

the RETURN *of the* PRODIGAL SON *the OLDER BROTHER*

Day 1 — READ Luke 15:1-2, 25-32

to whom is Jesus speaking

The parable of the prodigal son is one of the most well known of all Jesus' parables, but it's surprisingly NOT about the wayward son. If you read carefully, Jesus is responding to the Pharisees' self-righteous muttering (Luke 15:1). Jesus paints a rich picture of an older son who is self-righteous in the face of forgiveness. Is this a surprise to you? What other insights do you find in this passage?

Days 2 & 3 — READ Luke 15:11, 25-32

the older son

Have you ever imagined the older son as lost? In what way did he leave home even as he stayed home? What sorts of complaints does the eldest son share with his father? What feelings would he be carrying that fuels those complaints? **IMAGINE** what it was like for the older son to witness his younger brother abandon his family and then watch his father standing near the road day after day waiting for him for months or maybe years. How did that time feed his anger and bitterness? Can you identify a "lostness" in the older son?

Have you ever been in the shoes of the older son? Have you ever done the right thing while you watched another person make horrible choices that had negative consequences in your life? Most of us have. You may have grown up with irresponsible siblings. Perhaps you've been part of a group project at school where some members didn't pull their weight. You may have experience with a best friend or spouse or even a parent whose poor choices have laid an unfair burden on you. How did that situation make you feel? What did you say? Were you able to forgive?

Day 4 — READ Luke 18:9-14

In this scripture we see another example of the character of the older and younger sons. The irony of the lost older son is that he doesn't even realize he's lost. Pride can be blinding. Jeremiah 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Through the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus is trying to break through the Pharisees' pride as well as share the Father's heart to give grace. But the Pharisees have been deceived by their own hearts creating a sense of self-righteousness that feeds their pride and condemns others.

SEE how the father goes out to the older son. Henri Nouwen writes in *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (pg 82), "Is there a way out?...I cannot forgive myself. I cannot make myself feel loved. By myself I cannot leave the land of my anger. I cannot bring myself home nor can I create communion on my own. I can desire it, hope for it, wait for it, yes, pray for it. But my true freedom I cannot fabricate for myself. That must be given to me. I am lost. I must be found and brought home by the shepherd who goes out to me."

Some of us are living like the lost older son. Are you? Are you trapped in anger, bitterness, or resentment? Do you want to be free of it all? Are you ready to call out to the shepherd?

Day 5 — What's in the painting?

Using the Rembrandt painting from your program or the JW website, spend some time studying the older son on the right. **NOTICE** how he keeps his distance from the father and younger son. What is going on inside this man? What will he do? Will he come closer and embrace his brother as his father did, or will he walk away in anger and disgust? Although we never find out what the response of the eldest son is, we "know with unwavering certainty that the heart of the father is one of limitless mercy."
Henri Nouwen, pg 75

WRITE an ending to this story. How does this oldest son respond to the father's invitation to join the celebration? If you had to paint yourself into this picture, where would you be?

NEXT STEPS

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri Nouwen

Abba's Child by Brennan Manning

Good and Beautiful God by James Bryan Smith