

# STORIES OF FAITH

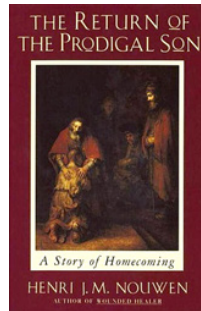
Lessons from the (Two) Lost Son(s)

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## PREPARATION & PRAYER

Read the Parable of the Lost (Prodigal) Son – Luke 15:11-32

Rembrandt's painting – The Return of the Prodigal Son – is the cover image and subject of Henri Nouwen's book with the same title.



Why do you think Nouwen suggests that a better title might be: 'The Parable of the TWO Lost Sons'...? In what ways are they each lost?

Let's spend a bit of time reflecting on his description of each son as he identifies with each of their postures.

## THE YOUNGER SON

The interesting thing about Nouwen's book however is that it highlights the fact that our running away to faraway lands doesn't necessarily stop once we decide to follow Christ. It happens each time we take the blessings God has given us (our "inheritance") and charge off to find our sense of identity and comfort in them... rather than in God.

*"Leaving home is much more than a historical event bound to time and place. It is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being... Leaving home is living as though I do not yet have a home and must look far and wide to find one... I leave home every time I lose faith in the voice that calls me the Beloved and follow the voices that offer a great variety of ways to win the love I so much desire. ...  
...over and over again I have left home. I have fled the hands of blessing and run off to faraway places..."*

*I am constantly surprised at how I keep taking the gifts God has given me – my intellectual and emotional gifts – and keep using them to impress people, receive affirmation and praise, and compete for rewards... It's almost as if I want to prove to myself and to my world that I do not need God's love, that I can make a life on my own, that I want to be fully independent. ...*

## FOR DISCUSSION

Can you think of any times or seasons in your life when this has been true for you?

## THE ELDER SON

Unfortunately, neither the parable or Nouwen stops there! In the second movement of the book, he describes his realization that he's probably more like the elder brother... depicted in the painting on the right, with arms folded in disapproval...

*"It is hard for me to concede that this bitter, resentful angry man might be closer to me in a spiritual way than the...younger brother. Yet the more I think about the elder son, the more I recognize myself in him. ... This is not something unique to me. There are many elder sons and elder daughters who are lost while still at home. And it is this lostness – characterized by judgment and condemnation, anger and resentment, bitterness and jealousy – that is so damaging to the human heart. ...*

*This lostness of the elder son is much harder to identify. After all, he did all the right things. He was obedient, dutiful, law-abiding, and hardworking. People respected him, admired him, praised him, and likely considered him a model son. Outwardly, the elder son was faultless. But when confronted by his father's joy at the return of his younger brother, a dark power erupts in him and boils to the surface. Suddenly, there becomes glaringly visible a resentful, proud, unkind, selfish person, one that had remained deeply hidden, even though it had been growing stronger and more powerful over the years. Similarly, my resentment is not something that can be easily distinguished and dealt with rationally. It is far more pernicious: something has attached itself to the underside of my virtue."*

## FOR DISCUSSION

Can you think of any seasons in your life when this has been your attitude or posture?

## THE FATHER

As N. T. Wright reminds us: "...of course the most remarkable character in the story is the father himself..."

o Firstly, we should reflect on the astonishing attitude of grace and love and patience that the Father shows to both of his sons. He moves towards both of them – even the bitter, resentful one. That is good news if, like Nouwen, we find ourselves acting more like him at times!

o And secondly, we should never forget that the most significant thing...is that we are in the Father's House! He calls us by name. Look at the opening of his reply to the elder brother: "My son, you are always with me, and [because you are always with me] everything I have is yours..." Ironically, in sulking and staying away from the party, the elder brother removed himself from the one thing that mattered – the Father's presence. How wonderful that the Father comes looking for him...

## FOR DISCUSSION

When and how has the Father moved towards you?

## LETS CLOSE IN PRAYERFUL THANKS TOGETHER