



Artist Rembrandt

Year 1661–1669

Medium Oil on canvas

Dimensions 262 cm × 205 cm (103 in × 81 in)

Location Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg

Faith Sharing Calendar

Week 1-- Introduction

Week 2 –Part 1 The Younger Son

Week 3-Part 2 The Elder Son

Week 4- Part 3 The Father

Week 5-Conclusion and where do we go from here?

Homework, for the last session, draw your take on the prodigal son.

Begin by reading the Prodigal Son narrative. I suggest using the book as the text rather than Luke's gospel.

Perhaps read this summary of the Introduction as you invite your group to look at the painting.

When I first stood before Rembrandt's *Return of the Prodigal Son*, the long, familiar story found new life. The painted figures — the son, the father, the onlookers — suddenly gave me a fresh understanding of my vocation and a renewed strength to live it.

At the heart of this painting is a first-century parable, its author, and me — and perhaps you — on our life's journey. Many of us are drawn first to the father's hands, to the old man who reaches and lays his hand upon the shoulders of the boy. Have you ever felt that small and vulnerable — wanting to crawl into your mother's lap and weep? Have you ever been so weary, so travel-worn, that you longed simply to go home, to be safe, to rest where you belong?

Rembrandt invites us to meet him where he painted the father and the son — God and humanity, compassion and misery — all contained in one circle of love. What does this image teach us about love? About mercy?

But look beyond the central figures. Who are the other people in the scene? Rembrandt's reading of the gospel includes people who listen with their hearts more than with their heads — those who are sensitive to the life behind words. And then there are those who stand at a distance. Have I ever dared to step into the center, to kneel, and to let myself be held by a forgiving God? Or have I preferred the role of bystander?

Often I find myself on the outside looking in. Sometimes my watching is simply curious. Sometimes it's envious. Sometimes it's anxious. And — if we are honest — sometimes I watch with love. The bystanders in the painting capture those attitudes: two women standing behind the father, each at her own distance; a seated man staring into space as if looking at nothing and everything; a tall man, upright and critical, appraising the scene before him. They are different examples of not getting involved.

That place of watching calls me out. It reminds me that receiving love, forgiveness, and healing is often far harder than giving it. Acceptance is not a transaction — it's not about earning, deserving, or being rewarded. It's beyond all that. It asks for surrender. It asks for complete trust.

So hear me plainly: come on — don't be bashful. Your Father wants to hold you, too. Don't cling to the resistance that keeps you away. Let yourself come to your senses. Fall to your

knees. Let the tears come. Surrender again to a love that knows no bounds. Move beyond your careful thoughts and arguments; lean into your feelings. Be brave enough to let yourself be wholly embraced by the safety of the father's arms.

Are you like the prodigal who rehearses speeches on the road, polishing apologies, preparing justifications, imagining how things will unfold when you arrive? "I will say this... I will do that..." We work hard at the performance of contrition. But Rembrandt's father doesn't wait. He runs, he embraces, he forgives without checklist or speech.

Jesus said, "Anyone who loves me will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come and make our home with him." Those words have always struck me. I am told, in Scripture, that I am God's home. Can I be that for God? Can I allow God to be that in me?

If God is a jealous lover — wanting all of me, all the time — when will I be ready to accept that consuming, tender love? Looking at Rembrandt, I sense something prophetic: he looked at people and at this world through the eyes of God. He saw the ache beneath our appearances, the hunger for belonging that we so often mask.

During our time together, let the painting be more than a picture. Let it be a mirror. Where are you standing? At the center or off to the side? Are you a bystander who watches life from a safe distance, or are you willing to be held, forgiven, and called home?

The father's hands are extended to every one of us. The invitation is simple and urgent: come home. Receive the embrace you have rehearsed a thousand times in your head but never accepted in your heart. Let love find you. Let it change the places inside you that have grown hard.

If you are on your way — as we all are in one way or another — go on. Keep walking. And when you reach the threshold, don't delay with speeches or plans. Enter. Kneel. Allow yourself to be loved without condition. That is the vocation Rembrandt showed me: to live as someone who has been received, forgiven, and permanently at home in the heart of God. Let us walk together!

Amen.

For the next gathering we will look at Part 1 The Younger Son.