

The Patient Father

Learning

Introducing the Parable (some example content you can engage with to prep and/or use as a group)

- Read - Luke 15:11-32
- Context: In chapter 14 and 15 Luke emphatically displays Jesus' teachings on God's Grace. Jesus has just healed multiple people on the Sabbath (Luke 13:13; 14:4). Then Jesus gives three parables focused on the poor, crippled, blind, lame, and the lost (the great banquet, lost sheep, and lost coin). All of this climaxes in what is commonly called the parable of The Prodigal Son. A key verse is Luke 15:2 where the Pharisees and teachers mutter, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."
- Interesting Words: The word Jesus uses to describe the father running (v. 20) to meet the son "implies straining to the utmost." Imagine the Father not merely happily walking out to meet his son, but running with all strain and effort he has to embrace his son.
- Culture: Culturally, in the ANE, to ask for early inheritance was the equivalent of saying "I wish you were dead right now." Further, if a son left his family, lost his family's wealth, and/or married an immoral woman the entire village would perform a ceremony called *gesasah* if he ever returned. In this ceremony everyone in the village would gather around the person and publicly declare they were to be cut off by throwing and shattering jars of corn and nuts—it was intentionally humiliating and ruthless. This may sound dramatic, odd, and even oppressive to our modern individualistic ears, but it demonstrates the depth of social connection and sense of interconnectedness in these small communities. This also adds more reason for the Father to run to him and embrace him before the village gathers to shame him. It should also be said that men of high standing did not run, and to kiss another publicly was a ceremonial declaration of reconciliation. Killing a calf signals that the entire village is invited to the party, not to shame the son, but rejoice with the father that he has returned.
- Themes: Traditionally emphasis is given to the sons. The explicit waywardness of the younger son and the internal resentment/bitterness of the older son. Push to hear the parable through the emphasis on the non-controlling love and unrelenting grace of the patient Father.
- Quotes for expanding the discussion:
 - This quote is from an exchange where Sue Mosteller was giving Henri Nouwen a timely challenge, try hearing these words directed towards you: "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the Father. You have been looking for friends all your life; you have been craving affection as long as I've known you; you have been interested in thousands of things; you have been begging for attention, appreciation, and affirmation left and right. The time has come to claim your true vocation—to be a father who can welcome his children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return."

Dialogue Questions (some example questions for this content above)

- Read a 2nd time - Luke 15:11-32
- What themes stand out in the parable? What connections do you see to the surrounding text?
- Consider breaking into three groups to reflect on the parable from the three vantage points of the younger son, older son, and the father? What different insights emerge?

Implication Questions (some example questions/challenges that engage real life now)

- Dialogue: Try reading the quote above and give space for reflection on it.
- Author Ronold Rolheiser talks about how the first stage of our faith journey is about "getting our lives together" (like the two sons), but that the second stage is about "giving our lives away (like the Father). Obviously this is not a cut and dry either/or and it is certainly not meant to be a value statement, but where do you feel like you are in this season of your life? Have you thought about your faith journey like this before? Have you been stuck in one or the other?

Meditation: This will stretch people's comforts and normal reflection modes. Consider inviting the group to look at a painting about this parable done by Rembrandt in the 17th century.

- Allow 2-5 minutes to look at it (they could search it on their phones or you could display it)
- What features of the painting stand out to you?
- What do you learn about Rembrandt?
- What insights does this give to you about discipleship?



Rembrandt *The Return of the Prodigal Son* 1667