



**Discipleship 101**  
**New Believer Lesson #16**  
**The Return of the**  
**Prodigal and Rembrandt's**  
**Masterpiece**

Based on the Book,  
*The Return of the Prodigal Son,*  
by Henri Nouwen



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**Introduction:**

When studying this parable in its original Jewish context, the traditional title, “the Prodigal Son,” becomes misleading. Actually, the title that we know so well distorts the story’s true meaning. . . The parables of Jesus are a slice from the reality of life. . . They teach a message concerning the nature of God and the needs of human beings. . . This story about a father and his two sons communicates a profound awareness of the divine character. . . These attention-holding stories tell [Jesus’] listeners what God is like. They call each person to make a decision. God’s love is for everyone. God’s deep love is illustrated in the word picture of a father. People created in the divine image are challenged to reach out, one to another, with the same kind of Godlike compassion. . . Jesus intended each person to see himself or herself in this story. Each person who hears this story looks into a mirror.

**Brad H. Young, *The Compassionate Father and His Two Lost Sons, from Jesus the Jewish Theologian***

Read: Luke 15:11-32 in several translations if possible, several times.

Here is the English Standard Version: [Luke 15:11-32](#)

Here is the King James Version: [Luke 15:11-32](#)

Here is the Message Version [Luke 15:11-32](#)

Here is the New Living Translation [Luke 15:11-32](#)

**A Parable, a Painting, and a New Life:**

These next lessons are based upon four sources, but ultimately, all pivot about a parable Jesus revealed in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, verses 11-32. The parable is one commonly known of today as the parable of the prodigal son. The painting is a masterpiece created by Rembrandt called *Return of the Prodigal Son*. The new life is one described by Henri Nouwen in his self-effacing, devotionally tinged book titled, *The Return of the Prodigal Son – A Story of Homecoming*. I have also used an excellent book by Kenneth E. Bailey titled *The Cross and the Prodigal*. I highly recommend both of these books to anyone interested in becoming a serious disciple of Jesus.

**Rembrandt’s Painting – Some Background:**

When Rembrandt painted the *Return of the Prodigal*, he was old. This was one of his last completed works before he died. His tumultuous life had played out, and when he painted the aged father embracing his younger son, he had, in a similar sense, finally returned from his own cavorting in a “far country” (verse 13) to complete his life. The tired old eyes of the compassionate father now saw more clearly things on the inside of a man. As Nouwen states, “The Prodigal Son shows the painter's perception of his aged self – a perception in which physical blindness and a deep inner seeing are intimately connected.”

Rembrandt biographers describe him as a proud man, aware of his own artistic genius at a young age. He made good money in his youth, but it all disappeared by middle age, when he began to encounter the worst this life could offer. His first son died, then three years later his first daughter died, followed two years later by the death of his second daughter. As if that wasn't bad enough, his beloved wife Saskia died two years after the children, and Rembrandt is left with a nine-month old son. He remarries, has two more children – a son who dies as a youth and a daughter who will eventually be the only child who survives him.

I give you all these details of Rembrandt's tragic life so you can see that beautiful art, art that mimics God's heart, can originate from very painful circumstances. These unpleasant roots reach far down into the human soul where it is dark, feeding on and revealing the filth of sin-filled man so that the miracle of God's redemptive grace can be plainly seen, opening the way for necessary cleansing to begin. I want D101 students and mentors to understand how this kind of artful, tragic, and poignant story reveals the true message on God's heart. Why? Because as apprentices of Jesus, the story you tell by those witnessing your life IS the gospel.

### **Nouwen's Life:**

Nouwen's life at this point had changed from that of a vaunted college professor to a nondescript spiritual leader at a community for the mentally handicapped. Here is how he views that challenging discipleship role.

*I [had previously] learned how to give lectures and write books, how to explain things systematically . . . how to argue and how to analyze. So I had little idea as to how to communicate with men and women who hardly speak and, if they do speak, are not interested in logical arguments or well-reasoned opinions. I knew even less about announcing the Gospel of Jesus to people who listened more with their hearts than with their minds and who were far more sensitive to what I lived than to what I said . . . Despite this I was convinced that, after more than twenty years in the classroom, the time had come to trust that God loves the poor in spirit in a very special way and that-even though I may have had little to offer them-they had a lot to offer me.*

*Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son, pgs 11-12.*

This is the heart of a disciple, an apprentice of Jesus.

### **How to Read a Gospel Parable:**

Jesus intends each of us to see ourselves somewhere in this story of a father and his two lost sons. It is, at its core, a story of relationships that come from the heart of a God who longs for relationship. When you read this, or any parable, you are called upon to choose which character best represents you. The challenge is to look into a mirror, being fully prepared to consider your life truthfully, soberly, anticipating what must change based on the revelation. You are also to consider which character you may have once been, and which character you should or could become, based on the seasons of your life.

You are not to read Jesus' parables with a view towards vindicating yourself at the expense of others, or of justifying certain of your actions, thoughts, and attitudes, or

judging and condemning others who don't see things as "clearly" as you do. If you feel this way, Jesus has a parable that IS about you – read it in [Luke 18:9-14](#).

As an apprentice of Jesus, you should read any Gospel parable with the goal of personal identification. Do not waste time wondering why Jesus is telling this story to the characters in the story, but rather ask, "Why is Jesus telling ME this story?"

### **The Characters in the Story:**

**The Bystanders** – In Rembrandt's masterpiece, there are three bystanders observing the main drama. In the upper left corner is a woman, barely visible, standing in a doorway. Behind the red-robed father lovingly embracing his son, is a man standing behind a pillar. Seated between the father and the similarly red-robed elder son is a man wearing a fluffy black hat, staring absently upon the main scene of the story.

Consider these three individuals carefully. None of them are mentioned in Jesus' parable in the Gospel of Luke, but their importance to Rembrandt, to Nouwen, and to D101 apprentices and mentors is powerful. What is the artist saying in the presence of these bystanders? What does it mean to be a bystander, observing the main drama playing out on the small dais where the father and younger "prodigal" son are embracing, rather than participating directly?

Ask yourself, are you one of the observers today, watching the action of the father but not partaking of it yourself? Are you a distant onlooker, too far removed to hear any dialogue, safely obscured from view, able to duck back inside the safety of your home and avoid messy confrontation? Are you satisfied to remain in the shadows, away from view . . . and responsibility? Maybe you are slightly interested but still unwilling to take an active part. You desire to hear the words exchanged, to see things more clearly than the distant observer in the doorway, but still content to remain aloof, just out of range, comfortably detached.

The gentleman in the large black fluffy hat is slightly more interested in the goings-on. He is close enough to catch all the dialogue, to see the expressions, maybe even smell the sweat of the young, disheveled son kneeling before his father. Yet even this closest one is not resting upon the platform of the drama. He is close enough to see, hear, feel and smell the proceedings, to play the voyeur grasping at morsels of gossip. But in his gaze is a detachment that belies any true interest; the gossip-potential of this personal family event does not lure him completely. Nevertheless, he wants to be close just in case something interesting occurs.

**The Younger Son** – The younger son gives us the title to this parable in most modern day translations. He represents the one with no love or desire to remain in the father's home; he has no care at all for being a part of the Gospel. He actually wishes his father were dead - and tells him so. He wants nothing more than to place as much space between himself and the Gospel as possible; getting close to the love of the father scares him greatly.

Have you ever been the younger son?

**The Elder Son** – This one is portrayed as dark and brooding. He is always available, a doer of chores, a hard worker. He is task-oriented to a fault – resembling Martha in [Luke 10:38-42](#). He is extremely dedicated, consistent . . . and not at all in love with his father. To him, dad is a supervisor, a taskmaster. Love to the elder son is externalized as legalism, not affection.

Have you ever been the elder son?

**The Father** – The father, not the prodigal, is the real focus in Jesus’ parable and in Rembrandt’s masterpiece. He is on the “platform,” taking part in the central drama, the portraying of the true Gospel.

He is the one who ran to meet his son.

He is the one who first embraced his prodigal.

He is the one who ordered a robe of righteousness placed on the prodigal.

He is the one who ordered a ring of sonship placed on his finger.

He is the one who comforted his angry older son, the one to whom he spoke the tender and powerful words, “You are always with me.”

Do you want to be like the father?

These next few lessons will look closely on each of these characters in the drama I call the Gospel: The bystanders, the younger son, the elder son, and finally the father. These D101 lessons focus on what the Gospel really is, and I hope and pray that you will be richer, wiser, and more focused on being like the father in your walk with Jesus in the remaining days of your earthly lives.

See you in Lesson #17!

[Note – This lesson can be downloaded in PDF format for printing or sharing]