



## Discipleship 101 New Believer Lesson #18 The Return of the Prodigal - The Waiting and the Plan



Based on the Book,  
*The Return of the Prodigal Son*,  
by Henri Nouwen  
as well as  
*The Cross and the Prodigal*,  
By Kenneth E. Bailey

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### **Introduction:**

***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.*** Luke 15:13

It is very helpful at this point to have read the entire 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, and re-read verses 11-32 several times, so you have this story firmly in your mind. The story begins with a family – a father and his two sons, but soon is revealed as a terribly dysfunctional family.

As I have stated before in previous *Return of the Prodigal* lessons, it is vital you remember that when reading Jesus' parables, you are asked to see yourself in the parable. Which character are you? Which one have you been in the past, and which one may you become in the future? The parable seeks your introspection and begs for careful, truthful self-analysis.

### **Blind Wasting:**

In this one sentence, time has passed, a lifetime has been dissolved, and the reality of a sin-filled world has begun to hit home like a hammer blow.

In verse 13, the father has a "fire sale" to liquidate one-third of the estate and pass the funds off to the younger son. The price for urgent sales like this one are much less than the real-market value of the estate – urgency is key, not profit – so the father, in subjecting himself to this unrighteous demand is now settling for a reduced price on the estate he has built over his lifetime in order to complete his end of the "bargain."

Armed with this fast cash, the younger sets out to complete what he feels is necessary – leaving "home" to find himself; leaving the sure (and mundane?) for the new and exciting; leaving the family he doesn't really like, doesn't really know, and doesn't want to know any longer, for the hope of fresh acquaintances he can get along with. We don't really know what he did in the "far country" except that he "squandered" all his money on "loose living." Kenneth E. Bailey's research and life lived in the Middle East tells us that in the culture of this young man, he would have

“invested” much money building a “reputation” of generosity. He would hold lavish parties and banquets, and give away expensive gifts in order to create the most sought-after virtue – generosity, and fuel the hidden inner engine of pride. Can you see the younger son’s desire to have what his father freely offered – acceptance and love, but to have it from outsiders instead of from his family? It’s like the lyrics from Rich Mullins’ song *Hold Me Jesus*:

***Surrender don't come natural to me  
I'd rather fight You for something I don't really want  
Than to take what You give that I need  
And I've beat my head against so many walls  
Now I'm falling down I'm falling on my knees***

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Have you ever rejected the sure “bird in the hand” love from those who are close to try and earn it from others who can be fickle? Have you rejected the father’s love, and understood later how foolish you were, and how he was lovingly and patiently waiting for you to figure it out eventually?

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**The Father’s Anguished Waiting:**

What kind of father agrees to give up one-third of his life to a young man with no idea how to handle it, and sufficient ammunition to royally ruin his own ignorant, misguided life? It is the father who knows his younger son is lost, even while still at home, and will become even more lost after he leaves the protection of the father’s home.

As Nouwen eloquently states: “The heart of the father burns with an immense desire to bring his children home. Oh, how much would he have liked to talk to them, to warn them against the many dangers they were facing, and to convince them that, at home can be found everything that they search for elsewhere. How much would he have liked to pull them back with his fatherly authority and hold them close to himself so that they would not get hurt.

“But his love is too great to do any of that. It cannot force, constrain, push, or pull. It offers the freedom to reject that love or to love in return. It is precisely the immensity of the divine love that is the source of the divine suffering. God, creator of heaven and earth, has chosen to be, first and foremost, a Father.

“As father, he wants his children to be free, free to love. That freedom includes the possibility of their leaving home, going to a "distant country," and losing everything. The Father's heart knows all the pain that will come from that choice, but his love makes him powerless to prevent it.

“As father, the only authority he claims for himself is the authority of compassion. That authority comes from letting the sins of his children pierce his heart. There is no lust, greed, anger, resentment, jealousy, or vengeance in his lost children that has not caused immense grief to his heart. The grief is so deep because the heart is so pure.

“Here is the God I want to believe in: a father who, from the beginning of creation, has stretched out his arms in merciful blessing, never forcing himself on anyone, but always waiting; never letting his arms drop down in despair, but always hoping that his children will return so that he can speak words of love to them and let his tired arms rest on their shoulders. His only desire is to bless” (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pgs 95-96).

This is the father Rembrandt chose to paint.

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Have you seen the father, your heavenly father, standing, waiting, with open arms of love for you to return from your journey to a “far country?” Can you see yourself in this role, having taken on the father’s characteristics towards other “prodigals” in your life? That is the ultimate goal of an apprentice of Jesus.

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### **Rock Bottom:**

***And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.*** Luke 15:14-16

Listen to Nouwen’s words again describing the condition of the younger son as he finds himself devoid of all resources:

“What happened to the son in the distant country? Aside from all the material and physical consequences, what were the inner consequences of the son's leaving home? The sequence of events is quite predictable. The farther I run away from the

place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world.

“The younger son became fully aware of how lost he was when no one in his surroundings showed the slightest interest in him. They noticed him only as long as he could be used for their purposes. But when he had no money left to spend and no gifts left to give, he stopped existing for them. It is hard for me to imagine what it means to be a complete foreigner, a person to whom no one shows any sign of recognition. Real loneliness comes when we have lost all sense of having things in common. When no one wanted to give him the food he was giving to the pigs, the younger son realized that he wasn't even considered a fellow human being” (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pg 46-47).

**Realization:**

***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! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants."'*** Luke 15:17-19

Kenneth E. Bailey tells us that the phrase, “*he came to himself,*” is a Hebrew and Aramaic expression of repentance. The younger son has turned to face the road towards understanding, but he doesn't yet grasp who his father really is. Look at the words he prepares, his “plan” to remain alive again by beseeching his father to make him – a son again? – no, but to seek to be “*as one of [his] hired servants.*”

He still views his father, not as a FATHER, but as an EMPLOYER! How does he prepare to return to the one he used so crudely and hurt so deeply? He prepares a script and rehearses a scenario. In his father, the “employer,” the younger son sees no real affection yet. Even in his desperate plan to return home and continue to live, he is still blind to the powerful unconditional love inherent in his father. He senses only some weak, anemic, parental affection. In this frame of mind, he can only see himself as a hired servant, which is probably how he felt before he left home.

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How do you view your heavenly father? Is he a “hard man” ([Luke 19:11-27](#)), or is he infinitely patient, waiting for you to come to your senses and return home to unconditional love? What has your experience been?

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**The Gauntlet:**

Weak as the younger son’s motives are, he is determined to remain alive, work his “plan” for re-admittance as a hired servant, and head back to his father’s home. But he has a daunting task ahead of him. Since he left not merely his family, but the entire clan, in such a heartless manner, his return will surely be greeted by intense scorn, derision, and possibly physical violence.

The Middle Eastern cultural of his time will position him lower than whale dung on the ocean floor in the eyes of everyone in the village. For his part, he hopes to make it back, work as a hired servant, possibly repay his father to make up the loss, and, if those near-impossible tasks are complete, maybe be granted some level of respect again.

The odds are against him. The gauntlet through the village to his father’s house waits ominously.



Be honest – Are you a fan or an opponent of the younger son, the “prodigal?” Why did you choose your answer? Have you ever been the younger son? Can you see why he made his mistakes? Has he acted in a manner that reminds you of YOU? What would you do if you were the father and your “prodigal” knocked on the door wishing to come back – could you accept him back?

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The younger son has “come to himself” after hitting the basement of life. He possesses a strong desire to remain alive, but the path ahead terrifies him. Is all hope lost? In Lesson #19, we will see that the father has a plan of his own – see you there next time.

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