

“The Other Prodigal Son”

Do we have any “only children” here? Anyone here not have a sibling?

OK, so out of the rest of you, how many of you were the oldest? How many were the youngest?

And how many were in the middle?

Well, you have probably all read articles on how birth order affects personality. So let’s see what you recall.

What do we know about older children?

Tend to act like mini-adults, reliable, conscientious, and successful;
they also tend to be rule oriented, inflexible, controlling, bossy, cautious perfectionists,
unwilling to change, unwilling to step out of their own comfort zone,
and have an intense fear of failure, feeling like they are never quite good enough,

What do we know about youngest children?

Tend to be free-spirited, adventurous, fun-loving, outgoing, charming, agreeable,
open-minded, uncomplicated, risk-takers;
they also tend to feel unimportant, and compensate by being self-centered and manipulative
and seeking attention, who know they are least likely to be disciplined

So thinking about what we know about youngest and oldest siblings today,

it would seem that even back in Jesus’s day there was a similar phenomenon.

Because as Jesus tells the story – and remember it is a story – these characteristics play their roles.

Now before we look at the story Jesus told, we need to look at his audience. Who is there?

We have people looking for something, coming to hear Jesus and to see what he has to offer.

And we have Pharisees who are there to judge and to mutter.

And so Jesus tells a story that addresses both groups.

So just keep that in the back of your minds as we look at the story.

It begins with a father who had two sons,

and the younger one decides he wants something other, something more, than he has,
and he tells his dad he wants to leave to find it.

Now I want to ask you, what do you think made the younger brother want to leave?

Was it his relationship with his father? Was it his relationship with his brother?

Or was it his lot in life, i.e., his work?

It seems clear that it was not his relationship with his father

because he has no qualms about going to his father, telling him what he wants to do,
and asking for his inheritance NOW.

It’s obvious that he knows his father is extremely generous and loving, and he is counting on that.

In fact he’s taking advantage of his father’s love, expecting to get what he asks for –

even though this is like a slap in the face to his father, wanting his inheritance while his dad is still alive!
and thus depriving his dad not only of 1/2 his wealth, but of his youngest son’s labor.

So it is not his relationship with his father that drives him away.

Was it his life situation?

Perhaps in part as he was the baby of the family, adventurous, free-spirited, fun-loving.

But I think that much of what drove him away was his older brother.

He looked at his older brother and thought, “I don’t want my life to be like his!

He slaves all day, it’s all work and no play, and he has no joy in his life. I want more out of life than that.

And there’s no way I can get that here because unless I live my life like he does,

he’s going to think I’m not working hard enough

and maybe others will agree with him – and I don’t need that.”

And so the younger son takes his inheritance and goes off on his own,
seeking something different, something more for his life, seeking joy.

The problem is he looks in all the wrong places.

He thinks what he is looking for are the things that money can buy –
adventure, good times, good food, good friends, leisure, luxury –
and he does find those things and buys those things.

But then, when the money runs out, there are no more good times or good food or good friends
or leisure or luxury or adventure.

And he finds himself forced to work and the only work he can find is the absolute worst:
he finds himself feeding pigs – an animal that Jews aren't even allowed to touch!

Now remember to whom Jesus is speaking –

those ordinary people who came with open minds to learn from him
and those Pharisees who came full of their own religious knowledge to judge him.

And you can be sure that the Pharisees – who were all about rules and righteous living,
all about rewards and punishments and the consequences for one's deeds –
you can be sure they were right there with Jesus, saying,

“Yep! That kid got what he deserved! You go and break all the rules?
Then you deserve the consequences of your actions. Yes Jesus!”

But then Jesus continues the story.

The younger son suddenly realizes that his father's slaves have it better than he does,
and so he decides to return.

It's obvious that he has learned his lesson because there is

no more arrogance, no more self-righteousness, no more presuming on his father's love.

He doesn't even think about reclaiming his position as son, but simply wants to be a slave of his father.

And again the Pharisees are probably saying,

“Well, I guess if he's learned his lesson, it might be OK for him to be a slave. Maybe.”

But then Jesus shocks them all.

Because when the father sees the son coming he runs to him
and before his son can even complete his request to be his father's slave,
the father has him in his arms and is saying,

“I love you! I am so grateful that you are okay! I am so happy you are home!

Come, we are going to have the best party ever!”

Can you picture the looks on the faces on those Pharisees?

Jesus had suddenly veered into heresy territory.

The father's reaction was not right because it was not fair!

The son had broken all of the rules and he deserved to pay for it!

But instead of punishing him, the father throws him a party –
and not just any party, but a party to end all parties!

He kills the fatted calf, puts a huge ring on his son's finger, dresses him in sumptuous robes,
calls everyone together,

and there is music and there is dancing and there is a feast and there is overwhelming joy!

The older son hears the noise and comes to see what's going on.

A servant with a huge grin on his face and excitement in his voice, comes and says,

“You are not going to believe this! It's like the best news ever!

Your brother is home! And he's okay! And we're having a party!

But the older son isn't happy.

He doesn't care that his brother is home.

His brother should have stayed where he was.

He had made his choice and there's no way he should be back here.

And what the heck was his dad giving him a party for????!!

There is an older brother, a Pharisee in all of us.

I was the eldest child in my family

and I spent my life trying to please my parents, my teachers, my employers, everyone.

I worked hard but somehow it was never good enough

to please all of the Pharisees in my life because, of course,

unless you can be perfect, you will always make mistakes

and the Pharisees will always be there to point them out to you

and to judge you as not being good enough.

And that drive to measure up, to succeed, to win approval

can never be satisfied because none of us are perfect.

And what this creates is this emptiness inside that we try to fill up with other things –

sometimes with wholesome things like family, friends, work, material possessions,

religious practice, service to those in need, hobbies, travel, adventure,

and sometimes with unwholesome things like love affairs or illegal drugs or addictive behaviors.

Both sons felt an emptiness inside.

For the younger son it was clear when he said to his father,

“I don’t want this kind of life – I want something else” and left.

For the older son it became clear when he said to his father,

“I have slaved my entire life for you, & it’s never been enough, because obviously you don’t love me.”

The older son tried to fill that emptiness by working to earn his father’s love.

The younger son tried to fill that emptiness by running away from his father’s love.

In the end the younger son finds what he was looking for in his father’s arms.

But we don’t know what happens to that older son.

I think most of us have experienced having a conflict in a relationship where we were really hurt

and even when the other person says they’re sorry and holds out their arms

we can’t bring ourselves to run into them.

We can’t run into their loving arms because our arms are still full of the hurt and anger

that come from our Pharisaic clinging to what we think we are owed, what we deserve

Our arms are too full of our judgment and self-righteousness and arrogance and pride

that says that we deserve more than someone else because we have done more.

But here’s the thing: the father loved both sons.

He loved the younger one enough to give him his inheritance and let him go

and to welcome him back without a word of judgment, with nothing but love and joy.

He loved the older son enough to come out and invite him into the party –

into the celebration of love and joy.

The father could have said, “Get in there! Put a smile on your face and welcome your brother home!

Be glad that he’s home! Be grateful!

I’m your father & you are my son and I’m telling you to get yourself in there and celebrate!”

But instead of ordering him in, his father simply invites, entreats him, saying,

“I love you just as I love your younger brother.

Everything that I have is and has always been yours, my son.

You’ve been acting like you’re my slave, but that was never the case.

You’re not my slave; you’re my son.

You just have been looking at it from the wrong perspective.”

Jesus told this story over 2000 years ago,
and it is as relevant today as it was when he first told it.
As a church – whether Roman Catholic, or mainline Protestant, or Evangelical –
the Pharisee inside of us has caused us to be perceived as the older brother –
people full of self-righteous arrogance and pride, proclaiming grace,
while in our thoughts and sometimes our words and even our actions,
we are blaming and judging others.
And the reason congregations do that is because too many of us refuse to run into God's arms,
God loves each one of you, enough to give you everything that you have.

You can look at your life like the younger son
and try to fill up that empty place with family and friends and work and play.
And as long as those things last you can be happy.
But none of those things last forever, and that empty place inside will remain empty.

You can look at your life like the older son and say,
“I am working so hard, trying my best to measure up, to succeed, to remain in control.”
You can fill up your life with judgment and blame.
You can be known as the one who moans and groans and whines and complains.
And that empty place inside will remain empty.

You can be like the Pharisees, filled with arrogance and pride,
thinking that you are always right, that you know best,
that you know the right way to think, the right way to live,
the right way to worship, the right way to serve, the right way to vote.
You can point the finger at others send judge them and blame them and point out their mistakes.
You can try to manipulate and control others.
And that empty place inside will remain empty.

You can be like the older brother, like the Pharisees and cut yourself off from God's love.
You can be like the younger brother at the beginning of the story & run away from God's love.
Or you can be like the younger son at the end of the story,
finally understanding that it's only when we return to God,
willing to submit our wills to His,
willing to do what God wants instead of what others want or what we want,
and become His obedient slave,
that we will find ourselves in God's arms, with our hearts so full of love that it overflows in joy.

Let us pray.

God of never-ending love,

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Amen