

# GOOD AND BEAUTIFUL GOD SERMON SERIES DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR SMALL GROUPS

**26 & 27 JUNE 2021**

## **GOD LOVES US, GOOD OR BAD**

**Scripture: Luke 15:11-32**

The recommended time allocation for your group meeting is:

### **If you meet weekly :**

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of core questions (40 mins)
- Discussion - 1 session worth of additional questions (30 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

### **If you meet fortnightly :**

- Worship through song (10 mins)
- Discussion - 2 sessions' worth of core questions (60 mins)
- Optional - additional questions (10 mins)
- Sharing, Prayer, Fellowship (30 mins)

### **Core Questions for Discussion**

(If your group meets fortnightly, combine Core Questions of two sessions and choose one Further Question from either session.)

**1A) In this parable, we read of a father who accepted his younger son back into his family despite his son leaving and spending his inheritance. Do you think the son deserved his father's love and acceptance? Why or why not?**

- This parable is the third in a series of parables in Luke 15. The three parables describe God seeking out the lost, be it a sheep, coin or son. Jesus used these three parables to reflect God's desire to pursue sinners. While the first two parables highlight God's proactive nature in seeking out the lost, the Parable of the Lost Son adds another layer of the need for repentance, as reflected in the younger son's return to the Father. However, this does not detract from the compassionate and forgiving nature of God the Father.
- Ask your group members to place themselves in the father's shoes and imagine how they would feel when the younger son comes to demand his inheritance.
- The social context of the parable: Handing out the inheritance was no easy task. In v.12, The father had to rush to divide up all his existing assets, land, and livestock and transfer ownership to his younger son.

- In addition, an inheritance is usually received only after the parent's death. The very act of demanding one's inheritance indicates that in the eyes of the younger son, the father was as good as dead.
- In v.13, the phrase 'gathered everything' implies that the younger son converted all these assets to cash. He then went off to squander the money, spending it in a reckless lifestyle. This was despite his father saving up his wealth and growing his assets after years of hard work.
- Eventually, the younger son realised that he did not deserve to be called his father's son. He felt that his sinful lifestyle made him undeserving of his father's lifestyle. When the son came into severe debt in a time of famine, the only food he could find was to eat the food that pigs ate. Pigs were unclean animals in Jewish society. Eating among pigs was a symbol of dishonour in Jewish society, and the younger son was among the outcasts. He was willing to be his father's servant, recognising that he would have a better and more comfortable life than what he currently was experiencing, even as a servant.
- If you were the father, would you take the younger son in as your servant? What would be your first reaction when you see him? Would you berate him for squandering hard-earned wealth or reject him and send him away?
- However, the father ran out to meet his son on the road. This was a dramatic act, for in that culture (as in ours), dignified senior men simply do not run. What's more, the father gave the returned son his best robe and a ring. He also killed the fattened calf, usually reserved for big and lavish celebrations.
- Are you shocked at the father's response? The Pharisees who were listening to the parable would have been. However, this is the nature of God's unconditional love for us. (Use this point as a lead-in to the next sub-question.)

**1B) Do we deserve God's love and acceptance into His kingdom? Why or why not?**

- Through our sin, we continue to be like the younger son when we rebel against God's laws. When we sin, our sin sets us apart from God, and we run away from Him. Hence, we are surely unworthy of God's love.
- However, God still chooses to love us even though we do not deserve it, just as the father loved the undeserving younger son. We do not need to do anything to earn our heavenly Father's love - He simply loves us.
- If you recall GBG #3, we discussed the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard. The parable highlights God's generosity with how he blesses us. God's generosity is an outpouring of this unconditional love for us, and he blesses us regardless of how much we have done for him.
- Take some time to allow your group to share: How do they understand this undeserved love? What challenges or doubts do they have over receiving this undeserved love? If they struggle to receive God's love due to guilt of sin, use the parable to point them towards God's love.

**2. The older son was angry that the father celebrated his undeserving younger son's return, while he felt that the father had ignored the hard work he had put in all these years. Are there occasions when we act like the older brother? Are there times when we think our good works give us a higher standing with our Father in heaven or grant us more favour from God? Do we begrudge God's love and acceptance of those who are undeserving?**

- While some of us may struggle with how undeserving we are with God's love like the younger brother, the older brother represents the long-time Christian who finds false assurance in his/her works or obedience, and who resents the love shown by God to the undeserving.
- The older brother felt that he deserved the father's blessings because he was obedient and had worked hard for his father. He was unhappy and resentful that someone less worthy (the younger brother) received such a great reward.
- Why was he resentful? What makes us resentful of the love that God lavishly extends towards the lost?
- Our pride manifests in resentment towards others we deem "less worthy" - much like how the elder brother resented his father welcoming his younger brother.
- For those who have been serving in numerous ministries: do we subconsciously think this will result in greater rewards?
- If we think we can in any way earn our way into God's family, we have a profound misunderstanding of God's love; we trivialize the work that Jesus has done on the cross. If we believe this, do we not realize that God's love is the greatest reward we have; and that we cannot have "more of" God's love?
- Take note of the father's reply to the older brother in v.31. The father told him that everything that the father has is his. The older brother already had a great reward and inheritance, but he had lost sight of it. His inheritance was not a reward for his hard work. Instead, it was a result of being his Father's son & included in the family.
- God's love for us is not dependent on our good works in life, nor does it come from a need to serve him to please him. We can do nothing to earn his love - and if we think otherwise, we have misunderstood the gospel. Like the Pharisees, the one who is truly lost is the one who doesn't see his own brokenness, his need for the gospel and his need to receive God's extravagant love.

**3. How does the cross of Christ break down both these narratives - that we need to earn God's love, and that others are undeserving of His love?**

- Do we feel that we can buy our way into God's love with good works? Or do we feel a sense of shame when we sin, and does this shame keep us away from God?
- For the younger brother that believes that "I am not worthy, I am a sinner":
  - Paul describes Jesus' love for us in Romans 5:7-8: 'Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to

die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.'

- Jesus is the worthy, perfect saviour who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins
- Jesus chose to show his love to us by dying on the cross for us. We only deserve salvation and eternal life if we are righteous people. Jesus did not even die on the cross because we were repentant of our sins. Instead, while we were still living in sin, He gave up his life so that we can be united with Him. His death on the cross was necessary to pay for the penalty of our sins.
- Mere repentance without placing our faith in Jesus and his work on the cross cannot grant us salvation. But when we trust in Jesus' perfect sacrifice, His worthiness becomes our worthiness. The Father welcomes us through Jesus' life, cross, and the empty grave.
- For the older brother who thinks to him/herself: "How can this unworthy and undeserving so-and-so be welcome in God's family?"
  - What it takes to be in God's family: perfect obedience and perfect sinless-ness. Can any of us say that we have achieved these standards? No, all of us are welcomed into God's family only through Jesus Christ.
  - While we might criticise or look down on the younger brother for his reckless lifestyle and the way he wasted his father's wealth, we are like the younger brother when it comes to our sin.
  - Nothing that we can do comes close to what Jesus has already done for us - and Jesus has done this for everyone who trusts in Him.
  - Have we lost an appreciation for what Christ has done? Have we forgotten our need for the cross? If we look down on those who Christ has redeemed and elevate ourselves above them, we make a mockery of His sacrifice.

#### **4. How does understanding the new narrative of the Father's love for the undeserving:**

##### **A) Change the way we respond to God?**

- Understanding Christ's work on the cross enables us to have deeper gratitude for our unmerited salvation.
- Furthermore, God desires to build a loving relationship with us, and He wants us to draw close to Him.
- Hebrews 4:16 encourages us to 'approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.'
- If you struggle with shame or guilt from sin, take these to Him and open your heart to receive his forgiveness from sin. If you feel that you need to be a perfect Christian before you can approach God, God also desires to be close to us in our vulnerability and brokenness. Ultimately, God wants us to be free from these inaccurate narratives. He longs for you to know Him as a father who loves you unconditionally.

- Set aside some time to allow your group members to go into a time of personal reflection. Encourage them to reflect on whether any narratives hinder them from approaching God and drawing close to Him.

**B) Change the way we see and relate to people in the church? (our fellow brothers and sisters)**

- Do we look down on people who we deem “unworthy?” Do we judge others based on how much sin they have in their lives? Or do we feel pride when we do more good works or serve more than other people in the church? Do we really welcome that irritating or unworthy person? Must we really see them as brothers or sisters and love them as such?
- Ultimately, do we reject those whom God accepts?
- Although there are occasions when we may feel like the older brother, we often forget that we are all like the younger brother in the parable: undeserving sinners who have been accepted into God’s kingdom.
- This is a good opportunity to encourage ourselves to be aware of the following:
  - The greatest blessing and reward is our salvation; an inclusion in God’s family that is purely from His love, and nothing else.
  - Our prejudices against people in God’s family - who do we have a hard time accepting? Hence, our good works should then come from an outpouring of God’s unconditional love to the people around us.
- May we learn to see our brothers and sisters just as how God sees them and to welcome them into our community unconditionally.

**Further Questions for Discussion**

(Optional question for discussion if time permits. Do allocate adequate time for prayer and fellowship.)

**5. Look up this parable in different English Bibles. Do their section headings all give the same title for the parable?**

- In the NIV, NLT, and NKJV, the passage is titled ‘The Parable of the Lost Son.’ This aligns with the earlier two parables, ‘The Parable of the Lost Sheep’ and ‘The Parable of the Lost Coin.’ Taken together, these 3 parables describe a common theme: how God pursues and recovers the lost. This is also reflected in v.24, where the father celebrates that his son was ‘lost but is found.’
- In the ESV and NASB, the passage is titled, ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son.’ The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines ‘prodigal’ as ‘characterised by profuse or wasteful expenditure’ or ‘recklessly spendthrift’. In the NET, it is ‘The Compassionate Father’. Both these titles emphasise that despite the younger son’s wasteful lifestyle, the father still chose to accept him back.

- The NRSV describes this ‘The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother’, while the CEV calls it ‘The Two Sons’. While we often focus on the younger son, we also have much to learn from the older brother’s reaction.
- The point of this short exercise is this: Section headers, titles, and chapters and verse numbers are not found in the original text. They are aids that help us as we read and engage with Scripture. So, when we read, do not simply skim the section headings and take them as definitive statements of the Bible’s content. Rather, let’s read the sacred text with care and diligence, for this is God’s precious Word.

## 6. Suggested Spiritual Workout: Lectio Divina

(For each session in this sermon series, a spiritual workout will be suggested for you to exercise on your own or together as a group. We encourage you to try this spiritual exercise, then share at your next small group meeting how it has impacted you.)

*(The following is adapted from The Good and Beautiful God, by James Bryan Smith)*

The spiritual exercise for this week is called Lectio Divina, which is Latin term for “divine reading.” It is a method of reading the Bible that involves meditating on God’s word. It’s an ancient practice which involved reading select passages of the Bible with specific pauses and concentration on certain words.

In Lectio Divina we turn to a passage of the Bible—usually no more than a few verses—and read it over and over, very slowly, reflecting on each word and phrase, while paying attention to the impact the words have on our hearts.

Lectio Divina is a complement to the study of Scripture. The reading and study of the Bible to understand the passage in its context and to grasp the communicative intent of the divine Author, must be paired with the practices of meditation, reflection, prayer, and listening in silence before God, and vice versa. God’s living Word has to come alive both in our minds as well as in our hearts. Study and meditation must go hand in hand to strengthen and inform each other. In this way, we can grow in loving God with all our heart, and soul, and mind, and strength (Mark 12:30).

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR ENGAGING IN LECTIO DIVINA**

1. First, select a passage of the Bible which you are familiar with and have previously read or studied. This provides a safeguard that the passage is not being taken out of context. In this specific exercise, we will use our passage, Luke 15:11-32. It is recommended that you use a different Bible translation for this exercise.
2. Spend a minute in silence to prepare your heart to listen and obey God's word
3. Read the passage thrice. Read it slowly, taking time to pause between each sentence as you internalise it. Pay attention to words or phrases that catch your attention or may seem to stand out each time you read the passage. It may help to note down these phrases.

4. Pondering. Reflect for a while on the phrase that moved you. Repeat it a few more times. Let it touch your heart, desires and fears. What might God want to say to me specifically?
5. Prayer. Turn that last question into a prayer, asking God, "What is the word you have for me in this passage, God? Is there anything you want to say to me today?" Listen. Write down anything you sense God might be saying to you.
6. Rest. Be still and silent for a while. Enjoy being in the presence of God. In this step, you move from doing to being.
7. Response. Ask yourself and God: "What am I being called to do as a result of the Word I have been given?" Perhaps you are feeling challenged to love God more or to accept some aspect of who you are, or to serve someone you know, or to begin changing some aspect of your character. Whatever it is, write it out. Thank God for the word and the calling you have been given.

## **Prayer Suggestions**

### **7. Would you consider praying for the following:**

- Are there any hindrances that keep you from approaching and drawing close to God? Pray that God will set you free from these false narratives and that you may enjoy the freedom God has given you and a close relationship with God.
- That God will illuminate His word and truth for you as you try out the Lectio Divina spiritual workout.
- That God will surface the prejudices we may unconsciously hold against those whom we consider unworthy or undeserving. Pray that God will transform your heart such that we may see others just as He sees them, and love and welcome them unconditionally.