

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?