

Apr 15, 2017

## Luke 15:11-32

### Conflict & Peacemaking: A Family in Conflict

*Jonathan M. Romig*  
[CornerstoneWestford.com](http://CornerstoneWestford.com)

Who here has experienced conflict? Who here has experienced conflict in your family? Who here has experienced conflict because of the youngest child in your family? I'm raising my hand because I'm the youngest child in my family.

This week Facebook reminded me to celebrate national sibling day. To commemorate this special holiday I shared this picture of my family on Facebook. It's a picture of my three older brothers, my parents, and me. Now I love each of my brothers, but growing up my older brother Matthew and I loved each other with a special kind of love. We had a love that constantly told each other, "you can do better," a love that took every opportunity to teach the other brother humility and patience, a love so deep nobody knew it was there.

A typical interaction between Matthew and me could go a little bit like this. Imagine we're eating breakfast and I say, "I'm going to eat all of the cinnamon rolls." My brother would say something like, "If you do that, you'll get fat." And so I would take not one but two cinnamon rolls. He would then try to remove the extra cinnamon roll and I would immediately appeal to a hire court, mom and dad, who would end our argument by offering to remove our cinnamon rolls. Matthew and I were truly committed to each other's holiness.

There will always be conflict in families, whether between a husband and wife, between children and parents, or between siblings. In our new series starting this week, **Conflict & Peacemaking**, we are going to look at conflict, learn how the Bible teaches peacemaking, and apply what we learn to our lives.

What better way to start this series than with the story Jesus gave us called The Prodigal Son? It is the story of two brothers and a father in conflict. It's a parable. A **parable** is "a simple story used to illustrate profound truth." In this parable we're called to contrast the younger brother and the older brother, and how each play a part in the conflict. Let's begin by looking at the younger brother's role.

### **The Younger Brother: The one in the wrong. (Luke 15:11-24)**

Jesus begins the story by telling us the youngest brother came to his father and said, "Father, give me my share of the estate." (v. 1) Now in the **ancient near eastern culture**, such a request was outrageous. You don't ask your dad to give you his property before his death. It's like saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead!"

I don't think I ever told my parents I wished they were dead. When I was **sixteen**, I told my dad something like, "My girlfriend knows me better than you." We'd been dating two months and we broke up a few weeks later. This week I watched a message on this story by pastor and author **Timothy Keller** called [The Prodigal God](#). One of the points he makes is that the word for "property" (v.12) is the Greek word **bios** (βίος), which means life. The father has to divide his very life and livelihood to pay for the demands of the youngest son.

Jesus' original audience would have expected the father to slap his son or even disown him, but instead he does something surprising. He sells a third of his property, he tears his life apart, and he gives a portion to the youngest. The other two thirds, a **double portion**, belonged to the oldest brother (Deut 21:17). Right from the beginning of this parable Jesus wants his audience and us to recognize this son's sin.

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

## His sin is obvious.

*The younger brother's role in the conflict is obvious.* He is the instigator, the offender, the perpetrator, the sinner who breaks the family apart. He's the careless brother who is always getting into trouble. He's like that **family member** who has a problem with alcohol, or drugs, and just when you think you can trust him, he asks you for money. He's like that family member who can't control her tongue, and uses every family gathering as an opportunity to criticize, put down, and wound. He's the problem child.

What does he do when he gets the money? He leaves town, travels far away, and wastes all of his money on **parties** and moochers. You would never see him on Shark Tank because he's in Vegas. But two disasters strike. He runs out of money, and famine hits the land, and that's when his friends disappear, and he's left alone. He finds himself in such poverty that he has to work with pigs. He's Jewish. They're unclean. They're smelly, dirty, and symbolize sin. If that's not bad enough, his boss won't even let him eat the pig's food.

His sin is obvious. He's literally covered in it. He's wallowing in it. He smells of sin and it smells bad. He has gotten what he deserves. He has reaped what he sowed. In most parables, this is where the story ends. "See kids, don't hurt your family because you'll lose them." The parable should end like **The Boy Who Cried Wolf**, one of Aesop's Fables. A boy tricks the local villagers into thinking a wolf is attacking his sheep, and when a wolf does actually attack, they won't come to his rescue because they think he's just joking. But the story Jesus is telling is different. It doesn't end this way because something changes in the youngest.

## He recognizes his sin and repents.

*When the youngest is at his lowest, God gets ahold of his heart.* God convicts him of his sin and reminds him of home. **Repentance** is "turning away from sin and coming home to God." Recognition of sin should lead to repentance, and that's what happens. The youngest decides to go home and apologize by saying, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you." (v. 18) He admits he sinned **vertically** against God and **horizontally** against his family. *We can only get right with others once we've gotten right with God.*

*He wants to show his repentant heart by offering to make restitution in the family he hurt.* He's going to say, "I'm not worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired hands." The youngest wants his father to hire him so that he can pay his father back, so he can repay what he took. *His repentance is true.*

This is the **moment** some of us need to go through. We hurt our family and friends because we're afraid to admit we're broken people. The father loves you, he wants you to come home. You're more sinful than you know, but you're more loved than you could ever imagine. It's safe to come home.

For others, you've already gone through this moment. You've been there. Praise God, **tell your story**. But for many of us, you're **praying** this for someone else. We pray God would convict the heart of the one who hurt us, of the one who started it all. Have you ever done that? Someone really hurts you, and you pray, "God, would you open their eyes to what they've done?" It's okay to pray that prayer. If God hasn't answered yet, keep praying. God can do miracles. *The younger son recognizes his sin and repents.*

## His father forgives him.

When the son is still a long way off, perhaps just cresting the hill, the father sees him. He doesn't sit there and say, "Well it's about time." He sees him because he is looking for him. He's praying for him to come home. Jesus tells us that when the father saw him, he doesn't just feel bad for his son, but the Greek describes a feeling like the **pit of his stomach** dropping to the floor. He gets the **butterflies**. His heart **skips**

a beat. He gets **lightheaded**. And that's why we see him lift up the folds of his robe and run. Like a foolish child, the old patriarch of the family shows his skinny pale legs and runs for his son. And when he gets to him, he falls on his neck and kisses him. Through the smell of pigs, the sweat of a long journey, the stink of poverty and homelessness, through the sin he embraces the son he loves. *His father forgives him.*

We have a **father in heaven** who is just waiting for us to repent of our sins and come home. If you're the one in the wrong, the one who hurts others and starts problems, God would love to forgive you. We receive this forgiveness by repenting of our sins and asking him, "Father, would you please forgive me?" And you know what? Our heavenly father forgives us completely, just like the prodigal son's father forgives him.

Before the son can finish his speech and offer to pay his father back, his father cuts him off. He gets halfway through his speech when his father yells for his servant, "Quick! Bring the **best robe** and put it on him. Put a **ring** on his finger and **sandals** on his feet." (v. 22) The best robe belonged to the father himself. The ring carried it with it the family crest, the authority of the family. And the sandals said he wasn't coming home as a slave—slaves didn't wear shoes—but he's coming home as a son. Then he kills the fattened calf, which was saved for special events, and invites the whole town to the party. *The father forgives everything.*

If you haven't tasted the forgiveness of the father yet, today can be that day. Last week I told just a snippet of my **faith story**, how in my teen years I rebelled. My friends and I partied, got drunk, acted out, I dated a girl I shouldn't have, and I probably ate too many cinnamon rolls. The day I confessed to my dad was one of the hardest days of my life. I remember sitting with him and just crying, telling him all the things I'd done. But at the end of my confession, he forgave me and he hugged me. That's the way our dad in heaven forgives us. He forgives our sin and embraces us. *If you're the one in the wrong, getting right with your earthly family begins by getting right with your heavenly father. The solution to conflict begins with God.*

But what if you didn't do anything wrong? What if you're not the youngest, the problem child? What if you're the good child, or sibling, or parent who hasn't done anything wrong?

## **The Older Brother: The one in the right. (Luke 15:25-32)**

In every conflict, there's the offender and the offended. At first glance this story seems to be entirely about the offender, and how he should repent and come home. But if we look at who Jesus is telling this story to we see he also is speaking to those in the right. At the start of Luke chapter 15, we read this.

**Luke 15:1-2** Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." (NIV®)

During Jesus' ministry, he was **famous** for spending time with those in the wrong. He hung out with tax collectors who wounded their communities and prostitutes who wrecked homes. He spent time with prodigal sons and daughters. And the ones in the right, the Pharisees and teachers of the law, didn't like it. They're the **sibling** who picks up the pieces, the spouse who tries to make it work, the parent who has sacrificed so much for their child's best, the son or daughter who puts up with their parents manipulative behavior. So you can understand their frustration with Jesus when he extends **olive branches** to those who don't deserve it.

Jesus doesn't say to them, "It's okay to look down on the ones in the wrong." Instead, he tells them **three parables**, the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son—the prodigal son. In his final story, the sinners would have related to the younger brother, but the Pharisees would have related to the brother in the second half of the parable, the older brother. When the older brother comes home and hears the party going

on for his younger son, and is outraged, the Pharisees would have felt his outrage. Jesus has a lesson for them too. *Just because they didn't start the conflict doesn't mean they're innocent.*

## **His sin is hidden.**

The older's brother's role in the conflict isn't obvious. But through the course of the story, we see him sin against both his younger brother and his father.

**Sin #1:** *The older brother sins against the younger brother by not going after him.* In the first parable Jesus tells, a sheep gets lost and the shepherd goes and rescues the lost sheep. In the second parable, a woman loses a silver coin and she searches carefully until she finds it. But in the parable of the lost son, no one searches for the younger brother. No one goes to find him. That job belonged to the oldest brother.

When the youngest left home, the oldest should have followed him. When the youngest was wasting his money, the oldest should have been there to tell him to stop. When he fell into poverty, the oldest should have been there to pick him up. He should have brought him home, thrown a party, and sacrificed a calf all at his own expense. He should have clothed his brother with his own robe, his own ring, and his own sandals, but just like the Pharisees refused to help the sinners, so the older brother refuses to help his younger brother.

The younger brother's sin is a **sin of commission**, which means "doing something bad." But the older brother's sin is a **sin of omission**, which means "refusing to do something good" (James 4:17). *How many of us are quick to point out what others have done wrong but ignore what we could have done right?* Instead of throwing up our hands and watching the slow-motion collision of family members, we could have stepped in. Instead of confronting the one in the wrong through email, text message, or **emojis**, we could have called or visited. Instead of complaining, we could have prayed. *The older brother's first sin is that of omission, but it leads to the sin of commission.*

**Sin #2:** *The older brother sins against his father by publicly shaming him.* When he got home from working in the fields, instead of going into the party to rejoice with his father, he throws a fit outside. The older brother turns into a scary green **ogre** like Shrek. He's mad and wants everyone to know it. When his father comes outside to talk to him, the older brother doesn't address him as his father, but says, "Look!" It's like he's saying, "Hey you!" He's shaming the patriarch of the family, maybe even in front of the whole town if they followed him out.

**Keller** points out both the younger and the older son want the same thing. *They want their father's things, but not the father.* What matters most to the older son is a goat and a party, not his family (v. 29). He wants his father's livelihood just as much as the younger son, but instead of admitting it and getting what he wants, he harbors resentment and works every day to acquire his father's things. He wants to party and live it up. He wants the good-life now, he's just chosen a different way of getting it.

*Just because we don't start the conflict doesn't mean we're innocent.* God examines not only our actions, but our hearts. If we closely at the older son's heart, he's also dishonest and selfish. When we look at our **own hearts**, what do we see there? Do we want our prodigal family member to come home, or are we jealous of their freedom? Do we need an apology, or do we just want to be right? Do we want peace, or do we actually crave the drama? Maybe we don't like how they act, but it makes us feel better than them.

Jesus doesn't just confront the sin of the one in the wrong, but also the sin of the one in the right. Both need the father's forgiveness for their sins, one for open rebellion, the other for self-righteousness.

## **The father offers forgiveness and peace.**

Just like the father ran to the younger son, now the father comes out to the older son, and says, “My son.” The word here is really “child” (τέκνον), a term of love and endearment. He says, “My child, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” Now do you think he means, you’re always geographically close to me? No, he’s saying, “Just like I’ve been thinking about your brother every moment of every day until he came home, I’ve been thinking about you. All I have is yours, my livelihood, my very life, it’s yours.” (v. 31)

When the father **invites** him into the party, he's extending forgiveness and peace. *Peace is not the absence of conflict, but a relationship with God.* We find peace with God through **repentance**—through turning away from sin and coming home. Jesus invites the ones in the right to come home too. It's only by admitting our sins and accepting his invitation that we experience the healing we also need. *We need to get right with God before we can get right with each other. The father offers forgiveness and peace.*

## **We don't know how his story ends.**

Jesus doesn't tell us how the older son's story ends because it's a Choose Your Own Adventure. Did you ever read those children's books? You the reader are the star of the story. You're in the pages. For example, you encounter a mysterious castle. Do you cross the drawbridge or try to find another way in? One choice may lead to rescuing the damsel in distress and the other to being eaten by a dragon. The goal is to rescue the damsel, kill the dragon, and take the treasure through the choices you make. Yesterday Jesus asked the Pharisees how their stories were going to end, and today he's asking you. *How will your story end?*

**Path A:** *Leave here unchanged.* Continue through life believing the conflicts you encounter are the fault of others—the ones in the wrong. If you choose this option, you'll never have to grow up, or face any of your sins. But if you do choose this path, you'll never find home.

**Path B:** *Repent and come home.* Recognize your sins, your role in the conflict, whether it's outward and obvious or inward and hidden, and confess them to your heavenly father. The father is just waiting for us, to throw himself on our necks and clothe us with heavenly garments, to say, “My child, welcome home.”

*How will your story end this Easter?* Even as Jesus tells this parable, he **whispers** another story. *It's through this other story that we can have a relationship with our heavenly father.* Twice the father exclaims, “My son who died has come back to life again! Your brother who died has come back to life again!” (v. 24, 32) When someone dies and rises again, we call that resurrection, and that's what Easter is all about. *It's because of Jesus we can know the father.*

## ***In the right or in the wrong, we find our peace in Jesus.***

The Easter resurrection is what makes forgiveness for sins and a relationship with the father possible. Easter makes peace possible. Because of what Jesus did, we can know the father. Jesus left the **glories** and riches of his home to come rescue prodigal younger brothers and sisters and self-righteous older brothers and sisters. Whether you're a sinner who knows it or a sinner who doesn't, Jesus came to bring us home to God. *He's the older brother we all need. He's the older brother who spared no expense to rescue us.*

Jesus was stripped of his robes and so that you and I can be clothed in righteousness. Jesus was covered in our dirt, our smell, our sins so that we are made clean. He was nailed to a tree to deliver us from the land of sin and death. He loved us so much he was willing to die in our places. You can know Jesus as your savior brother, your resurrection brother, your true older brother if you repent and put your faith in him. If you do,

he promises to walk with you through every conflict. Because of him, one day our heavenly father will wrap his arms around us and say, “Welcome home child.” *In the right or in the wrong, we find our peace in Jesus.*

My brother Matthew asked me to serve as the best man at his wedding. I got to toast the one I grew up arguing with because Jesus changed our hearts. *In the right or in the wrong, we find our peace in Jesus.*

*Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church on Easter weekend 2017. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).*