

WEEK 3

The stories Jesus told

THE PRODIGAL SON

ENCOUNTER

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND STUDY

- Read Luke 15:11-19. Can you relate in any way to this story? Have you had times when in some way you felt or acted like the younger son in Jesus' story? If so, what (if anything) brought you to your senses?

- Read Luke 15:20-24. Who does the father represent in this story? If at some time you "ran away" from God, did you (without mentioning specifics) do anything that made you feel that you "no longer deserved to be called (God's child)"? How did you overcome this, or do you still harbor this feeling? Who might have celebrated when you responded to God's love? The father saw the son not as bad, but temporarily lost. Do you view some people as "bad" or just lost?

- Read Luke 15:25-32. How would you interpret this story as it relates to issues of faith and the faithful? Who does the elder son represent? Do some people see themselves as having followed Christ virtually all their lives? Might some of these people resent "bad" people who suddenly show an interest in the faith? Does God only love "good" people? Did Jesus only associate with "good" people? How can we learn to see all people through Jesus' eyes?

- Read Matthew 20:1-16. How would you interpret this story as it relates to issues of faith and the faithful? Do you see yourself more like the workers who first agreed to work, or like the workers who were the last to agree to work? What is the "equal pay" received by all followers of Christ, regardless of the point in their life when they chose to follow him? Are

you grateful that God is generous with you, despite the life you may have led? Do you personally know people who you hope will someday receive a portion of God's generosity? Is there anything you can do about that?

- Read Matthew 18:21-35. Is forgiveness of others always easy? How hard do you find it to let go of wrongs done to you? What inner factors too often make that a characteristic of us as humans? How can the growing depth of our faith and commitment make such forgiveness easier? Why does God demand us to be forgiving? What potential effects does forgiveness have on the lives of others and even on the events of the world? Must we “forget” in addition to forgiving? Does God also want and expect us to forgive ourselves? How can you do this?

- Read Matthew 9:9-13. Jesus associated with tax collectors and sinners. What does this tell us about God? Does God shun sinners? Does God love sinners? What did Jesus mean when he said, “I want mercy and not sacrifice.”? Mercy by whom and for whom? What kind of sacrifice did Jesus not want? Does God require some form of sacrifice on our part?

EMBRACE

How does this story relate to the path of many of our spiritual lives? In what ways do we run away from God? In what ways do we foolishly waste “our inheritance”? Was the father in the story concerned with whether his son “deserved” his love? Is God? How does the way we think about this inform the way we see others and treat “sinners”?

ENGAGE

This week, prayerfully consider the scars of your life where others have wronged you. Forgive them and pray for them, whether they have asked for forgiveness or not. Forgive yourself for your own mistakes, put them behind you. Pray for one another that you might take this message of mercy into all your conversations and interactions with people this week.

DAILY READINGS

MONDAY - LUKE 15:11-19

Some of the younger son's hurry in Jesus' extended parable about God's grace might be understandable. In his culture his older brother would inherit the larger share of the estate, and the leadership role in family matters. But he created his own problems by poor choices. He demanded his inheritance while his father was still alive, and foolishly blew it on high living. No doubt many heads nodded when Jesus said it was only "when he came to his senses" that he headed for home.

- Today we expect children to "grow up and leave home." But scholar N. T. Wright wrote that in the culture of Jesus' day, this was a story of shameful behavior, "with the younger son abandoning his obligation to care for his father in his old age." Have you had times when in some way you felt or acted like the younger son in Jesus' story? If so, what (if anything) brought you to your senses?

- We tend to think the father's love showed only when the son came home. But Wright said "people in traditional cultures, like that of Jesus' day, find the story at this point quite incredible. Fathers just don't behave like that; he should (they think) have beaten him, or thrown him out. There is a depth of mystery already built in to the story before the son even leaves home." In what ways does God's choice to allow us moral freedom speak to you of God's desire for a relationship built on love, not robotic control?

Prayer: Lord God, at times I get frustrated or impatient with your ways, and feel like "running away from home." Help me to keep my senses about me at those times, to use my God-given freedom well and lovingly. Amen.

TUESDAY - LUKE 15:20-24

The dejected younger son trudging home had wasted his inheritance. He managed to get out the words, "I no longer deserve to be called your son." But, like the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14 who "wouldn't even lift his eyes," he found the father's heart full of mercy, and not worried about "deserving." The father ran to him, hugged and kissed him. Then he called to his servants, and gave orders to start a big celebration of his son's return.

- Imagine how this story would impact your heart if Jesus had said, "The father grudgingly said, 'Fine—you can come home. But hear me, young man—you're on probation, big time. One step out of line and I'll send you back to the pig sty.'" What was Jesus' message about God's attitude toward us at all times, whether we've messed up or been on our best behavior? How deeply have you internalized Jesus' image of what God is really like?

- The Pharisees labeled people "good" or "bad," mainly based on external behaviors. Jesus saw people much more as "lost" (in the wrong place), and what's lost can be found. What's more, he pictured God celebrating each time a heart responded to God's love. What people have you known who, like God, are more eager to find a "lost" person than to punish or shun a "bad" person?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to be a part of the big story you are writing in human lives, wrapped up in my heavenly father's big, strong embrace. Keep leading me to my place in your story. Amen.

WEDNESDAY - LUKE 15:25-32

It made the perfect “happy ending,” but Jesus’ story didn’t end when the younger son was home and the party had begun. In this story (and the two before it), Jesus spoke to people who “were grumbling, saying, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2-3). So we meet the older brother, angry about his younger sibling’s return and the party going on. The father clearly loved the older brother, too, and begged him to join in the joy at his brother’s return.

- As “good” people, the Pharisees avoided “bad” people. Jesus’ stories asked: how can we help anyone find their way if we avoid them? To what extent do you prefer to relate only (or mainly) to “good” people? Do you tend to feel disdain (or envy) for the “tax collectors and sinners” you know? How can you learn better to see them through Jesus’ eyes?

- Jesus left the older son’s story open-ended, like the fig tree parable (cf. Luke 13:6-9). We hear the father pleading, but Jesus didn’t say what the older brother did. It was as though Jesus was telling us that we decide how the story ends. Sadly, most of the “older brothers” in Jesus’ day turned haughtily away rather than welcome prodigals home. As you enjoy the “party” of faith, how do you respond to the father’s appeal to welcome the lost who’ve come home?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to “enter in” to the joy of your kingdom, and celebrate what you are doing in other lives. Move me from a “tit for tat” existence into the exuberant, abundant life of your kingdom. Amen.

THURSDAY - MATTHEW 20:1-16

In this parable, Jesus showed that God’s grace goes way beyond “fairness.” People who worked all day watched people who’d only worked one hour get paid the same amount that they had agreed to work for—and it made them angry. (We can almost imagine the pro-rated mental calculations they did.) But the vineyard owner didn’t cheat them. Sadly he asked the upset workers “Are you resentful because I’m generous?”

- In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul said Christ was treated as we deserved, and we are treated as he deserved. Was that “fair” on God’s part, or generous in ways that stretch our assumptions all out of shape? In what ways does the “unfairness” of that exchange (in which you’re the big winner) draw your heart toward Christ?

- In another place, Jesus described God’s generosity by using the forces of nature almost as a parable: “He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). In what ways have you encountered God’s grace, his lavish generosity? What aspect of God’s generosity most amazes and encourages you?

Prayer: O Lord, I want to embrace your generosity, to incorporate that giving spirit deeply into my character. Guide me away from my all-too-human tendencies toward envy and hoarding. Amen.

FRIDAY - MATTHEW 18:21-35

Most of Jesus’ themes in the parables grew out of the Hebrew Scriptures. That was certainly true of this parable about a king who showed almost undreamed of mercy (cf. Psalm 103:8-12, Isaiah 55:6-7). When we serve a king as merciful as God is, then our gratitude toward the king and our mercy toward others will be signs that we truly value and wish to live by the kingdom’s values.

- Jesus used a shorter version of this parable to show a self-righteous Pharisee why a woman known as a “sinner” was more grateful and gracious toward Jesus than the Pharisee was (cf. Luke 7:40-47). Jesus’ story made the debt owed to the king incredibly large—as if we said the man owed “a gazillion euros.” Was Jesus accurate in seeking to make us aware of the gap between our purity and God’s, to show us how desperately we need a Savior to bridge the gap?

- Scholar Craig Keener noted, “Seventy times seven (some interpreters read seventy-seven)... is a typically graphic Jewish way of saying ‘Never hold grudges.’” How hard do you find it to let go of wrongs done to you? What inner factors too often make that characteristic of us as humans? How can taking in God’s forgiveness transform you over time so that you can forgive others as God forgives you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you gave up so much in order to reach me with your forgiveness. Help me to accept and value that gift, and to be more forgiving toward myself and others in my life. Amen.

SATURDAY - MATTHEW 9:9-13

Israelites, with some reason, saw their countrymen who collected Roman taxes as traitors and outcasts. Rome’s system enriched tax collectors by letting them overcharge people and keep the excess. But Jesus didn’t see Matthew as an outcast—he saw one of his “lost sheep” in need of his inclusive love. He called Matthew to “Follow me,” and Matthew left his predatory work and wealth behind to follow Jesus. The Pharisees were incensed, but Jesus asked them if a soul “doctor” should ignore the “sick.” The self-identified “righteous” needed him as much or more as the “sinners.”

- Scholar Hans Küng wrote, “A Church that will not accept the fact that it consists of sinful people and exists for sinful people becomes hard-hearted, self-righteous, inhuman.... though it is true that the Church must always dissociate itself from sin, it can never have any excuse for keeping any sinner at a distance.” Do you ever feel left out when Jesus said, “I didn’t come to call righteous people?” In what ways do you sense that you (and all of us) were included when he added, “but sinners”?

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. As I live in the light and life of your mercy, give me a heart that has a welcoming mercy for all my fellow sinners. Amen.

