

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri J.M. Nouwen



The Return of the Prodigal Son is among Rembrandt's final works, likely completed within two years of his death in 1669. Depicting the moment of the prodigal son's return to his father in the Biblical parable, it is a renowned work described by art historian Kenneth Clark as *"a picture which those who have seen the original in St. Petersburg may be forgiven for claiming as the greatest picture ever painted"*.

Session 1 - Prologue & Introduction

Henri Nouwen's book *"The return of the Prodigal Son"* (Darton, Longman & Todd 1992) is a series of personal reflections on the Rembrandt painting which hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia and the way it allows the parable of Jesus to speak in new ways. The Prologue and Introduction tell of Henri's encounter with the painting itself in 1986 and his move to the L'Arche Daybreak community. He hung a print of the painting in his new community, and he reflected over time on how he had been the younger (prodigal) son, the elder son and the father in the Gospel story. What struck him like a thunderbolt though, was a friend's challenge: *"Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you are called to be*

the father". The book is both autobiographical and a call to the sometimes lonely and challenging role of spiritual fatherhood.

An important word about masculine and inclusive language; while the three main characters in the prodigal son story are all men, Henri is careful in his book to point out how the spiritual characteristics that he describes – even the call to be a better father – are applicable to both men and women. Rembrandt died when he was 63 years old. Nouwen, a fellow Dutchman, died four years after this book came out. He was 64.

Reading – Luke 15:11-31

Discussion questions:

- Rembrandt's painting had a profound and lasting effect on Henri. What work of art – painting, novel, film, poem, music– has touched you deeply? Why?
- Nouwen suggests that "*accepting love, forgiveness and healing is often much harder than giving love and forgiveness*". Why do you think this is true for Henri? If this is true for you also, what keeps you from accepting love, forgiveness and healing?
- In describing his spiritual struggle Henri says: "*I am called to enter into the inner sanctuary of my own being where God has chosen to dwell.*" He adds: "*The only way to that place is prayer, unceasing prayer*". What does he mean by this "*inner sanctuary*" and why is it so hard to is it so difficult to reach this and to stay there?
- Over the course of several years Henri identified in turn with each of the three main figures in Rembrandt's painting: first the younger son, then the elder son and finally the father. How does he justify each identification? To which figure do you feel the greatest affinity? Why?
- How do you feel about Henri's suggestion that we might be at different times all the characters in this story? In what ways are you challenged in different ways by it?

Session 2 - The Younger Son

Themes:

Henri writes about the most famous person in the story: the younger son, the prodigal son. He says Rembrandt at a young age “*had all the characteristics of the prodigal son: brash, self- confident, spendthrift, sensual, and very arrogant*”. The artist earned a lot, spent a lot, and lost a lot. The painting is about the “*return*” of the lost son. In order to “*return*”, one must have left something behind. Henri finds the concepts of leaving and returning very powerful. For Henri, “*leaving*” means spending our time and energy in the pursuit of success, material things, busyness and productivity. “*Leaving*” means not paying attention to the core of our being where God is waiting for us. Henri also admits he tried hard to please people and to be recognized, but he often felt jealous of others’ success or resentful when he did not get enough recognition.

Reading – Luke 15:11-20

Discussion questions:

- What parallels does Henri see between Rembrandt and the prodigal son? How does knowledge of Rembrandt’s biography enhance our understanding of his painting?
- According to Henri, leaving home “*is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being*”.
When has Henri left home? When have you left home?
- Henri states: “*“Addiction’ might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society”*”.
What addictions do you see in the world around you? To which addictions have you succumbed at some point in your life? Why?
- Henri says that a belief in total, absolute forgiveness does not come easily.
Can you think of something for which you have not yet forgiven yourself? How does our failure to accept God’s absolute forgiveness limit our understanding of God?

- “Jesus makes it clear that the way to God is the same as the way to a new childhood.
What does it mean to become like a child? Why is this process so difficult?

Session 3 - The Elder Son

Themes:

The elder son usually gets little attention in discussions of this parable. Yet, Nouwen explains how both Rembrandt and Henri himself had part of the dark, resentful side of the “*elder son*” in them. Henri admits he understands the envy that the elder son feels toward his younger brother. The elder son lived an obedient and dutiful life. Yet when his brother came home, the elder son felt resentful, unkind, selfish and without joy. Neither the parable nor the Rembrandt story indicates whether the elder son finally reconciled himself to what was happening. Nouwen asks: “*Can the elder son in me come home? ... How can I return when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty [that is] lived out as slavery?*” The answer, Henri says, can be found in living with gratitude as a discipline and not just in response to gifts or favours received. To live in gratitude is not only a discipline; it is a choice.

Reading – Luke 15:25-31

Discussion questions:

- Although there is a discrepancy between the parable and the painting, Henri is convinced that the man standing on the right represents the elder son.
What justifies this belief? In what ways does Rembrandt resemble the elder son?
- How has the elder son left home? Why does Henri identify with him? In what ways do you identify with him?
- Why is it more difficult for the elder son to return home than for the prodigal son?

- Why are trust and gratitude such essential disciplines for Henri?
Why must we make a conscious effort to practice these disciplines?
 - Henri states: “*Resentment and complaints, deep as they may seem, can vanish in the face of him in whom the full light of Sonship is visible*”.
- In what ways is Jesus the elder son? In this role what does Jesus reveal to us about the nature of God?

Session 4 - The Father

Themes:

Nouwen says the painting just as easily could have been called “*The Welcome by the Compassionate Father*.” In the painting, the father’s hands are the true central point. The light and the eyes of others focus on those hands. The left hand is masculine while the right hand is more feminine. So the character “*is mother as well as father*” – welcoming, holding and caressing the son. The painting is about the father’s love for both of his sons. Many people live with secret feelings that they are not worthy of love, or they wonder whether others truly love them. Nouwen felt that way – he rarely felt or experienced the intimacy that he wrote about so often. He suffered from loneliness. The father of the prodigal son though, invites us to experience joy which can be more difficult than experiencing sadness or frustration. Joy, like gratitude, is a choice. “*It requires choosing for the light even when there is much darkness to frighten me, choosing for life even when the forces of death are so visible, and choosing for the truth even when I am surrounded by lies*”.

Reading – Luke 15:20-24

Discussion questions:

- According to Henri, God’s “*only desire is to bless*”.
- How does Rembrandt convey this sense of blessing in his painting?
When in your life have you felt especially blessed?

- Look at the hands, the central point of the painting. The left hand is strong and muscular. The right hand is refined, soft and very tender. The left hand touches and holds; the right hand comforts and consoles.

What meaning does Henri see in the differences between these hands? How does this change your understanding of the parable?

- Henri asks: “*Wouldn't it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly?*.”

What are you doing to open yourself to God's love? Why is this often difficult? When have you felt unworthy of God's love?

- According to Henri: “*Celebration belongs to God's Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them*”.

How does this statement affect how you see God? When in your life have you felt great joy? What can you do to find joy in the little things of everyday life?

- Given all the darkness in our world there is much temptation to be cynical.

When are you inclined toward cynicism? How do you respond to people who are perpetually cynical?

Finally - Becoming the Father and Living the Painting

Themes:

We are called to be as compassionate as God is compassionate. We are called to follow Jesus' example as a son – “*the younger son without being rebellious*” and “*the elder son without being resentful*”. We are also called to grow into spiritual fatherhood – this means both father and mother, masculine and feminine. All of that is easy to say but very difficult to live.

To be compassionate means we do not compare ourselves to others and we are not competitive either, Henri says. He finds three major traits in a compassionate father: grief (*the discipline of the heart that sees the sins of*

the world), forgiveness, and generosity. The father said to the elder son: “*All I have is yours,*” and Henri adds: “*There is nothing the father keeps for himself. He pours himself out for his sons*”. Henri adds to his description of spiritual fatherhood “*the radical discipline of being home*”. There is something foundational about the father being home, where the father waits and the transformation from son to father that takes place in an individual.

Nouwen admits that he spent time as the rebellious young son in search of a home, which he found at L’Arche Daybreak, and also spent time feeling as angry and alienated as the elder son. He says few people actually claim spiritual fatherhood for themselves because “*the pains are too obvious, the joys too hidden*”. Henri ultimately relates to the “*bent-over old father*” who is poised “*to stretch out to all who suffer, to rest upon the shoulders of all who come, and to offer the blessing that emerges from the immensity of God’s love*”.

Questions to Think About:

- Henri asks: “*Hasn’t the Church in the past stressed obedience in a fashion that made it hard to claim spiritual fatherhood, and hasn’t our consumer society encouraged us to indulge in childish self-gratification*”.

Where in your life have you felt this kind of pressure and how have you responded to it?

- In what ways do you “*remain subject to . . . competitive ways*” of the world and “*expect to be rewarded for all the good*” you did? How can you move beyond this to become the father or mother Henri says we are called to be?
 - Henri names “*three ways to a truly compassionate fatherhood: grief, forgiveness, and generosity*”.
- What does he mean by each of these disciplines? Why are they so difficult?

- How do you respond to Henri’s challenging, almost chilling words that spiritual fatherhood involves loneliness and a “*dreadful yet*

fruitful emptiness”? Henri explains: “That same dreadful emptiness is also the place of true freedom. It is the place where there is nothing left to lose, where love has no strings attached, and where real spiritual strength is found. ... I know that I can welcome anyone there without condemnation and offer hope. There I am free to receive the burdens of others without any need to evaluate, categorize, or analyse. There, in that completely non-judgmental state of being, I can engender liberating trust”.

Do you know anyone who has attained this spiritual state, describe them. How do you feel about them? What do you think enabled them to reach this state of development?

- In what ways do you wish you were able to be more like the father in the Gospel story?
- *“Rembrandt portrays the father as the man who has transcended the ways of his children. His own loneliness and anger may have been there, but they have been transformed by suffering and tears. His loneliness has become endless solitude, his anger boundless gratitude. This is who I have to become. I see it as clearly as I see the immense beauty of the father’s emptiness and compassion. Can I let the younger and the elder son grow in me to the maturity of the compassionate father?”.*

How do you answer Henri’s question for yourself? What are you moving from? What are you moving to? What step or steps can you take to make this movement?

OPENING PRAYER

God of compassion,
you await the sinner’s return and spread a feast to welcome home the lost.
Save us from the temptations that lead us away from you,
and draw us back by the constancy of your love,
that we may take our place in your household
and gladly share our inheritance with others.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. **Amen**