



**Discipleship 101**  
**New Believer Lesson #19**  
**The Return of the Prodigal**  
**- A Cross and a Savior**



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:**

***And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.***  
Luke 15:20

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.

**The Gauntlet vs. The Cross!:**

In the previous lesson (#18) of Discipleship 101, we learned of the terrible gauntlet the younger son would encounter if he showed his face back among the clans of his village. Remember, he had severed relationships with of his father, his elder brother, and his family, indeed, the entire close-knit Middle Eastern community he was raised in. Finding his way down the narrow village streets past all those who knew him and were appalled at what he had done would be similar to a well-known child molester strolling through town advertising to babysit toddlers. The emotions and the prejudice would likely lead to physical confrontation and violence.

Everyone would know when the younger son came to the outskirts of the village, and they would all remember his betrayal. They would expect the father to offer a similarly cold reception, levy some form of face-saving punishment and humiliation, thus preserving the dignity of the family name.

But the father has another plan in mind.

Having been heartbroken at the younger son's feelings and mode of departure from his home, the father waited patiently, biding his time, sleeping little and praying much. This father has been ever scanning the horizon for the site he sees this day – the younger son appearing at the edge of town! The father knows the well deserved scorn and violence he will encounter when he is spotted, so he enacts his own “plan” to save the boy from what he honestly has coming.

He runs!

This may not sound like much, but in this act of heading off the boy from the mobs who will make his entrance a living hell, the father shows us what salvation really means. He pantomimes the actions of our Savior on the cross by interceding for his prodigal and taking what was due upon himself.

Kenneth E. Bailey describes V. 20 with these words: “His father saw him and had compassion and *raced*” (*The Cross and the Prodigal*, pg 54).

This man had an estate, complete with servants, fields, herds and livestock; he was a man of stature and position. Men of this rank DO NOT RUN! In his Middle Eastern culture, this was unthinkable, undignified, worthy of the scorn and ridicule justly awaiting the younger son as he entered the village.

Again, Kenneth E. Bailey gives us a clear picture of the proceedings. To run with the garments of the day, the father had to grasp the front of his robes and pull them up to allow his legs room to run. In doing so, he would expose his undergarments in a shameful manner. The father would suddenly become the major spectacle in the village, taking the eyes of everyone off the younger son. The compassion Jesus places in V. 20 is manifested in the father's racing, unceremoniously and unashamedly, to rescue his son from the mob, taking the brunt of the shame and humiliation upon himself.

Jesus listeners to this story would undoubtedly see parallels to [Isaiah 53](#), particularly verses 4 and 5. In Jesus' parable, it would be clear that the father is the one Isaiah describes as carrying griefs and sorrows not of his own making, willing to be smitten, afflicted, and wounded for the sake of the prodigal – for our sake.

I quote Bailey directly to convey the beauty of the father's actions:

“It is not possible to capture in any parable the mystery and wonder of God in Christ. Yet in this matchless story we have a clear indication of at least a part of what these things mean. The father, in his house, clearly represents God. We would suggest that, when the father leaves his house and takes upon himself a humiliating posture on the road, he becomes a symbol of God incarnate [Jesus!]. He does not wait for the prodigal to come to him but rather at great cost goes down and out to greet the one dead and lost.

“If we begin with the verse, ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself,’ ([2 Corinthians 5:19](#)) . . . we can say, ‘The father was in this humiliating posture reconciling the prodigal to himself.’

“In this parable we have a father who leaves the comfort and security of his home and exposes himself in a humiliating fashion in the village street. The coming down and going out to the boy hints at the incarnation. The humiliating spectacle in the village street hints at the meaning of the cross.

“Islam claims that in this story the boy is saved without a savior. The prodigal returns. The father forgives him. There is no cross, no suffering, and no savior . . . But not so. The cross and the incarnation are implicitly yet dramatically present in this story. More than that, the going out of the father and his visible demonstration of suffering are the climax of the parable” (*The Cross and the Prodigal*, pg 55-56).

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Can you see the plan of salvation in this parable, and now see it more clearly and so beautifully depicted in Rembrandt’s painting? Did you ever see the work of the cross in this parable before? Does it mean more than it did previously?

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### **The Younger Son’s Return:**

***And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to make merry.*** Luke 15:21-24

The son gives his “speech,” he unveils his grandiose plan. He makes his half-hearted attempt to regain his life by offering to become a servant, a hired servant, the lowest level of the working class in his day. He still feels his father is a hard task-master, loveless and calculating – he doesn’t know him at all.

But the father, who already interceded with the entire village on behalf of his son, pays absolutely no mind to his younger son’s words, because he has words of his own.

*'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'*

Look again at Rembrandt's painting at the clothing the younger son has on as the father grasps him in the loving embrace he so longed for and read the words of Nouwen describing Rembrandt's depiction of the younger son upon his return.

"The clothes Rembrandt gives him are underclothes, barely covering his emaciated body. The father and the tall man observing the scene [the elder son] wear wide red cloaks, giving them status and dignity. The kneeling son has no cloak. The yellow-brown, torn undergarment just covers his exhausted, worn-out body from which all strength is gone. The soles of his feet tell the story of a long and humiliating journey. The left foot, slipped out of its worn sandal, is scarred. The right foot, only partially covered by a broken sandal, also speaks of suffering and misery. This is a man dispossessed of everything . . . except for one thing, his sword. The only remaining sign of dignity is the short sword hanging from his hips-the badge of his nobility. Even in the midst of his debasement, he had clung to the truth that he still was the son of his father. Otherwise, he would have sold his so valuable sword, the symbol of his sonship. The sword is there to show me that, although he came back speaking as a beggar and an outcast, he had not forgotten that he still was the son of his father. It was this remembered and valued sonship that finally persuaded him to turn back" (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pg 46).

The father has a rich royal red robe, likewise the elder son. The father demands the "best" robe for his younger son. Bailey tells us that the best robe in the father's home undoubtedly belongs to the father himself. Remember in Esther, when Haman is asked by the king the best way to honor the man the king chooses to honor, the king asks, "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honor? . . . Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn" ([Esther 6:6-8](#)).

The ring is a signet ring, signifying the younger son has new authority in the home – the elder son will have great trouble with this development, as we will see later. The shoes also have significance. In the Middle East, shoes show rank – slaves went barefoot, sons have shoes.

The servants, the rest of the family, the entire village now sees that the younger son, by virtue of the father's elaborate generosity and forgiveness, has now been completely restored.



Thus far, has this study of Luke 15 and the “Prodigal” parable made you more aware of God’s love for you as an individual? Can you see more clearly how God will literally “stick his neck out” for you, or any of his children?

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Henri Nouwen completes this lesson with words describing the father that Rembrandt has painted:

“Now I wonder whether I have sufficiently realized that during all this time God has been trying to find me, to know me, and to love me. The question is not “How am I to find God?” but “How am I to let myself be found by him?” The question is not “How am I to know God?” but “How am I to let myself be known by God?” And, finally, the question is not “How am I to love God?” but “How am I to let myself be loved by God?” God is looking into the distance for me, trying to find me, and longing to bring me home. In [all three parables](#) which Jesus tells in response to the question of [why he eats with sinners](#), he puts the emphasis on God's initiative. [God is the shepherd who goes looking for his lost sheep](#). [God is the woman who lights a lamp, sweeps out the house, and searches everywhere for her lost coin](#) until she has found it. [God is the father who watches and waits for his children](#), runs out to meet them, embraces them, pleads with them, begs and urges them to come home” (*The Return of the Prodigal*, pg 106).

The father has taken the initiative and sought out the returning younger son, but what of the elder son who never left home? In Lesson #20, we will see that the father has a plan for this lost son as well – see you there.

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