



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

### Session 2

### **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”. 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.

#### **Discussion questions:**

What parallels does Henri see between Rembrandt and the prodigal son? How does knowledge of Rembrandt’s biography enhance our understanding of his painting?

According to Henri, leaving home “is a denial of the spiritual reality that I belong to God with every part of my being”. When has Henri left home? When have you left home?

Henri states: “‘Addiction’ might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society”. What addictions do you see in the world around you? To which addictions have you succumbed at some point in your life? Why?

Henri says that a belief in total, absolute forgiveness does not come easily. 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?

“Jesus makes it clear that the way to God is the same as the way to a new childhood”. What does it mean to become like a child? Why is this process so difficult?

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?

Church on the Corner 2018, Based on the material prepared by Ed Wojcicki and John Holsinger and Revised by Claire S. Merritt.