for a sinner like the Prodigal? **"You've killed the fattened calf... for him!"** The grace of God offends the religious heart, because grace strips us of any ability to buy Father's favour. So we develop a legalistic system of works-orientated Christianity. Yes, we are saved by grace through faith, but kept by legalism through sweat!

We need to define the word 'Legalism' because there is a danger that we can brand anything and everything that is habitual or born of discipline as legalistic (e.g. Grace before meals): so don't throw the baby out with the bath water! Legalism = Traditionalism. "You nullify the Word of God for the sake of your tradition". (Matt. 15:6) There's a difference between tradition and traditionalism. Some of our traditions are useful and rich in meaning. I traditionally take a shower every morning. My Family and Friends are glad! I have friends who are filled with the Holy Spirit who worship in a more traditional setting than St Andrews and how the Lord is blessing them. It's traditionalism - where God wants to take us in a direction but 'the way we've always done things' prevents us from following Him - that's the problem. When we refuse to allow God to move and cling to our predictable patterns instead, we commit idolatry, for there can only be one Lord of the Church. The Local church can avoid traditionalism by being brave enough to ask 'why?' about everything she does (e.g.). We might find good reasons for what we do but lets be brave enough to ask the questions anyway.

Just like the coat stating 'genuine imitation leather', legalism offers a veneer, plastic 'genuine imitation' Christianity. Legalism requires me to change my outward behaviour but not my heart or mind. Because my behaviour fits in with the local set of rules, I look quite impressive. The problem is, I may be

able to keep up the act on Sundays when I'm around other Christians, but inside, in my heart and mind, nothings really changed. True Christianity is about a change of heart that then leads to a change of behaviour: we are 'transformed by the renewing of our minds'. e.g. Matthew 23:5 (Everything they do is done for men to see). The scribes and Pharisees had a passion to impress: Tablets (foreheads and arms), Prayer Shawls (longer the better), Eccles. Title Power: Rabbi. Jesus called them 'dirty mugs' full of greed inside, 'Graves' dead men's bones within. The grace of God means that we are called to walk in a daily process of having our minds renewed and then we will be totally transformed (Romans 12:2). As we are filled with the Spirit and fed on Scripture, as we walk in fellowship and accountability in God's Church, so then real change can take place. Children of the Father can be transformed: Slaves of religion sweat it out.

The Elder Brother looked fine on the outside, but He was actually acting more like a slave than a son, and His heart had burned over the years with resentment towards His Father. Notice that the Elder Brother never once used the word "Father". Contrast that with the first words of the returning younger brother: "Father I have.." It's Ironic. The Younger brother came home and asked to be made a slave, and was returned to son ship. The elder Brother never left home but had lived in slavery for years.

I've noticed that religious people are often really concerned about their principles, doctrines and opinions, and people cease to matter. The Elder Brother, referring to the prodigal, says, **"this son of yours..."** He's so consumed for His own protection, and for 'the cause of righteousness', that He actually forgets the prodigal is not only the son of His Father, but He is also His long lost brother! Gently the Father reminds Him in His reply: 'This Brother of Yours was Dead and is alive again'. Do we forget who our brothers and sisters are? The elder Brother not only forgot who His Brother was, but He had a

poor memory for the truth as well! 'This Son of Yours...has squandered your property on prostitutes'. Now hold it right there. Who said anything about prostitutes? The Elder Brother hadn't even been in the party to speak to anybody, and the narrative mentions nothing about prostitutes. It's the Elder Brother himself that introduces this juicy little rumour as He seeks to verbally destroy and slander His Brother. The fact is that Religious people can be the most terrible gossips and rumourmongers. That's why James warns those who think they're rather advanced in spiritual matters: 'If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on His Tongue, He deceives himself and His religion is worthless' (1:26). But isn't it the truth? The Pharisees looked wonderful, but their mouths were full of poisonous venom. Refuse to pass rumours around, and refuse to believe the worst about your Brother. Demand Proof! If someone tells you a slanderous story, why not suggest that you and the gossip go to see the one who is being gossiped about immediately, so that the truth can be clarified. Religion and legalism exalt principle and punch people.

The Elder Brother was a true legalist, because He was convinced that He really did deserve a Party! He had a great pride in himself. 'All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders, yet you never gave me....' The Man who lives under grace is aware that he deserves nothing and has been given everything. He should get hell but instead is granted heaven. Human Pride has to flee in the face of such a towering love. The legalist quietly believes that in the end God will open heaven because of His hard work and obedience. Paul is a great example of one who had been driven far too long by proud legalism. In fact, He declared that He looked upon all that religious stuff in the past as 'dung' (isn't it interesting how the strongest language from Paul and from the Lord Jesus is reserved for cursed religiosity). Delivered from that way of life, He was able to say "The Love of Christ constrains me'.

That's why he obeyed, suffered, and endured. To earn love? To be able to say 'all these years I've been slaving for you Lord. Now I deserve a crown?' No! All that He did was because he had received amazing love. The true tyranny of legalism is that it warps our understanding of God. Rather than being a Father to us, He becomes a slave driver, a heavenly taskmaster who insists that we keep the rules in order to keep His love, rather than walk in integrity because we're thrilled with his Love.

That's why the Father in the Story began His response with the words: '**My Son..**' The Father was thrilled that His Young son was home, but he loved the Elder brother just as much, and quickly reminded Him: '**Your no Slave, You're my Son**'. A reminder is given about the privileges of son ship as well: You are always with me and everything I have is yours. Religion, like Sin, is robbery. It robs us of our joy, as Sons and daughters of God, forcing us to feel and act like slaves. It robs us of the joy of being able to find out how God would have us live, as we settle for someone else's' rulebook. It robs us of true enduring friendship: relationships last only as long as others agree with our religious principles. In short, religion leaves us standing outside in the cold, whilst others enjoy the party. Make no mistake about it: this parable should be called 'the Parable of the Prodigal Sons, for there were two of them. One lost to sin and restored. The other lost to religion and a prodigal still.

The story ends with the Father outside for the second time that day, pleading with His oldest Son, begging him to come in and join the Party. He explained his actions, affirmed His son, but Jesus ends the story without telling us the outcome. Did the elder brother go in to the warmth and joy of the house, welcome his brother, and begin to enjoy the celebration? Or did he stay outside, stubborn in the cold? We are left with the image of a man with His hands on his waist, considering his response. Perhaps Jesus wanted His listeners in the crowd that day to write their own ending to the story. Would they hear the invitation from the heart of Father God, lay aside thier sin

and their religion, and enter into a party? Or would they stay outside?

We have to write our own ending to the story too. To each and every one of us, religious and sinner alike, there is a personal invitation to God's party via a divine hug, an invitation that demands a response: RSVP respond if you please.

Pastor David

March 16th 2014