



grow groups



Week 7: Turned Down for the Job

Luke 15:11-32

GOAL: To deepen our understanding of our identity as children of God rather than his employees.

CHECKLIST

- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- If your group will not meet next Sunday, March 10, please let Amy know ASAP. There will be no Kids or Students Grow Groups that day due to spring break.
- Invite your group to sit together with you at the Table to the Cross service on Thursday, March 28, at 7pm. This will take the place of your group meeting March 25-31.
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members. Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your unconditional and unwavering love for me. I know that my sin damages our relationship and separates me from you. I confess to you that sometimes I try to repair the damage by my own efforts--trying to "make it up" to you or earn my way back into your favor. But I know that I could never do enough to atone for my sin. Thank you for sending Jesus to take upon himself the penalty for my sin and offer me abundant life as your beloved child. When I mess up--and I know I will--help me to run to you rather than away from you. And as I experience your love and forgiveness, help me learn your ways and extend that same love and grace to those who are far from you. Like the father in this parable, may I have eyes to see those who are still a long way off, be filled with compassion for them, and run to them with your welcoming embrace. In the name of our gracious and loving Savior Jesus we pray, Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT

- Use this time to connect with your group relationally - both formally and informally.
- Invite your group to share one way that they have seen God at work in the past week, and one way they're praying for God to move in the week to come.
- Spend time praying for your group members and for your time together today, including any praises or prayer requests from your previous conversation.

COORDINATE

Spend a few minutes covering any details the group needs to know:

- Mar 6 - Pray First gathering from 6-7pm. Childcare provided.
- Mar 10 - No VR Kids or VRSM Grow Groups.
- Mar 20, 6-8pm - The Great Exchange, a Bible study for adults from Isaiah 61 re: hope in difficulty
- Mar 28, 7pm - Table to the Cross service. Ask your group to attend and sit together.

DISCUSS

- What stood out to you this week from the Growth Guide readings about God's response to the lost and hurting?

Leaders: *If your group meets on Sunday morning, you can jump right into the following questions. If your group meets during the week, you may want to have someone read the passage (Luke 15:11-32), or maybe have the group re-tell the story in their own words.*

Also, as is often the case, we've given you more questions than you'll likely have time to discuss. Think and pray about which topics will be most helpful for your specific group and feel free to pick and choose in whatever way works best.

- As you reflected on this familiar story of the Prodigal Son in your personal reading and in hearing this week's sermon, was there anything that struck you in a new way? How is the Holy Spirit speaking to you through this passage?

Leaders: *In addition to helping the group be open to new insights from the passage, asking this question communicates the expectation that the Spirit wants to speak to us through the passage!*

- Compare the speech the younger son plans to give (v18-19) and the speech he actually gives (v21). What's different between the two? Why?

Leaders: As I (John) mentioned in the sermon, the son's planned speech had three parts: 1) acknowledge his sin, 2) acknowledge the way his sin damaged their relationship, and 3) propose a new kind of relationship - boss/employee rather than father/son. But when he actually begins to deliver the speech, the father interrupts him after the second point. He won't even let him suggest a new kind of relationship! Instead, he welcomes him back as a son. (Not an employee)

This is one of the main points of the sermon - that when we do return to God, we often subconsciously (or consciously!) think that we need to "make it up" to God...to be good enough to work off our debt. The bad news is that this is impossible. We can never do enough to atone for our sin. But the good news is that Jesus has done it for us on the cross. Because of this, the Heavenly Father doesn't want to hire us as employees, he wants to welcome us home as sons and daughters

- Compare the younger son's words (v18-19) and the older son's words (v29-30). What do they have in common? What's different between the two?

Leaders: It's interesting to look at these two speeches side-by-side. Despite the fact that the two brothers are in vastly different situations, they both share a common view of their relationship with their father - they both have a "hired hand mentality."

Because of their different situations, they come at this from different angles: The younger brother thinks he has messed up so badly that the only way he can ever receive anything from his father is if he works for it/earns it. The older brother thinks he's been so good that his father owes him something. One brother thinks he's been bad and the other thinks he's been good, but both assume that what they receive is/should be based on what they do.

You can continue to explore this idea in the remaining questions, but this is a HUGELY important point for our faith. The vast majority of the world views their relationship with God in this way - if I mess up, God will be angry with me, but if I do well, God will owe me. But the consistent testimony of Scripture is that salvation is by grace, through faith, not by works. And the thing is that even people who consciously believe in salvation by grace sometimes unintentionally slip into this "hired hand mentality." And this has all kinds of negative impacts:

- *It robs us of the joy of knowing we are saved by grace and weighs us down with the burden of earning our salvation.*
- *It causes us to feel shame about our bad actions when God has already forgiven us.*
- *It causes us to feel pride about our good actions when in reality they are a gift from God.*
- *It causes us to judge others based on what they do rather than who they are.*

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- Read the Father's response to both sons (v22-24 and v31-32). What does his response teach us about God and our relationship with him?

Leaders: *In both responses, the Father reminds the son of his identity. He calls the younger brother "this son of mine." He calls the older brother "my son." He is reminding them (and God is reminding us) that their relationship with their father isn't based on what they do - it's based on who they are. They can't earn anything from him - instead, he delights to give them what they need out of love, not obligation.*

In both responses, the father also talks about the necessity of celebrating when a lost son comes home. This reveals the Father's heart of love for us...what he wants most is not for us to "get what we deserve," but instead for us to come home and experience a restored relationship with him.

- At the end of his sermon, Pastor John encouraged us to "Live like a son, not a staff member." What are some differences between sons/daughters and employees? How might this difference play out practically in our lives?

Leaders: *It will work best to take this question in two pieces. First, discuss as many differences as you can come up with between sons/daughters and employees. A few to get you started:*

- *An employee gets paid because of what they've done; a son/daughter gets blessed because of who they are.*
- *An employee works to earn a paycheck; a son/daughter serves out of love and gratitude.*
- *An employee has working hours; a son/daughter is a child 24/7*
- *An employee's main goal is to get paid; a son/daughter's main goal is for the family to thrive*
- *An employee follows directions out of obligation; a son/daughter follows directions out of respect/love.*
- *An employee's relationship with their boss is transactional; a son/daughter's relationship with their father is relational*
- *An employee is temporary; a son/daughter is forever.*

- In verse 17, the younger son "came to his senses," realizing that life with his father is better than life on his own. Have you ever had an experience like this? How can we make space for the Holy Spirit to help us "come to our senses" and repent from our sin?

Leaders: *As always, if you have a personal story to share here, your transparency can be helpful to prompt greater transparency in the group. Note - these stories don't have to be as dramatic as the prodigal son story...it could be as simple as the Holy Spirit helping you see an area of sin in your life and giving you the desire to repent and go the other direction.*

Brainstorm with the group about how we can put ourselves in position for the Holy Spirit to do this for us. A few ideas:

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WEEK 7

- Regularly reading, meditating on, and memorizing Scripture
 - Regular times of prayer, especially including times of silence.
 - “Daily Examen” - a practice, typically done in the evening, where you walk through your day together with God, asking him to remind you of times when he was at work during your day and to show you areas when he wants you to repent.
 - Investing in spiritual friendships/community - spending time in intentional conversation with other Christians gives the Holy Spirit the opportunity to speak to you through other people.
 - Regular commitment to corporate worship - The Spirit often uses times of corporate worship to convict, encourage, and redirect us.
- Is there someone you love who is currently “in the far country?” Pray together as a group (or in smaller groups) that the Holy Spirit will help them come to their senses and turn back to God.

Leaders: Depending on the size of your group, this could be a question for the entire group, or it could be an opportunity to divide into smaller sections. Many people in your group will likely have someone (or multiple someones) in their lives that they’re praying will return to God. Take time right now, here in the middle of the conversation, to pray for these people.

- How should this parable impact the way we view others and relate to them? What might it look like for us to run to meet those who are making their way back to God and celebrate their return?

Leaders: Most of our conversation so far has been about our relationship with our Father. In this question, we turn our attention to the other “younger sons” who are returning to God. It’s so easy to slip into judgmentalism! Especially when someone sins differently than we do. But the main reason Jesus told this parable in the first place was to tell the Pharisees that instead of judging the tax collectors who were hanging out with him, they should be celebrating that they are turning to God!

In the same way, we ought to be constantly looking for those who are lost and encouraging them to turn to Jesus - not so that we can add a tally mark to our evangelism to-do list, but because life with God is better for them! And when they return to Jesus, it is cause for celebration for many reasons...they will experience the joy of following him, we will experience the joy of being part of the family of God with them, and God will receive glory.

Talk practically about what it might look like to do what the father in the story does and run to meet those who are returning home. Would this change who we make conversation with in the church lobby? Would it change how we relate to our co-workers? Would it change how we think about our family members?

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- How does the father welcoming us home as sons and daughters impact the way we live after that?

Leaders: *The father welcomed the younger son home without any preconditions. As soon as he confessed his sin and returned, the father welcomed him with open arms, restoring him as his son. BUT - if the son spent the rest of his life back at home but constantly mistreating the family and refusing to serve the rest of the family in any way, or even sitting back in idleness and luxury and self-gratification, he would miss out on the life that the father has offered to him and intended for him! The fact that the son couldn't earn his relationship with the father doesn't mean that his role as a son is to do whatever he pleases! In order to fully embody his identity as a son, he would need to act in a way that reflects that identity.*

In the same way, we are called to embody our identity as dearly loved children of our Heavenly Father. We don't do it to earn our salvation - that's impossible. But we do it as an expression of our gratitude to God and as a manifestation of who we are and who we are becoming. 2 Corinthians 5:19 is a great verse on this topic. Paul is talking about the eternal hope we have in Christ, and then he says "So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it." In other words, because of the wonderful grace God has given us, we want to please him. Other examples of this idea are found in Colossians 1:10 ("so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way") and 1 Thessalonians 4:1 ("we instructed you how to live in order to please God").

PRAY

As you close, divide into groups of 2-4 people. Give each group a few minutes to share one takeaway from today's conversation and then ask them to pray for each other, using this parable as a guide. For example, encourage them to pray that the Holy Spirit would help them come to their senses when they wander away from God, that they would see themselves as sons/daughters of God rather than employees, and that they would be ready to celebrate whenever a prodigal returns home.