



Chapter V

The Prodigal Son

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

Pages 116 - 127



focus

fellowship of Catholic
university students

UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Introduction

We've seen the big picture of the Christian faith — the heart of the Gospel. We've seen how God created us out of sheer love, to share his love with us as his children and how we broke our relationship with God through sin (chapter 1). We've also seen how even though we were sinners, God loved us so much he became man in Jesus Christ (chapter 2) and offered his life as a gift of love on the cross in order not only to restore our relationship with the Father and but also to send his Spirit into our hearts to transform us with his very divine life (chapter 3). We've also seen how this new life in Christ is lived in God's covenant family, the Catholic Church (chapter 4).

Now we will consider what all this means for us personally. To do that, we will turn to a famous story Jesus told; but we will look at it with new eyes, the eyes of a first-century Jew hearing this story for the very first time. The story is known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Turning Away from the Father (v. 11-16)

¹¹ And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; ¹² and the

younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

This story is absolutely shocking. In the first-century Jewish context, a son asking for his share of the inheritance — the family property — is in effect saying to his father, “I wish you were dead. I value this property more than my relationship with you.” To make matters worse, the son sells off his portion of the property, which is not his right to do. The family land is not his own. He is just a trustee, called to care for his portion of the land during his lifetime so that future generations could benefit from it, just as his ancestors had done for him. To sell the family land is to break covenant with his many generation of grandparents who came before him and his many generation of grandchildren who will come after him. To top it off, he goes to a distant land and spends the money on loose living and prostitutes (Luke 15:13, 31).

The consequences of his decisions are devastating. He loses everything and becomes poor and hungry. He finds himself separated from his loving father, far from home, working as a slave for a foreign master. All of us can relate to this story at some level. We've all had moments or seasons in our lives when we rejected the Father's love, when we turned away from God and turned to other things to find happiness and fulfillment in life.

The Return of the Son (v. 17-24)

17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."' "

Finally, at this low point, the son remembers his father and how much better his life would be if he were back in his father's house. He regrets what he has done. He acknowledges that he has sinned. Ashamed of his horrific actions, he plans to tell his father that he is not worthy to be called his son. He views himself as no better than one of the hired servants.

This is a good first step of repentance. Indeed, the word "repent" literally means "to turn, to turn back." And the son does this: he turns away from sin and humbly recognizes how he severely hurt his relationship with his father. Though the younger son takes this first step, the father has something even more amazing in store for him.

20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; 23 and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; 24 for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Perhaps more shocking than the son's sinfulness is the father's generous, merciful love. After all the father had to endure, we might understand if the father rejected the son and disowned him. We might understand if the father treated the son like a hired servant and make him work his way back into the family. But the one thing we would never expect is for the father welcome the son back with such wholehearted, lavish love. The father is described as seeing the son coming *in the distance* — meaning the father was already on the lookout for his son, longing for him to return. As soon as the father catches the first glimpse of his son returning, he *runs* out to meet him. This too is surprising, for an older man in first-century Jewish culture was expected to walk deliberately with honor. But moved with such joy, the father casts aside all human decorum and rushes out to embrace his son.

Most significant is what the father does when the son tries to say, "I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." At this, the father immediately cuts him off. He will have none of it. The father surprisingly offers the son an amazing feast to welcome him home. He will not let his son view himself as a hired servant, as someone who has to earn the father's love and approval. No, the father's love is freely given, and the son is always the son no matter what he has done. The son who was dead is alive again; he was lost but is now found.

The Older Son (v. 25-32)

²⁵ "Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. ²⁶ And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. ²⁷ And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' ²⁸ But

he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, ²⁹ but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' ³¹ And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

The older brother is angry because the younger brother has returned home to such a warm reception. "Why does the sinful younger brother, who has so shamed the family and disgraced himself with prostitutes, get such a big party?" he wonders.

Notice how the older brother views his relationship with the father: he sees himself as a servant, someone who for many years he served the father and never disobeyed the father's command. He complains that after so many years of faithful service, he never got such a feast as his reward. He views himself as a servant who should receive the father's love because of his faithfulness.

Which Son Do You Relate to More?

Both sons have the same fundamental problem: they think they have to *earn* the father's love. We can do the same today. In our modern age especially, we are taught that we have to earn love — from our parents, teachers, coaches, friends and followers on social media. It's not surprising, then, that we apply this same notion to God. On one hand, we can be like the older brother and think that we earn God's love through fulfilling our obligations, checking all the right Catholic

boxes, our orthodoxy, our Rosary devotions, doing the right things, saying the right things and believing the right things.

On the other hand, some of us feel like the younger brother. Maybe we've turned away from God. Maybe we've done some bad things, or some bad things have happened to us and we cannot comprehend that God would want to love us. We are not lovable. We are unworthy of God's love. We may think, "After all I've done, how could I possibly be beloved by the Father?"

But here's the key: It doesn't matter which son we identify with more. Whether we're like the older brother, trying to be faithful, checking all the right boxes, or we're more like the younger brother who has sinned and wandered far from home, both sons — all of us — need to know the Father's love.

Your Decision

Do you know the Father's love? Indeed, do you know God in the Biblical sense of "knowing"? In Scripture, the Hebrew word for "to know" (*yada*) means more than just intellectual head knowledge, like knowing a fact ("I know Rome is the capital of Italy;" "I know that $2+2=4$ ").

Yada, in Scripture, means to know the person, to be in deep, covenant friendship with the person. In the Book of Genesis, for example, "to know" (*yada*) can even describe the profound union of a husband and wife: "When Adam knew his wife Eve, she bore him a son, Seth" (Genesis 4:26).

The difference between the modern notion of knowing (head

knowledge) and the Biblical notion of *yada* (to know in a deep, covenant friendship) is like the difference between textbook knowledge and a marriage proposal. It's one thing to know God in the modern sense — to know God exists, to know many facts about him and the Catholic faith; to believe God is real and true. That's head knowledge. It's another thing to know God in the sense of committing your entire life to him and abiding in a deep covenant friendship with him.

We must pose the personal question: How well do you know Jesus in the Biblical sense of *yada*? He is calling us to follow him, to surrender our lives to him, to be his disciples. When we say yes to Christ's call and give him everything, he doesn't take away anything that makes life good:

If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. ... Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.¹

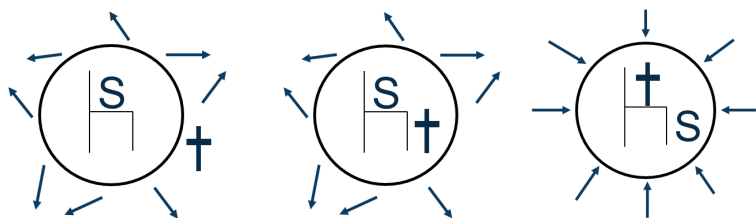
Now, let's pause for just a minute, and recognize that this is the climax of the Bible study. At this point in the study, we want you to personally invite your Bible study participants to make Jesus Christ the center of their lives.

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Mass, Imposition of The Pallium and Conferral of The Fisherman's Ring For The Beginning of The Petrine Ministry of The Bishop Of Rome, Homily Of His Holiness Benedict XVI, St. Peter's Square, Sunday, 24 April 2005, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html March 13, 2020.

You are going to do some of this at the end of your Bible study this week. That said, it is also essential that you take time to meet with each of your Bible study participants individually and allow them to make a decision about Jesus Christ. However, this point in the study is a critical moment, so here is some guidance for the end of your Bible study.

First, as you consider making this invitation to your Bible study, one way to present a relationship with God is in three simple stages: 1) God is not a part of my life. I rule over my life myself. 2) God is a part of my life, but not the center. He's important and I involve him in my decisions sometimes, but I still rule over my life myself. 3) God is the very center of my life. I surrender my life, my plans, my dreams all in his hands and seek to do his will and not my own. He is the Lord of my life. He is sitting on the throne of my heart.

To help you explain this, see the images below.



(Note, the lines refer to different aspects of our lives: family, friends, finances, reputation, success, etc.)

Next, you can ask the following questions to the members of your study:

Looking at these three images, where would you place yourself? Why?

Right now, will you make the decision to place Jesus Christ at the center of your life? Will you give your life to him and choose to follow him?

If they are unwilling to make this commitment, ask them:

What is preventing you from committing your life to Jesus as a disciple?

Or, if they are willing to make this commitment, take a moment and pray with them. Ask them:

Can we take a minute right now to express your desire to invite Christ more deeply into your life?

Then, you can pray together in your own way, or you can pray the following prayer or one of your choosing:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (CCC 435).

MORE BACKGROUND: KEY CONCEPTS

Conversion (CCC 1426):

Conversion to Christ, the new birth of Baptism, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Body and Blood of Christ received as food have made us “holy and without blemish,” just as the Church herself, the Bride

of Christ, is “holy and without blemish.” Nevertheless the new life received in Christian initiation has not abolished the frailty and weakness of human nature, nor the inclination to sin that tradition calls concupiscence, which remains in the baptized such that with the help of the grace of Christ they may prove themselves in the struggle of Christian life. This is the struggle of conversion directed toward holiness and eternal life to which the Lord never ceases to call us.

Repentance (CCC 1430):

Jesus’ call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, “sackcloth and ashes,” fasting and mortification, but at the conversion of the heart, interior conversion. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance.

Interior repentance is a radical reorientation of our whole life, a return, a conversion to God with all our heart, an end of sin, a turning away from evil, with repugnance toward the evil actions we have committed. At the same time it entails the desire and resolution to change one’s life, with hope in God’s mercy and trust in the help of his grace. This conversion of heart is accompanied by a salutary pain and sadness which the Fathers called *animi cruciatus* (affliction of spirit) and *compunctio cordis* (repentance of heart).

Mercy and Forgiveness (CCC 1847):

“God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us.” To receive his mercy, we must admit our faults. “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

Passage: Luke 15:11-32

Introduction

1. Launching Question: Think of a time when you've had to make a significant apology. How did you feel about it beforehand? What were your feelings afterwards?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

We've seen the big picture of the Christian faith – the heart of the Gospel. We've seen how God created us of sheer love, to share his love with us as his children and how we broke our relationship with God through sin (chapter 1). We've also seen how even though we were sinners, God loved us so much he became man in Jesus Christ (chapter 2) and offered his life as a gift of love on the Cross not only to restore our relationship with the Father and but also to send his Spirit into our hearts to transform us with his very divine life (chapter 3). And we've seen how Jesus is inviting us to experience this new life in him not as isolated individuals, but all together in the one covenant family of God, the fulfillment of God's plan for the kingdom, the Catholic Church (chapter 4).

Now we will consider what all this means for us personally. To do that, we will turn to a famous story Jesus told, but we will listen to it with new ears the ears of a first-century Jew hearing this story for the very first time. The story is known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Turning Away from the Father (v. 11-16)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Let's turn to the beginning of the story.

(Read Luke 15:11-16)

2. There are many reasons why this story would be shocking to a first-century Jewish audience. What reasons can you think of?

Answer: Allow the group to discuss. After the group shares some ideas, share with them the following (if not already discussed):

A son asking for his share of the inheritance — the family property — is in effect saying to his father, "I wish you were dead...I value this property more than my relationship with you."

To make matters worse, the son sells off his portion of the property, which is not his right to do. The family land is not his own. He is just a trustee, called to care for his portion of the land during his lifetime so that future generations could benefit from it, just as his ancestors had done for him. To sell the family land is to break covenant with his many generation of grandparents who came before him and his many generation of grandchildren who will come after him.

To top it off, he goes to a distant land (a gentile land filled with non-believers) and spends the money on loose living and prostitutes (Luke 15:13, 31).

3. What are some of the consequences of the younger son's decision?

Answer: The consequences of his decisions are devastating. He loses everything and becomes poor and hungry. He finds himself separated from his loving father, far from home, working as a slave for a foreign master.

4. All of us can relate to this story at some level. We've all had moments or seasons in our lives when we rejected the Father's love, when we turned away from God and turned to other things to find happiness and fulfillment in life. Can anyone share a time when God or your Christian faith was not the top priority in your life? When you valued other things — things like wealth, possessions, honors, being liked, career, sex, comfort, pleasure — more than you valued God? How did that go for you? What was your life like?

Allow the group to discuss.

The Return of the Son (v. 17-24)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Let's continue the story.

(Read Luke 15:17-19)

5. What do you think has changed in the son's heart? How does he view himself in relationship to his father?

Answer: Finally, at this low point, the son remembers his father and how much better his life would be if he were back in his father's house. He regrets what he has done. He acknowledges that he has sinned. Ashamed of his horrific actions, he plans to tell his father he is not worthy to be called his son. He views himself as no better than one of the hired servants.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

This is a good first step of repentance. Indeed, the word "repent" literally means "to turn, to turn back." And the son does this. He turns away from sin and humbly recognizes how he severely hurt his relationship with his father. But that's not the end of his story. Let's keep reading:

(Read Luke 15:20-24)

6. What is surprising about the Father's response?

Allow the group to discuss. After the group shares some ideas, share with them the following (if not already discussed):

After all the father had to endure, we might understand if the father rejected the son and disowned him. We might understand if the father treated the son like a hired servant and make him work his way back into the family.

But the one thing we would never expect is for the father to welcome the son back with such wholehearted, lavish love.

The father is described as seeing the son coming in the distance—meaning the father was always on the lookout for his son, longing for him to return.

As soon as the father catches the first glimpse of his son returning, he runs out to meet him. This too is surprising, for an older man in first-century Jewish culture was expected to walk deliberately with honor. But moved with such joy, the father casts aside all human decorum and rushes out to embrace his son.

7. How is the Father's view of his son different from the son's view of himself?

Answer: What the father does when the son tries to say "I am no longer worthy to be called your son..." is most significant. At this, the father immediately cuts him off. He will have none of it. The father surprisingly offers the son an amazing feast to welcome him home. He will not let his son view himself as a hired servant, as someone who has to earn the father's love and approval. No, the father's love is freely given, and the son is always the son no matter what he has done. The son who was dead is alive again, he was lost but is now found.

The Older Son (v. 25-32)

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

There is another character in this story, the older brother. Let's read his part in the story.

(Read Luke 15:25-32)

8. Why is the older son so upset? How does he view his relationship with the father?

Answer: The older brother is angry because the younger brother has returned home to such a warm reception. He views himself as a servant who should receive the father's love because of his faithfulness.

9. Now that we've heard the story of both sons, which son do you relate to more? Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Your Decision

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Interestingly, both sons actually have the same fundamental problem: they think they have to *earn* the Father's love. We can do the same today. In our modern age especially, we are taught that we have to earn love — from our parents, teachers, coaches, friends and followers on social media. We have to earn other people's love by how we look, how we perform, how much money we make, etc. It's not surprising, then, that we apply this same notion to God.

On one hand, we can be like the older brother and think that we earn God's love through fulfilling our obligations, checking all the right Catholic boxes, our orthodoxy, our rosary devotions, doing the right things, saying the right things and believing the right things. On the other hand, some of us feel like the younger brother. Maybe we've turned away from God. Maybe we've done some bad things, or maybe

some bad things have happened to us and we cannot comprehend that God would want to love us. We are not lovable. We are unworthy of God's love.

10. What about you? Do you ever feel like you are trying to earn God's love or are running away from him because you think you don't deserve love?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

In Scripture, the Hebrew word for "to know" (*yada*) means more than just intellectual head knowledge, like knowing a fact ("I know Rome is the capital of Italy;" "I know that 2+2=4"). *Yada*, in Scripture means to know the person, to be in deep, covenant friendship with the person. In the Book of Genesis, for example, "to know" (*yada*) can even describe the profound union of a husband and wife: "When Adam knew his wife Eve, she bore him a son, Seth" (Genesis 4:26).

It's one thing to know God in the modern sense — to know God exists, to know many facts about him and the Catholic faith; to believe God is real and true. That's head knowledge. It's another thing to know God in the sense of committing your entire life to him and abiding in a deep covenant friendship with him.

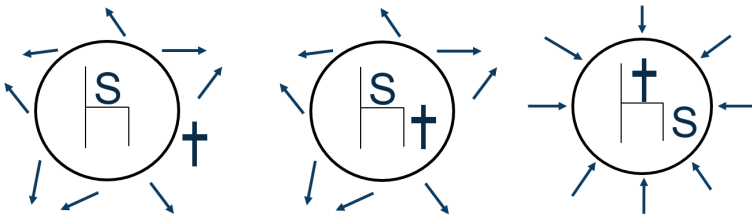
11. As we near the close of this chapter, we have to ask ourselves the question: "In which way do I "know" God?" Do you just know *about* him, or do you *know* him?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Finally, Jesus offers us an incredible invitation know God deeply and personally. As we consider this invitation, it can be helpful to look at our relationship with God in three simple stages:

1. God is not a part of my life. I rule over my life myself.
2. God is a part of my life, but not the center. He's important and I involve him in my decisions sometimes, but I am still the one in control, pursuing my will and not His. I still rule over my life myself.
3. God is the very center of my life. I surrender my life, my plans, my dreams all in his hands and seek to do his will and not my own. He is the Lord of my life. He is sitting on the throne of my heart. See the images below.



12. Looking at these three images, where would you place yourself?
Why?

Allow the group to discuss.

Note to the leader: Please read aloud.

Right now, I want to invite you to make a decision to place Jesus Christ at the center of your life. This is a very personal question, and I want to talk about it with each of you individually. So, in the next week or so, I'd like to meet with you to discuss your relationship with Jesus, who he is in your life, and what next you can take to grow closer to him.

Let me leave you with this quote:

If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that He might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful? ... No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. ... Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life.²

² Pope Benedict XVI, Mass, Imposition of The Pallium and Conferral of The Fisherman's Ring For The Beginning of The Petrine Ministry of The Bishop Of Rome, Homily Of His Holiness Benedict XVI, St. Peter's Square, Sunday, 24 April 2005, accessed March 13, 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html.

NOTES
