

THE SECOND GREATEST LOVE STORY EVER TOLD

The Older Son

Luke 15:11-32

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-older-son/>

One of oldest themes in family conflict is this one: “My parents favored you! You had it easy! Let you get by with murder! They always liked you best.” Every Christmas, for as long as I can remember, my dad would remind us kinds that they spent the same amount of money on each of us. Someone has commented that the moment Jesus utters the words, “A man had two sons...” we know we’re in for a tension-filled story. Jesus’ Jewish audience would immediately recall Cain and Abel; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and jealous brothers.

In some ways, the two sons were similar. To be honest, they both were incredibly selfish. They were in the relationship with the father for what they could get out of him. They loved the father for what he could give them, not for his own sake. And in their selfishness, they both shamed their father, the younger via the scandal of running away, the older by throwing the fit. Think about this. The older son’s refusal to come inside to the party is as much a slap to father’s honor as was the rebellious son’s; a father not to be seen publicly begging; an embarrassment and shaming to family.

But the older son stands out as an example of people trying to work their way into a relationship with God. Respectable people, upstanding citizens (see vv. 1-2), like the older son, who don’t do those nasty sins, who stay home and work hard, all to earn God’s love (as if it needs to be earned or could be). But deep inside, our hearts are as dark as younger sons who go away into a far country. And we see in the older son that a works-righteousness always produces a self-righteousness. The older son declares, “I deserve to be consulted about whom you let back in the family! I have my rights!” [*The Prodigal God* by Timothy Keller, p. 31].

I’ve been compiling a list of “older son behavior” and I’m afraid it looks a lot like me...and maybe, you. Judgmental of others, hyper-critical, yet very sensitive and touchy when criticized by others; obsessed with outward appearances; very scrupulous, keeping lots of rules (unsure of God’s love); guilt-ridden and driven by shoulds and oughts; a people pleaser; busy and hard working, doing lots of good things; insecure/low self-esteem (overcompensates by bragging); feels smugly superior (“this son of yours”), morally, racially, ethnically; competitive to the max—has to win, get the last word; controlling of others; jealous, unforgiving, grudge-holding, keeps score.

Older brother behavior is also angry and joyless. I want to ask you the older son, “What are you so angry about?” You can feel resentment oozing off the pages of your Bible. Where is the joy? We like to serve, but we reserve the right to complain about how hard it is and difficult people can be. Remember the older son says, “I have worked like a slave,” v. 29...well, it probably did feel like slavery if there was no joy and his heart wasn’t in it.

Seriously, if the church is full of older brothers like this, how many younger brothers who've been in a far country are going to want to come home?

Rembrandt's famous painting, "The Return of the Prodigal Son," brings all of this into focus. We see the older son, hands folded or clenched. Oddly, the younger son and the father are not in the center of the painting; they are on the left side. The older son is on the right. Nouwen notes there is a great gap between the two brothers. A chasm of darkness. The older son is keeping his distance. He might catch something!

Over the centuries, people have noted the way the father's cape makes a great dome or cathedral, hovering over the young, returning son, enveloping him in love. And the older son is outside that dome. Perhaps this is Jesus' central truth for us. What if we are the ones missing the Kingdom? Do you remember what the father said about the younger son? "This my son was dead but is alive; he was lost but is found." Perhaps God sees our cold, brittle hearts and says, "This my son was alive but is now dead; he was found but now is lost." God is calling us to come home from the far country of pride, anger and resentment, to love and joy.