

A Tale of Two Siblings: The Younger Brother

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"The Return of the Prodigal Son" (1773) by Pompeo Batoni

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

This is a parable, a tale that tells of not just one, but two lost siblings and their loving Father. It's a drama with two acts—

Act 1: the prodigal son, and

Act 2: the elder brother

These brothers shared the same father, but they couldn't be more different. One chose the path of finding himself to attain happiness. The other chose the path of moral duty to achieve happiness.

One was about expressing himself, the other about coloring within the lines. One self-indulgent, the other self-righteous.

- The deadly sins of the prodigal son were greed, gluttony, sloth, and lust.
- The deadly sins of the elder son were pride, wrath and envy.

They had all seven deadly sins covered. In other words, both brothers are lost, both need a Father to reach out to them. And thank God, he does. But each must decide how they would respond to the Father's love.

Today, in our families of origin, in our homes, our churches, and in society, we have younger brothers and sisters and elder brothers and sisters. This is an age-old story that keeps being told and retold. It never gets old. Sometimes we play the role of a younger sibling, and other seasons of life we're more older sibling. We all have both of them inside us. But no matter who we are at any given moment, our prayer and our desire is to be fashioned and formed into the Father's likeness more and more. A spitting image. A chip off the ol' block.

This is the longest of Jesus' parables. It's a two-part parable that compares and contrasts two characters—a common story-telling technique within Jesus' stories and other stories of the day. The first part of the story is pure gospel—the lost are found, the dead raised, and sinners repent. The last part of the story is a sad story of the insider's resentment that refused the offer of the good news of grace extended to both outsider and insider alike.

So let's hear now from:

Scripture: Luke 15:1-3, 11b-24 (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. The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on

him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' And they began to celebrate.

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

SERMON – A Tale of Two Siblings: *The Younger Brother*

Well, the Super Bowl is today. The Buccaneers vs. The Chiefs. Quarterbacks Tom Brady vs. Patrick Mahomes. Strangely, the Patriots aren't in the Super Bowl, but ex-Patriot Tom Brady is in it again—his 10th Super Bowl in fact, going for his seventh ring. The Chiefs are looking to repeat with Patrick Mahomes. One quarterback is young, the other seasoned.

If Jesus' parables went into the playoffs, there would be two perennial Super Bowl contenders:

- The Good Samaritans
- The Prodigal Sons

In my estimation they're both well-matched and make for a classic and complimentary rivalry for Jesus's **G.O.A.T.** parable. (Greatest. Of. All. Time.) Which parable would you vote for? My vote is with the Prodigal Sons. But today we find brother pitted against brother.

The Younger Brother vs. The Older Brother.

The audience gives us a clue or two of who is who. The tax collectors and sinners were crowding in close to listen to Jesus. But the Pharisees and Scribes were grumbling, "this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." The religious were offended by Jesus and repulsed by his company. The irreligious were fascinated by Jesus and attracted to his teaching. One group pushed away from Jesus, the other leaned in. So this is a parable about the insiders and the outsiders. The establishment and the mavericks. The licentious and libertines. The straight-laced and conventional.

But by the end of the story—roles are switched. The outsider becomes the insider. And the insider becomes the outsider.

So, the tax collectors and sinners represent the younger brother. They are the party animals. The Bohemians. Hooligans. The Frat Boys and Sorority Girls. A motley crew. They might have even participated in a riot or two. To generalize, they weren't the cream of the crop—more the dregs of society. In other words, they were Jesus' people. Their mantras might be: If it feels good, do it. Obey your thirst. Buy now, pay later. Give me liberty or give me death. They were living life in the fast lane on their terms and in their way. They were sowing their wild oats—and it was a bumper crop—until the manure hit the fan and a famine came.

Now the Pharisees and Scribes, who we'll get to next week, represent the elder brother—the responsible firstborn. Dutiful—staying home, working hard, following traditional morality, and fitting in well with the establishment and respectable society. They weren't always joyful about it, but SOMEONE has to do it. They read their Bibles, prayed, paid their taxes, saved, didn't litter, recycled,

wore their masks, and socially distanced. They watched online worship every week—the whole service—never fast-forwarding. Exemplary citizens—voting at every election—even primaries.

Not so much the younger brother. My Father, who art on earth, give me this day my share of the family inheritance owed unto me. The father obliged and divided his estate between his sons. The younger son went straight to BOI, Bank of Israel, and cashed out his part of the inheritance stimulus check. Finally, he could escape the bird cage, the confining nest, go out on a limb, spread his wings, and soar! A sidenote here: the word “prodigal” is not actually found in the parable, but Merriam-Webster defines the word “prodigal” as “recklessly spendthrift.” The Prodigal Son wanted his father’s fortune, not the father. The father’s resources, not the relationship. Privilege, not responsibility. Freedom, not rules. Now he could finally get out of Dodge. So he ubered a donkey to a distant country and there he broke open his piggy bank and began to spend.

First thing he did was upgrade to a higher horsepower at the New Chariot Lot. No denarii down. He hosted Sabbath parties every Friday night. The wine flowed. His BBQed lambchops were legendary. Good times were had by all. And some ribaldry too. The young son took out a fifty-year loan on a McPalace downtown. Took out another loan on a luxury sailboat. Went on spending sprees amassing a closet full of Armani tunics and countless pairs of Gucci leather men’s sandals. He even got a Rolex sundial. Dave Ramsey began pulling out his hair (*he had hair then*) as he watched the inevitable train wreck about to transpire. The prodigal was not only keeping up with the Jones’s, he was leaving them in the dust.

But as my brother-in-law Dale likes to say:

*When your outgo exceeds income,
your upkeep will be your downfall.*

Well, as you can imagine, the younger brother’s lack of self-restraint and budgeting finally caught up with him. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Windfalls, like lottery winnings or inheritances, can take you only so far. Even credit cards have their limits.



“The Last Flight of Icarus” (artist unknown)

Like Icarus—the lost son had spread his wings, took flight, and his wings of wax melted when he flew too close to the sun. He, along with his assets and cash flow, took a nosedive. It was a financial

meltdown. Personally, he crashed and burned. He was drowning in debt too. The repo man took back his two chariots, four horses, three donkeys, and that dust-layered olive press—the one he just knew he would use someday. The prodigal son was, as hip hop singer Khalid phrased it, “Young, dumb, and broke.”

Then a natural disaster hit. Not a pandemic, but a severe famine. He had no emergency fund. No rainy day fund. No drought fund either. On top of that, he was hungry and hangry. Destitute and desperate. The son now hired himself out to feed pigs—an unclean animal to Jews. In fact, the Mishnah forbids Jews from rearing swine because they were so distasteful. (*I do thank God I'm a Gentile because bacon, as we all know, is a truly divine foretaste of heaven. I digress.*)

The lost and hungry son would have gladly filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one cared enough to even let him pig out on pig food. Finally, he came to his senses as he cast his pods before swine. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks: I blew it. I blew not just all my money, but it. I blew it. The young son didn't appreciate what he had until it was gone. He had only one option left: Go back home.

Have you had one of those revelations before—an aha moment? Or maybe an uh oh epiphany? This is the work of the Holy Spirit. A wake up call. A wake up and smell the coffee moment. It's that point when you reach the end of your rope, when you get fed up—sick and tired of being sick and tired. Enough! This is ridiculous!!!! Stop the insanity!

In these times we become clear-headed and finally see what everyone else has been seeing for a long time. We repent. Change our thinking. Change direction.

How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! Helloooo??!!!! I'm going back home and I'm going to eat humble pie. I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” “Home,” poet Robert Frost says, “is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

So the prodigal son in a faraway country set out on another journey—back home. A homecoming. But he was different now. The school of hard knocks taught him a thing or two. He was a different man, a different son. Chastened and changed. The son began rehearsing his talking points for his confession speech along his long walk back home:

My Father on earth, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.

While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He wasn't peeved, but was certainly moved to pity. His heart went out to his wayward son. But not just his heart. The father girded up his loins and hoofed it—hightailing it to his lost son. Then he embraced him and kissed him. (Sidenote: *All kinds of social distancing taboos were broken. But not to worry, it was a famine, not a pandemic—so we can cut them slack.*) To the son's surprise, his dad wasn't listening to his monologue. He was motioning to the servant, not the son. Maybe, just maybe, the son could also be a servant. Maybe.

'Go Quickly, fetch a robe—not just any robe in the closet—the best one—the Brooks Brothers one? Yes, that one and put it on my formerly lost son; put a Tiffany ring on his finger and Birkenstock sandals on his feet. Get the fatted Black Angus calf and kill it—we're going to have ourselves a feast and celebrate; *"for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!"* (The song "YMCA" begins to play in the foreground as the village people flood the dance floor.)

And thus ends Part 1 of the Tale of Two Siblings.

And so we must ask ourselves: What kind of God do we have? A prodigal-hugging God? God is eager to receive back those who have wandered far from home. Are we? Jesus' story challenges us with profound questions that make us scratch our head and our heart—individually and collectively as a church. What is our attitude toward all the younger siblings out there? Do we resent them? Want them barred from the family? Cut off? Or do we forgive them? Welcome them back into the fold? Do we run to them and celebrate them, kiss and make up? Are we willing to lose even more of our inheritance?

Jesus has questions for all the younger brothers and sisters out there: Are you willing to swallow your pride and return for a spiritual homecoming? A family reunion? Who do you need to seek reconciliation with? Is there a family member you're estranged from? Is it time to call that sibling you haven't talked to for years or even decades? Is there some fence-mending you need to do over political divides with family? Apologize to mom or dad? Or maybe forgive your mom or dad?

To put it in Bible terms: What do you need to repent of? Do you need to return to your senses about something? Make amends? Start down the road of recovery with an addiction in your life? Are your spending habits out of control? Can you live life beyond yourself? Take some responsibility in your life? Forgive yourself?

There are questions for those of us who are elder siblings:

- Will you forgive your irresponsible brother or sister?
- Do we go inside and join the party? Or do we stay outside in the cold with, not the family, but the servants, and throw a hissy fit instead? A pity party?
- Will we decide to live like a servant, or a son or daughter?
- Have you lost your joy? Where did it go?
- Will we be the life of the party? Or a wet blanket?
- Do we lean in and listen to Jesus?
- Hang out with his rough around the edges friends? Or do we walk away in disgust with his bad company?

What kind of Christian are we? What kind of church are we? Are our literal and virtual church doors and church arms flown open wide to receive prodigals? Or are they shut tight and locked up in a fist? Would any prodigals and young sons ever want to darken the doors of our Church or YouTube channel? Do we throw a party or rain on the prodigal's parade?

Let us follow the compassionate Father's lead and embrace the gospel and the prodigal and say, "All is forgiven!" Throw some meat on the grill—it's time to celebrate! This is at the very heart of the gospel. Good news. A heavenly banquet here below.

I like how Tim Keller put it: "The gospel is not just the ABCs of the Christian life, the gospel is the A to Z of the Christian Life."

So tune in next week for more about the other sibling—The Elder Brother.

Amen.

Sermon Art:

"The Return of the Prodigal Son" by Pompeo Batoni, Public domain, Wikimedia Commons

"The Last Flight of Icarus" (artist unknown)

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