

A Tale of Two Siblings: The Elder Brother

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"The Return of the Prodigal Son" (1663) by Rembrandt

Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, the Scriptures teach that your Word is quick and powerful, living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, seeking out the place where soul is divided from spirit and joints from marrow. Your Word is able to pass judgment on secret thoughts and intentions of the heart. So God, shine your light on not only your Word, but upon us. Amen.

Background

Tolstoy opened his novel *Anna Karenina* with this famous sentence:

"All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

And in the Parable of the *Prodigal Son*, we see a family tragedy played out:

- A fractured relationship of two boys with a parent. And, of course, sibling rivalry—brother against brother, sister against sister, sister against brother, moms and dads watching, heartbroken.

- You can also see sibling rivalry played out in the church, where sons and daughters of God struggle and compete.
- Or with fellow countrymen fighting and pledging allegiance, not to country, but to parties.
- We see sibling rivalry in the Bible, in the very beginning, Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, Leah and Rachel, Joseph and his brothers.
- And in the New Testament, Mary and Martha. Martha was the hard-working, busy, dutiful, serious-minded, and I'm guessing the eldest daughter, while Mary, I'm guessing again, the younger, sat at the feet of Jesus. Mary got in trouble with her big sister Martha over this idleness. Martha chided her, but not directly. She tried to bring Jesus into the mix, triangulating Jesus. "Jesus, tell my sister to do some work!"

In fact, sometimes I wonder about the wisdom of looking to the Bible for family values. This is surprising hearing this from a minister, but it's true. Look at almost all of the families in the Bible. It's not a pretty picture. If you read the Scriptures carefully, human families are painfully like our families. In fact, a recent study was done and it found that 95% of families are dysfunctional. I was shocked by that number—I thought it would be much higher!!! (*ha ha*)

Well, last week we looked at the first lost son—the younger son, the prodigal son who ran away from home, but returned—a boomerang child if you will. The first part had a happy ending—there was reconciliation with dad.

Today we hear about the second lost son—the elder brother. He too left home in his own way—without ever leaving home. Like he did for his prodigal son, the father also went out to his elder son in love and invited him to his own homecoming. We turn our attention to the elder brother. He felt forgotten by the father in the story. In fact, he usually gets forgotten by readers of Scripture as well. Even the title of the parable forgets one of the sons: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." The Elder Son isn't even mentioned. The Elder Brother usually isn't even preached on—or maybe tacked on at the end of the sermon's conclusion. Problem children always get the most attention. But here's the thing—the Elder Brother is a problem child too.

We're going to change that this morning. In many ways, he's the pivotal character in the story. Things get really interesting with him. One brother is estranged by foolish deeds and the other brother estranged by good deeds done bad. Both sons are lost sons and both are prodigal sons. Both need to learn to love their brother and their father in their unique and different ways.

Once again, Jesus reminds us of the importance of all our relationships—with God, with one another, and with ourselves. But yet another character is often forgotten in this family saga: the Father. He alone is in both Act 1 and Act 2 of the parable. On a surface level, the father is baffling. One commentator put it this way: "It appears the Father indulged the one son who slighted him and slighted the other son who indulged him." But there's more going on than that, as we will see. In fact, the central character in the parable is the father. So the parable might most accurately be entitled: "The Tale of the Compassionate Father and His Two Lost Sons."

The father feels deeply, experiencing both loss and restoration. The father loves his sons equally and differently—each according to his need, personality, and situation. Yet with even-handed compassion and concern, he loves the “Rebel Young Son” and the “Resentful Elder Son.”

The Father also loved them both enough to give them the freedom and space to make their own decisions... while remaining connected. As family systems theory says: be differentiated, while connected. Learn to come apart... so you won't come apart.

And when each of his sons messed up, the father was right there with an extended hand rather than a pointing finger or clenched fist. Both brothers were lost. Both strayed. Both needed to come home. The prodigal did.

The question remains: will the elder son come home? Will he repent, like his younger brother?

Let's hear now the word of the Lord from...

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3, 11b, 25-32 (NRSV)

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.” So he told them this parable: “There was a man who had two sons...

“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’

Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

***The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.***

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SERMON – A Tale of Two Siblings: The Elder Brother

Tim Keller, in his book *“Prodigal God”* tells a story about a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. He took his carrot to the king and said, “My lord, this is the greatest carrot I’ve ever grown or will grow. Therefore, I present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king was touched and he discerned the man’s heart, and as the gardener turned to go, the king said, “Wait! You’re clearly a good steward of the earth. I own a plot of land next to yours. I want to give it freely as a gift to you, so you can garden it all.” The gardener was amazed, delighted, and honored. He went home rejoicing and filled with gratitude.

There was also a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard the conversation. That got him thinking. “If that’s what you get for a carrot—what if I gave the king something better? What could I get in return? The next day the nobleman came before the king and offered him a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses and this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred or will breed. Therefore I present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” But the king discerned his heart and said, “Thank you,” and took the horse and merely dismissed him. The nobleman was stunned. The king then replied, “Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot. But you were giving yourself the horse.”

What are our motivations and our attitudes and our emotions behind our giving and living and loving? Why do we serve God? For reward? ...or for love. Is our heart in line with our actions?

This was the rub for the elder brother. He was doing good. Outwardly it was all fine. But inwardly was quite a different story. He wasn’t doing good or being loyal for the right reasons. He did what he did out of selfishness, pride, anger, and envy. The elder brother challenges us to look in the mirror and ask ourselves some tough questions:

- Are our good deeds—clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the prisoner—really for those in need?
- Or do we have underlying selfish motives—where we’re not really clothing the naked, but we’re clothing ourselves and feeding ourselves? Self-righteousness is just a fancy name for self-service, self-interest.

We also need to take a closer look at what is not in the story.

Did you notice last week there is no elder brother in Part 1 of the story? Only the younger son and the father. The elder brother is strangely silent and absent. But he needed to be there.

In ancient Jewish law and tradition, the elder brother was the mediator in family financial disputes. But in this story, the father was left alone to divide up the inheritance. Why wasn’t the elder brother present to help bring reconciliation—to talk some sense into his brother? Like Cain, he wasn’t being his brother’s keeper. He absconded from his true family duties. The elder brother didn’t step up to the mic and lead.

Ecclesiastes says: there’s *“a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.”* This was a time to speak. We’re reminded that we need to be involved—but not meddling nor passive—in our families. Appropriately engaged.

This was the sin of the Elder Brother: his good deeds were done out of slavish fear and self-centeredness. He didn't do it out of joy or love—that was long gone. He forgot his first love and became jaded. I've been there before—and it's not a fun place. The elder brother was physically the closest to home of the two brothers, but spiritually and relationally, he went much further away than the prodigal ever did. Physically he was in the Holy Land. Spiritually and mentally, the elder brother was in a Siberian Prison Camp.

In Genesis 4, God puts it this way to Cain: Cain was jealous of his brother Abel's offering that God accepted:

"Cain, why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" The author of Hebrews gives us good warning too: See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. The Apostle John provides the solution to the deadly sins of wrath, envy, and pride that elder brother was prone to: "perfect love casts out fear."

But let's be honest with ourselves here—myself included, before we get too smug about our estimations of the Elder Brother. That would defeat the purpose of Jesus' parable. We all have a little bit of the Prodigal, some of the Elder Brother, and the Father in us. All of us. Let's courageously face our shadows, Immanuel.

Elder siblings usually have a secret, inner-Prodigal hiding in them. They are jealous of the prodigal's fun—and even Elder siblings go hog wild—just more discreetly. In privacy. We all, one time or another, will struggle with envy and jealousy. Or joyless servitude out of duty or obligation. Our life devolves into a series of musts, oughts, shoulds, and "have tos." And so we elder brothers fall into what one therapist jokingly describes as: "compulsive mastication and regularly shouldering all over yourself."

We've also got to be careful of legalism in our lives and taking ourselves too seriously. Refusing to laugh at ourselves. We get into serious trouble when life is based upon "law, merit, and reward" rather than "love and graciousness."

We "Elder Brothers" also struggle with entitlement. Basically, when the younger brother was welcomed back, his older brother thought: it's not fair! He's taking even more of my inheritance. And Dad, you have no right to do this. But I have rights here. The elder brother was an injustice collector. Grace wasn't in his vocabulary. This is not a fun place to be—I've been there. This type of existence is a slavish one—more like an imprisoned slave than a beloved son.

The Prodigal Son was the 1 lost sheep that left the 99. He's now back in the fold with the 99. The Elder Brother was originally with the 99. Now he's reversed roles and is the 1 lost sheep.

So the older brother is lost in the fields—there he hears music and dancing. He turns to his brother, I mean his fellow slave, I mean the slave: what's going on over there? Your brother has come home! He's safe and sound. My brother? They started the party without me? He got a fatted calf? The older brother frowns. Then he stews and then broods. And then he gets angry—miffed. Really?!! OK, well, I'm certainly not going home.

The father now went out to his second lost sheep. Pleading with him, urging his son, "Come home!" Join the party—there's plenty of fatted calf to share and enjoy! It's delicious! The elder son only gave his dad the cold shoulder. Come out of the cold, let's hit the dance floor... Kool and the Gang's playing!!!!

Father, All these years, I've slaved, I've worked like a dog for you. Never disobeyed. Did my chores. Made my bed. Washed the dishes. Got home before curfew. Did my homework. Mowed the lawn. Took out the trash. Got straight A's. Drove you to your doctor's appointments. Cleaned up the dog's poop. I'm a good kid, I'm your GOAT son—the greatest of all time! And yet. And yet, you never even gave me a goat to eat with my buddies. But this, this, this son of yours, devours our, I mean your property, blows all of his money on call girls, kegs, and catering, and you kill the fatted calf for...him!???

Come on God. We've got a deal here. I've lived a good life, and so I deserve a good life. I've carried out my end of the bargain. I've obeyed you. I've stayed. Done good work. It's your turn to deliver on yours now. You owe me God. I deserve this. I've earned this place—now give it to me. And that son of yours—he's unworthy. Undeserving. You were wrong to let him come back in.

You see, elder siblings obey... in order to get things. He didn't do good for goodness sake. Strings are attached to his giving and serving. And when things don't happen the way they're "supposed" to happen, resentment creeps in. Disappointment. Depression. But the thing is, we can't control God or manipulate God. The elder brother was rebelling against God by his strict OBEDIENCE to the law. The only party he had was a pity party. It's sad. At least the prodigal's rebellion was fun... for a season. But the elder brother is just miserable.

When we're following in the footsteps of the elder brother, we feel, well, superior, special, privileged, favored. And utterly forgotten. We feel utterly unforgiven, unhappy, and unloved too.

The Prodigal Son came to his senses. Now it was time for the Elder Brother to come to his senses. Repent. Return. And out comes the father scanning the fields For his older son. He's undeterred. 'Son, sweet child of mine, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. Don't you see? We had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'" The father was seeking to reconcile his sons, To bring them both back into the fold. To get him back home—to the home he never left.

Jesus is calling all us joyless elder brothers and sisters to joy! Together for joy! Celebration! Forgiveness! Grace! Connection.

This story is open-ended. It's a cliff-hanger. We must put ourselves into the sandals of the elder brother. Will we come home? Will we celebrate? Will we let our anger and bitterness go? Will we forgive our brother? Forgive God? Will we share our diminished inheritance with the prodigal son? Will we live as a slave or as a true brother or sister, a beloved child of God? The choice is ours. How will we end the story?

How will you end the story? What kind of new story will you begin? It's a choose your own ending story—choose your own beginning story. Who are we unhappy about that God has let in? Tax-collectors? Sinners? The other political party? A sibling that we're estranged from? Someone with

different tastes or skin color from you? Do we view God as an employer to be obeyed or a father to be loved? Will we be proud or will we be humble? Will we stay or will we go?

Remember—no matter which sibling you are, you are loved by the Father. You are not forgotten. Whether you are an only child, oldest child, middle child, or youngest child. Adopted child. Or your child is adopted. Step-child. Stepparent. Wild child. Problem child. Well-behaved child. Mild-manner child. Special-needs child. Half-brother, half-sister. You all have been invited to a party! Sometimes the fatted calf is for you, other times you share it with someone else— but all are invited to partake of the feast together. There's more than enough for seconds and thirds. Forgive, live, and join the party. Party like it's 1999 with the Prince of Peace. Don't go back into the Field of Nightmares— whether it's a field of pigs or the Father's field. Let your slights, resentments, and bitterness melt away in God's presence.

If God's inviting you, today, right now—go back home. Run to him. If you're too tired—not to worry. God says to you, "Come as far as you're able, with the strength you have. I will come to you the rest of the way. Return and I will return to you.

Christians, let's take one small step home. Immanuel, let's take one giant leap to the Father together. Towards, not against, God. Towards our brothers and sisters. Away from our selfishness.

Let us put a happy ending to the story of the Elder Brother. And begin a new beginning together, arm in arm. In fact, I think I see the Father now, off in the distance, running to us.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*The Return of the Prodigal Son*" by Rembrandt (c. 1661–1669), The Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg, Google Cultural Institute (public domain)

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