

The Love of God

Luke 15:11-24

Lesson 9

Exploring Faith Bible Study Series

Lesson Purpose:

The purpose of this lesson is to help the participant to reevaluate his or her perception of how God looks at each person. In our society many people view God in the wrong way and make assumptions about how God sees us. Often times these ideas are inconsistent with the God of Scripture. In this passage of Scripture the father loves his son even though his son doesn't deserve his love. What a beautiful picture this is of how God loves each of us. We all need to be reminded how God loves us and waits for us on the horizon. When we come home His open arms will encircle us.

Ice Breaker:

Invite your group to draw a sketch of what they think God looks like. After a few minutes have each member share his or her drawing with the group.

Life Connections:

Use these questions to help your group members to begin to open up with one another and to think about their own lives. The answers to these questions need not be spiritual in nature. The intention is for practical real life responses.

- 1) How does the media portray God? As angry; as meaningless; as a great big judge in the sky.
- 2) How were you raised to view God? As someone you don't want to make mad; my family never talked about God; as someone to talk to when you were in a crisis.
- 3) If you could use one word to describe God what would it be? Big; wise; old; loving; judgmental.
- 4) In your life how have you experienced God? He hasn't played a role in my life; at different times He has been closer to me; I have prayed and He did not answer my prayers.
- 5) When you have been away from someone for a long time and are reunited, what do you notice about that person? The smell of their cologne; the sparkle in their eye; their smile.

Scripture's Answers: Luke 15:11-24

In this section the Life Connection questions are now related to the passage of Scripture being used in this Bible Study. The answers to the following questions should come from the text as well as out of the individual's hearing and understanding of what they have heard read.

Have a member of the group read the Scripture passage aloud for all to hear. Make sure extra Bibles are available so everyone can follow along.

Introduction: Scripture:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them. 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. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men." 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.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

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. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

(Luke 15:11-24)

This passage of Scripture is found in a group of passages about lost things; a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son. When we come to the story of the prodigal son, we must understand the following: a son asking for his inheritance before his father's death is a slap in the face. The son is wishing his father were dead so he can get the money and property he would receive later. This sort of behavior should have made the father angry. He should have been hurt so deeply he could have disowned his son. However, we find a very different image in this story. What we would expect is not what we read.

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6) How do you think the father felt when the son demanded his inheritance? Devastated; angry; like his son did not love him.

7) The Bible tells us the son spent his inheritance very quickly. What does this say about him? He was stupid; he did not think about the future or the ramifications of his choices; he was living for the moment.

8) After the money was gone, how desperate was the son? He was willing to eat pig slop; he was thinking about going home and becoming a slave; he was considering facing his father whom he had hurt so badly.

9) How would you expect the father to respond to the son? To strike him; to turn his back on him; to welcome him back as a slave.

10) How would you have responded? I couldn't have forgiven him; I would have forgotten all about what he did; I would have punished him.

11) What is the significance of the things the father gives the son when he returns home? They are fancy things, meant for important people; they are symbols of being part of the family; they are not things a servant would own.

12) Which character is supposed to be God in this story? The Father.

13) Does this image of the father who is waiting to hug, kiss and give good gifts to the child match your view God? No, that is not who God really is; I hadn't thought of God that way before; Yes, I know that He is loving.

Teaching Time:

Say to your group: "Jesus paints a picture of God for us. For many of us this picture doesn't match what we have been taught or what we have experienced. But throughout the Bible, time and again, we find God wanting to be in relationship with people, wanting to love them, wanting to give them a new and more complete life.

"Jesus is the greatest example of God's love to us. God sent His Son so that we could be closer to him. Jesus came to show us who God really is and to clear up the distortions that can creep into our thinking. Jesus shows us a God who is waiting for us, who wants to welcome us home, no matter what we have done. He has a kiss and a hug, a robe and a ring and a great feast planned for each of us. All we have to do is show up."

Reflection:

Invite the group to take a moment to reflect silently on the questions you are going to ask. These questions can be answered or you may choose to allow the members of the group to think about them.

14) Have you run away?

15) Are you living in ways you know aren't right and want to come back but are too afraid?

16) How have relationships in your life changed your image of God?

Optional Activity Time:

As a way to make the reflection more meaningful in the lives of group members there are two activities to engage in. First, give the group time to write the answers to the reflection questions in a journal they can keep throughout your study time and the week to come. Second, send each group member home with these questions to think about and write about in a journal during the week. When the group gathers together the next time, break the group up into smaller groups and give them the opportunity to share what they have been thinking about since they last met.

Teaching Time:

Say to your group: "Think about God in this way: A loving Father who would never hurt His child. Even though you have hurt Him so very deeply and run away from home, He is waiting. He waits every day, looking off into the distance with His hand above his eyes, hoping He will see you coming. When that day finally arrives He is so overjoyed He can't wait for you. He meets you and restores you."

Conclusion:

Take time to pray together before the group leaves. Allow group members to share insights and ask questions they may have.

Possible Prayer:

Dear Jesus,
Thank You for showing us who God really is. Thank You for Your great, never ending love for us. Give us the courage to start the journey home. Grant us the joy of reuniting with the Father who loves us very much. We are amazed You would be waiting for us; hoping we would come to You. We desire to know You, to come to You, to be Your children.
Amen.

Closing Activity:

This could be a time when you could invite your group to raise their hands if they have made a commitment to God. Those who raise their hands should be honored for their decision. Be careful not to ostracize those who do not raise their hands. Let the group know you will be praying for all of them, regardless of their decision.