

# The Other Brother

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Luke 15: 11-32

Fourth Sunday Of Lent

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Our lesson today is a very familiar parable, one, if not *the* most well known parable in the whole Bible. Who hasn't made reference to the *Prodigal Son* in one manner or another before? However, as we look deeper into this parable, we will discover we can learn a lesson from all the characters in this parable, and not just the prodigal son, whom most of us seem to relate to when we read this passage.

Let me retell this parable to you in a nutshell: This is a story of a father and his two sons. The younger son asks his father for his share of his inheritance. The father divides his inheritance between his two sons and the younger boy leaves home.

Well he spends all the money on loose living, shall we say, and then a famine comes to the land. He found a job sloping pigs for a pig farmer –which tells you how desperate the boy was because any good Jew knows that pigs are filthy animals, not fit for eating, let alone tending to. The boy is so hungry he says to himself he would eat the corncobs given to the pigs if he could, but no one gave him anything.

Well, the hunger finally gets to him and he comes to his senses, realizing that even the servants in his father's house get three meals a day and a place to live. He decides he will go back home. He says, "I'll tell my father that I have sinned against heaven and against you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. I'll ask him if I can come back as a hired hand and work for him."

So the son set off for his father's house. Well, while he was still a ways off, his father spotted him on the road. The father started running toward him—which was a huge cultural faux pas! Grown men, heads of households just never lowered themselves to running! That was something a woman might do, but never a dignified man. The father embraced his son and welcomed him back home as the son tried to blurt out the confession he had worked so hard to come up with.

Well, the father just ignored the confession and instead called his slaves to kill the fatted calf, bring a fine robe, and the family ring. "Let's celebrate," the father said, "for once this son of mine was dead, but now he lives, he was lost, but now he is found!" So the party started.

Well, the older brother, all this time, was working out in the field. As he started home for the day, he heard music and asked a servant what was going on. The servant told him, and that ole green eyed monster flared up! He was really angry! I can just picture him standing there with his arms folded across his chest, nostrils flaring and a huffing and a puffing!

The father came out and pleaded with his son to come into the party. "Come on, son—don't be that way—we're having a party! I know I have pleaded with all my kids at one time or another like that when they had gotten their feathers ruffled and were pouting about life not being fair.

Well, the son would have none of it, and he begins his little tirade: “I work all the time for you, I do exactly what I am supposed to do and never cross you or go against your will, and you have never thrown a party for me! You haven’t even given me an old goat for a feast, let alone a fatted calf. No fair!” And there is something in each of us, that can probably relate to this other brother, in one way or another, isn’t there?

“Please try to understand,” the father says, “You are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” “Notice that the younger brother will get no more. His future will depend on the good grace of the older brother.”<sup>i</sup> It is right to celebrate, though, because your brother was dead and now has come to life, he was lost and has been found.”

And so ends the parable, and the older son, the other brother, may or may not have ever caught on to what his father was telling him—he may or may not have attended the party.

For us, there is not too much remarkable about a son wanting to leave his father and mother’s house and strike out on his own. In fact, that is something we usually encourage in our families today. That was not the case, though in this ancient Middle Eastern culture.

This world in which the prodigal son and his family lived were largely agrarian. Chances are 9 out of 10 listeners who heard this story, were rural farmers—not unlike many who are here today. Their land was their livelihood, and it was also their ancestry. The land had probably been passed down through the generations. I know that is the case with some of you here today as well.

One thing that was different, though, was that there were no courts—no legal documents stating who owned what land. The claims to the land were held in the memories of those in the community, and if you broke relationship with the community, you were losing more than just your family and friends; you were losing your claim to the land and your livelihood. This story is all about breaking relationships and mending them.

Another thing about Jesus’ Middle Eastern world was the sense of patriarchy that was present. There are remnants remaining in some cultures still today, but nothing like was present during this period. The patriarch of the family held a very high place of honor and respect not only in his own family, but in the community as well.

So, all in all, I guess what I am saying, is that regular customs, the norms of this culture are pretty much tossed out the window in this parable. This is one of the things that would make this such a shocking story for Jesus’ listeners to hear. Keep that in mind as you think about how it seems normal for a son to leave his father’s house and set off on his own. It was not normal.

And what about the other brother? So many times, interpretations of this parable focus on the *prodigal* son—the son who was recklessly wasteful with his inheritance—and the father’s unconditional love of him when he returns. That is all well and good, but I often wonder about the lesser characters in a story and what is their significance?

I think there must’ve been some trouble in the older brother’s soul, too. Why would he doubt his father’s love for him? That is basically what he is saying when he is whining to his

father about all his father is doing for the younger brother. Why do you love him more than you love me?

Maybe the older brother's faithful life, his love for his father, had become a duty or a chore to him, something that no longer held any joy. Fred Craddock said, "There is a condition worse than death, and that is to be lost. There is something better than life, and that is to be found."<sup>ii</sup> The older brother was lost, even though he was still at home. He was lost in his resentment of his younger brother.

Yes, the younger brother was lost, too, but his was a flashier kind of being lost. He lost himself on wine and women, lust, greed, and riotous living. Resentment, though, is not so overt, not so showy. Resentment can be covered by the appearance of a holy life—a life of faithfulness.

Are there any here today feeling a bit lost? Is there resentment in your life that you are holding on to? Has the joy slipped out of your faith or are you here today out of duty? Do you think you must act, do, think, and speak a certain way for our Father to love you?

Most folks, when studying this parable, tend to label the brothers or sons as the good son who stayed home and honored his father and the bad son, or the prodigal son. Well, I think it's time to put away the good son/bad son thinking, because we ALL wander away from God at times. We are all lost at times in our lives, whether it is to wild living or being lost to God even as we sit right here in worship.

God is ready to rescue us from wherever we may have wandered. God has prepared a feast, "and won't be satisfied till every child has come safely home."<sup>iii</sup> Meanwhile, the party is going on inside. The fatted calf has been killed, the music is playing and the Father is waiting. . . The Father will run to meet us as we make our way back home, but it's up to us whether we want to join the party or not.

Let us pray:

Loving Father to us all, as we wander in and out of being lost in our lives, we give you thanks that you are a constant; that you will always be there to welcome us home. Guide us, lead us, and free us to joyfully love you. Amen.

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#### NOTES

<sup>i</sup> Robert Gnuse, *That'll Preach!* March 14, 2010, Theological Themes.

<sup>ii</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990). 187.

<sup>iii</sup> Mary Harris Todd, *A House of Joy*. "Preaching the Lesson," March 14, 2010.

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