



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

Part II: The Elder Son (Chapters 4-6)

Themes:

The elder son usually gets little attention in discussions of this Bible story. Yet, Nouwen explains how both Rembrandt and Henri himself had part of the dark, resentful side of the “elder son” in them. Henri admits he understands the envy that the elder son feels toward his younger brother. The elder son lived an obedient and dutiful life. Yet when his brother came home, the elder son felt resentful, unkind, selfish and without joy. Neither the parable nor the Rembrandt story indicates whether the elder son finally reconciled himself to what was happening. Nouwen asks: “Can the elder son in me come home? ... How can I return when I am lost in resentment, when I am caught in jealousy, when I am imprisoned in obedience and duty [that is] lived out as slavery?” (page 71 hc/76 sc) The answer, Henri says, can be found in living with gratitude as a discipline and not just in response to gifts or favors received. To live in gratitude is not only a discipline; it is a choice (page 80 hc/85 sc).

Discussion questions:

Although there is a discrepancy between the parable and the painting, Henri is convinced that the man standing on the right represents the elder son. What justifies this belief? In what ways does Rembrandt resemble the elder son?

How has the elder son left home? Why does Henri identify with him? In what ways do you identify with him?

Why is it more difficult for the elder son to return home than for the prodigal son?

Why are trust and gratitude such essential disciplines for Henri? Why must we make a conscious effort to practice these disciplines?

Henri states: “Resentment and complaints, deep as they may seem, can vanish in the face of him in whom the full light of Sonship is visible”. In what ways is Jesus the elder son? In this role what does Jesus reveal to us about the nature of God?

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