

The Return of the Prodigal Son



Rembrandt's painting, *The Returning of the Prodigal Son*, depicts the moment the prodigal son returns to his Father as told in the parable in Luke 15:11-31. There is much symbolism in this painting, and it invites all of us to step into the story – to step into the embrace of the Father ourselves. In this guide, we will take a first step into this painting that tells the greatest love story. If you are interested in going deeper to let this painting speak to you, we recommend Henri Nouwen's book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, which is his reflection based on the painting.

The Parable & the Painting: Luke 15:11-31

Read the Parable of the Prodigal Son slowly a couple times.

Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

“When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.

“Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”

The Different Characters in the Painting

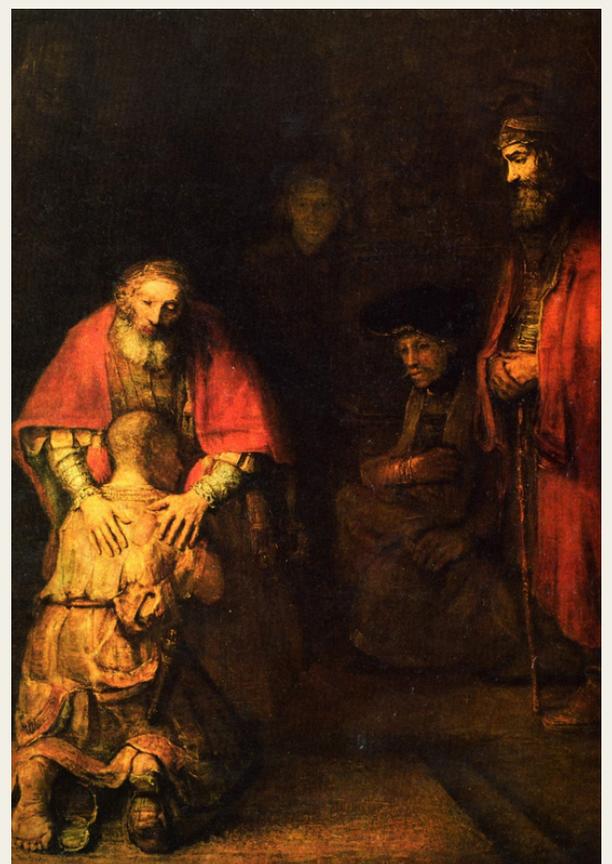
There are 6 people in this painting:

- The Father in the red cloak on the left of the painting.
- The younger son, kneeling and embraced by the Father.
- The older son in a red cloak on the right of the painting. He can also be seen as the Pharisees who looked with disdain of the Father's acceptance of the wayward son.
- The old man sitting to the right of the older son. During Rembrandt's time, "the parable of the Pharisees and the tax collector and the parable of the prodigal son were closely linked" (Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, p. 63), so it's likely this seated man represented the sinners and tax collectors the Pharisees referred to in Luke 15:1-2.
- Two women watching the Father-Son embrace from a distance, one closer than the other. They might be relatives or servants in the story.

Reflection Questions

With this parable sitting in your heart, spend some time to just look and gaze at the painting.

- Look at each character. What stirs in your heart? Which character do you feel most drawn to?
- Imagine yourself being in the painting, which character would you resonate most in that painting?
- Let the painting and the characters help you become more aware of your own heart and desire. Dialogue with Jesus and journal your reflection.



The Invitation

The Parable of the Prodigal Son speaks of the Father's deep forgiving and accepting love. We often read the story and focus on the younger son leaving and coming home, but the older son, though remaining at home, was not really at home either. Both sons' hearts were far from the Father, far from "home."

What is home? Home is where we belong, where we are loved and accepted, where we are affirmed in our identity, receive healing and comfort, and live in peace and rest. Richard Foster, in his book, *Prayer – Finding the Heart's True Home*, writes:

"Today the heart of God is an open wound of love. He aches over our distance and preoccupation. He mourns that we do not draw near to him. He grieves that we have forgotten him. He weeps over our obsession with muchness and manyness. He longs for our presence.

And he is inviting you – and me – to come home, to come home to where we belong, to come home to that for which we were created. His arms are stretched out wide to receive us. His heart is enlarged to take us in.

For too long we have been in a far country: a country of noise and hurry and crowds, a country of climb and push and shove, a country of frustration and fear and intimidation. And he welcomes us home: home to serenity and peace and joy, home to friendship and fellowship and openness, home to intimacy and acceptance and affirmation." (p.1)

The younger son in the parable left home by going away to seek other voices and pleasure to give him a sense of joy, of identity & belonging, and of meaning and purpose – kind of like what Foster said about being preoccupied by muchness, manyness, different noises & voices. The older son left home by doing all the right things but missing the Father's heart, presence, and & generous love that was not dependent on a list of to-dos. He became judgmental, resentful, and lived a slave mentality.

Leaving Home

- Do you identify with either of the sons? In what ways might you have left home and the Father's embrace?
 - Have you preoccupied yourself with opinions of others, voices of the world to tell you who you are, how you are to see/think about things instead of drawing close to the Father to receive His acceptance and let His voice of love lead you and guide you?
 - Have you stopped connecting with the Father regularly and intimately in this season? Stay in the Father's embrace as you reflect on this. Remember, His love is wrapping around you and there's no condemnation here.
 - Have you been doing all the things you feel you are supposed to do as a good and faithful Christian – reading the Scriptures, doing facetime, being part of a lifegroup, giving, serving....etc., yet have not connected with the tender heart of God that call you the beloved, apart from what you do? Different ways to identify if you're in this place are:

- How do you feel when you see others being accepted or forgiven easily? Or are you able to let the unconditional love and forgiveness of God to flow through you to others, who you don't think deserve it (unless they repent and do better)?
- You don't particularly feel connected to God's love or heart and you are just checking off the to-dos on your list.

Reflect on this and hear the invitation of the Father to come closer to His embrace.

Spend Time With the Painting Again



"I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness."

Jeremiah 31:3

- What does it look like for you to kneel like the prodigal son and be embraced by the Father?
- Imagine the Father's hands on your shoulders. How does that make you feel? What do you sense God the Father saying to you?
- Dialogue with God, journal your experience and what you receive.

Ending Prayer

End your reflection time by praying something like, "Father, I receive. I want to stay/come home where You are, where I am embraced and accepted by Your love. Thank you for Your open arms. Open my ears to hear Your voice of love and that would be enough for me. Thank you. In Jesus' name, Amen."

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