



Return of the Prodigal Son

Part III The Father

Luke 15: 11-12, 20-24

Jesus told the tax collectors and sinners this parable, “A man had two sons, and the younger son said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of your estate that should come to me.’ So the father divided the property between them. After the son lost everything he said, “I shall get up and go to my father and I shall say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as you would treat one of your hired workers.” So he got up and went back to his father. While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son.’ But his father ordered his servants, ‘Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.’ Then the celebration began.

Opening Prayer

You come before me with restless hearts,
seeking the peace that only my love can give.
Even when you wander far from me,
I never stop watching the road for your return.
Come home to my embrace—
for my mercy has no end,
and my joy is complete when you are near.
Amen

Reflection Questions

Take a moment to choose one or two to share aloud.

1. Nouwen writes that the final call of the spiritual life is not to be the prodigal or the elder son, but to become like the Father. What does it mean for you to “become like the Father”? What qualities of the Father do you find most challenging to embody—compassion, patience, generosity, or forgiveness? Why?
2. Nouwen describes compassion as the heart of the Father’s being. How does Nouwen distinguish compassion from pity or condescension? In your own life, where have you

- experienced the Father's compassion most clearly—and where might you be called to extend it?
3. The Father's love "sees beyond appearances" and recognizes both sons as beloved. How does this way of seeing transform relationships—with family, community, or those who are different from us? What prevents us from seeing others through the Father's eyes?
 4. The Father lets both sons go their own way, respecting their freedom. What does Nouwen teach us about love that allows freedom, even when it leads to pain? How can this kind of love shape our parenting, ministry, or leadership?
 5. Nouwen emphasizes that the Father's joy is rooted in communion, not control. How does joy manifest in the Father's welcome? In your life or ministry, what practices open you to that same joy?
 6. The Father's love includes suffering—a willingness to feel pain out of love for his children. How does Nouwen understand the suffering of the Father? How might embracing our own suffering deepen our compassion?
 7. Nouwen says the journey of the spiritual life is to move from being the one who receives compassion to the one who gives it. What steps can you take to grow from being loved by God to living as a source of love for others? Where do you see yourself on that journey?
 8. The Father's blessing affirms the belovedness of both sons. What does it mean to bless others as the Father blesses? Who in your life might be waiting for a blessing—your forgiveness, affirmation, or understanding?
 9. Nouwen reclaims the image of "Father" as one of tenderness, not authority or power. How does this affect your image of God? How might our faith communities reflect this more nurturing image of the Father?
 10. The book ends with Nouwen's desire to live as the compassionate Father—to "stretch out his arms in blessing." What might it look like for you, today, to live as a compassionate parent, friend, or minister? What practices or disciplines might help you grow into that identity?

Closing Prayer

You welcome us home each time we turn our hearts away.
There is no distance too great, no time too long—your arms are always open.
Help us to live each day in the joy of forgiveness
and in the freedom of your unending love.
As you welcome us, you ask us to welcome one another—
those who seek to return, those who long to be seen, those who need your grace.
For in every act of mercy, we share your heart.
Amen.