



Session 13
Winter 2015–16
Junior Youth

The loving father

LUKE 15:11–32

prepare



PRAYER

God of grace and mercy, may I come running to you like the younger son. I know you are waiting for me with overflowing love. 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 junior youth

The image of God as parent is one of the most powerful in all of Scripture. Yet it can be difficult. Some in your group may come from homes full of unconditional love and welcome, others from homes where parents are abusive, absent, or critical. In either case, seeing God as a parent can be difficult for youth at this age when they are trying to separate themselves from their parents. No image for God is complete or perfect. Seeing God as the parent in today's story, however, can remind youth of the way we are meant to love and be loved—with joyful welcome, abundant forgiveness, and unending relationship.

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

- Shine Songbook and CD
- CD player
- Stones
- Permanent marker
- Purple cloth
- Pillar candle
- Lighter/matches
- White paper
- Colored pencils or markers

poster pack

- Bible memory poster (Luke 4)
- Lent poster

to do

- Make sure the worship table is set up with a purple cloth and pillar candle. Write the word *reconciling* on the stones with permanent marker and arrange them around the candle.

media connections

- Casting Crowns song "Prodigal" from *Lifesong* CD
- YouTube search for "The Prodigal" by The Skit Guys
- Image search for *Forgiving Father* by Frank Wesley
- Image search for *The Prodigal Daughter* by Oliver Wong
- Internet search for *The Prodigal Son* video by Bluefish TV

BUILD COMMUNITY

Invite youth to share about their place in their families—are they an oldest, youngest, middle, or only child? If they have brothers or sisters, how are relationships with their parents and their siblings different? If they could choose to be an oldest, youngest, middle, or only child, which would they choose?

WORSHIP TOGETHER

Gather around the Lenten worship table and light the candle. Draw attention to the Lent poster and to this week's word, *reconciling*. This may be a less familiar word, so let youth share what they think it means and then offer this simple definition:

To be reconciled means to settle differences, make peace, or restore harmony. It often means healing, forgiveness, or a new start between people, or between people and God.

Read together 2 Corinthians 5:17–20. Give each youth a stone with the word *reconciling* on it. Invite them to hold the stone, turning it over in their hands, as they reflect on this question: Where do you need to work towards reconciling with someone else or with God? Play "Óyenos, mi Dios" from the Shine CD, track 15, quietly during this time of reflection.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Hand out sheets of paper. Have youth write a synonym for *reconciling* in the middle of the paper, such as *forgiving*, *healing*, or *resolving*. Invite them to draw designs or symbols around the word as they listen to "Peace Pilgrim's Prayer" from the Shine CD, track 16.

Bible memory

Invite youth to sit or stand back-to-back with a partner. One of them should face the Bible memory poster. The other, facing away from the poster, tries to say the passage from memory with help from their partner. The partners then switch roles and try again.

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

Today's story is a readers theater, found on page 27 in *L.E.D.* Have four volunteers read the parts of Jesus (who is telling the story), the younger brother, the father, and the older brother. The rest of the group may act as servants and join in the celebration.

For smaller groups: Have two youth take turns reading the parts, or you and one youth take turns.

WONDER AND REFLECT

Have youth read "A little illumination" on page 27 in *L.E.D.* Then ponder some of these questions together:

- I wonder why the father granted his son's request for his inheritance.
- I wonder how the two sons got along before the younger one left. I wonder what their relationship with their father was like.
- I wonder if the father and older son ever talked about the younger son while he was gone.
- I wonder when you might have felt like leaving home.
- When you think about "home," what images come to your mind?

PEACE NOTES

There is much in this story that is the opposite of peace (self-centeredness, jealousy). Then there is the contrast of forgiveness, welcome, and restoration. Draw a line down the middle of a chalkboard or sheet of easel paper. Invite youth to suggest words or actions from the story, writing those that show the opposite of peace on one side, and those that make for peace on the other. End with a simple prayer, asking for God's help as you show love, forgiveness, and welcome.

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supplies

- Bibles
- *L.E.D.* magazines
- Chalkboard or easel paper
- Chalk or markers

explore

CREATE

Have youth explore different images of God in Scripture, including God as parent, and create art interpretations of them. (Check Psalm 18:2; Psalm 23:1–2; Psalm 27:1; Psalm 61:2–4; Psalm 84:11; Psalm 91:4; and Psalm 93:1–2.) Make a gallery of the art pieces and talk about them.

supplies

- Bibles
- Wide variety of art supplies (paper, markers, paints, clay, wire, collage materials)

RETELL

Today's story ends on a cliffhanger, with the older son still angry and jealous. What will happen next? Divide youth into two groups. Have one group act out an ending to the story where the brothers stay in conflict. Have another group act out an ending where peace is restored and the brothers reconciled. How will the younger brother be different after his experience? How will the older brother be different?

supplies

- Bibles

L.E.D.

Have youth complete the maze on page 28 of *L.E.D.* to help the father and son find their way to reconciliation. Then invite youth to look at the quotes about home on the page and share which is their favorite and why. What does it feel like to be “at home” with God, welcomed as the father welcomed both of his sons?

supplies

- *L.E.D.* magazines
- Pencils

CONNECT

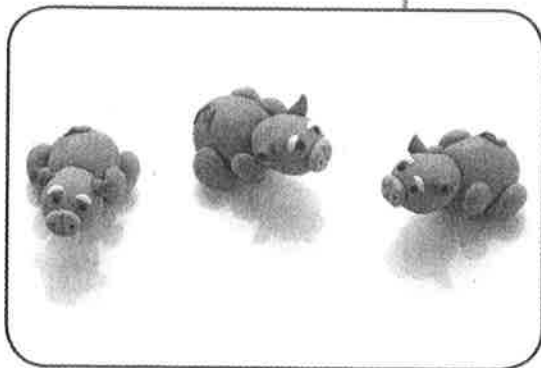
Ahead of time, write the additional words listed on page 103 of this guide on the God's kingdom cards. To play a version of “Taboo,” put the cards in a stack, facedown, and divide the group into two teams. One at a time, youth will draw a card and try to get teammates to guess the illustration of God's kingdom printed on the card—using none of the extra words you wrote on it. (They may use only words, not actions or sounds.) A player from the other team can watch to make sure none of the “taboo” words are used. The team has thirty seconds to guess before the other team can steal. Teams take turns until all cards are used, keeping the cards they guess correctly.

supplies

- God's kingdom cards (from poster pack)
- Words for God's kingdom cards (from Additional resources)
- Timer

other ideas

- Break into groups of two to four, and have each group create one of the party games on page 102 of this guide. Groups can then take turns explaining their games and leading them.
- Act out the “Parable of the problem child.” The script can be downloaded for free from www.ShineCurriculum.com/Extras.



bless

PRAY

Encourage youth to carry their “reconciling” stones with them this week as a reminder to seek healing with others. For a closing prayer, hold the stones as you listen to or sing along with “Sizohamba Naye” (We Will Walk with God), track 18 on the Shine CD, page 27 in the *Year Two Songbook*. Lyrics are also found at the back of *L.E.D.*

SEND

Send youth with this blessing adapted from Psalm 5:11 (*The Message*):

God has welcomed us with open arms and decked us out in delight. Go forth and rejoice!

supplies

- *Shine Songbook and CD*
- *Year Two Songbooks* (optional)
- CD player
- “Reconciling” stones (from Worship together)

Share unique moments with other leaders. Your experiences can encourage and teach others at just the right time.

—Stephen Murphy
Holland, Michigan



leader's closing prayer

Are you the younger child, brazen and wayward or desperately longing for home? Or the older child—faithful, steady, but resentful? Or are you the parent, one who welcomes and embraces those in need of healing? All of these characters can be found within us. Whose story connects with yours today?

God, may I be one who welcomes like the father, returns like the younger, and is always ready to join in celebrating your mercy and love. Amen.