

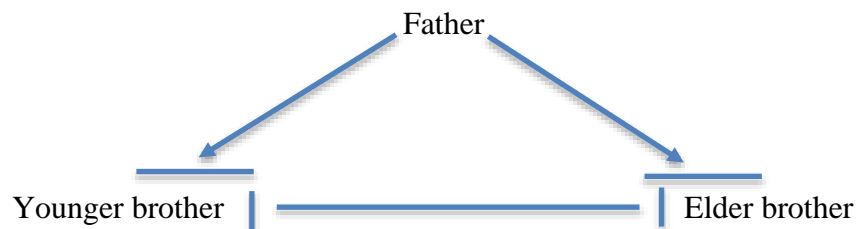
The Prodigal

The younger brother threw down his hoe and stormed angrily across the field to the farmhouse. His elder brother watched for a while, shook his head and returned to his weeding. For the two brothers, never happy with each other, this was the latest incident in the ongoing argument that was their lives.

The younger brother was a free spirit, unbound by convention, who loved to sing and dance. He was a charming, sensuous young man with an easy smile. But he was no farmer and hated the back-breaking labor it required. The younger brother dreamt of leaving his small town on the edge of nowhere to go and experience the wide world for himself. He wanted to leave the joyless toil of the farm, get away from his overbearing brother and mix with people as interesting as himself. The elder brother was his opposite, a diligent field hand who loved the land, appreciated the food it produced and the community it sustained. He was a conservative soul, mistrustful of outsiders, who poured all of his ambition into the earth. And what ambition he had! The elder brother had big plans for the family farm, which he would someday inherit, a responsibility he prepared for every day.

For all of their lives, the two had been locked in a dysfunctional embrace, with the elder brother trying to pound his younger brother into a traditionalist mold he could understand and the younger brother chafing under the heel of his tiresome sibling, unable and unwilling to give up his big city dreams. Their values, their aspirations, their very souls were opposed to each other in a struggle that played out on the family farm, the younger brother yearning to leave, the elder brother committed to the earth and the ancient customs that grew out of it.

As was his habit, their father had been watching from the upstairs window of the farmhouse. He had seen this many times before: a thoughtless comment, an equally unthinking response, an explosion, followed by a deepening alienation that made the next argument all but inevitable. The father was a compassionate man, who loved his sons deeply. He well understood his boys and their poisonous relationship. The strife between his sons was a source of great pain to him and he longed to mend their rift. In their self-absorbed struggle with each other, neither son was able to feel the love of the father. Indeed, blinded by their mutual fury, they did not even see him. The relationship between the three of them was a broken triangle, with the father pouring out love onto his two angry sons like a soft rain on two hard stones:



As the younger son headed back to the farmhouse, the father watched him closely. There was something different in the walk of his younger son, a quick, determined step that the father had

not seen in him before. When the younger son was fifty yards from the house, the father saw that the normally cheerful face of his younger son was twisted into a grimace.

This argument was in fact different from the others that had preceded it. For all of their lives, the father had protected the younger brother from the more extreme rages of his elder brother. However, the father was growing old and the younger brother had been thinking lately about what life would be like after his father passed. The elder brother would inherit two-thirds of the farm as well as the right to manage the place. The elder brother would be in charge and there was every reason to think that he would become, untempered by the kind oversight of the father, a tyrant. The elder brother would work his younger brother from sunup to sundown and force his unwilling sibling into the role of a traditional farmer, settling once and for all their long-running argument. With his elder brother in charge, the younger brother would be bound to the soil forever because the elder brother would certainly never consent to a sale of the farm and a split of the proceeds. His father, on the other hand, just might. The younger brother flew up the stairs and confronted his father, saying, "Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me."

The father fell back into his chair, astonished at the request. His younger son was asking for the one-third of the family estate that would normally come to him after the father died. The younger son was saying that he could not wait for his father to die and wanted his inheritance now. The implications of this demand were enormous. First, the younger son showed a profound disrespect for his father, saying in effect that he wanted the material goods of his father but not the father himself and could not wait for his father to die to collect. In order to comply with the request, much of the farm would have to be sold, removing any hope that he and his elder brother might resolve their differences and keep the family farm together. Such a sale would leave the family with a smaller estate and much more exposed to the risk of famine. The community, too, would suffer as servants would have to be released and the property sold at fire-sale prices, very likely to an absentee Roman landholder. There would be a public hearing by the rabbis to adjudicate the claims between the brothers and this was guaranteed to be ugly, an unwelcome test of God's law.

The farms in Judea at this time were undergoing a consolidation where large landowners bought out smaller farmers to produce wheat on a massive scale. Under the Roman Empire, trade had increased dramatically and large quantities of grain were needed to feed an exploding population. Local farms that had produced fruits, grain and oil for an indigenous people were being rolled up into plantations dedicated exclusively to the growing of wheat, a cash crop that was sold in large cities which generated the coins needed to pay Roman taxes. In the process, many small farmers were forced off of their land to work as day laborers. The loss of the land, God's land that had been promised to them, was deeply unpopular with the Jews who saw the Roman juggernaut devouring their divine inheritance.

So the demand of the younger brother to sell off part of the family farm was an affront to the father, the family, the community and the laws of God. But this meant nothing to the younger brother, at least not in comparison to the freedom he so craved. Legally, the father could have denied the request of his younger son and the matter would have been settled. But the father looked up into the unnaturally hard face of his younger son and sadly agreed.

Over the next few days, the elders and rabbis of the town met to sort out the details. The house and barn could not be divided, so 50 percent of the land would have to be sold to satisfy the claim of the younger brother. One-third of the inventory from the last harvest would be sold in bulk at reduced prices. The brothers argued hotly over which lands were to be auctioned off, each vying for the most fertile tracts. Throughout the proceedings, the father remained quiet, accepting each ruling of the court, but his eyes could not conceal the pain churning deeply within him as his sons squabbled over their inheritance as if he were already dead. Nobody, not the family, the town nor the rabbis agreed with the decision of the father to divide the farm, but they all grimly went about the business of carrying out his wishes.

In the end, the younger brother got his money, the elder brother got the capital rights to the unsold remainder of the farm and the father retained the usufruct, the right to all of the income from the farm. The father also retained the right to manage the property until his death, at which time all of the capital, income and management rights would revert to the elder brother. A hated Roman did indeed acquire half the land, and added it to the growing number of displaced family farms in Judea. In the absence of loving family, the state had done its job efficiently, and unraveled the work of many generations over the course of a few days.

After the unpleasantness of the hearings, the younger brother gathered up his coins and made preparations to leave, eager to shake the dust of this small town from his sandals. He was neither missed nor mourned by the community, who naturally resented the economic and spiritual damage he had inflicted upon them. More than that they hated the fanciful airs of the younger brother, his evident disdain for the town and its rustic ways. He had rejected them all in the most disrespectful way imaginable and was completely unconcerned about the destruction he left behind on his way to a better life for himself. The townspeople gathered on the small dirt street of their town to watch him depart. They quietly glowered as he took a substantial part of the community's wealth with him and left another foreigner in possession of yet more of their holy land. The father stood at the upstairs window and watched his younger son fade into the horizon, the sole griever.

For his part, the younger brother was finally free of the dull routine of the farm. A new life lay ahead of him. And what a life it was! He traveled in style around the Roman Empire, visiting new countries and tasting new cuisines, dazzling everyone with his wealth and his sunny disposition. His new life was just as he imagined it, full of interesting people and experiences of all kinds. He happily succumbed to all of its glamour and temptations. When he thought of his elder brother, it was with a sense of relief to be away from him and the pure joy of having finally triumphed over him. He did not think about his father at all.

He eventually settled in a gentile city far from Judea where he rented a large house just outside of town, complete with servants and a pool. He entertained lavishly and soon attracted a retinue of false friends eager to exploit him. The younger brother did not disappoint. Flush with cash, he spent his inheritance on feasts, wine, fast women and slow chariots. With his pleasing personality and open-handed ways, he was welcome everywhere. Not content to burn through his money with parties, he quickly invested in a number of business ventures which failed just as quickly. He became known in merchant circles as a fool who could be easily parted from his

money, which attracted more schemes and even more friends who competed with each other to empty his purse. When the last investment failed, the younger brother was shocked to find himself bankrupt and owing more money than he could possibly repay.

As the younger brother descended the social scale, he saw another side of the Roman world he was once so anxious to embrace. Places that were so hospitable and interesting when he had money were now cold and unforgiving without it. Friends no longer found him so amusing and they drifted away, replaced by angry creditors. His view of himself also began to change. He recognized that he was no longer the confident adventurer who had set off to experience all that the Empire had to offer, but a man who was down on his luck. He began to appreciate the life he left, secure, warm, welcoming. But he never lost the resentment he felt toward his elder brother, whom he blamed for his decline. If I had gotten just one more parcel of land, he told himself, all would be well. If I had been born first, or better yet, he had never been born at all, none of this would have happened. His elder brother remained the villain of his life, the robber of the happiness that was due to him. The idea of crawling back to his elder brother was unthinkable. With creditors biting at his heels, the younger brother left the city and was forced to seek anonymous work as a day-laborer in the fields, a difficult occupation for which he had neither the back nor the skill and for which he was singularly ill-suited.

Meanwhile back at home the elder brother re-doubled his efforts to rebuild the family fortunes. Through hard and unrelenting work, he succeeded admirably. The father was pleased with the diligence of his elder son. But the elder son did not forgive his father for the sale of farm which undid so much of his life's work and put them all at risk while earning the ridicule of the community. When he thought of his younger brother wasting the family's money on a good life for himself, the elder brother grew angrier still, especially since he knew that his father spent much of his time at the upstairs window scanning the horizon for his lost son.

For the elder brother, this was one more injustice inflicted upon him by his father, who was a fool for his spoilt younger son. Everyone said so. The elder brother had always been obedient to his father, diligent and clean-living. He was scrupulous in his adherence to the law, all in the expectation that his time would come when his father passed and he inherited the farm, something he clearly deserved. Everyone said so. But his father had upset the natural order of things and the elder brother had paid the price for both his brother's selfishness and his father's indulgence. Everyone said so and the elder brother believed it in the core of his being. The elder brother also believed that the law and the heavens were on his side, rewarding diligent people like himself who held the world together with their self-sacrifice and hard work, who would in fact inherit the earth. The law and the heavens provided the moral support to assure him that his cause was just and that he would in the end get what he had bargained for and worked for, what he had earned. That was the deal, and that deal that had been broken by his father. In spite of it all, the elder son uttered not a word of protest, but kept his head down and his eyes focused on the soil, a martyr to the way things ought to be. Everyone said so.

The final fall of the younger brother, when it came, was quick and steep. A famine struck the country and the younger brother could no longer find work in the fields. Instead he found employment with a pig farmer, easier than the bone-crushing field work, but barely a subsistence living. And very low indeed for a Jew who was strictly raised to neither eat nor touch swine. The

pig farmer fed his animals better than his workers and the younger brother found himself reduced to rags, skin and bones. With his stomach clawing at his back, he wished he could eat the slop reserved for the pigs but did not dare. Never physically strong, he was weakening to the point where he could not do his job and the swine herder would throw him out. He was approaching an early death, most likely alone somewhere on the side of the road, and he knew it.

His thoughts turned to his father's farm, where the workers were treated well and always had enough to eat. 'How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger!' He considered the prospect of returning home. His grand ideas of a great adventure were gone. He had seen more than enough of the world. His inheritance gone, he was no longer the proud young man who had ridden out of town with high hopes and bags of money, but a broken failure who was forced back home because there was no place else to go. He would have to admit all of this before the community. They would not be merciful. He looked deeply into himself and found that he was ready to endure the mockery of his neighbors. It was better than starving to death in a pig sty.

Still he bristled at the thought of submitting to his elder brother. Weak as he was, he could not, he would not relent and he resolved to labor on in the hope that something, anything would turn up. Nothing did. Knee deep in pig dung and on the verge of a painful and lonely death, the ego of the younger brother finally gave out. His pride demolished, he cried out from a very dark place within himself, 'I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands."' The lifelong struggle with his elder brother was over. He had lost. He would throw himself on the mercy of his father and beg for some food and perhaps a menial job. He would endure the wrath of this elder brother for the rest of his life. Deliberately and painfully, he got up out of the muck and headed home.

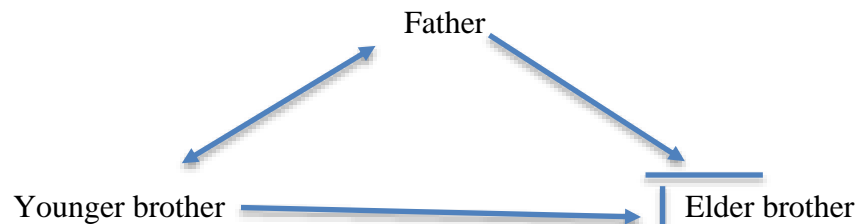
The bedraggled and foul-smelling younger brother limped into town, drawing a crowd who immediately understood what had happened to him. Unable to contain their glee at his well-deserved fate, the townspeople jeered and kicked at him. Slowly working his way through them, the younger brother left town and took the road out to the family farm. He knew the community would deride him but he was unprepared for their hatred. He finally understood how much he had hurt them. The younger brother now clearly saw that he was a man without a friend, without any skills, without a place in the Empire or his own community, without expectations. It was in this expectation-less state that the younger brother approached the farm and his father.

About a half mile from home, his father spotted him from his upstairs window. The father ran out of the house to meet him. The house servants, shocked at the sprightliness of the old man, ran hard to keep up with him. When the father met his younger son, he embraced and kissed him. Deeply ashamed of himself, the younger son said, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

The younger son began the rest of his prepared speech, but his father cut him off saying to his house servants, "Quickly, bring out a robe – the best one – and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

The younger son stood before his father in a state of disbelief. He had hoped for a bit of food and some shelter, not an outpouring of affection. The younger son looked into his father's joyful face and finally saw his father for what he was: a bottomless pool of unrequited love. The younger son also saw himself for what he was: a broken vessel unable to hold all of the love that the father wished to pour into him, a love that the younger son most certainly did not deserve. The younger son felt a rush of conflicting emotions run through him all at once, gratitude to the father, shame for his actions, joy to see the true nature of his father, remorse at not seeing it sooner. He thought of his elder brother and saw him through the eyes of his father, not as a tyrannical sibling, but as another deeply fractured vessel unable to hold the love of the father. He felt compassion for his elder brother, struggling alone with the farm, weighed down by the responsibility of it all, missing the good things his father wanted him to have. The younger brother looked into the face of his father and also saw the pain that he and his elder brother had caused. The younger brother began to weep.

They all went into the house and began preparations for a feast. The joy of the father was infectious and soon spread throughout the entire house, with everyone singing as they prepared the fatted calf, a very rare treat for the entire town. One part of the broken triangle had been mended:



The elder brother was away in the fields finishing up the work for the day. As he approached the house, he heard the music and saw all of his neighbors at the farmhouse enjoying a feast. He called one of the house servants for an explanation.

“Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound”, the servant said. The servant proceeded to tell the elder brother the whole story. Of course the little fool had failed out in the great world and the elder brother, like the townspeople, was glad for it. The elder brother enjoyed that feeling for a while, the feeling of having been right all along. But now what? His father had welcomed his spoilt son back with open arms, placed a ring on his finger and sandals on his shoeless feet. Would the father try to restore the rights of the younger brother and give him yet another one-third of the farm? The farm that the elder brother had worked so hard to re-build? Would there be another legal hearing? More land sales and public derision? These thoughts swirled inside the head of the elder brother as he paced in the dust outside the house, re-kindling his old anger against his younger brother and sparking new feelings of rage against his father.

Told of the arrival of his elder son, the father ran outside and pleaded with him to come in. But the elder son refused and instead exploded in anger, breaking a silence he had held since the sale of the farm, saying “Listen, old man! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!”

The words of the elder son fell onto his father like a hailstorm. The servants attending the father stepped back from them both, shocked at the harsh words of the elder son, unsure of what they should do, fearful for themselves and the future. This public outburst of the elder son was not just disrespectful, it was a violation of both the law and ancient tradition that honored the father. It was in its own way as bad as anything the younger son had done and there would be consequences, as yet unknown. Perhaps the elder son would lose his inheritance, perhaps there would be grounds for another division of the farm.

The elder son, too, was astonished at his own words. A flood of turbulent emotions ran through him: relief to say at last what needed to be said, immediate regret at having said it, the pure joy of getting even with the father and his favorite son, fear that his outburst might cost him his inheritance, to say nothing of his place in the community and before God. The father reached out and held his son’s arm, saying “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.”

With these words, the father assured the elder son that his inheritance was secure and that there would be no further divisions of the farm in favor of the younger son. The elder son would inherit everything and the younger son would never have any greater claim on the property than that of a hired hand. The rash words of the elder son were forgiven as soon as they were spoken. In spite of his violent outburst, the elder brother had retained his inheritance and won out over his younger brother. The elder brother had won. He had decisively and conclusively won.

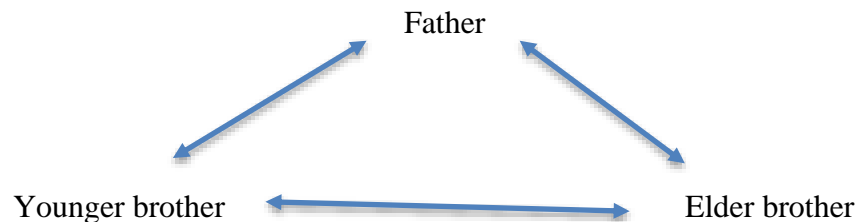
And yet something was amiss. The elder brother had everything that he ever wanted, the farm, dominance over his younger brother, an esteemed place in the community. And yet. The elder brother had for one brief moment, stepped outside of the law that was so central to his being and the experience had badly frightened him. By all rights, the father could have cut off his elder son, something the elder son would have certainly done had he been in his father’s position. The father could easily have used the outburst of the elder son as an excuse to shower even more blessings on the younger son, but the father had not done so. Instead the father had given everything to the elder son and nothing to the younger son. The father had responded to disobedience and insults with kindness and generosity. Why?

Many conflicting feelings ran through the elder brother at once. From habit, the elder brother remained angry with them both, but there was no longer anything to be angry about. The elder brother was elated because he had finally gotten everything he ever wanted, but felt guilty about the public disrespect he had shown his father. He had consciously violated the law for the first time in his life and had been rewarded for it, an experience he found deeply disturbing. His father had favored him over his younger son and the elder son was grateful, but suspicious. Most

of all the elder brother felt exposed as his ideas about his father, his younger brother, the estate, the law and even himself fell away like shattered castings around a statue, leaving his inner self standing naked and alone. The elder brother looked strangely at his father, as if seeing him for the first time.

In this newly exposed state, the elder brother was suddenly unsure of himself, unsure even of what he thought he deserved. The father took his elder son by the hand and together they walked into the feast, now in full swing with the whole town dancing and enjoying the fatted calf. Word spread quickly that the elder brother was to inherit the farm and the townspeople surged forward to congratulate him. The younger brother approached the elder brother and embraced him, an embrace that the elder brother did not at first return. The elder brother understood in that moment that his obedience, his self-sacrifice, his piety were all a sham and that he had, when threatened with the loss of the estate, been quick to attack his father and the law. The elder brother had used the father to satisfy his deepest desires and he was in this regard no different from his renegade sibling. In the radiant light of his father's love the elder brother was able to see the dark shadows of his own hypocrisy. It was not a pretty sight. Resting in the arms of his younger brother, the elder brother was now the target of an outpouring of love on all sides, from his father, his younger brother and the community, a love he was unable to resist. Against the din of the celebration, the elder brother slowly returned the embrace of his younger brother.

The father had risked everything, his estate, the life of his younger son, the affection of his elder son, the goodwill of the community, so that his two boys might come to understand their deeply broken selves and return his love for them. The younger son tried to run away from the father; the elder son tried to replace him. But in the end both realized that the father could be neither avoided nor overcome but had to be accepted for what he was: an infinite reserve of radical love for both of them, a love that mended all sides of the family triangle:



Meditations

1. In the parable, the two brothers are deliberately drawn as polar opposites. The elder brother was a traditionalist, suspicious of outsiders and the change they brought to his beloved community. He saw his younger brother as part of a hierarchy with himself at the top and his younger brother as a junior partner, a very junior partner, in the management of the farm. For the elder brother, there was one truth, one law, one community and one God who had blessed him as a first born son. He was conservative, stoic, traditional, obedient, hard-working and rural. The younger brother was the opposite, a less endowed son who had little loyalty to the existing order. He was quick to abandon his ancient Jewish heritage and embrace the up and coming Roman Empire. Unlike his single-minded elder brother, the younger brother was a relativist for whom

one truth was pretty much like another, and no truth, law, community or God meant more to him than his personal freedom. He was liberal, sensual, modern, rebellious, idle and urban. The two brothers are so different, so extreme that it is impossible not to favor one or the other.

Which brother do I favor, the law-abiding elder brother or the freedom-loving younger brother? Which do I find more offensive, the narrow-minded elder brother or the irresponsible younger brother? Whichever brother I favor, how much do I tolerate, understand and accept the other?

2. The two brothers were pathologically selfish. The younger son wanted to be free of his brother and the responsibilities of the farm, regardless of the consequences to his family or the community. He extorted the funds he needed from the father and ran away from his family to pursue a riotous lifestyle, his heart's desire. Even after he capitulated at the point of death, he still only saw his father as a means to an end, a way to get some food and shelter. The elder son wanted the farm and the esteemed place it gave him in the community, his heart's desire. He stayed at home, where he grudgingly and lovelessly obeyed his father, but only to gain his inheritance. Each used the father casually and cruelly to achieve his own ends.

Am I rebelling against the Father to get what I want or resentfully obeying the Father to get what I want?

3. The father loved his sons deeply, almost uncontrollably and wanted nothing more than for them to return his love. But the father could not simply demand affection from his sons: it had to be given freely by them to mean anything. This proved impossible as long as the two brothers remained in pursuit of their selfish desires, as long as they remained separated from the father by their sins. The father needed to find a way for his sons to acknowledge their sins, to repent and thereby break the pattern. He did so by granting each son what he wanted: he gave the younger son his freedom and he gave the farm to the elder son. It was only then, after the younger son understood the consequences of his disobedience and the elder son saw the hypocrisy of his obedience – and both were forgiven – that they came to understand their own sinful natures in relation to the perfect and selfless love of the father. It was only then, after they accepted the forgiveness of the father that they came into a right relationship with him and with each other.

If I favor the younger brother, do I understand the cost of my disobedience? If I favor the elder brother, do I understand the true motives behind my obedience? Have I sought forgiveness?