

Spring 2010

SMALL GROUP SERIES

Christ and Culture

Discussion Guide

Week 3

Small Groups 
Transforming Community @ RBCPC

Christ and Culture: Jesus and Reality TV

Luke 15:11-31 (TNIV)

11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 "The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 "Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 "The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 " 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.

Facilitator's Guide

Commentary on this passage

15:11-32

The Lost Son

15:11-12. To ask one's father for one's share of the inheritance early was unheard of in antiquity; in effect, one would thereby say, "Father, I wish you were already dead." Such a statement would not go over well even today, and in a society stressing obedience to one's father it would be a serious act of rebellion (Deut 21:18-21) for which the father could have beaten him or worse. That the father grants the request means that most of the hearers will not identify with the father in this parable; from the start, they would think of him as stupidly lax to pamper such an immoral son. The eldest son always received a double portion (Deut 21:17); in this case, he would have received two-thirds of the inheritance and the younger brother one-third.

15:13. Jewish law did permit a father to determine which assets (especially land) would go to which sons before he died, but they could take possession only on the father's death: the father was manager and received the land's profits until then. Thus this son could know what would be his but could not legally sell his assets; he does it anyway.

Many Palestinian Jews migrated, seeking fortune in less economically pressed areas. The younger son is presumably no older than 18 (he was unmarried) and had an older brother; he would thus have had little experience in managing finances. Moralists considered squandering very evil.

15:15. At this point, Jesus' Jewish hearers are ready for the story to end (like a similar second-century Jewish story): the son gets what he deserves—he is reduced to the horrendous level of feeding the most unclean of animals. The son is cut off at this point from the Jewish community and any financial charity it would otherwise offer him.

15:16. Given pigs' proverbially unclean eating habits, the thought of eating pigs' food would disgust Jesus' hearers. That the young man is jealous of pigs' fare also suggests that he is not receiving fair wages (cf. 15:17).

15:17. "Hired men" could be either slaves rented for hire or free servants working for pay; either one suggests that his father is well-to-do.

15:20. It was a breach of an elderly Jewish man's dignity to run, though familial love could take priority over dignity after a long absence. Given the normal garb, the father would have to pull up his skirt to run. Kissing was appropriate for family members or intimate friends.

15:21-22. The best robe in the house would belong to the father himself. The ring would probably be a family signet ring—a symbol of reinstatement to sonship in a well-to-do house. Slaves did not normally wear sandals, though they carried and tied a master's sandals. The father is saying, "No, I won't receive you back as a servant. I'll receive you only as a son."

15:23. The calf would be enough to feed the whole village; this would be a big party! Aristocratic families often invited the whole town to a banquet when a son attained adulthood (about thirteen years old) or a child married.

15:25-28. Dancing was used in both religious and nonreligious celebrations. Elder brothers were to reconcile differences between fathers and younger brothers, but here the elder brother, returning at the end of a long day's work, refuses even to enter the house. This is also a grievous insult to the father's dignity and could have warranted a beating (cf. 15:12).

15:29-30. Failing to greet one's father with a title (e.g., "Father," "Sir"; contrast even 15:12) was a grievous insult to the father's dignity. The elder brother here is a transparent metaphor for the Pharisees, and the younger brother for the sinners with whom Jesus was eating (15:1-2).

15:31-32. Because the inheritance had been divided, the elder brother was already assured of his share, effective on the father's death (15:12); he had nothing to lose by his brother's return. The final response of the elder brother is never stated, providing the Pharisees with the opportunity to repent if they are willing.

Christ and Culture: Jesus and Reality TV

START IT

- What's your favorite reality TV show?
- What show inspires you to do or be something different?

STUDY IT

- Read the Luke passage. (see commentary on page 2) What's the story? Make observations.
- What might have motivated the son to take off? How might that have felt to the Father?
- What was the younger son's experience like when he was gone? Why did he decide to come back?
- How might the original hearers of this story expect the Father to react to the son's return?
- What's shocking about the Father's response?
- What's shocking about the older brother's response?
- How does this story communicate God's character?
- What does this parable say about God's love and affection towards us?

LIVE IT

- What's an appropriate way to respond to this story?
- What parts of your life need to return to the Father?

PRAY IT

- For courage to return to God.
- For the ability to love other like the Father loves his sons in this story.