

The Return of the Prodigal Son - Henri Nouwen
Week 1 - Discussion questions

Prologue

- “I had never really given up the role of the bystander.” There is comfort and safety in the role of the bystander. In this case, Nouwen is talking about a bystander looking on to God’s act of grace. Watching others receive grace, or describing it theologically. Do you find yourself there? What makes it hard to escape the bystander position? What makes it possible?

Introduction

- The book will call us to see ourselves in the younger son, the elder son, and the father. Which of these rings true for you at this stage? Which sounds less likely?
- The structure of the book will engage both the painting and the parable. Take time to read the parable slowly (Luke 15:11-32), noticing phrases and words that you don’t normally hear when the story is simply told. Take time to look at the painting – preferably as large a print as possible (it is 8 feet tall in real life!). Consider each figure and their thoughts, motivations, and experiences.

Part 1 - The Younger Son

Rembrandt and the Younger Son

- In Rembrandt’s own life, the parable seems to be a warning about the arrogance of youth and the fragility of life. Have you experienced the prodigal (wasteful spending) and assured nature of the younger son? Have you experienced the disillusionment of that arrogance? If so, where does that disillusionment leave you? Where does it send you?

The Younger Son Leaves

- What makes the voice of love so hard to hear? What makes all of those other voices so alluring? What other voices in your life take the place of God’s voice of love?
- What is the “distant country” to which you flee?
- In the “distant country,” do you hear God’s voice calling you home? How?

The Younger Son’s Return

- “Even in the midst of his debasement, he had clung to the truth that he still was the son of his father.” (46) What identity do you cling to even when all else fails?
- Nouwen says the gift of life and forgiveness is always before us. What helps you make the choice to claim childhood?
- To claim childhood of God is not just to receive forgiveness, but also to be renewed as who God created you to be. Does that sound thrilling, daunting, both?
- Nouwen offers a fascinating reflection of Jesus as the prodigal son. Does that idea trouble you? Does it give you hope?

Week 2 Discussion Questions

Part 2 – The Elder Son

Rembrandt and the Elder Son

- If the figure to the right is the elder son, does it bother you that the painting does not follow the parable, or do you agree that it is painting the “spirit” of the parable? What do we gain by having the two brothers in one painting? What do we lose?
- Nouwen gives us a glimpse of the dark side of Rembrandt with his description of Rembrandt’s treatment of Geertje Dircx. Nouwen then uses this example to say that Rembrandt was as familiar with the elder son in the story as the younger son. How does this change your perspective of Rembrandt? How does this change your perspective of the elder son?

The Elder Son Leaves

- Nouwen proposes a different title for the parable: The Parable of the Lost Sons. How would you describe the lostness of the elder son?
- Nouwen describes the elder son as resentful, and that his resentfulness reveals his bondage. “I have not yet lived a free life in my father’s house.” Describe the bondage of the elder son. What do you resent? How does it keep you in bondage?
- The father in the parable is so full of joy, a joy the elder son cannot/will not participate in. Why is joy so hard sometimes? What must we do or let go of to experience joy?
- In the final page of this chapter, Nouwen identifies a tension between the choice the elder son (and each of us) is left with and the inability to make that choice. Can the elder son choose to abandon resentment and come home to the father, or must something happen to him from the outside? What happens to help you abandon resentment?

The Elder Son Returns

- Nouwen describes the possible choice to the elder son as a conversion. What is he being converted from and to?
- The elder son no longer sees his brother as his brother. His resentful darkness affects every relationship. Have you found this to be true?
- “Although we are incapable of liberating ourselves from our frozen anger, we can allow ourselves to be found by God and healed by his love through the concrete and daily practices of trust and gratitude.” Here Nouwen tries to resolve the tension between our choice and God’s work in our conversion from resentment. Does this ring true for you? Are trust and gratitude the path to allowing ourselves to be found by God?
- With the younger son, the voice counter to God is one of temptation. With the elder son, the voice counter to God is one that says you’re not loved or worthy. Which do you hear more in your life? Which do you find harder to break free from?
- The father runs out to meet the elder son, just as he went out to meet the younger son. While we are stuck in comparisons between the two, the father simply wants both to experience his joy. Does this character of God make you hopeful, disgruntled, puzzled?