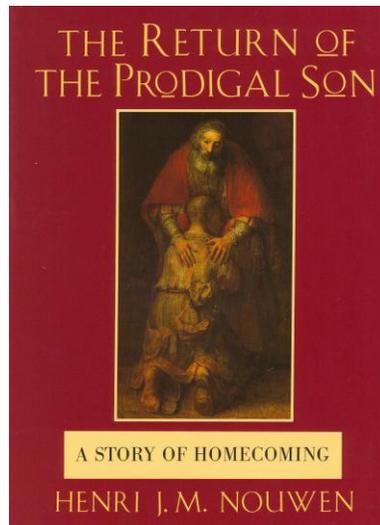


*The Return of the Prodigal Son*  
By Henri J.M. Nouwen

Discussion Questions for Nouwen Reading Groups

Five Week Program



©2012 Henri Nouwen Society

# *The Return of the Prodigal Son*

by Henri J.M. Nouwen

© 1992 New York: Doubleday, 142 pp. (hardcover)

© 1994 New York: Doubleday, 151 pp. (softcover)

## **Discussion questions for Nouwen Reading Groups**

Prepared by Ed Wojcicki and John Holsinger

Revised by Claire S. Merritt

**Recommended number of meetings for this book: 5**

**Meeting #1 (pp. 1-20 hardcover; pp.1-23 softcover)**

**Prologue: *Encounter with a Painting***

**Introduction: *The Younger Son, the Elder Son, and the Father***

About this book and getting prints of the “Prodigal Son” painting

This is Henri Nouwen’s own personal favorite book, based on Nouwen’s reflections on a Rembrandt painting called *Prodigal Son*, which hangs in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Russia. The Prologue and Introduction (pp. 3-20 hc/3-18 sc) tell of Henri’s encounter with the painting itself in 1986 and his move to the L’Arche Daybreak community in the town of Richmond Hill, Ontario, 30 miles north of Toronto. He hung a print of the painting at Daybreak, and he reflected over time on how he had been the younger (prodigal) son, the elder son and the father in the Gospel story. What struck him “like a thunderbolt,” though, was a friend’s admonition: “Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you are called to be the father” (page 19 hc/22 sc). The book is both autobiographical and a call to the sometimes lonely and challenging role of spiritual fatherhood.

An important word about masculine and inclusive language: While the three main characters in the prodigal son story are all men, Henri is careful in this book to point out how the spiritual characteristics that he describes – even the call to be a better father – are applicable to both men and women.

About the painting: People often ask about getting prints of Rembrandt’s *Prodigal Son*. For a long time they were hard to get, and Henri would buy dozens at a time and mail them to people throughout the world. Now the prints, ranging from wallet size to poster size, are available in many places, including Daybreak Books & Media ([nouwenbooks@larchedaybreak.com](mailto:nouwenbooks@larchedaybreak.com), 1-800-853-1412). The painting can also be found online. One source is the Web Gallery of Art ([www.wga.hu](http://www.wga.hu)). It is also noteworthy that Henri was en route to St. Petersburg, Russia, to film a documentary about his interest in the painting when he stopped in Holland and died there of heart failure on September 21, 1996.

Note: Rembrandt died when he was 63 years old. Nouwen, a fellow Dutchman, died four years after this book came out. He was 64.

## Discussion questions – Week 1:

1. Rembrandt's painting had a profound and lasting effect on Henri. What work of art – painting, novel, poem, musical composition – has touched you deeply? Why?
2. Nouwen suggests that “accepting love, forgiveness and healing is often much harder than giving” love and forgiveness (page 12 hc/13 sc). Why do you think this is true for Henri? If this is true for you also, what keeps you from accepting love, forgiveness and healing?
3. In describing his spiritual struggle Henri says: “I am called to enter into the inner sanctuary of my own being where God has chosen to dwell.” He adds: “The only way to that place is prayer, unceasing prayer” (page 15 hc/18sc). Why is it so difficult to reach this “inner sanctuary” and to stay there? In your own spiritual struggle where have you looked for God? What is the importance of prayer in your spiritual life?
4. Over the course of several years Henri identified in turn with each of the three main figures in Rembrandt's painting: first the younger son, then the elder son and finally the father. How does he justify each identification? To which figure do you feel the greatest affinity? Why?

## Notes – Week 1

## Meeting #2 (pp. 21-54 hc/ 25-58 sc)

### Part I: *The Younger Son* (Chapters 1-3)

#### Themes:

Henri writes about the most famous person in the story: the younger son, the prodigal son. He says Rembrandt at a young age “had all the characteristics of the prodigal son: brash, self-confident, spendthrift, sensual, and very arrogant” (page 26 hc/30 sc). The artist earned a lot, spent a lot, and lost a lot. The painting is about the “return” of the lost son. In order to “return”, one must have left something behind. Henri finds the concepts of leaving and returning very powerful. For Henri, “leaving” means spending our time and energy in the pursuit of success, material things, busyness and productivity. “Leaving” means not paying attention to the core of our being where God is waiting for us. Henri also admits he tried hard to please people and to be recognized, but he often felt jealous of others’ success or resentful when he did not get enough recognition (page 42 hc/47 sc).

#### **Discussion questions:**

1. What parallels does Henri see between Rembrandt and the prodigal son? How does knowledge of Rembrandt’s biography enhance our understanding of his painting?
2. According to Henri, leaving home “is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being” (page 35hc/37sc). When has Henri left home? When have you left home?
3. Henri states: “‘Addiction’ might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society” (page 38hc/42sc). What addictions do you see in the world around you? To which addictions have you succumbed at some point in your life? Why?
4. Henri says that a belief in total, absolute forgiveness does not come easily (page 47 hc/52 sc). Can you think of something for which you have not yet forgiven yourself? How does our failure to accept God’s absolute forgiveness limit our understanding of God?
5. “Jesus makes it clear that the way to God is the same as the way to a new childhood” (page 48hc/53sc). What does it mean to become like a child? Why is this process so difficult?
6. What is your reaction to Henri’s identification of Jesus with the prodigal son? How does Henri justify it? How does this change your understanding of Jesus?

## **Notes – Week 2**

### Meeting #3 (pp. 55-82 hc/59-88 sc)

#### Part II: *The Elder Son* (Chapters 4-6)

##### Themes:

The elder son usually gets little attention in discussions of this Bible story. Yet, Nouwen explains how both Rembrandt and Henri himself had part of the dark, resentful side of the “elder son” in them. Henri admits he understands the envy that the elder son feels toward his younger brother. The elder son lived an obedient and dutiful life. Yet when his brother came home, the elder son felt resentful, unkind, selfish and without joy. Neither the parable nor the Rembrandt story indicates whether the elder son finally reconciled himself to what was happening. Nouwen asks: “Can the elder son in me come home? ... How can I return when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty [that is] lived out as slavery?” (page 71 hc/76 sc) The answer, Henri says, can be found in living with gratitude as a discipline and not just in response to gifts or favors received. To live in gratitude is not only a discipline; it is a choice (page 80 hc/85 sc).

##### **Discussion questions:**

1. Although there is a discrepancy between the parable and the painting, Henri is convinced that the man standing on the right represents the elder son. What justifies this belief? In what ways does Rembrandt resemble the elder son?
2. How has the elder son left home? Why does Henri identify with him? In what ways do you identify with him?
3. Why is it more difficult for the elder son to return home than for the prodigal son?
4. Why are trust and gratitude such essential disciplines for Henri? Why must we make a conscious effort to practice these disciplines?
5. Henri states: “Resentment and complaints, deep as they may seem, can vanish in the face of him in whom the full light of Sonship is visible” (page 82 hc/87-88sc). In what ways is Jesus the elder son? In this role what does Jesus reveal to us about the nature of God?

### **Notes – Week 3**

## Meeting #4 (pp. 83-112 hc/89-119 sc)

### Part III: *The Father* (Chapters 7-9)

#### Themes:

Nouwen says the painting just as easily could have been called “The Welcome by the Compassionate Father.” In the painting, the father’s hands are the true central point. The light and the eyes of others focus on those hands. The left hand is masculine while the right hand is more feminine. So the character “is mother as well as father” (page 94 hc/99 sc) – welcoming, holding and caressing the son. The painting is about the father’s love for both of his sons. Many people live with secret feelings that they are not worthy of love, or they wonder whether others truly love them. Nouwen felt that way – he rarely felt or experienced the intimacy that he wrote about so often. He suffered from loneliness. The father of the prodigal son though, invites us to experience joy which can be more difficult than experiencing sadness or frustration. Joy, like gratitude, is a choice. “It requires choosing for the light even when there is much darkness to frighten me, choosing for life even when the forces of death are so visible, and choosing for the truth even when I am surrounded by lies” (page 108 hc/115 sc).

#### **Discussion questions:**

1. According to Henri, God’s “only desire is to bless” (p. 90 hc/96 sc). How does Rembrandt convey this sense of blessing in his painting? When in your life have you felt especially blessed?
2. Look at the hands, the central point of the painting. The left hand is strong and muscular (page 93 hc/98 sc). The right hand is refined, soft and very tender (page 94 hc/ 99 sc). The left hand touches and holds; the right hand comforts and consoles. What meaning does Henri see in the differences between these hands? How does this change your understanding of the parable?
3. Henri asks: “Wouldn’t it be wonderful to make God smile by giving God the chance to find me and love me lavishly? (page 101 hc/107sc). What are you doing to open yourself to God’s love? Why is this often difficult? When have you felt unworthy of God’s love?”
4. According to Henri: “Celebration belongs to God’s Kingdom. God not only offers forgiveness, reconciliation, and healing, but wants to lift up these gifts as a source of joy for all who witness them” (page 106 hc/113 sc). How does this statement affect how you see God? When in your life have you felt great joy? What can you do to find joy in the little things of everyday life?
5. Given all the darkness in our world there is much temptation to be cynical. When are you inclined toward cynicism? How do you respond to people who are perpetually cynical?

#### **Notes – Week 4**

## Meeting #5 (pp. 113-130 hc/120-139 sc)

Conclusion and Epilogue

*Becoming the Father*” and *Living the Painting*

*Themes:*

We are called to be as compassionate as God is compassionate. We are called to follow Jesus’ example as a son – “the younger son without being rebellious” and “the elder son without being resentful.” We are also called to grow into spiritual fatherhood – this means both father and mother, masculine and feminine. All of that is easy to say but very difficult to live. To be compassionate means we do not compare ourselves to others and we are not competitive either, Henri says. He finds three major traits in a compassionate father: grief (“the discipline of the heart that sees the sins of the world” (page 121 hc/129 sc), forgiveness, and generosity. The father said to the elder son: “All I have is yours,” and Henri adds: “There is nothing the father keeps for himself. He pours himself out for his sons” (page 122 hc/130 sc). Henri adds to his description of spiritual fatherhood “the radical discipline of being home.” There is something foundational about the father being home, where the father waits and the transformation from son to father that takes place in an individual. Nouwen admits that he spent time as the rebellious young son in search of a home, which he found at L’Arche Daybreak, and also spent time feeling as angry and alienated as the elder son. He says few people actually claim spiritual fatherhood for themselves because “the pains are too obvious, the joys too hidden” (page 129 hc/138 hc). Henri ultimately relates to the “bent-over old father” who is poised “to stretch out to all who suffer, to rest upon the shoulders of all who come, and to offer the blessing that emerges from the immensity of God’s love” (page 130 hc/139 sc).

### **Discussion questions:**

1. Henri asks: “Hasn’t the Church in the past stressed obedience in a fashion that made it hard to claim spiritual fatherhood, and hasn’t our consumer society encouraged us to indulge in childish self-gratification” (page 115 hc/122 sc). Where in your life have you felt this kind of pressure and how have you responded to it?
2. In what ways do you “remain subject to . . . competitive ways” of the world and “expect to be rewarded for all the good” you did? (page 117 hc/125 sc) How can you move beyond this to become the father or mother Henri says we are called to be?
3. Henri names “three ways to a truly compassionate fatherhood: grief, forgiveness, and generosity” (page 120 hc/128 sc). What does he mean by each of these disciplines? Why are they so difficult?
2. How do you respond to Henri’s challenging, almost chilling words that spiritual fatherhood involves loneliness and a “dreadful yet fruitful emptiness”? (page 124 hc/132 sc) Henri explains: “[T]hat same dreadful emptiness is also the place of true freedom. It is the place where there is nothing left to lose, where love has no strings attached, and where real spiritual strength is found. . . . I know that I can welcome anyone there without condemnation and offer hope. There I am free to receive the burdens of others without any need to evaluate, categorize, or analyze. There, in that completely non-judgmental state of being, I can engender liberating trust” (page 124 hc/133 sc). If you know persons who have attained this spiritual state, describe them. How do you feel about them? What do you think enabled them to reach this

state of development?

3. In what ways do you wish you were able to be more like the father in the Gospel story?
4. “Rembrandt portrays the father as the man who has transcended the ways of his children. His own loneliness and anger may have been there, but they have been transformed by suffering and tears. His loneliness has become endless solitude, his anger boundless gratitude. This is who I have to become. I see it as clearly as I see the immense beauty of the father’s emptiness and compassion. Can I let the younger and the elder son grow in me to the maturity of the compassionate father?” (page 129 hc/139 sc). How do you answer Henri’s question for yourself? What are you moving from? What are you moving to? What step or steps can you take to make this movement?

### **Notes – Week 5**



## *About Henri Nouwen*

The internationally renowned priest and author, respected professor and beloved pastor Henri J.M. Nouwen wrote over 40 books on the spiritual life. He corresponded regularly in English, Dutch, German, French and Spanish with hundreds of friends and reached out to thousands through his Eucharistic celebrations, lectures and retreats. Since his death in 1996, ever-increasing numbers of readers, writers, teachers and seekers have been guided by his literary legacy. Nouwen's books have sold over 2 million copies and been published in over 22 languages.

Born in Nijkerk, Holland, on January 24, 1932, Nouwen felt called to the priesthood at a very young age. He was ordained in 1957 as a diocesan priest and studied psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen. In 1964 he moved to the United States to study at the Menninger Clinic. He went on to teach at the University of Notre Dame, and the Divinity Schools of Yale and Harvard. For several months during the 1970s, Nouwen lived and worked with the Trappist monks in the Abbey of the Genesee, and in the early 1980s he lived with the poor in Peru. In 1985 he was called to join L'Arche in Trosly, France, the first of over 100 communities founded by Jean Vanier where people with developmental disabilities live with assistants. A year later Nouwen came to make his home at L'Arche Daybreak near Toronto, Canada. He died suddenly on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1996, in Holland and is buried in King City, Ontario, not far from the Daybreak Community.

Nouwen believed that what is most personal is most universal. He wrote, "By giving words to these intimate experiences I can make my life available to others." His spirit lives on in the work of the Henri Nouwen Society, Henri Nouwen Stichting (Holland), the Henri Nouwen Legacy Trust, the Henri J. M. Nouwen Archives and Research Collection, and in all who live the spiritual values of solitude, community and ministry, to which he dedicated his life.

For more information about Henri Nouwen, his writing and the work of the Henri Nouwen Society visit: [www.HenriNouwen.org](http://www.HenriNouwen.org).

---

<sup>1</sup> Photo of children with Henri in Guatemala by Peter Weiskel. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen in Ukraine.





Other comments about the reflection guide: \_\_\_\_\_

7. Was the Nouwen Reading Group a positive experience for you?  Yes  No  
Why? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Would you consider leading or joining another Nouwen Reading Group in the future?  
 Yes  No  Maybe

Additional comments welcome: \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank you!*

---

### **Additional questions for group leader:**

9. Where did your group meet?  Your home  Church hall  Library  School  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_ State/Province: \_\_\_\_\_

10. How often did your group meet?  Once a week  Bi-weekly  Monthly  
Other: \_\_\_\_\_ Duration of meeting: \_\_\_\_\_ hours

11. Your group met from (month) \_\_\_\_\_ (year) \_\_\_\_\_ **to** (month) \_\_\_\_\_ (year) \_\_\_\_\_

12. How many people were in the group at the beginning? \_\_\_\_\_ At the end? \_\_\_\_\_

13. What occurred during your first meeting?

Prayer  Fellowship  Invited others to take on some leadership roles (ex. introduction to a chapter; organize refreshments, prayer, etc.)  Viewed “Journey of the Heart: the life of Henri Nouwen” video  Discussion based on reflection guide  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Additional comments welcome: \_\_\_\_\_

Please return completed forms to Maureen Wright at the Henri Nouwen Society:  
In Canada — 113 St. Joseph Street, Toronto, ON M5S 1J4  
In the USA — P.O. Box 220522, St. Louis, MO 63122