

THE RETURN OF THE PRODIGAL SON

Discussion Questions

- 1) Have you ever been spiritually moved by a piece of art, music or literature? In what way did the artist move you?
- 2) In what areas of your life do you play the bystander or critical observer? Do you see yourself more as an outsider looking in or an insider looking out? Henri Nouwen states on page 13 that there are different ways of not getting involved – indifference, curiosity, daydreaming, and attentive observation. Which of these are more familiar to you?
- 3) On page 21, Sue Mosteller says to Henri Nouwen, *“Whether you are the younger son or elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father.”* Later she states, *“You have been looking for friends all your life; you have been interested in thousands of things; you have been begging for attention, appreciation, and affirmation left and right. The time has come to claim your true vocation – to be a father (or mother) who can welcome his/her children home without asking them any questions and without wanting anything from them in return.”* Do you find yourself more often in the position of seeking affirmation, attention and appreciation or in the position of giving affirmation, attention, and appreciation?
- 4) On page 40, Nouwen writes about hearing voices that say, *“Go out and prove that you are worth something.”* He goes on to say that, *“Soon after Jesus had heard the voice calling him the Beloved, he was led to the desert to hear those ‘other’ voices. They told him to prove that he was worth love in being successful, powerful, and popular.”* How often do you hear these “other” voices? How can we filter out the “other” voices and hear only that we are Beloved?
- 5) On page 53, Nouwen states that one of the greatest challenges of the spiritual life is to receive God’s forgiveness. Are there areas in your life where you struggle with feeling forgiven or continue to beat yourself up? Why do you think that we sometimes cling to our sins? Would you describe yourself more as a “hired servant” or a “Beloved son?” Is there anything that God cannot forgive?
- 6) Nouwen writes at length on pages 55-58 about his nontraditional interpretation of Jesus Himself being a prodigal son. He states, *“There is no journey to God outside of the journey that Jesus made.”* What are your thoughts about this interpretation? Does it make you think any differently about the incarnation?
- 7) In what ways are you like the younger son?

- 8) On page 69, Nouwen remarks that the painting might well be called, "The Parable of the Lost Sons." Both the younger and elder sons were lost in different ways. The elder son "*exteriorly did all the things that a good son is supposed to do, but, interiorly, he wandered away from his father. He did his duty, worked hard every day, and fulfilled all his obligations but became increasingly unhappy and unfree.*" In what ways are you like the elder son?
- 9) Do you complain a lot? In your conversation with others, how much time do you spend talking about difficulties, hurts, and injustices? We all have a need to have our concerns heard, our hurts validated, and our injustices corrected. We all need healing, but how do we voice these needs without unduly burdening others? Who should we talk to about our struggles?
- 10) On page 74, Nouwen states, "*The experience of not being able to enter into joy is the experience of a resentful heart.*" Have you ever experienced not being able to enter into someone else's joy out of feelings of resentment or jealousy?
- 11) It is stated on page 80 that, "*The father sees the passion of the younger son, even when it is not regulated by obedience. With the same love, he sees the obedience of the elder son, even when it is not vitalized by passion.*" In your spiritual life, would you describe yourself as more passionate or more obedient? How can we balance the two?
- 12) On page 99, Nouwen states, "*As soon as I recognized the difference between the two hands of the father, a new world of meaning opened up for me. The father is not simply a great patriarch. He is mother as well as father. He touches the son with a masculine hand and a feminine hand. He holds, she caresses, He confirms, she consoles.*" Later on page 102, Nouwen uses the feminine pronouns 'her' and 'she' when referring to God. How does it make you feel to hear God referred to as 'her' or 'she'? Does God have a gender?
- 13) "*For a long time I considered low self-esteem to be some kind of virtue. I had been warned so often against pride and conceit that I came to consider it a good thing to deprecate myself,*" Nouwen states on page 107. How is low self-esteem an obstacle to receiving God's love? Have you ever been surprised to discover that someone who you admired had low self-esteem? What is the difference between true humility and false humility? How would you describe Henri Nouwen's temperament?
- 14) Nouwen describes a man on page 115 who is so connected with God that he can see joy where Nouwen only see sadness. When this man travels he never talks about the great injustices that he undoubtedly sees, but rather about the hidden joys he discovered. Do you know anyone who only focuses on the

joys of life? If so, how do you feel when you are with this person? What would happen if everyone only focused on the joys of life?

- 15) Nouwen states on page 128-129 that there are three ways to a truly compassionate spiritual fatherhood: grief, forgiveness, and generosity. The first way is grieving and Nouwen states that he has come to see that much of praying is grieving. Comment.
- 16) The second way to spiritual fatherhood is forgiveness. Nouwen states, "This requires "climbing over" the wall of arguments and angry feelings, the fear of being hurt or used again, and the fear of losing control. Forgiveness is a way to "climb over" the wall and welcome others into our hearts without expecting anything in return." How can we develop the strength to "climb over" these walls?
- 17) The last path to spiritual fatherhood presented by Nouwen is generosity. Nouwen states that generosity is moving from fear to love (page 131). Jesus makes it clear that the giving of the self is the mark of a true disciple when he states, "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*" (John 15:13) When was the last time you died to yourself for the sake of someone else? How did you feel afterwards? How hard is it for you to give energy, time, money, and attention to someone who has offended you? Is it always desirable to do so?
- 18) On page 132, Nouwen states, "*There is a dreadful emptiness in this spiritual fatherhood. No success, no power, no popularity, no easy satisfaction. But that same dreadful emptiness is also the place of true freedom.*" Do you more often feel like a spiritual parent or a spiritual child? Have you experienced the dreadful emptiness that Nouwen speaks about? Have you experienced true freedom? What is the difference between spiritual loneliness and spiritual aloneness?
- 19) What did you think of Nouwen's move from the "wise and the clever" people of academic life to the mentally handicapped people of L'Arche community? How did he grow?
- 20) How has reading The Return of the Prodigal Son and studying Rembrandt's painting changed or enhanced your understanding of the parable?