

# A Tale of Two Brothers

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**T**he Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." Then Jesus told them this parable: . . . "There was a man who had two sons. . . ." (Luke 15:2, 3, 11-32, NIV)

Two groups of people, with opposite perspectives, had crowded around Jesus—the notorious sinner seeking forgiveness and hope, and the self-righteous religious leaders looking for another opportunity to discredit Him. Through three memorable stories Jesus told on that occasion—those of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—He illustrated God's plan for their rescue. As we come to the last parable, we cannot avoid identifying with one of the characters of this moving drama.

The two brothers who appear in this story not only symbolize the two groups that were intently listening to Jesus; they also illuminate our own predicament and individual response to God's overtures. The contrast is clear; the prodigal son—representing the repentant sinners—ends up enjoying the "welcome home" party thrown by the father, while the older son—the critical religious leaders—is conspicuously absent from the joyous feast.

However, Jesus concludes His story abruptly, just as the celebration is beginning. The dialogue between the father and his critical son freezes in time, and we are left wondering about its denouement. How long will the father continue pleading with the older son, arguing in favor of forgiveness? Will the older brother ultimately refuse his father's invitation? This story is the human drama reduced to its basic components—God's persist-

ing love pleading with humanity's self-sufficiency and rancor. The outcome, with its eschatological implications, hinges on the decision of the individual's will, on an invitation gracefully accepted.

The story also expresses the tension between communication and lack of communication. We hear the younger son asking his father for his share of the estate, wasting it in superficial social relationships, speaking to the pigs' owner, talking to himself, and then confessing his sins as finally, he returns home. We also hear the older brother asking one of the servants what is going on as he comes from the field, and then angrily arguing with his father, accusing him of blatant favoritism. We see the forces that favor communication, forgiveness, and harmony struggling to overcome the stubborn resistance of resentment and envy. How will the drama play out?

Jesus told this unforgettable story of complex human relationships to emphasize the role of divine grace, the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. It's a story of estrangement and homecoming, of sadness and joy, of formal obedience and sincere repentance. The language is simple and direct, the circumstances are familiar and true-to-life. But under the homespun story on the surface we find subtle social and spiritual nuances. And we see ourselves depicted in the parable.

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### Profile of the Pharisee

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With deft strokes, the Master sketches the psychological profile of the older brother. What are the mental processes, what is the emotional make-up, the cherished

dreams and deepest anxieties of this apparently faithful and obedient son?

It is clear that he has considered leaving his father's home. Perhaps this thought has occurred more frequently since his younger brother's departure, in order to satisfy his repressed passions through partaking in the pleasures of the outside world. This type of emotional mimicry is common among siblings. The difference here is that the older brother never got up the courage to face his father, demand his inheritance, leave the security of home, and run the risks of adventure.

The older brother had easy access to his share of the estate. He could also have left, following the steps of his younger sibling. Why didn't he? Was it loyalty, obedience, or fear? His angry words prove that he was uncomfortable there: "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders" (verse 29). Had he repressed the bitter feelings that imprisoned him in his own emotional jail? What mysterious chains bound him to the paternal home? Did they include cowardice? He had not remained there because he valued its blessings. More likely, he stayed because of inertia, inability to break the rules of tradition, or "fear of freedom" as Erich Fromm would call it.

Psychologists have described this phenomenon which freezes emotional development at the adolescent stage. It creates a fixation on the past and concurrent spiritual paralysis. The condition causes deep frustration. Individuals handle it in different ways. Some seek to drown it in drugs, alcohol, or continuous so-

cial activities and superficial relationships. Others choose the distraction of endless work. The younger brother chose the first forms of escape, while the older chose the latter. He had struggled to keep a lid on his secret desires, attempting through hard work to justify himself before his father and his own conscience.

Why do some people choose this approach? Perhaps because they convince themselves that they are living the right type of life, that they are acting properly and being righteous. Since this behavior requires considerable effort, they expect to receive recognition and praise for their exemplary conduct—a social medallion of merit. When they fail to receive such recognition, the whole facade crumbles. It is then that the forced propriety and the false religiosity give way to open resentment and bitterness. The selfish heart, struggling for its own salvation, now reveals its sheer nakedness.

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### Parents and Children

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Alfred Adler, founder of the school of individual psychology, has skillfully analyzed the role of each child in the family structure, according to birth order. He observes that the eldest child usually enjoys the concentrated attention of the family. This privileged position comes to a painful end when another child is born. Now the parents' attention must be shared. The younger sibling thus emerges as a potential and, frequently, actual rival.

Adler notes that when this "dethronement" takes place after the older child is at least three years old, the child has already begun to establish his own life-style and can verbally express his feelings of loss and displeasure. When the sibling rival appears before that age, the process takes place at a deeper, prelinguistic level. Observing the social dynamics implied in the parable, we can speculate that the former was the case of the two brothers.

Throughout his life, the older child tends to maintain a fond memory of the past, for a time when he was the center of attention. The role of authority and the maintenance of rules has a special attraction to him. These early influences prompt many first children to lean toward conservative positions.

Adler remarks that all the children can be "dethroned" except the youngest. He or she will always be the last in the sequence, but usually the first in the affections of the family. This child benefits from the psychological and intellectual stimulation provided by the older brothers and sisters, and frequently overtakes them in development. (It is interesting to reflect on the psychological make-up of biblical characters such as Abel and David, who seem to fit this pattern.)

The youngest child is, after the oldest, the most likely to be spoiled. He always wants to be special and unique. At times he suffers from feelings of inferiority, because everyone else in the family is older, stronger, and more experienced.

Jesus' story includes a third character—the father. Throughout the drama he is the one who attempts to help his two sons grow emotionally and spiritually. He reasons with them, forgives them, and seeks to bring them to a harmonious relationship both with him and with each other. Intuitively sensing their struggles, the father seeks to rescue them from their dark emotional prisons and guide them toward a mature and fulfilled life.

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### An Open-Ended Story

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The parable, as we know it, remains unfinished. Why? Is it because the older son must give the final answer? Or because the story also requires our response?

It is true that the Bible—and especially the Gospels—cannot be read as if it were any other book. Its inspired content has not been

given to us for mere information or entertainment. God speaks personally to each of us in His Word. His message requires an attentive and responsive heart. Jesus' telling of the story requires us to assume a role in it.

In depicting this human drama, Jesus reduced its characters to the barest minimum—a father and two sons. But after observing the size of most biblical families, it is possible to imagine the presence of two more children between the oldest and the youngest in this family.

One of them could be the son or daughter who leaves the paternal home, never to return. Unfortunately, some of God's children do plunge into the madness of the world and succumb to its fatal embrace. Another could be the ideal child, the one who always remains with the father, working happily at home, enjoying his companionship and eventually establishing his own home there. He is the one who rejects the empty temptations of the world, the one who suffers deeply when his brother leaves home, prays for his return, and joyfully helps prepare the welcoming party. Most of us, however, fit more naturally in the role of one of the two sons depicted in Jesus' memorable story. With which character do you identify?

Literary critics classify most dramatic creations as either comedies or tragedies. The former have a happy ending; the latter end in calamity. How would we categorize this human drama? Jesus' story does not fit neatly into any of these categories because its ending is still being written. You and I are the authors of the final lines. The decisions we make today in response to God's overtures will determine its ultimate conclusion.

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