

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Luke 15:11-32

(discussion questions at the end)

As we dive into this passage let's recall what precipitated the triad of parables that make up this chapter (we looked at the first 2 parables—the lost sheep and the lost coin—last week.) The Pharisees and teachers of the law were grumbling about the fact that Jesus hung out with tax collectors and sinners.

All 3 of these parables are designed to address this grumbling by confronting them with portraits of the Father's heart. In the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin we see that the Father rejoices (and all of heaven with Him) when even one sinner repents. The implication being that we, too, should rejoice with whatever the Father rejoices over.

Now in the parable of the lost (prodigal) son we see the heart of the Father portrayed in even deeper, richer fashion by the Master Storyteller.

We're all familiar with this story/parable, so rather than looking at all the finer details of it, let's simply spend some time gazing at the heart of the father.

The father in the story (obviously representing God the Father) is deeply wounded and offended. The younger son, by asking for his share of the inheritance, is essentially saying, "I wish you were dead. I don't want anything to do with you. I'm better off without you." These are deeply hurtful words for any child to say to any parent. And the scandal of such a notion would not be lost on the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Jewish culture was steeped in "*honor your father and mother*", as it is the 5th of the great 10 commandments.

But notice what the father does in this story, how he reacts. He gives his son what he wants! Why would he do this? Surely he knows that this isn't in the son's best interest. And he would be fully within his rights to refuse such an audacious, rude, offensive request, if not outright punish his son for even uttering such a request. But the father gives his son what he asks for. What the son wants, what he thinks will make his life "better" is his "freedom". What does this tell us about our heavenly Father? As much as He loves us, He won't, He can't, make us love Him in return. And even though He knows that going our own way will only hurt us, He grants us our "freedom" to love Him or reject Him. Our Heavenly Father, though deeply grieved, understands that our love isn't worth anything if we don't have the choice to choose otherwise.

We know from the parable that while the son was still a long way off, "*his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son...*" (15:20). This implies that the father was looking for the return of his son. Notice, however, that the father at no point went searching for his son in the "distant country". At first glance this seems to contradict the parable of the lost sheep where the shepherd left the 99 sheep and went searching for the lost sheep. It's not a contradiction, rather there is an inherent difference. The sheep wandered off. The sheep did not make a conscious decision of "I don't want anything to do with this stupid shepherd and

this unruly herd. I'm outta here." This could, perhaps, be likened to the brother/sister who makes a series of poor decisions that ends them up further and further away from God and His Body...but at no point makes a conscious/rebellious decision to reject either. Therein lies the difference with the prodigal son. He wanted out, and made no bones about it. So the father gave him what he wanted. This should be very sobering for us. God, by giving us the freedom to make our own choices, knows that misery, pain, even grave destruction is a possibility. This goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden. God knew the potential harm that would occur if our original ancestors chose the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But that choice must be allowed if love is to mean anything.

So the heart of God is on display in this parable as seen more by what He desires than in what He allows; more in His reaction to getting what He wants (as seen by the sons return) more than His reaction to the offense against Him.

Have you ever conserved how humble God is? Sure, we can get our heads around the humility of Jesus (God the Son), but how about the humility of God the Father. The humble heart of God the Father is portrayed in the father in this parable. It is demonstrated by: granting the offensive request; in running to his son upon his return (a very undignified act which would not have been lost on the original hearers of this parable); and in how he received his son back, *"Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet."* (15:22). Do you see what is happening here? The father is not allowing the son to wallow in his guilt and shame. In fact, he's covering it up. The father could have still thrown a party but let the son stay in his dirty, worn out, pig-feeding clothes. The father could have made it all about himself, "Look how gracious I am, allowing this shameful son of mine to return." But no, the father covers up the son's sin and receives him fully back, reinstating him into the family...even though that's the last thing he deserved. So it is with our Heavenly Father. He gives us far better than we deserve. He accepts us fully, not partially after we have proven ourselves somehow. He loves us that much.

The real problem that both the older brother and younger brother shared is that neither of them really understood, trusted, or appreciated their father's heart. Likely that was due to never taking the time to "get it"...they were both too selfish and self-absorbed...even though such selfishness/self-absorption played itself out in different ways. The younger brother was more blatant and brash with his self-centeredness while the older brother was more cowardly (self-righteousness is always based on fear). Both suffered from not appreciating their father's love or finding their identity in their father's love. Both were looking for security in/through their own effort (the younger brother thought he could do life on his own; the older brother thought rule keeping was the key...both were wrong).

Do we find our security, identity in God's love? Are we appreciative/grateful for God's abundant love and allow it to mold and shape us? Or are we like the 2 brothers who both allowed their pride to blind them from their father's love...even though it was right under their nose? Have we "come to our senses" and recognized that being with the Father is the best

place to be? Do we serve the Father as a response to His love for us, or out of fear/insecurity or as a way to “out-perform” others?

Here’s another angle to think about this parable. We’ve all heard that God’s love is “unconditional”. (And that’s true, it is.) BUT, have we ever considered that while His love is a constant, never increasing nor diminishing, always present regardless of what we do type of love; it is possible to put ourselves in a place where we can’t experience that love? Think about it. The father in the parable loved his son (we could accurately say “unconditionally”), but the younger son’s ability to experience/feel that love was very conditional. Actually, we could say the same about the older son, even though he was close in proximity, his heart and attitude didn’t allow him to experience that love. This should cause us to ask ourselves: am I experiencing God’s great unconditional love for me? If the answer is no, we need to understand that it’s not because God’s love has changed in anyway, but rather that we have put some sort of barrier between us and God that is causing us to not experience it. The only remedy is to go to Him. The younger son needed to come home. The older son needed to join the party. God’s love is always there, always welcoming us, always beckoning us...we simply need to respond to it.

There’s yet another angle we could take with this parable (this parable is so rich and deep we could go on and on). It is common to hear of people who had such horrendous (or at least far from ideal) relationships with their fathers that they have trouble with the idea of “Father God”. On a certain level that is understandable, and we always want to be sensitive to the pain of others. But consider this: is the problem really the “Fatherhood” of God or the really poor example of a father someone had? Or to say it another way, perhaps were looking at the comparison the wrong way. Instead of comparing God the Father with our earthly fathers, perhaps we should be comparing our earthly fathers with our Heavenly Father.

Let me share a little bit for James Bryan Smith’s book, *The Good and Beautiful God*:

“The problem is that we begin with our understanding of what father means and project that onto God. That is not how it ought to work. When Jesus describes God as his Father, we have to let him define what fatherhood means. Karl Barth is helpful here: ‘It is...not that there is first of all human fatherhood and then a so-called divine fatherhood, but just the reverse; true and proper fatherhood resides in God and from this fatherhood what we know as fatherhood among us men is derived.’ What does Barth mean? The Trinity existed before the world was created. Long before God made humankind ‘in His image,...male and female,’ God existed as Father, Son, and Spirit. The relationship between Jesus and God has been defined—by Jesus—as that of Father and Son. Their relationship existed before any human male had offspring. God as Father and Jesus as Son existed before any human father and son (or daughter). Therefore, fatherhood is first defined by God and Jesus, not by Adam and his children. This has tremendous implications—and a great deal of healing—for us.”

Along this vein it's also helpful to understand that up until Jesus, people didn't really think of God as such a term as "father". It was a very rare usage in the Old Testament and didn't carry the relational emphasis that Jesus used.

Jesus understood God as Father because that is how He always related to Him. So as Jesus reveals God to us, He reveals His Father to us. All human fathers will fall short. So what is a good father like? Jesus reveals that in this parable. But that's not the only place. Think about the Lord's prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)—again, I will lean on James Bryan Smith:

God the Father is Present—"Our Father in heaven" (the original audience would understand "heaven" as near; the unseen realm around us, not some far off place.

God the Father is Pure—"hallowed be Your name"

God the Father is Powerful—"Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

God the Father is Provider—"Give us today our daily bread"

God the Father Pardons—"Forgive us our debts..."

God the Father Protects—"And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil"

To conclude, just like we're not told if the older brother changed his heart/attitude and joined the party, we're not told if the Pharisees and teachers of the law changed theirs. (Well, I guess we can assume that since they eventually conspired to have Jesus crucified they didn't repent, at least not in mass.) But it does make us wonder if perhaps some individuals within the grumbling group "came to their senses".

- Q. Do you trust your Heavenly Father? Do you believe His heart to be good, trustworthy, generous? How so? Or, in what ways do you find that difficult?**
- Q. Are you experiencing the Father great, unconditional, never-giving-up love for you? Describe that. Or, in what ways do you find that difficult/challenging?**
- Q. Which would you say you struggle with more: taking God's love for granted or not really being able to accept His love? Explain.**
- Q. In this parable we see what form the selfishness/self-centeredness take for both the older and younger brother. What form does your selfishness/self-centeredness often take?**

- Q. If you wanted to communicate to someone (a friend, family member, co-worker, neighbor, whoever) that God loves them, how would you describe it? What proof would you offer to back up such a claim?**
- Q. Think of all the various ways you “serve” (your family, your church family, whatever ways you otherwise volunteer and give of your time)...why do you do it? What’s your underlying motivation?**
- Q. Responding to God’s love for us is not a “one and done” sort of thing (that’s not how relationships work). How are you presently responding to God’s love? What are His current advances (His efforts to show you His love)?**
- Q. Did you ever think about running away from home? What kept you from doing so? Or if you actually did, why did you? (possible ice breaker)**
- Q. When you think about God in your mind’s eye, what is He like? What “mood” is He in? How does God as you imagine Him (and as you relate to Him) compare to the father in this parable?**