

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE:

The Prodigal Son

for Teens, College Students, and Young Adults

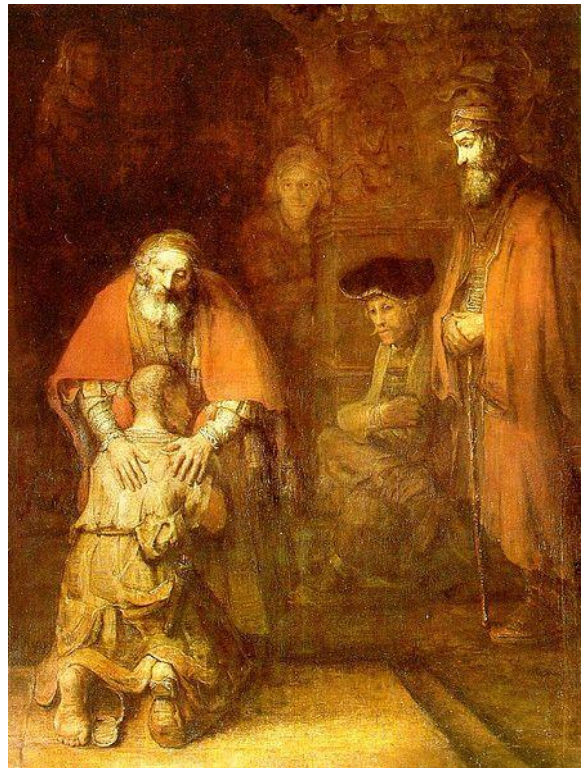
God of mercy and compassion, Be with us as we examine our hearts before you. Give us the strength we need to deeply reflect on the truth of who we are, as we see ourselves in and through the lives of the three main characters in the parable of the Prodigal Son – The younger son, the older son and the father.

THE YOUNGER SON

We turn our hearts to reflect on the Younger son – the Prodigal Son.

What does the word “prodigal” mean anyway? “Spending money or resources freely and recklessly; wastefully extravagant.”

- Where am I “prodigal” in my own life?
- Am I wasteful in the resources given to me?
- Do I take care in how I use my own, or another’s, money?
- Do I prefer, or long for, an extravagant lifestyle over a simple one?



The prodigal son wants to leave home, wants to go his own way and wants independence from his family. This is something many of us may be experiencing right now and it’s a very natural occurrence. Sooner or later we all have to take flight from the comforts and confines of our parents or guardians. But where the prodigal son goes wrong is that he uses his new found independence to reject the values which his parents has spent much effort trying to help him acquire. Perhaps he felt like life at home was too restrictive and the he knew better than his parents.

- How am I handling this gradual transition into independent adult life?
- Do I truly take to heart and live the teachings of my family and my faith?
- Have I ever acted or spoke in a defiant way because I swore “I knew better” than everyone else?
- Do I honor my mother, father and other loved ones by living the virtues in which they raised me?
- What is causing me to rebel?
- Do I ever claim that rules are “too restrictive” only because I don’t want to follow them?



After the prodigal son squandered his wealth and spent everything, he worked and lived with pigs. For Jews, the pig is an unclean animal which means that the swineherd – the pigpen – is the expression of man’s most extreme alienation and destitution.

- When have I chosen to live a less dignified life?
- Have there been moments in my life when I found myself in the “pigpen?”
 - o What led me there?
- How do I handle feelings of despair when they enter my heart and mind?

The prodigal son reaches a moment of conversion. As St. Luke tells us – “He came to his senses” – and he realizes that he is called to a more dignified life. He recognizes that he has become alienated and wandered into truly alien lands and his conversion involves a return to himself, which means, a return to his father.

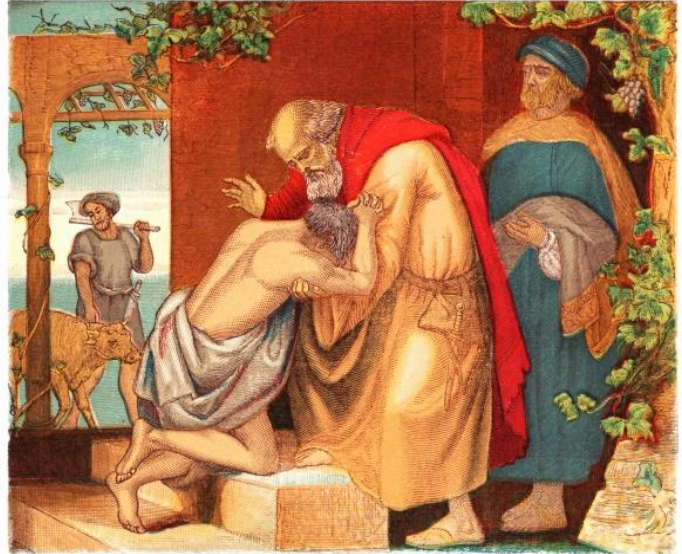
- Are our hearts open to allow us to “come to our senses” to be truthful with ourselves and with God, about how we are living our lives?
- When do I experience being in an “alien land?”
- What words or actions... or lack of words or actions, make me recognize that I am not being my true self?
- What is getting in the way of my own conversion to a more dignified life?
 - o Pride? Greed? The need to be popular or liked? Fear of being vulnerable?

The prodigal son heads home, prepared to ask for mercy and forgiveness from his father.

- Do I know that I’m love despite my sin?
- Do I understand God to be slow to anger and rich in kindness?
- Am I capable of fully owning my personal life choices or do I blame my life’s circumstances on other people or other things?
- Do I value the importance of a sincere apology, or do I make it a habit to assume that everything is ok?
- Do I genuinely live a life of conversion and take to heart the pledge to sin no more?

THE OLDER SON

We don't hear much about the older son in the parable until after his younger brother returns. So, let's reflect for a moment on what life must have been like for the older son, after his brother leaves. He had to find out about his brother's decision from someone. Did he overhear the conversation? Did his younger brother tell him and they got into a huge argument? Did his father tell him that his brother left and they grieved together? Did the same servant who told him of his brother's return, also tell him of his departure? We can wonder about how he found out, and we can also imagine his reaction.



- What is our relationship with our siblings like?
- Do we foster friendship and love? Or discord and dislike?
- Do we get wrapped up in the drama of other people's lives and decisions that we forget to reflect on our own?
- Do we hold grudges against people who have made mistakes in their lives?

While the younger son pursues "self-discovery" – his quest to find and fulfill himself, even if a few people get hurt... the older son is committed to a more socially respectable way of being in the world – the way of "moral conformity." He's on a program of self-salvation, earning the approval of this community and the favor of his father. When he feels the terms of this deal are violated, his good attitude changes into resentment.

- Do I live my life simply to 'avoid evil' or do I actually pursue the good?
- Am I too rigid or too flexible in the way I understand Church teaching?
- Am I living my life "self-centeredly" - only caring about my own salvation, and not interested or called to assist others in their life in Christ?

When the older son hears of his brother's return and how he is ceremoniously welcomed back, he is shocked at his father's response. The older son gets angry, confused and jealous.

- Do we have an understanding of God's forgiveness to include all people and all sins?
- Do we expect recognition for being good and following the rules?
- Have we ever been envious of someone else's forgiveness experience?
- At times when we don't get what we want, do we over dramatize the situation and claim we experienced an injustice?

There are many good qualities that the older son possesses - - he was a hard worker – when we first encounter him, he is out in the fields working for his father. While his younger brother was out “sowing his wild oats” – the older brother was in the field diligently sowing seed for his father and working hard to harvest the grain. He was also an obedient son - - He didn’t rebel and go off to squander his father’s wealth on loose living, like the younger son. Rather, we hear of his obedience when he says, “I have never neglected a command of yours.”

Jesus do not fault the morality or the obedience or the work ethic of this older son. However, he does fault his attitude.

Not only was the older son angry, but he also sulked and pouted and withdrew himself from his brother and the community. In the story we hear, “The older brother became angry and refused to go in.”

- Do we sometimes get caught up with counting the good we do compared to the bad we do and calculate our sinfulness that way?
- Do we excuse sinful behavior away by highlighting our graces?
- How does our attitude affect our relationship with others? Are we someone who is a positive presence? Or someone who has the tendency to bring people down?
- Do we get pouty when things don’t go our way and then refuse to participate in the new situation?



THE FATHER

We now focus our examination by reflecting on the words and actions of the Father in the Prodigal Son parable.

As a parent, he raised his sons to be hard working and obedient, but when one son chose to take his money and leave, the Father made the choice to allow his son the freedom to figure out his own life. There were no harsh words spoken, even though the father was most understandably heartbroken over the younger son’s request. How can his own son basically say, “You are dead to me, give me my money.” Yet, we hear of no argument, no ultimatum.

- How often do we challenge the authority of our parents, our professors and our friends because we want to do things our own way?
 - When has there been a time when our selfishness caused pain in another person?



- Do I get wrapped up in caring so much about my own life and my own experiences that I don't even think about how my words and actions make other people feel?

The father is the supreme example of unconditional love. He forgives and rejoices without hesitation when he sees his younger son return. His joy is lavish as seen in the gifts of the robe and the ring and the feast.

- How would I describe my love of others? Is it unconditional? Are there limitations?
- Do I believe in a God who welcomes me back into life with Him after I sin?
- In what relationships am I called to offer more unconditional love?
- What relationship needs forgiveness, so that it can flourish and grow?

The father approaches the older son with love as well. He leaves the party to go talk with him, and pleads with him to come back to the feast. He is caring and offers no argument, no ultimatum, but rather a loving invitation to rejoice that his brother has returned.

- How long do we brood over injuries? Hold a grudge?
- How we respond to times when we have been hurt, especially by the ones that we love? Are we honest? Silent? Calm? Disruptive?
- Do I believe that if I play by all the rules, then I am entitled to all kinds of perks and rewards?
- Am I a disciple of Christ out of love or fear?
- How eager am I to respond to God's invitation to a part of a family that sometimes doesn't get along? My personal, physical family? But also my spiritual, Church family?
- Am I a person who looks to assist those who are being excluded or feel excluded? How can I be someone who is mindful of everyone's "place at the table?"
- Am I able to open my heart to hear God's plea for me to enter into a more mature and fulfilling relationship with him?