

Minor Characters 3: The Older Brother. Luke 15:11-32. Grenoble 26/1/25. Mike Starkey.

When I was a teenager, I had a friend called Laura. Laura's mum decided to employ a cleaning lady, and arranged for her to start the following week. But when it came to the day before the cleaning, Laura's mum had a horrible realisation.

A strange woman was coming into her house. She'd see the dust. She'd see dirty surfaces and mess in the house, and would think badly of her. The cleaning lady would think: 'She's the sort of woman who doesn't care about her house, the sort of woman who lets her house degenerate into such a state.' She might despise her as a result.

So *Laura's mum* got out the cleaning equipment, and spent the day cleaning the house. So when the cleaning lady arrived, she'd look at the house and admire it, and think what a marvellous woman it must be who could keep such a perfect home. And that's what she did. Whenever the cleaning lady was coming round, she'd get out her cleaning stuff and clean the house. To give the right impression to the cleaning lady, so she wouldn't judge her. Remember that story, because I'll come back to it!

We've reached part 3 of our series *Minor Characters*, where we look at some of the less well known characters in the Bible. Today we're thinking about the older son in the story of the prodigal son.

Down the years, so many people have identified with the *younger* son. The son who wants his share of the inheritance now, and effectively wishes his father were dead, and then goes on to waste his money and his life. Then, as a last resort, staggers home and is surprised by the father's response: love where he expected judgement, and a party where he expected a clip round the ear.

A lot's been written about how shocking the younger son's actions would have been in the culture of the day, where obedience and respect had to be shown towards your parents. And for some of you, this story of the lost child returning home is *your* story.

I used to work at a college in Sheffield that trained Christian workers, and some of our students had lived crazy, messed-up lives. God brought them home, and they were now training for ministry. It was lovely to see them using the mistakes and hard knocks of the past to help others. Down the years, the focus in books and sermons has usually been on the younger son who messes up. And if that's you, brilliant!

But there's another character in the story. And that's the older brother, the one who never ran away but stayed and kept the rules. The one who's angry and resentful about the return of his brother.

So why does Jesus tell this story of the prodigal son? The Bible tells us there are two groups of people listening to Jesus's parable. The first group are 'tax collectors and sinners'. Tax collectors worked for the Roman invaders, and would line their own pockets at the same time. Then there were other groups on the edge of polite society: like shepherds, who had a reputation for stealing sheep. The younger son represents these so-called 'tax collectors and sinners'.

But there's another group listening in: 'the Pharisees and teachers of the law'. Pharisees were obsessed with *purity*. Keeping inherited rules and traditions. Doing the right thing. If you're a Pharisee, there's a right way and a wrong way to do everything.

So Jesus tells his story and he includes both groups of listeners in the story. The tax collectors and sinners are represented by the younger son, and the Pharisees by the older son. But here's the shocking part. It turns out the older son is just as screwed up as the younger son, just in a different way. It's a story of *two* lost sons.

I have to be honest. When I read the story, I identify more with the *older* son. For a start, I was the oldest child in my family. Have you come across 'Oldest Child Syndrome'? There's been a lot of research on this in recent years.

- Older children tend to be more concerned about rules.
- Older children are more likely to correct other people when they make a mistake.
- Older children tell their younger siblings not to make a mess.
- Older children think they're being treated more harshly than their younger siblings.

So some of us start off like the older son just by being born first. But then we become more like the older son as we grow up. Maybe you were brought up in a churchgoing home, you didn't do drugs or smoke, you didn't do anything criminal or get drunk. You mostly stayed on the straight and narrow.

What Jesus shows is that an older brother type can be as lost as the younger brother. That's like the Pharisees. They had their big lists of rules, their dos and don'ts, but they lost something more important along the way. Here are three aspects of what it's like to be an older son type:

1) Judging others. The older brother stays at home and sticks to the rules. His wild and reckless brother comes home, covered in pig-dirt. But the older brother's response is not to welcome him home, but to criticise the bad choices that got him into the mess in the first place. Some people had parents who were like this. Parents who saw their role in life as stopping you making mistakes. People who believed the world would be a better place if everybody kept the rules and didn't mess up.

Older brother types don't mean to be legalistic and judgemental. But that's how it can come across. They want to be helpful. But if you're on the receiving end, it can feel as if you're always being judged, as if affection is being withheld until you're good enough.

That's why I told you the story about Laura's mum and the cleaning lady. If Laura's mum had been a younger-son type she'd have seen the cleaning lady as a gift, and said: 'Fantastic... I've got somebody to clean my dirty house!' But because she was an older-son type, she saw the cleaning lady as a judge who'd see her as having failed if she had a dirty house. The very person who's there to help you, makes you feel more guilty, as if you've got to clean up your act first and be perfect.

2) Feeling resentful towards God. The older son says to his father: 'Look! all these years I've been *slaving* for you and never *disobeyed* your orders'. See the words he uses: he sees the Father as a slave-driver and imposer of rules. The older son resents the Father throwing a party for his brother. His brother doesn't deserve it. It's unfair: Dad's never thrown a party for him and his friends.

Some of us read these words of the older brother and think: 'Well, he's got a point. It does seem a bit unfair.' But through this small window of moral correctness can pour an ocean of bitterness and resentment. Some people who've been Christians a long time and tried hard to live the Christian life, can carry anger towards God, a nagging sense that they've been cheated by God.

They missed out on the fun of going off the rails, then they missed out on the fun of the Father welcoming them home again. Older sons can harbour resentment towards God. And the more lavishly he welcomes home the prodigals, the more left out they feel.

3) Difficulty praying. If you feel angry with God or cheated by him, you stop wanting to be with God or communicate with him. It's the same in any relationship. If you feel angry with another person, and cheated by them, and you don't know if they love you or not, you're not going to want to spend an evening with them or be intimate with them. The result is that many older brother types struggle in *prayer*, because prayer is vulnerable communication with somebody you love.

The danger for us older brother types is that we stay in the Father's house but stop communicating with him, because we resent him and don't trust him. We stop praying.

So. The older brother turns out to be as lost as the younger brother. In a way, he's more lost, because he can't see he's lost. So here's a question. What does the gospel look like,

for buttoned-up older brothers? It's obvious what good news is for a younger brother who's messed up and wants forgiveness. He receives grace. But where's the hope for people who're tight-lipped and angry and resent grace because it's unfair and breaks the rules?

Well, the good news for the older brother is also an invitation to the party. The Father invites both sons. But the invitation that goes out to the older son is more than an invitation to *attend* the party. In that culture, the older son would have been expected to host the party. He's family. He's the honoured son who's there to welcome others and share in the Father's role as host. It's an incredible privilege, to be the one *who throws the party*. The Father's not excluding the older son from the party, quite the opposite. He wants him to be the one who makes sure it goes with a swing.

The story Jesus tells in Luke's gospel has no ending. It stops at the point where the older son's about to respond. We never hear whether the older son does go into the party.

For some of you, you know you're the younger son. You've messed up in life. If you're a younger son type, the invitation to you is to come to God's party, just as you are. You don't need to do anything, or be good enough, just come and enjoy the party. But what does good news look like if you're the older brother? Let me end with three short pointers that might help those of us who know we're older brother types:

a) Relax and learn to love the father. Let go of resentment, enjoy being loved and being the host of the party. Start talking and joking with the Father again.

b) Relax and learn to love your brother. Enjoy grace, because it's better than fairness. Celebrate the brother coming home, rather than telling him where he went wrong and how he can avoid mistakes in future. Be the person who throws the party and enjoys it.

c) Relax and learn to love your own story, because it's yours and it's unique. Let go of focusing on somebody else's faith journey. Thank God for your own life.