

## Luke 15:11-32

Then he said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

<sup>12-16</sup> “So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

<sup>17-20</sup> “That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’ He got right up and went home to his father.

<sup>20-21</sup> “When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

<sup>22-24</sup> “But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

<sup>25-27</sup> “All this time his older son was out in the field. When the day’s work was done he came in. As he approached the house, he heard the music and dancing. Calling over one of the houseboys, he asked what was going on. He told him, ‘Your brother came home. Your father has ordered a feast—barbecued beef!—because he has him home safe and sound.’

<sup>28-30</sup> “The older brother stalked off in an angry sulk and refused to join in. His father came out and tried to talk to him, but he wouldn’t listen. The son said, ‘Look how many years I’ve stayed here serving you, never giving you one moment of grief, but have you ever thrown a party for me and my friends? Then this son of yours who has thrown away your money on whores shows up and you go all out with a feast!’

<sup>31-32</sup> “His father said, ‘Son, you don’t understand. You’re with me all the time, and everything that is mine is yours—but this is a wonderful time, and we had to celebrate. This brother of yours was dead, and he’s alive! He was lost, and he’s found!’”

### **Sibling Rivalry**

This parable that Jesus tells – and such a wonderful parable it is! – got me thinking about my brother, Jon. I spoke to Jon a few days ago. We enjoy chatting – even texting – about movies and politics and books and the past. We're four years apart, which doesn't matter much now, but it seemed like an eternity when I was an adolescent. You see, my brother went off to a boarding school when he was 15...and I was 11, so I only saw him on weekends, and as he got older and made more friends at his school he came home less and less frequently. And he worked during the summer, so our relationship grew more distant as we grew older. He ended up going off to college right after graduating high school, so our visits grew fewer and further between.

But I idolized my brother. He was the valedictorian of his high school class and ended up going to Harvard University. I was not the best and the brightest student in high school, so I would end up going off to a state university. He would graduate magna cum laude; I was lucky to graduate.

But while I was in college, my brother was surprising everyone on his road to self-discovery. He didn't pursue a high-paying job in a white-collar profession; he headed off to California where he worked as a cab driver, and a roofer, and eventually ended up in Alaska working on the oil pipeline and then as a carpenter. You see, my brother had always enjoyed working with his hands, and after earning a college degree he went off to pursue the kind of work that he enjoyed, and he's been doing it ever since.

And I'm kind of glad he has, because I felt like I was competing with my brother, and if he had made a great name for himself I would have gone crazy trying to achieve something great. But because he was off in Alaska doing carpentry the pressure was off me; I don't know if my brother's decisions were made in consideration of his competitive younger brother, but I am sure happy that he didn't pursue fame and fortune.

And I'm sure glad that my father did not have a business that he wanted my brother and me to inherit. My father died penniless – in fact he probably owed people some money. He was a bit of a dreamer, and not a very practical person. But one thing I am very grateful to my father for was that he never tried to steer us into a profession. He didn't pressure my brother to become a lawyer though he certainly could have and would have made a good lawyer. He never steered me into teaching or business. And he didn't have a family business that he expected any of his children to acquire. In fact he urged us in college to study whatever we enjoyed studying regardless of what the job prospects would be when we graduated. The point is that he accepted us for who we were wherever we were in our lives. And for that I am eternally grateful. He was a free spirit, and he encouraged his children to be free spirited, and because of that we were never rivals, as so many children are.

The Bible is full of stories of sibling rivals. There's Cain and Abel. There's Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers to name a few. And then there are these brothers in this parable that I like to call the Parable of the Prodigal Father, because I think that's where our focus should be – on the Father who does all in his power to bring peace of mind to his children. He is so much like God, and we should take note of how he approaches his children so that we might get an idea of how we should deal with not only our children but with people in general.

We begin with the unsatisfied son, the one who just wants to break away from it all, who challenges that status quo. He doesn't want to work on the farm, and so he asks Dad to give him his inheritance early. **And get this; the father complies!** He doesn't lecture his son or deny his son; instead he gives his son what he wants so that he can go and enjoy himself. And who can't relate to this son's desires. We are attracted to the high life, the fast lane, the club scene, especially during youth. And God allows us to check it all out, to indulge in it if we so desire. But once we do, whether we end up like the younger son, broke and hungry, or whether we just grow disillusioned with life spent pursuing physical pleasure, we usually end up returning to the Father who welcomes us back without judging us, without chastising us or shaming us. He just welcomes us back.

And to the son who never went out to explore the wild world, the Father reaches out and tries to help this son see this bond of brotherhood – you see the real prodigal son is not the one who went away and blew his inheritance; it's the one who stayed but nonetheless felt cheated when his father threw a party for his younger sibling.

My father passed away in 2012. Having been a father for 24 years I reflect on the challenges. The love.

Note how many dysfunctional relationships in the Bible between parent and child:

Jacob and Essau

Joseph and his brothers

David and Solomon (who kills his brother)

It always bothered me that God looked upon Abel's offerings more approvingly than he did Cain's.