



Sibling Rivalry in God's Family

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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Introduction:

Genesis 37 contains one of the saddest stories ever. Jacob had a favorite son, Joseph. Joseph received a special coat and special dreams, all of which angered his brothers. Eventually, in their anger, they sold him as a slave. While I know this sad event paved the way for Israel's perpetuation, I can't help but notice the sibling rivalry. Sibling rivalry is found throughout the Bible: Cain and Abel (**Genesis 4:1-16**), Isaac and Ishmael (**Genesis 21:9**), Jacob and Esau (**Genesis 25, 27**), Rachel and Leah (**Genesis 29:31-30:23**), David and Eliab (**I Samuel 17:28-30**), Moses and Aaron and Miriam (**Numbers 12:1-16**). But sadder still is the rivalry of spiritual brothers and sisters in Christ. We see that happen in **Mark 10:35-41** as James and John requested special treatment and the other apostles became indignant. We also see the 12 spoiling their final Passover with Jesus by disputing their greatness (**Luke 22:24**). This can also happen among sisters, as seen in **Philippians 4:2-3** when Euodia and Syntyche were having some struggle.

And no doubt, this same thing will happen today among brothers and sisters. We all sin. We're going to get in each other's ways and step on each other's toes sometimes. Sibling rivalry is going to happen. What can we do about it? We'll look at this in three ways. First, let's see how sibling rivalry manifests itself, then what is really at the heart of sibling rivalry, and wrap up with how we can overcome these feelings in ourselves. While we can look at numerous examples of sibling rivalry, I think a great place to actually examine this is the Parable of the Prodigal in **Luke 15:11-32**. We see that especially in **Luke 15:25-32** as we witness the older brother's reaction to the return of the prodigal.

Discussion:

I. How does sibling rivalry manifest itself?

- A. *Resentment*—The first manifestation of the sibling rivalry is the older brother's anger in **Luke 15:28**. Siblings can be annoying and frustrating. And if we are not careful, we can carry this frustration with us and have this underlying resentment whenever we are around or hear about the brother or sister who is bothering us. This can often cause us to overreact when irritants come up causing scenes and blowing up. This can also be seen in holding grudges. Yes, they apologized or we worked through it, but we still live in resentment. This is sibling rivalry.
- B. *Stubbornness*—In **Luke 15:28**, we also see stubbornness. The older brother refused to go in, but waited until his father came out. Then he argued instead of listening. When sibling rivalry has its hold, rather than taking the first step to deal with it, siblings stubbornly wait for everyone else to do something about it. The elders need to take care of it. The rival needs to come ask for forgiveness. Someone else needs to take care of this. Not me.
- C. *Comparison*—In **Luke 15:29-30**, the older brother wanted the father to compare the brothers. He always did what was commanded. He was the standard. Sibling rivalry often manifests itself in the protestations of how responsible, submissive, and perfect we are in comparison to our rivals. There are two sides: the "I'm so good" side and the "They're so bad" side. In sibling rivalry, you may hear, "I know I have my issues, but at least I'm not like so and so who does such and such." Or "I'm not perfect, but it bugs me when so and so does this or that."
- D. *Demands*—The comparison often leads to demands, usually surrounding fairness. Isn't that the older brother's plea? "It's not fair. I want fairness." It would be fair if this younger brother was punished. It would be fair if he at least had to grovel for forgiveness and be held at arm's length until he proved himself. It would be fair if he had to live merely as a servant until he proved that he could be as good as the older brother. Sibling rivalry often manifests itself with statements like, "Sure, I'll be happy to have a relationship with so and so as long as they meet this demand and that demand of mine." Why does this happen? Because then we'll be satisfied that it has been fair.
- E. *Punishment*—Notice what the older brother complains about in **Luke 15:29-30**. The younger brother wasted his inheritance on sinful living, but he returns home and gets a celebration. What does the older brother want? He wants punishment. One of the biggest issues in sibling rivalry is the desire for the sibling who messed up to be punished. The older brother was so afraid that the younger brother was going to get away with something. That just shouldn't happen. If no one else will punish the brother or sister who messed up, we'll do our best to get it done. That may come through the way we treat them or it may come through talking to others about them so that others will know how bad the brother or sister really is and therefore won't like them either.

II. What is at the heart of sibling rivalry?

- A. Sibling rivalry may come about based on numerous surface issues. Someone hurt us or someone we love, perhaps deeply. Someone committed a sin and no one said anything about it. Someone betrayed us. Someone mishandled

a situation or messed up something we were working on. Someone embarrassed us or made us look bad. Things happen. **Romans 3:23** says we all sin. If we are going to look for something, we will find good reasons to be rivals. We can sit in our own stubborn justification because we know someone else sinned. And so we spend our time in stubborn resentment while comparing, demanding, and punishing our rivals. But these are just symptoms of a greater heart struggle. What is at the heart of all sibling rivalry?

- B. Look again at **Luke 15:29-30**. What was the older brother really crying out for? Listen to what he says. “I’ve always served you and you haven’t noticed me. I always obeyed and you haven’t thrown a party for me. But this guy treats you like dirt and you throw a party for him.” Do you see what the real plea here is? “Father, notice me. Reward me. Approve of me. Accept me. Love me. Not him.” This is the heart of all sibling rivalry. *It is the battle among brothers and sisters to win the love, acceptance, and approval of their parents.* All of those manifestations are merely symptoms of this heart struggle, trying to prove we ought to be loved, accepted, and approved. Sadly, we tend to think there is room for only one to be really loved, accepted, and approved. Therefore, we have to prove ourselves as more worthy of love, and rivalry is born.
- C. Among spiritual siblings, the struggle is winning the love, acceptance, and approval of God, the Father. It was the same struggle Cain and Abel had in **Genesis 4:1-8**. Cain desperately wanted acceptance. But instead of living by faith as God said, he felt the best way to be accepted was get rid of the one who was in the way of his acceptance.

III. How do we respond to sibling rivalry?

- A. *Start with yourself*—Notice the older brother’s self-deception in **Luke 15:29**. “I never disobeyed your command” (ESV). Is that true? Of course not. No one obeys perfectly. Everyone messes up. But because of this older brother’s rivalry, he had a big log in his eye. There was no way he could be helpful to the younger brother because he couldn’t see clearly (**Matthew 7:3-5**). The problem is sibling rivals rarely know they can’t see clearly. They think they are the only ones who do. That is why this is so important. Before declaring everyone else’s involvement in the problem, start looking at your own. Sadly, all too often, this kind of rivalry comes from an attempt to make sure someone else gets blamed for something so our own involvement won’t keep our Father from loving us. Quit looking around at everyone else and start cleaning up your own side of the street.
- B. *Recognize the Father loves you*—I think the saddest part of this whole story is **Luke 15:31**. The father said, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours” (ESV). He didn’t say “All that is mine will be yours.” He’s not talking about a future inheritance. The father never gave him a young goat because the young goats all belonged to the son already. If the son had wanted to celebrate with his friends, he could have. The older brother didn’t recognize what sonship meant. He didn’t know his father loved him. He was too busy trying to earn that love by being better than the younger brother. Don’t ever forget **Romans 5:6-8**. God loves you so much He sent Jesus to die for you. This isn’t a competition. You don’t have to be better than your siblings to have God’s love. You don’t have to pin the blame on others so God will love you. God loved you even when He knew exactly what sinning you had done. You don’t have to prove you are less of a sinner than anyone else. There is nothing you can do today to make God love you anymore, and there is nothing you can do today to make God love you any less.
- C. *Celebrate with your brothers and sisters*—The older brother could not celebrate that the father loved the younger brother too. Look around you this morning. Who are you looking at? You’re looking at people who have lied, lusted, cheated, stolen, hurt people, betrayed people, committed fornication and adultery, looked at pornography, coveted, and committed some of the most awful and heinous sins in the world. Some of them have done things you haven’t even imagined. And you’ve done some things some of them haven’t even imagined. Do you know what is universal? **Romans 5:6-8** applies to them too. Don’t think that means somehow the Father doesn’t love you. He does. Spend some time celebrating with your brothers and sisters that God loves them just like He does you. Don’t view His love of them as a reason to be angry with them. View it as a reason to rejoice with them.
- D. *Gently approach your brothers and sisters*—In **Luke 15:28**, the older brother believed he had reason to be angry. But instead of going to his brother or father, he sat outside pouting. There are times when our siblings have done wrong. There is time when we need to talk to them. The older brother should have gone in instead of waiting around for someone to come to him. Whether your brother or sister has something against you (**Matthew 5:23-24**) or you have something against them (**Matthew 18:15**), you need to talk to them. But do so with gentleness (**Galatians 6:1**), not in an attempt to put him/her in their place, prove them worse or you better, or show you deserve the Father’s love more. Do so because you know the Father loves both of you and wants both of you to have the Father/child relationship. Do so because you want to celebrate with them when they are won by the Lord.

Conclusion:

Sibling rivalry will always rear its head among us. We’re flawed people, growing in the Lord. We are going to make mistakes, hurting and slighting each other. That is not permission to go about recklessly; it is simply recognition that it will happen. But when it does happen, let’s respond appropriately and get back to sibling unity. That is what God wants.