



Session 13
Winter 2015–16
Middler

The loving father

LUKE 15:11–32

prepare

PRAYER

God, it is sometimes difficult to have compassion when people make poor choices and create problems for themselves. It is easy to look at the world with an attitude of judgment rather than mercy. Help me see myself clearly. Amen.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

To understand God as a loving parent

STORY SUMMARY

Jesus told a parable about a man with two sons. The younger son asked for his inheritance early. He went to another country and spent all the money. He worked for a farmer feeding the pigs, wishing he could eat the pigs' food. Starving, the son returned to his father and apologized. The father was so happy to have him back that he held a feast in his honor. The older son was angry.



teaching tips for middler

The image of God as a parent can be tricky if there are problems at home, which could be happening even in “good” families. God is portrayed in today’s session as an always-loving parent, not necessarily similar to an all-too-human relative. Though they may not admit it, middle schoolers long for parental approval. They will benefit from knowing that they are deeply loved by a heavenly parent.

You will need three toilet paper tubes for today’s Bible story. Make sure to read through the story ahead of time and think through how the Peace notes activity will work with your group. Decide which Explore activities you will do, and check Supplies and To do throughout the session to see what needs to be prepared.

A surprising father

The third parable of Luke 15 follows the same pattern as the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, studied in last week's session. This final parable, however, extends and elaborates themes in surprising and provocative ways. The father in the third parable is quite surprising. Unlike the shepherd and the woman in the first two parables, who exert themselves immediately, the father is initially quite passive. He also endures shame as a result of the actions of both his sons. For the younger son to request his inheritance while the father is yet alive was shameful and outrageous, because in those days it would have been seen as a desire for his father to actually be dead already. The elder son, however, also treats his father dishonorably. The father compounds his humiliation in the way he interacts with both sons—dividing his property between them, running through the village, and leaving his own feast. He is incredibly passive in the face of the insults he has received.

Disgraceful sons

After the younger son leaves home, his desperate and isolated situation is ironically expressed in keeping with Luke's exploration of meal symbolism: even the pigs would not share a meal with him. Destitute and hungry, he plans to return to his father's household, now in the role of a servant. However, the father's actions eclipse those of the son; his father refuses to treat him as "one of your hired servants." Indeed, the robe, ring, and shoes are all symbolic of full restoration to son-ship and family. They suggest that the father is saying, "I will not receive you back as a servant but as a son!" In fact, the killing of the fatted calf implies that the entire village is invited to join the celebration, in keeping with the pattern of the previous parables.

However, this parable presents the additional element of the episode with the elder son. Though the elder son has never left home, he also relates to his father in a servant-like manner and refuses to acknowledge his own brother. Everything he says conveys the fact that he is as estranged from the father as the younger son is.



In reality, both sons are estranged and hold a servant-like attitude toward their disgracefully gracious father. Though the father persists in recognizing the elder as his son and inviting him to embrace the younger son as his brother, we do not hear the older son's answer. Unlike the first two parables, which conclude with the entire community joining in celebration at the finding of the lost, this final parable is open-ended in a manner that forcefully turns the question back to the Pharisees in Jesus' audience.

The lavish grace of the father

Who is the central character in this parable? Initially, it appears that unlike the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, the main figure may be the one that is lost—the son. However, after his initial passivity, the father eclipses everyone else by the extravagant compassion he exercises toward both his sons. As in the first two parables, it is the one searching for the lost item that is the real focus. Some have referred to this as the parable of the prodigal father, given the shame that he endures and the lavish grace he extends to both his sons.

What is this parable about? Despite the occurrence of the word in the first two parables, this may not be a parable about repentance. This is surprising, given the emphasis on the word *repentance* in the first two parables. However, neither son models true repentance as Luke explains it. Each of the parables in Luke 15 is really defined by the intense actions of the one who is searching for the lost items. This parable is not so much about repentance as it is about the seeker and about being found. Or perhaps repentance and salvation in the Gospel of Luke are about being found.

gather

supplies

- Glow magazines
- Shine Songbook and CD
- Year Two Songbooks (optional)
- CD player

poster pack

- Bible memory poster (Luke 4)

to do

- Review the signs for the Bible memory passage if you will be using them.

media connections

- Prodigal son artwork by Rembrandt, James Tissot, He Qi or John August Swanson or from Vie de Jesus Mafa
- "Far, Far Away from My Loving Father" hymn
- Vimeo video "Prodigal Son" by Evan Oliver (for older groups), Vimeo video "God's Story: Two Sons and a Father" by Crossroads Kids' Club (for younger groups)
- *Adam Raccoon and the Circus Master* by Glen Keane

BUILD COMMUNITY

Greet children by name as they enter and give each person a hug, high five, or fist bump. Encourage children to similarly greet each person. (A bit of awkward laughter is okay!)

Then ask children to finish the sentence, "If I were a parent, I would . . ." Welcome silly and serious responses. Would loving parents do things the same or differently from these answers?

teaching tip

As the leader, displaying welcome and acceptance is fundamental to building community within your group.

WORSHIP TOGETHER

Sing or listen to "God's Light Shines," track 8 on the Shine CD and page 14 of the *Year Two Songbook*.

Invite three readers to lead the group in the "God of small things" prayer on page 29 of *Glow*.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Invite children to get into a comfortable position. Ask them to close their eyes and remember a time when they needed a parent's help. Invite them to silently thank God for the care they received.

Then ask them to remember any times they were not listened to or did not get something they needed. Invite them to talk to God about this and ask for healing for any related hurts.

Say to each child:

___ (name), you are a precious son/daughter of God!

Bible memory

If your group has enjoyed learning sign language, review the signs on pages 100–101 of this guide and use them as you say the passage. Or, divide into two groups and have each group come up with actions for half of the passage. Do the actions and say the passage together.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

—Luke 4:16–19

experience

SHARE THE STORY

Invite everyone to gather on the floor in front of you, and open a Bible to Luke 15. Tell the group that today's story comes right after Jesus' stories about the lost sheep and the woman who lost a coin.

Pass out the storytelling tubes (toilet paper tubes with faces drawn on them) to three different children. Indicate that one is the younger son, one is the older son, and one is the father. The person in charge of each tube should put it in front of the group when that character is part of the story, making sure the appropriate face is showing (happy or sad).

Read the Bible story from page 232 in *Shine On*. Have the person in charge of the youngest son slide the foil ring over the tube and tape the paper robe on when indicated by the story.

WONDER AND REFLECT

Set the tube characters aside and invite children to reflect on the story together. Hold up the story picture from *Shine On* during this time.

- I wonder what the son thought about when he was leaving. I wonder how his father felt.
- (Point to the son in the picture.) I wonder who this could really be.
- The older brother is not in this picture. I wonder why he was so angry at what his father did.
- (Point to the father in the picture.) I wonder who welcomes you with arms wide open.

PEACE NOTES

The two sons and father made choices that led toward or away from peace in their family. Help the children enter these experiences using the "Enter the story" stations on page 102 of this guide. If you have children who struggle with reading, do this activity together. Move to three different areas in your meeting space. Read the instructions out loud and invite children to participate with eyes closed (so they are not looking at others).

If you have a more independent group, cut apart several sets of the instructions and place them at three different areas for children to engage with individually. They can move through the stations in any order. Encourage them to take their time.

Softly play "Unity," "Come and See," and/or "Peace Pilgrim's Prayer" (tracks 20, 3, and 16 on the Shine CD) during this time.

teaching tip

The stations activity uses the language of *child* and *parent* rather than *son* and *father*. This may help girls enter the story more easily.



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supplies

- Bible
- *Shine On: A Story Bible*
- *Shine Songbook and CD*
- CD player
- "Enter the story" stations (from Additional resources)

storytelling props

- Three toilet paper tubes (each with a happy and sad expression on opposite sides)
- "Ring" (circle of aluminum foil)
- "Robe" (triangle of colored paper or fabric)
- Tape

to do

- Draw happy and sad faces on opposite sides of three toilet paper tubes.
- Make a ring out of aluminum foil that fits around the "younger son" tube. Make a little robe with a triangle of colored paper or fabric. (See page 103 of this guide for an example.)
- Copy and cut out the "Enter the story" stations and put them at three places around the room. Or, plan to guide your group through the exercise together.

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explore

CREATE

Have each person cut or tear a paper into four sections, one for each scene of the story from the younger son's perspective:

- life at home
- leaving home and spending money
- working with pigs and deciding to go home
- arriving at home

Invite children to use colors, shapes, and lines to represent each scene. If they are comfortable sharing their work, hang the art in columns so people can see the different ways they expressed the action and emotion in the story.

supplies

- Blank paper
- Colored pencils, markers, paint, colored paper, or other art supplies
- Scissors

MOVE

Give each child a slip of paper with an animal name from pages 36–37 of *Glow*. (Use the more common animals without descriptors; for example, “spider” rather than “wolf spider.”) They can all act out the animals at the same time while trying to guess which animal the others are. When someone yells out a correct guess, the person playing that animal should freeze. The last person moving “wins.” Trade animals and repeat if desired. Then read about amazing animal parents in *Glow*.

supplies

- *Glow* magazines
- Slips of paper with animal names



RETELL

Read the “What’s different?” stories on page 35 of *Glow* and invite children to stand up when they hear something different from today’s Bible story. Or, have children read the stories to each other and mark the changes in their magazines. Talk together about how you could tell this story in today’s world.

(*Changes in first story*: woman, older son, nearby town, donkey cart, hospital, no one noticing, yelling at him. *Changes in second story*: daughters, sheep, trying to eat sheep food, telling father it was his fault, beans, older daughter being excited.)

supplies

- *Glow* magazines

GLOW

Children can help the son get home by finding a way through the maze on page 38 of *Glow*. They can also check out some other Bible passages that refer to God as a parent.

supplies

- Bibles
- *Glow* magazines
- Pencils

other ideas

- Look at artwork of this story from different cultures. (See Media connections.)
- Make thank you cards for parents or people who are like parents to you. Invite parents to join all or part of the session today.
- Add props to today’s story by making origami pigs. (Find instructions online.)

bless

PRAY

Direct attention to *halal* on the Praise poster. Point out that “boasting” is usually a bad thing, but we can boast about how great God is through our praise. Play a lively song from the Shine CD and encourage children to move to the music, shout “hallelujah,” and call out reasons to praise God.

SEND

Gather near the Crazy comparisons poster. Which images show what God’s kingdom is like according to today’s story?

Send children with this blessing:

Like a mother hen who gathers in her chicks, like a father who holds open his arms, God welcomes you. Live in God’s love this week.

supplies

- Shine Songbook and CD
- CD player

poster pack

- Praise poster
- Crazy comparisons poster

looking ahead

Next week you will need a pile of paper advertisements to help tell the Bible story. Collect these from the mail or other sources. You will also need a pile of coins. Retell calls for a variety of items to create “Foley sound effects,” such as gardening gloves, metal washers, shoes, and stalks of celery.

That they are beloved, created, and called is exactly what I want these kids to know, exactly what I want to be saying to them, in whatever words come out of my mouth.

—Dana Cassell
Manassas, Virginia

leader’s closing prayer

Sometimes it almost seems easier to forgive big offenses than to deal with the small annoyances that people create for us every day (perhaps especially children). Reflect on how you can better incorporate the attitudes and actions of the father in today’s story into your daily life.

Caring God, help me imitate your flexibility and forgiveness. Show me new and expanded ways to love everyone around me, including these children. Amen.

