

Only be careful, and watch yourselves so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart all the days of your life; but make them known to your sons and your grandsons." Deuteronomy 4:9



SIBLING RIVALRY

by Greg Brezina

Remember the biblical story of the prodigal son.¹ A father has two sons. The younger son wants to leave home. He asks his dad for money, packs his bags and heads out the door. It doesn't take him long to reject the way he was raised. He corrupts himself by partying, smoking pot, or an ancient form of the same, and playing the prostitutes.

After debasing his mind, disfiguring his soul and wasting his body, he realizes the vanity of his existence. He longs for the life that he had with his father. Eventually, he decides to return home and seek his father's forgiveness.

Thrilled to have him back, his dad forgives him and celebrates. In the midst of the party, the older brother, without provocation, blasts his father. He says (Brezina paraphrase), "Dad, all these years I've obeyed and served you. Yet, you never honored me. Then this son of yours who has squandered your wealth and shamed our name comes home, and you honor him with a party. It's not right. You should be honoring me and not him."

What in the world is the older brother thinking? Why isn't he rejoicing with his father?



This unhealthy outburst of anger may seem strange at first glance; however, the story comes into focus as we come to understand how the consequences of sin play out in sibling rivalry.

Simply said, "Sibling rivalry is the jealousy, competition and fighting between brothers and sisters."² Siblings compare and compete to find their identity and to prove or gain their worth as persons. Usually the closer siblings are in age, the more intense the rivalry.

Most of the time when siblings compete, one "wins" and the other "loses". The "winner" feels like he or she measures up and is worthwhile as a person. The "loser" feels like he or she is not good enough or worth-less. These thoughts of inferiority normally stir up anger and frustration that is either expressed by fighting or by passive/aggressive behavior.³

Sibling rivalry is not new. Cain and Abel were the first to experience it. In anger, Cain attacked Abel because Abel outperformed him. Ishmael mocked Isaac because Isaac was favored over him. Esau was ticked at Jacob for supplanting him and threatened to kill him. The sibling rivalries of

Sibling Rivalry. . .

Jacob's sons are legendary. Joseph's dad favored him above his brothers. His brothers felt inferior. Joseph fueled their inferiority by sharing his dreams of superiority. In anger, his brothers treated him violently and then sold him into slavery. Sometimes this rivalry continues for generations. Ishmael and Isaac's relatives are still fighting each other.

Before adulthood, a younger sibling seldom dethrones an older sibling from his or her first-born position. No matter how hard the younger sibling tries to measure up to the older, he or she rarely can bridge the development gap. The older is frequently a step ahead of the younger until they are adults.

In the biblical story of the prodigal, I believe the younger son left home because of sibling rivalry. He probably had grown tired of being outperformed and being told what he should and shouldn't be doing by his know-it-all brother. Everyone who has brothers and sisters is familiar with this kind of sibling rivalry. Connie and I went through it with our siblings, and our sons also felt the struggles of competition and worth. Now, Connie and I are viewing the rivalry in our 13 grandchildren, ages seven and under.

Recently, I took three of my grandsons to the ballpark to practice. Two of them are first-borns and the other is a second born. At five years of age, the second born frequently expresses anger consistent with being on the losing end of the rivalry. Somehow, in his very young mind, he has decided that his acceptance, worth and value as a human is attached to performing up to par with his

older brother and cousins.

Connie and I have seen this coming and have asked Father for wisdom in how to minister to this gifted grandson. He is trying so hard to equal his older brother and cousins. But no matter how hard he tries, he can't measure up. He can't run as fast as they can. He can't throw as well. He can't bat as well. He can't write as well. He can't talk as good, etc.

On the way to the ballpark, the second-born mispronounced a word. His older brother and cousin laughed and mockingly repeated the mispronunciation. I corrected them. They apologized, but the damage was done. The five year old was wrong, embarrassed and angry.

At the ballpark, I tried to teach the second-born how to bat. With a frown on his face, he looked me dead in the eyes and said through his teeth, "I know how to bat!" Then came this revealing fact, "You didn't teach (he called his brother by name) how to bat."

After hitting a few baseballs off a batting tee, he told me to pitch to him like I pitched to his brother. I did, and he only hit one ball. Discouraged, he put the bat down and said that he was tired of batting. The two older grandsons were running the bases, so he said he wanted to go run the bases, too. He couldn't keep up with his brother or older cousin, so he quit running the bases. Frustrated and confused, he stopped trying. He went and sat under a tree. I tried to get him to participate, but with head down, he refused.

Yesterday, nine of our grandchildren were over for dinner. After dinner, five grandsons and one granddaughter wanted to go golf ball fishing. A par three fairway parallels a pond out back, and a lot of golf balls end up in that pond. Our fishing pole is a golf ball retriever that extends. At dusk, when the golfers are gone, we go golf ball fishing.

So far, every time we have gone fishing, each grandchild has "caught" a ball. Yesterday, we caught an extra ball. The second born grandson asked for the extra ball. I shared with him that if I gave it to him, all the others would also want one. Then He asked to carry it, so I let him.

When we returned to the house, I noticed that someone had tossed an advertising circular in our driveway. The second born grandson was closest to it, so I asked him if he would get it for me. He turned his back and said, "No!"

Instantly, his older brother shouted, "I'll get it, Daddy B." He ran, picked up the circular, and brought it to me. Wanting to teach all the grand-



children that serving pays dividends, I said, "Everybody, look at (I called his name.). He has a great servant's heart. And for your great servant's heart, you can have the extra golf ball." The older brother took the ball, held it high above his head and went around showing his prize to all of his cousins.

His second born brother didn't respond well. He dropped his head below his stooped shoulders. With anger, he began to whine and complain about his older brother getting the extra golf ball.

He didn't respond the way I expected. When I was the younger sibling in a situation like that, I would think, "Next time I will be a servant and get the reward." The problem with my thinking was that my grandson is not me.

As I walked towards the house, I asked Father again how to minister to this precious grandson who was bitter over not getting a ball. Instantly, Father told me

to give him grace – gift him an extra ball.

After getting another golf ball from my golf bag, I called him aside and explained, as best I could to a five year old, how God loved and graced us with Jesus when we didn't deserve it. Then I shared that I was gifting him an extra ball because he was my grandson - not because of anything he had done or because of his whining and complaining. I was gifting him an extra golf ball because I loved him.

A big smile spread across his face. With excitement in his voice, he grabbed the ball and said, "Thank you, Daddy B!" Then he ran around, holding it high and telling everyone that he got an extra ball just like his brother.

Years of training are usually required before children can understand God's grace and how to get their worth and

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FOSTERING PEACE AT HOME

Sibling rivalry is the direct result of our children and grandchildren trying to get their needs of worth, value and significance met apart from God. (The Bible calls this "flesh") Since those needs can never be fully met by anyone or anything else, frustration, anger and conflict will always result. As parents and grandparents, we cannot control the thoughts or behavior of our children and grandchildren. But we can choose to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of who God is and how to get their needs met in Him instead of choosing to provoke them to anger by reinforcing the ideas of the flesh. Here are a few tips to keep us from provoking rivalry and to instruct us in fostering peace at home.

- 1 In our speech, don't connect worth with performance or possessions. ("He is such a good boy. He got straight A's") The flesh and the world say that what we do or have is who we are. God says that we all have worth and value because we are His special creations. Performance and hard work is to be encouraged when it is an expression of God's life in us, but not as something that will enhance our worth.
- 2 Don't compare one child to another ("Why can't you be like your brother or sister?"). Science tells us that there are no two people created identically in physical features, personality, gifts, and talents. God places a high value on all the people He has created and does not play favorites based on these features He has formed into each of us.

- 3 Celebrate the differences of our children. Because they are not the same, we don't need to behave as if they were. Children will differ in their needs for discipline and instruction. Only the Holy Spirit knows what each of our children need and when they need it. If we are listening to the Spirit within, we will have the wisdom we need for the moment.

- 4 Realize that disciplining and instructing our children in who God is and how to get their needs met in Him is not a one time event. It takes consistency and persistency. We can faithfully continue instruct through abiding in Jesus and living out of His life.

- 5 In addition to instruction, we must be lifting our children up in prayer because only the Holy Spirit can take the truth and make it revelation in the hearts of our children.

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value from who they are in Christ instead of how many golf balls they have or how they swing a bat. Not every situation calls for a golf ball of grace. Children also have to learn that there are consequences for unwise choices. But occasionally a golf ball is a good reminder of the graciousness of our Heavenly Father.

So, just as the father of the prodigals trained his sons in the way they should go and then patiently waited for his training to take root in them and grow, Connie and I also are committed to helping our children in the training of our grandchildren in the way they should go. We too, by God's amazing grace, will patiently wait for our training to take root in them and blossom even if they occasionally choose to get stuck in the pig pen of life.

Blessings to you, your children
and your children's children,

Greg Brezina

1. Luke 15:11-32
2. Sibling Rivalry, University of Michigan Health System, <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild>
3. Wikipedia Encyclopedia; Wetzler, Scott (1992) Living With The Passive-Aggressive



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