SESSION TWO

Grace

Reading by John Ortberg and Laurie Pederson

Bob is a great dad who wants his kids to learn about grace. Every once in a while, he lets his kids go free when they know they’re about to be punished. When he does this, he’ll say what they are receiving: “Grace. I’m cutting you some slack. I’m showing you grace. Do you know why I’m doing this?”

They shake their heads.

“No reason at all. There’s never a reason for grace.”

Once, his son Ryan had violated several important rules simultaneously and was about to receive justice. “Can’t you cut me some grace?” he pleaded.

Bob, who was not in a gracious mood right at the moment, asked, “Why? Give me one good reason I should cut you some grace.”

“Dad,” his son said, somewhat shocked at his father’s theological lapse, “there’s never a reason for grace.”

The Story of Two Sons—Luke 15:11–32

One of Jesus’ unforgettable stories about grace is sometimes called the parable of the prodigal son. Henri Nouwen, in his book The Return of the Prodigal Son, points out it is really the story of two prodigal sons . . . and one gracious father.

One son’s lostness is obvious. A runaway who defiantly flees to a distant country looking for fulfillment he had not allowed himself to find at home, this son is the picture of obvious sinners — people who have deliberately pursued life and pleasure apart from God.

Although less obvious, the older son is just as lost. On the surface this son did all the things good sons are supposed to do. He stayed home, worked hard, kept the rules, stayed within the lines. But he was, in his own way, far from home. Judgmental and jealous, his words reveal the inner complaint of a heart that felt it never received what it was due. He did not know joy, for joy and resentment cannot live in the same heart. This son is a picture of the religious leaders of the day — people whose very pursuit of righteousness left their hearts prideful, cold, and far from the Father. And they didn’t even know they were lost.

One son wandered off. One stayed dutifully behind. Neither lived a life of abundance in the father’s house.

The “Sons” in Each of Us

Is there a bit of the prodigal son in you? Are you tempted, even as a believer, to wander from home in search of self-fulfillment? Perhaps your wanderings are carefully disguised — maybe even religiously acceptable. But is there something that lures nonetheless? The desire for wealth or power? An appetite for achievement, admiration, status? A craving for physical gratification?

Nouwen understood these prodigal realities:

As long as we live within the world’s delusions, our addictions condemn us to futile quests in “the distant country,” leaving us to face an endless series of disillusionments while our sense of self remains unfulfilled. . . . I am the prodigal son every time I search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.

It’s an amazing truth: We are loved so much that we are free to leave home.

And what about the older son? The one who worked hard, kept the rules, and fulfilled his obligations only to become increasingly resentful and joyless. Might there be a bit of him in you? It’s sad but true that many of us have an easier time being saved by grace than we do liv-
ing in grace. Over time, ours becomes a life of inner complaint. In our own way, we end up equally far from home.

Grace: An Invitation to Be “At Home”

with the Father

The gracious Father desires only to bring his children home. He longs for each of us—older and younger sons alike—to walk back into his welcoming arms. He invites us to relax in his love, to feel his esteem, to be the recipient of a lifetime of lavish feasts at his table. He longs for us to live in grace.

The good news is that you really can grow to experience grace more and more. Grace starts with repentance and forgiveness and grows as we train our eyes to see the many aspects of the Father’s everyday generosity often taken for granted—a warm home, a satisfying meal, the kind words of a good friend, the sight of a garden blooming in a riot of color, the body of Christ gathered in rich worship. Grace surrounds us every moment, but we must develop eyes to see.

Finally, we grow in grace when we give ourselves permission to celebrate and enjoy life. For the grace-impaired among us, this actually takes some discipline and a new understanding. God has saturated the world with wholesome pleasures. Wholeheartedly enjoying them is not sinful. It’s not frivolous. It is an irreplaceable part of spiritual life, an irreplaceable part of what it means to live in grace.

The father in the parable said it best: “Everything I have is yours.” Linger on those words. Live with them. Your Father is saying them to you.

Extending Grace

For a long time I have lived with the insight that returning to my Father’s home was the ultimate call. It has taken me much spiritual work to make the elder son as well as the younger son in me turn around and receive the welcoming love of the Father. The fact is that, on many levels, I am still returning. But the

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closer I come to home the clearer becomes the realization that there is a call beyond the call to return… I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own.

—Henri Nouwen, The Return of the Prodigal Son

God wants every day to be a homecoming. Only as we learn to live in the grace of the Father’s house can we become like him. When our hands are filled with his blessings, we are able to relax our grip on our sinful pursuits of fulfillment, our prideful competitiveness, our inner complaints. Gradually, each of these is replaced with a refreshing freedom and vitality, and we become drawn to extend his grace-giving ways.

We extend God’s grace each time we behave kindly and generously to others—when we pray for them, notice them, forgive them, serve them, include them. We extend God’s grace especially through evangelism, which is simply sharing his life.

As we live in grace, we come to experience a joyful, unforced fruitfulness. In time, we find ourselves living more and more like Christ, who drank in the joy of his Father’s house to the full and then offered it freely to others—for no reason at all, except grace.
Read Luke 15:11–32 several times throughout the week. Use at least two translations if possible.

Reflect on this statement by Henri Nouwen that describes his own prodigal-son-like wanderings:

_The farther I run away from the place where God dwells, the less I am able to hear the voice that calls me the Beloved, and the less I hear that voice, the more entangled I become in the manipulations and power games of the world._

1. How have you seen this pattern played out in your life?

2. In what ways do you sometimes leave your Father’s house as the younger son did?

What tends to pull you away from God?

3. Is there any way in which you may be like the dutiful but resentful older son?

4. How does being like the older son impact your desire to extend grace to others?

5. Read the following passages and put into your own words what God thinks of you and how he desires to lavish his kindness on you. Write your paraphrase as if God were personally speaking to you.

Ephesians 1:3–8

Ephesians 1:18–19
6. Reflect again on the father’s words: “All that I have is yours.” How would your life be different today if you really believed God meant those words for you? Be specific.