



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**). And it is often found in families today. As we wrap our look at the victorious family this month, let's see how to handle this difficult situation. We'll start by noting how sibling rivalry manifests itself, then what is really at the heart of sibling rivalry, and wrap up with how we can overcome sibling rivalry. 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 the sibling who bothers 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 parents 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 my sibling who does such and such." Or "I'm not perfect, but it bugs me when my sibling 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 be siblings 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. The sibling hurt us, perhaps deeply. The sibling committed a sin and the parents didn't say anything about it. The sibling betrayed us. The sibling mishandled a situation or messed up something we were working on. The sibling 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 our sibling 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.

III. How do we respond to sibling rivalry?

A. Parents

1. *Show each child with love, approval, and acceptance*—If sibling rivalry is the battle among brothers and sisters to win the love, acceptance, and approval of their parents, then the best way to overcome it in the home is for parents to show each child with love, approval, and acceptance. No doubt, since the father in **Luke 15** represents God, the older brother’s misunderstandings about love are his own misperceptions and not the father’s problem. However, in many families, parents struggle to show love, approval, and acceptance, especially to children who don’t follow the same natural bent as the parent. The driven, type A parent, finds it hard to show love to the free spirit child who likes to take life as it comes. The sensitive, artistic, musical parent finds it hard to show love to the accountant/engineering type child. Then it is hard for parents to show love to children they are jealous of. The parent who had to struggle for every middle of the road grade struggles to show love, approval, and acceptance of the children who ace their studies. Instead, that parent usually finds some place to be critical to prove to the children they aren’t as good as they think they are. By the way, while this is not between siblings, it is the exact same kind of rivalry we are talking about between siblings. Finally, it is tough to show love, approval, and acceptance to the child who repeatedly breaks the rules. Certainly, you need to discipline the child when rules are broken (more on that in a minute). My encouragement though is to find things you can show love, acceptance, and approval for. Make sure to do that even when you’ve had to discipline them for breaking the rules.
2. *Deplore favoritism*—Do you see what the older son’s claim is to the father? He is essentially saying, “You’re showing favorites to my sibling who has been a louse of a son.” Again, we know in this story the father represents God and has shown no favorites. But if even the notion of favoritism causes this rivalry how much more when parents show actual favoritism. Consider the favoritism of Isaac and Rebekah with their sons Esau and Isaac respectively (**Genesis 25:28**). It prompted dishonesty and hatred and even threatened murder. Or Jacob’s favoritism with Joseph (**Genesis 37:3**). That prompted deception and selling a brother into slavery. Understand that this doesn’t necessarily mean treating each child exactly the same way. The fact is, when you treat children who are different the exact same way, you are not being fair. This doesn’t mean making sure there is an even number of presents for each child on their individual birthdays. Children do need to learn that life simply doesn’t work that way. What it does mean is recognizing that all of your children aren’t going to be just like you and the ones that are like you aren’t necessarily better. Look again at **Genesis 25:28** and what caused the favoritism there. Apparently, Isaac could understand Esau. He was a hunter, an outdoorsman. Isaac could get into that. Jacob, on the other hand was a quiet man, an indoorsman. Rebekah could get into that. Give each of your children the opportunity to pursue their interests, not just forcing them to pursue yours and showing favoritism to the ones who pursue your same interests.
3. *Refuse comparison*—One point we definitely see demonstrated by the father in **Luke 15** is a refusal to get in the comparison game. When the younger brother asked for his part of the inheritance, the father didn’t rebuke him for not being like the older brother. When the younger brother came back, the father didn’t hold over his head that he hadn’t stayed like the older brother. When the older brother was surly, the father didn’t compare him to the younger brother. Far too often, we parents can blow this rule. Especially if we have a favorite among the children. Our children don’t need to be like each other. They have their own personalities, interests, strengths, weaknesses. These will not necessarily match ours or each other’s. They don’t need to be more like each other, they each need to develop their own strengths and channel them to be more like Christ. Statements like “Why can’t you be more like your brother?” Or “Your sister doesn’t have this problem” need to be removed from our parenting. All we are doing is prompting rivalry in these cases.
4. *Reaffirm love after discipline*—As we said earlier, discipline has to take place. However, in those moments, our children may not be quite mature enough to recognize how proper discipline is actually an expression of love (see **Hebrews 12:5-11**). When the discipline has been administered and explained clearly, we need to follow similar advice to what Paul gave the Corinthians in **II Corinthians 2:6-8**. We need to reaffirm our love for our disciplined children. I don’t mean we need to fawn and grovel as if we are afraid our children won’t love us after we have disciplined them. But we do need to let them know that we love them when we have done so. There is a time for us to say, “I want you to know that I’m very angry at you right now. But that doesn’t change

the fact that I love you and always will.” And this means not treating our children with bitterness and resentment just because they have done what children do and broken some of the rules.

B. Siblings:

1. *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 parents from loving us. Quit looking around at everyone else and start cleaning up your own side of the street.
2. *Recognize your parents love for 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. Siblinghood is not a competition and if your parents are making it so, then let them know you feel that way with specific instances. I can almost guarantee you your parents love you as much as your siblings, but due to different personalities they may have a harder time displaying that to you. Don’t let them know about this in the middle of a fight, but in a calm time. Of course, in some families, this may be hard. In which case, I urge you to go back to our lessons on communication and fighting fair.
3. *Celebrate with your brothers and sisters*—The older brother could not celebrate that the father loved the younger brother too. He saw this party as some kind of evidence that the father didn’t love him, the older brother, properly. Parental love is not a zero sum game. That is, your parents don’t just have so much love within them that they are trying to divide up between you and your siblings. It is true that there is only so much time in a day and only so much money in the bank account. Parents have to divide up time and money. But that is not the case with love. When your parents love your sibling, your sibling isn’t stealing love away that would have otherwise come to you. I know if you are the first born, it can definitely feel like that since some of the manifestation of love as evidenced by time and money is being split between you.
4. *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 your parents’ love more. Do so because you know your parents love both of you and want both of you to have a positive parent/child relationship. Do so because you want to celebrate with them when they are loved by your parents.

Conclusion:

Sibling rivalry will always rear its head among our families. 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.