Series: Gospel-Centered Paradigm
#2: The Third Way
Galatians 2:11-14
New City Church of Los Angeles
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I. Introduction

We've started a series last week called "Gospel-Centered Paradigm." Some of you are here wondering what New City is about, and if that's you, you are going to hear some pure DNA stuff of New City today. Our vision statement says we are an inclusive gospel-centered community and we have been talking about what it means to be gospel-centered.

The gospel-centered paradigm is the most foundational thing for Christianity because if you don't get this, you don't get Christianity. If you don't get this and you try on Christianity and see if it fits, it's not going to fit. Some of you may have tried to be a Christian at one point in your life, but it didn't do much for you. Or some of you may have tried to change or grow in your Christian life but feel like something is off. Well, it is probably because you tried to add God or Jesus to your life, to your paradigm, to your grid.

If you try to add Jesus into your existing paradigm, you are going to be very frustrated. Jesus didn't come to add to your paradigm, he came to destroy your paradigm and replace it with the gospel-centered paradigm. If you don't do this, you anin't going nowhere. You're just going to tread water. God is not someone you add to your life. He is someone who takes over your paradigm and gives you a new view towards everything.

What we are going to do in this series is to take an old paradigm that we have, dissect it, blow it up, and then replace it with the new paradigm that Jesus gave us, the gospel-centered paradigm.

Today, we are going to look at the parable of the prodigal sons. This is usually referred to as the parable of the prodigal son, but as we will see, Jesus starts out the story by saying it's a story of two sons—two prodigal sons.

Jesus used this parable to teach us that all human paradigms about how we relate to God are wrong.

As we read Luke 15:1-3, 11-32, the story of the prodigal sons, think about the underlying world view and assumption of each son.

READ THE PASSAGE

This parable tells us three things:

1. Two approaches to God which are wrong.
2. Two ways to be lost.
3. One way home.

II. First, two approaches to God: our existing paradigms about relating to or dealing with God.

Let's start with the context in which Jesus told this parable. In verse 1-3, it says that:

> Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then, Jesus told them this parable.

The commentators say that the Greek tense used here to say that tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear him, means that they were *always* hanging around Jesus. It wasn't just something that happened once, but as we see from the other parts of the Bible, Jesus was always hanging around sinners. Some of you may be wondering about who these people are:

- They were people who wanted to figure out life on their own terms. They didn't want anyone telling them how to live. So, they left home and came to LA. In other words, these were the younger brother types.
- Then, you have the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. They were the respected religious people of the times. They pray regularly, they tithe, they try their best to live a moral and religious and upright life. They want to be a good person and live by the rules. In other words, they were the elder brother types. They were church attending conservative heterosexuals.

There were two kinds of people and Jesus told them this parable of two sons—the younger sons representing the sinners and the elder son representing the Pharisees.

They represent two paradigms: the moralistic grid and relativistic grid.

- The elder brother represents the moralistic grid: the way to find God is by obeying his laws. All religions of the world take this view. We have to find out what the standards are, and we have to obey them. Then, we are accepted by God. The Pharisees had a slightly nuanced view: they believed that Israel was chosen by God's grace, but they could only maintain by their status by measuring up to the standard. So, they tried really hard not to sin. Then, if they sinned, they repented.
- The younger brother represents the relativistic/self-discovery grid: You have to follow your heart, not rules. If there is a God, he would want you to find yourself. Many of these younger brother types are spiritual but the last thing they want to be is religious or subscribe to any particular religion.

Our society is completely divided into these two paradigms.

- If you tell a relativistic/self-discovery approach person to accept Jesus Christ as their savior, they automatically assume that you are calling them to a moralistic approach because the world only knows these two approaches.

Both grids divide the world into two groups:

- Moralistic approach people divide the world into moral people and immoral people.
- Self-discovery/relativistic approach people divide the world into open-minded people and judgmental bigots

In both cases, they believe that the world would be a better place if they undermine the view of the others. In some ways, this is the underlying battle in American politics: The fight between these two grids. They are the red states vs. the blue states. In some ways, liberals vs. conservatives. Secular vs. religious.

But, Jesus divides the world into the humble and the proud. The humble gets in and the proud does not.

The gospel is not religion or irreligion.

The gospel is not morality or immorality.

The gospel is not just grace—that God loves us unconditionally, it is truth as well.

The gospel is not just truth—that we are a sinner, it is also grace.

The gospel is truth and grace together.

The grace that God loves you more than what you can imagine.

And the truth that you are a lot more sinful than you are imagine.

The gospel is both at the same time.

What Jesus is saying is completely different. It's not a middle position between the two. What he is saying is radical.

Let's go back to looking at the two approaches:

First, he shows that the first son's approach leads to destruction.

- He goes to the father and asks him for his share of the inheritance. This request is pretty amazing. You get your inheritance when the father dies. So, it's like he's saying to his father, I wished you were dead. He's saying, I don't want you, but, I want your things.
- Don't we do that a lot? I want your blessings. I want this job. I want pleasure. I want a woman or a man. I want to be well. I wan to be rich. But, I don't want you. God is really just a means to something we want. We don't want to live in his house. We just want his stuff. He's a magic genie. He's a Santa Claus.
- The younger brother doesn't want to live under the father's rules. As Billy Joel's said in a song: "I don't care what you say anymore. This is my life. Go ahead with your own life. Leave me alone!"
- But what happens to the younger brother? The thing that he finds destroys him. His pursuit destroys him. There's nothing but the pig sty at the end.

Most people only talk about the younger brother in this parable, but the parable is really more about the elder brother. It is a parable told to the Pharisees, who are represented by the elder brother. But, Jesus shows us that the elder brother's moralistic approach is destructive as well:

- He believed that his moral uprightness means that his father owes him. He is full of pride. He is self-righteous. At the end, he refused to enter into the feast (although, we don't know if he did later or not)

Ultimately, both of them are alienated from the father: the father has to urge them to come into the feast.

II. But, there are two ways to be lost. This is the second point.

Most of us think of sin as breaking God's rule for behavior. We have two sons who both want the father's wealth but without the father's control.

- The first rebels so that he can do whatever he wants. He wants to be his own savior and lord. He breaks the rules and leaves the father's values.
- The elder brother: he's just resentful. It pretty much looks like that's what he wanted to do but he didn't do it and that gives him chits—rights. He's trying to get control of the father's wealth by being good. There are two ways to be your own savior: (1) by being good; and (2) by being bad. If you're living your life and you feel like you deserve to live a good life because of the sacrifices you are making, you are your own savior. You're trying to save yourself.
    - A Southern writer named Flannery O'Conner in one of her novels describes one of her characters like this: "there was a dark nameless understanding in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin."
    - How can this be? If you do everything good, we don't need a savior.
    - She nailed elder brotherness. If you think: "if I do this….. God has to bless me." You are trying to control God by what you are doing. Religious people obey God to get things. Gospel people obey God to get God.

Now, why is the elder brother lost? It's not inspite of his goodness, but because of his goodness. What? It's his rightousness, not his sin. This is why one theologian said: "The gospel is so different than the moralistic grid and relativistic, the main thing between you and God is not sins, but it's your damnable good works." Pharisees repent when they sin, but Christians repent of the reasons for their goodness. You are willing to see that all of the reasons that you were doing good were to control God. And you repent of that!

Now, what are some signs of younger brother lostness?

- You can't wait until the pick up date on the beginning of the month so that you can go on a binge. The drugs got a hold of you.
- You are living a wild life. You are passed out on a gutter. Your life is out of control.
- You feel a sense of meaninglessness, emptiness in all of your pursuits.
- In many ways, it's pretty obvious when you're lost. We've got a lot of younger brothers among us in downtown LA.

How about signs of elder brother lostness? It's more difficult to deal with because it's not as obvious and most of them don't think they are lost, just like the Pharisees in this passage. But, here are some signs we see from this passage:

1. You're angry about the way things are going. The parable says that the elder brother got angry and refused to go in. You have this feeling that God owes you because you lived such a good life and you get angry when things are not going your way. You have this sense of entitlement with God based on your moral behavior. So, elder brothers tend to be angry and upset. Younger brothers are cooler and they don't get as upset because they feel that they deserve what they are getting.

2. Elder brothers have joyless mechanical obedience. The elder brother said: "I've been slaving for you." That why some elder brothers explode at the end.

- I heard a story from this guy who said that: he took a music appreciation class in college to get his degree. He listened to Mozart so he can get a good grade. He was trying to get good grades in order to get a good job, where he can make good money. So, he listened to Mozart to make money. But, now, he pays a lot of money to listen to Mozart. Before Mozart was a means to an end: money. But, now Mozart has become an end in itself.
- Christians obey God because he is beautiful and we find pleasure in him.
- Elder brothers treat God as an instrument.

3. Coldness to younger brother types. The elder brother in the story definitely felt superior to the younger brother and didn't even want to call him by name. He says to his father when referring to his brother, "this son of yours." You feel morally superior to them and that's important to you. You tend to be homophobic. You tend to be judgmental. You tend to have in your heart of hearts, a holier-than-thou attitude. Why wouldn't you? You have been slaving over obeying God all these years and the thief got in at the end right before he died! In many ways, you have a hard time reaching the younger brother types in your evangelism because they sense your judgmental attitude.

4. Lack of assurance of the father's love. There is a sense that he doesn't really know how much his father loves him. He's not sure. How can he be sure when his approval is based on his performance? There might be some of you who have always wondered if God really loved them, it might be because you are measuring his love for you based on your work, morality, performance. I think you have to stop that!

5. There is an unforgiving spirit. The elder brother didn't want to forgive his brother. If are holding a grudge, you probably think you would never do that—and in some way, you feel morally superior. Be careful! I think people who understand their mistakes are more forgiving. For example, people who are late all the time, are much more forgiving to others who are late. In fact, they might be relieved.

IV. So, what's the solution?

If they are both wrong, how do we get home?

1. We need the father to come to us. The solution always starts with God. Before the younger brother speaks, he is kissed. He kissed before the repentance! It's wasn't like the father was tapping his feet while the younger son was accounting all the things he did wrong before the embrace and the kiss. We need to open our eyes and see this loving father. He waits for you (it says he saw his son far off), he runs to you (respectable middle-eastern men didn't run), kisses you, restores you, cleans you up, and feasts with the whole village (because you don't kill a fatten calf and celebrate with the immediate

family only—you celebrate with the entire village). He is not the moralistic, condemning, judge. He is a loving father who is emotionally open and extravagant in his love. He loves you! Even if you are the elder son, he pleads with you. Even when his elder son is humiliating him by not coming into the feast where the entire village is gathered, even in your pride, judgment, and anger, Jesus pleads with you. It's very interesting because through the story, Jesus is pleading with the Pharisees—come in to the feast! Come rejoice together! Wherever you are, you need to open your eyes to God's love.

2. We have to repent not only of our sins but our righteousness. It is not the amount of repentance but the depth of your repentance. Don't you think the Pharisees repented of their sins? Yes they did. They felt very bad about their sins. The difference between a Christian and a religious person is that you not only repent of your sins, you also repent of the reasons you did anything good. If you hear the stories of John Wesley, he said he became a Christian while he was a pastor. He said, he went from being a slave to a son. If you hear stories of Martin Luther, the great reformer, he became a Christian while a monk. It is when they repented of the reasons for their righteousness that they became a Christian.

3. You have to see the cost of the father's salvation. When you first look at this passage, it looks like there's no atonement, meaning there is no cost for accepting the younger son back. But, that's not true. Look at the details. When the younger brother took all of his possession and squandered it, now 100% of the father's possession is the elder brother's inheritance. In fact, the father says to the elder son: "everything I have is yours." The only way is at the cost of the elder brother.

We, however, have the ultimate elder brother. Jesus by giving us a bad elder brother, makes us long for a true elder brother.

- We have an elder brother who came from heaven
- We have an elder brother who lived in absolute obedience and fellowship with God
- We have an elder brother who went searching for us

- We have an elder brother who picks us up out of the pig sty and gives us his place in the family.

Do you know why we can have the robe of God's righteousness?

- Because Jesus was stripped naked on the cross.

Do you know why we can feast with the father?

- Because Jesus took the cup of God's wrath

Do you know why we can take his place?

- Because Jesus took our place and lost his place for us.

We have the true elder brother who paid the incredible cost to bring us home.

Let's pray.