



Return of the Prodigal Son

Part I the Younger Son

Luke 15: 11-15a

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 a few days, the younger son collected all his belongings and set off to a distant

country where he squandered his inheritance on a life of dissipation. When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need.

So he hired himself out to one of the local citizens who sent him to his farm to tend the swine. And he longed to eat his fill of the pods on which the swine fed, but nobody gave him any. Coming to his senses he thought, ‘How many of my father’s hired workers have more than enough food to eat, but here am I, dying from hunger. 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.

Opening Prayer

Loving Father, we come before you as your children, sometimes restless and wandering, longing for your embrace.

Guide our hearts as we reflect on the journey of the younger son and our own need for your mercy.

Reflection Questions

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

1. Nouwen reflects on the younger son’s desire for freedom and independence. When have you experienced a longing to “leave home” spiritually, emotionally, or relationally?
2. What parallels do you see between the younger son’s decision to take his inheritance and moments in your own life when you have chosen self-reliance over trust in God?
3. How does Nouwen describe the restlessness of the younger son? Where do you notice restlessness in your own life today?

4. Nouwen says the younger son's leaving is more than a geographical move—it's a movement of the heart. In what ways have you experienced "inner leaving" from God or from your true self?
5. The younger son reaches a point of deep poverty and hunger. How does this mirror the spiritual hunger that can come from seeking fulfillment apart from God?
6. Nouwen suggests that the prodigal's search for love in "distant places" is a universal human story. What "distant places" do people today often turn to for love and meaning?
7. The moment of conversion begins when the son "comes to his senses." What does "coming to your senses" look like in your spiritual life?
8. Nouwen emphasizes that returning to the Father requires humility and trust. Why is it often so difficult to admit our need and return home?
9. What role do you think shame and fear play in the younger son's hesitation to return? Have you ever felt those same barriers in your own return to God?
10. Nouwen admits that he strongly identifies with the younger son. In what ways do you see yourself in the younger son's story?
11. How does the image of the younger son in Rembrandt's painting help you enter into the reality of God's mercy?
12. If you could speak to the younger son at his lowest point, what words of encouragement would you give him?

Closing Prayer

For whom and what shall we pray for...

Gracious God, thank you for welcoming us home whenever we return to you.

May we live each day in the joy of your forgiveness and the freedom of your love.

May we welcome those who want to walk back into our lives.

We ask this in your holy name.

Amen