

THE ELDER BROTHER TYPE

Point number two. Do you remember? The first point was: We are in a Covenant of Grace, not a Covenant of Works. Some of you are catching a new glimpse – a new realization – of what Christianity is really about. You are starting to realize why Jesus has such a powerful and dramatic impact on our world, and, more to the point, why He calls forth such a strong love and devotion from the people who get close enough to begin to know and trust Him. Not as many, perhaps, but *some* of you are getting a clearer comprehension of why the institutions and structures of this world, especially the church structures, keep reversing and reworking the central message of God's grace back into the more familiar and useful approaches of law, rules, requirements – the do-it-yourself, but MY WAY, religion. The freedom for each of us to live in obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ above and before all other allegiance and loyalties is the most incredible possibility on earth – and at the same time, the most threatening thing imaginable to any person or institution who wants or depends upon our allegiance and loyalty. What if they need or want us to do one thing, and Jesus tells us to do another? Whether it is the church, the spouse, the government, the boss, the friend, or our own inner desires, their response is: “Well, grace may be fine in theory, but right now I need you to do it my way. Besides, who are you to make such big decisions as an individual when WE [whoever WE are at the moment] need you to cooperate for the benefit of the greater number.” It is terribly difficult for us to say to the WE, even in humility and under guidance: “Are you bigger and more important than God, and God's Kingdom?” You know ahead of time what their reply will always be: “But WE are more qualified to decide what is good for God and God's Kingdom – what God really wants – than you are!”

That, of course, is unarguable – unless you know God's message and our tradition really well. God does not incarnate as a group. God gets through to Abraham, to Moses, to Jeremiah, to Josiah, to Peter, to Paul ... one at a time. The group gathers in response to God's individual action. When the people of the group stop praying as individuals and start trusting God to guide the group in general, Christianity dies. That is, the Christian WAY of Life dies. The names and claims and numbers may be bigger and stronger than ever, but the Path – the WAY – dies. Mass conversions are emotional binges. No group and no leader can substitute for your personal relationship or your personal allegiance

to God. You may think Jesus' leadership is an exception – that following Jesus is an adequate substitute for having your own personal relationship with God. But that is the most incredible part of the story. When the physical Jesus died, the followers discovered that they were still “hooked up,” and to something far greater than the human Jesus. He never built loyalty to Himself, or for Himself, alone. The core of it was not justice; the core of it was not feeding the hungry or healing the sick; the core of it was not neighbor love, or building a better world. **THE CORE OF IT WAS PRAYER:** allegiance and obedience to God, who turned out to love us more than we ever knew or dared to believe.

But that was last Sunday – point one. Point two is that this grace and this love are for sinners. Despite many efforts at clarification, some of you still cannot get used to being called “sinners.” You insist that it's an insult, no matter how I define it. Some of you still think I'm trying to scold you. How could you possibly imagine that a derelict old drunk like me could possibly be scolding *you*? I have failed at more things than many of you have ever even tried. I still cuss and swear, and my wife says I don't eat right, and I never go to bed at night without having failed to do things that would be really beneficial to this church. And *I'm* scolding *you*? You have me entirely wrong. I am only trying to tell you that you are eligible for Jesus' love, and invited into His Kingdom. If you deny or dilute His truth, I will squabble with you about it, of course. But it is not *my* truth ... it is not *my* Kingdom. I do not run it, or make it work. I just want you in on it. Believe me, I understand the offense of encountering God's love and realizing there is a new and different life for us. But there is no help for it; it is *better* than the lives we design for ourselves and act so proud of – despite all the loneliness and fear and anger and depression they cause us, and those around us. And the truth is, there is no grace or forgiveness for the unrepentant. To repent means to turn – to go in a new direction. Point two is that this grace and this love are for sinners. If you are not a sinner, you are not eligible for Christ's Kingdom. It has nothing to do with insults. It has to do with acknowledging our true condition. There is no way into the Kingdom – no way to have a relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ – except through repentance. Keep reading the story. Find me somebody – anybody, anywhere, at any time – who came in some other way.

So the Prince of Peace comes to reconcile us to God. Jesus does that: He picks us out of this reality and, though leaving us here for a little longer, He puts us into a new reality – where we are *in* but no

longer *of* this world. We live for the Prince of Peace, but in a world where there is no peace. Why is there no peace on earth? Why will there never be peace on earth? Because despite those of us in every generation who get picked off and brought into the New Kingdom, the world itself is alienated from God. And despite our dawning awareness of His love and mercy, the effects of our own alienation take a long time to heal completely. Sin *means* alienation from God.

We have covered that definition of sin until some people are sick of it. Well, sin *is* a sickness, so that's good. But getting sick of being sick does not make us well, as we have all discovered, to our sorrow, from time to time.

Now, I do not mean to imply that none of us have done any bad things – that we have never been “sinners” by the common definition. And some of us may not manage to stay perfect from here on out, either. The Cross does cover every kind of sin. His mercy can heal and restore us. I would feel wretched indeed if this sermon seemed to reduce the power or breadth or reach of the Cross for anybody here. But I don't happen to believe that sin is fun. I've tried it – never liked it! I don't believe any of you will ever get to liking it either – I mean on the inside, or for the long run. So I do not worry about *too much* forgiveness, like some of you do. Sometimes I worry about pretend forgiveness, or forgiveness where there is no repentance. But those are different subjects.

Anyway, I have to try one more time to get through on this “sin” business. There is still a great and serious misunderstanding on the part of many, many Christians regarding sin. Sin is NOT BADNESS, it is LOSTNESS. It is BEING ALONE – ESTRANGED – especially and primarily from God. Sin comes in two classic categories. The majority of Christians know only one category, or at least they take only one of the categories seriously.

1.) FIRST CATEGORY: Sin is alienation from God that shows up mostly in fear and anger. THE RESULT IS BAD BEHAVIOR: stealing, lying, murder, adultery, and all the other famous bad actions. AWARENESS LEADS TO REPENTANCE: guilt and shame for the great damage we have done. CONVERSION INCLUDES turning away from these destructive behaviors. And since outsiders cannot see the inner relationship with God in Christ Jesus that brings and sustains the inward change, they think it is mostly about turning away from the bad behaviors. They think it is about self-discipline. I used to have enormous

self-discipline when I was an active drunk. Someday I'll tell you about how much discipline it takes to be a conscientious minister during the day, and drink all night. No monastic life could ever be more rigorous. My life is like a summer breeze today, in comparison to that.

2.) SECOND CATEGORY: Sin is alienation from God that shows up mostly in pride, and trying to be superior to other people. THE RESULT IS GOOD BEHAVIOR – at least externally and for the record. Behavior must be exemplary, or the pride and superiority would seem false. I am not talking about the hypocrites; I'm talking about real pride, for solid earthly reasons. The result is self-righteousness and judgmental attitudes toward others, however carefully masked. AWARENESS LEADS TO REPENTANCE: awareness of an inner wasteland, loneliness, lack of love – going or coming. Only in prayer and meditation do we realize how much damage we have done. The good deeds were not done in love, but in pride and superiority. CONVERSION INCLUDES turning away from turning away. Shields melt, and unloving patterns we didn't even know we had begin to crack and peel away.

Both forms of sin are killers of the Kingdom. Both are alienation. Both lead to death – one just as completely as the other. Sin is not badness – it is lostness, alienation, the absence of love. It comes in two major categories: the good guys, and the bad guys. *Both* are enemies of the Kingdom, though only one is declared an enemy of the state, community, or organization. Yet the second category of sin does enormous damage in every community and organization on earth. I know that adultery, stealing, dishonesty, and greed can do enormous damage in any church. But in the churches I have known, the damage from these sources is minuscule in comparison to the damage done by pride, self-righteousness, jealousy, aloofness, and arrogance. So why do we continue to presume and insist that our problem is mostly about first-category sin, when second-category sin is doing us far more damage? Why do we think Jesus came to save first-category sinners, when second-category sinners are a far greater problem where most of us live most of the time?

For that matter, of the two sinner types: Which one killed Jesus? The good guys or the bad guys? That's right, the *good guys* killed Jesus. If you do not know that, you have very little comprehension of what Christianity is about. The good guys killed Jesus. The *good guys* killed Jesus. The responsible, dependable, hard-working people killed Jesus.

The most sincerely religious people who ever walked the earth *killed* the Son of God. “*Jesus said to them, ‘Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you.’*” (Matthew 21:31) The good guys killed Jesus. Do not suppose or imagine that I am making this up, or that Jesus was unaware of such dimensions. Who were His true opponents through all His earthly ministry? Were the big confrontations with thieves, murderers, harlots? No, they were with Pharisees, the *crème de la crème*: priests, scribes, doctors of the Law, the High Priest, members of the Sanhedrin. Well, most folk try to say that they were a bunch of hypocrites, but that’s because those folks don’t want to see or understand. They are afraid to grasp the real story. They are afraid of what will happen to their hearts, and souls, if they ever do.

So, most of Christendom still thinks Jesus only died for the bad guys. Naturally, the good guys who think that think they do not *need* Jesus – they don’t think they are sinners who need to repent. And so they still spread their alienation – their brand of sin – and die in their emptiness and lostness, often with very good reputations in the communities in which they lived. And that would be fine with me, you understand, but Jesus hates it that people have to be so hard on themselves, and so alone.

Although there are a great many stories and sayings about this subject in the New Testament, the most famous of all, I suspect, is the passage we read this morning. Jesus tells the story of two lost sons. Both are estranged from their Father, but for opposite reasons. Both are apart from the Father’s will and purpose. Both are deeply loved by the Father. The first-category son (often called the Prodigal) is destroying the Father’s way by rebelling – going off to live his own life in his own way, and obviously not according to the behaviors and approaches his Father would approve of. The second-category son (often called the Elder Brother) is destroying the Father’s way by staying where he belongs, working hard, doing everything expected of him – but, it turns out, with a resentful heart, with no joy, with a complaining heart toward his Father because of all his duties, and with no understanding whatsoever of who his Father really is, what he is like, or what the Farm is all about. It all erupts, of course, when the Prodigal returns – revealing an angry, unloving, unforgiving, resentful, vengeful heart behind the façade of an obedient, dutiful, righteous Elder Brother.

The story ends with our knowing that the younger son, though lost, has been found. He is reconciled with his Father. But the story ends with our not knowing if the elder son will be found. He is certainly lost – what we call “the unlost lost.” He is most certainly estranged from his Father – lonely, angry, miserable in his cloak of self-righteousness. Will he be reconciled to his Father? Come in out of the cold? Rejoice for his brother’s return? Learn what his Father and the Farm are really all about? We are not told. We are not told because Jesus is telling the story to *us*. And He is saying: “You are the only one who can decide how this story will end. It’s your call. Do you want to stay lost, or do you want to be found? If you want to be found, it is about repentance, grace and mercy – turning toward love.” You have heard of a chemical reaction? Well, this is a spiritual reaction (transformation). Jesus said, “*He who is forgiven little, loves little.*” (Luke 7:47) It is not about your “goodness.” Goodness always reeks of pride, superiority, judgment, estrangement. Someone once tried to call Jesus “good.” The response was instantaneous: Never do that! The minute we see or acknowledge it as good, it reeks. We are only obedient servants. “*No one is (truly) good but God alone.*” (Mark 10:18; Luke 18:19)

Surrender. Give it up. Receive mercy. It is about grace. We act out of acceptance and love – or we act out of judgment and superiority. And we cannot fake (very well, for very long) *one* attitude if we are coming out of *the other* from inside ourselves. If the heart has not changed – received mercy – it cannot offer genuine mercy to others.

It is the biggest issue in Christianity. Are you an outsider looking in – or an insider, by Christ’s mercy, trying to respond to what you have received? It is much easier to see your need, find Jesus, and repent and turn your life over to Jesus’ new WAY if you are the first kind of sinner. That’s why the bad guys so often “go into the Kingdom” ahead of us. The vast majority of us, most of the time, are second-category sinners. We don’t feel love’s judgment because we have openly defied the laws of morality, or directly done hurt and damage to other people; we feel love’s judgment because the Cross keeps reminding us that He loves people we do not, and that He forgives people we would rather write off or ignore. It also reminds us that LOVE is more vulnerable, open, caring, and totally involved than most of what goes by the name of “love” in our world ... and that it flows from places in the soul a lot deeper than “should” or “ought” or right or wrong ... and that its motive is not about looking good, getting a good reputation, or even getting

thanks or affection in return. So even us second-category folk – when we start to see who He is, what He is like, and what He is about – even we can stand at the foot of the Cross and pray earnestly, “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

If you are a Christian: turn away from being bad, and doing bad things. If you are a Christian: turn away from being good, and doing good things. Both are killers of the Kingdom. We serve a King of LOVE beyond good or bad. Conversion draws (or drop-kicks) us into a dimension that no longer understands life on such terms. Our only desire and our only hope are to turn our lives over to His guidance and leadership on a daily basis. It is all too big and confusing for us. When it comes to eternal dimensions, we are not any good at leading. But we can get better and better at following. So after we awaken and pray “Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner,” we also humbly ask: “So, what is my next assignment?”