



The Return of the Lost Sons

**EEA Week of Prayer
10-17 January 2016**

Prayer

“Prayer is a gift of the Spirit. We often don’t know, how to pray, when to pray and what to pray for. We are interested in all different methods and techniques of praying. But in the end it isn’t us who prays, but it is the Spirit in us, who is praying for us... It is important, that we stay connected to the sources of our words. There is a great temptation to be a “comforter,” to say the right words to comfort others, even though they don’t have any roots in our inner life. We must continually convince ourselves that the words that we deliver flow from our hearts. The best way to do this is through silence filled with prayer. - *Henri J.M. Nouwen*

If there is to be a spiritual renewal in our nations and particularly the church, it cannot happen without the renewal of a joyful and deep life of prayer as a part of our multi-faceted life of interacting with God. It is an open secret that for many Christians prayer is more of an obligation and burden, something that a good Christian should do, but for which he usually does not find the time, and thus his feelings of guilt grow.

We are in captivity to many concepts of how to pray and how not to pray. We see our church leaders and how they pray beautifully, while we never have the right words. Public prayers are disappearing from services and we are in danger to wither away because of all the toil and activity, which isn’t based on prayer and the fruit of the Spirit – the peaceful joy of a simple everyday walk with God and the assurance of his presence.

The EEA prayer weeks are only a small opportunity to deepen our prayer as individuals and in the church. Large church services are not the center of prayer, but rather closed rooms, family tables and the places next to our children’s beds. Here we get to the roots of our inner life with God, who speaks to us covertly, when we aren’t tempted to make an impression on others with our eloquent speech.

That is why, during this Alliance prayer week, I would like to ask you to prepare your church services in a way so that the words that will be said would surge from the heart and that the Spirit would have room to speak. Less preaching and more prayer with more listening to people as well as to God and more worship. Less of the outward appearance and more creativity, as well as the honest longing to let yourself and your community be changed into the image of Jesus Christ. Let us accept before God the responsibility to enter into that which He is showing right now.

The whole Prayer Week is focused on the parable of the prodigal son. Besides spiritual meditation about this passage, which is a challenge (probably) for everyone, this prayer guide is dedicated especially to praying for people, who have, for various reasons, abandoned God or the church.

Many parents suffer because their children have left the church – there will be an opportunity to pray for them as well. Many young believers are in pain because their parents do not know God the Father and they wish that God would turn “the hearts of fathers to their sons” and their parents would become children of God, their sisters and brothers. You can pray for them as well. We will also pray for the church, which in Europe isn’t very often prepared to accept and love sinners and meet them halfway and which is often full of people who feel enslaved but don’t have the courage to leave.

Will we pray? Together?

Thomas Bucher – General Secretary of the European Evangelical Alliance

PS: This comes with special thanks to the Czech Evangelical Alliance which has prepared this excellent guide

SUNDAY - LOST

Luke 15:11-12

And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them."

In his book about parables in the gospel of Luke, Kenneth Bailey writes, "For more than 15 years, I asked people of different nationalities and customs, from Morocco to India and from Turkey to Sudan, about the consequences of the son's request for his inheritance, while his father was still living. The answer was always the same and the conversation looked like this."

"Has someone in your village ever asked for something like that?"

"Never!"

"Could someone ever make this kind of a request?"

"That is impossible!"

"If someone did this, what would happen?"

"The father would obviously beat him!"

"Why?"

"This request implies that he wants his father to die."

What the younger son did was a very serious thing, not only towards his father and his family, but also towards the community in which he lived. The community had to reject him because of his unheard of request and the subsequent cashing in of his inheritance, for he dishonored all that was holy to them. Everyone expected that the father would punish his son, but in an outrageous act of love, he gave his son, not only a part of his inheritance, but also the right to use it. The older son, on the other hand, was expected to turn down his share of the inheritance, scold his younger brother and try to reconcile the father and the younger son. Even if the older son hated the younger one, it would still be his responsibility to formally try to help them reconcile with each other, both because of his own honor and because of his father. However, the older son is silent. His silence and his acceptance of the portion of the inheritance not only show his bad relationship to his brother, but also the violation of his relationship with his father. They are both lost. Both sons are failing and cannot live together, and the relationship they have with their father is the same.

Prayer Points:

- There are many people leaving their families or churches, because they think that they can find whatever they are looking for elsewhere. Pray for courage for the parents and churches to let these people leave, and for a steadfast hope that they will find their way back home or to God.
- Pray for genuine freedom in the church. Pray that it will respect the need of people to be themselves, but also their need for love and a home.
- Pray for those who have abandoned us, for those who hate us, for our enemies, and for those who criticize us. Pray for those people who were close to us and have hurt us, either in our family, community or church.
- Pray for those who don't fit into the typical church categories, that they would be able to feel at home and find acceptance.
- Pray that our churches would be real homes full of fatherly acceptance and that they would not have a need to manipulate them or dote on them
- Pray for the greatest "sinners" in our vicinity – people known for their corruption, injustice and deceitfulness - that God will use these people as a testimony to His power despite our expectations.
- Ask yourself, "How God can see that I personally, or my church, love sinners; not only in word, but also in deed?"

MONDAY - EVERYTHING WASTED

Luke 15:13-16

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

The heart of a father burns with a never-ending longing to bring his children home. He longs to talk to them and warn them about the many dangers they will face. He wishes he could convince them that everything that they are searching for elsewhere, they can find at home. How he longs to draw them home with his fatherly authority, to hold them close, so that they will not get hurt. However, his love is far too great for him to do any of these things. He cannot make them, force them or order them to do what he wants. He offers the freedom to turn down love. The father wants his children to be free. This freedom includes the option of leaving home and losing everything.

Except for a place in Lamentations, where mothers out of hunger cooked and ate their own children, we don't have many other examples in the Bible of someone in a greater state of despair than the prodigal son. The younger son is slowly finding himself in his own personal hell. He accepts probably the most humiliating job that someone could offer him. He couldn't be full even if he ate who knows how many bitter, tart and for humans indigestible wild pods. Thanks to hunger in the land, not even begging works; no one will give him anything. He is at the end of his strength and is afraid that he will die of hunger.

Many of those who have abandoned God or who are not searching for him don't look like they are materially very badly off--rather the opposite. Outwardly, their lives are going so well that many of us even envy them. Leaving home and abandoning God, however, is much deeper than it seems. Leaving the Father's house is living as if I no longer have a home and I have to search for it throughout the whole world. Home, however, is the center of my being, the only place where I can hear the voice that says, "This is my beloved son, with whom I am well pleased."

In some ways, all of human life and one's relationship with God is a journey home. It is the search for a real home, which has always been and always will be; the search for the place where we can hear everything that we need to hear. The thirst for success, the longing for acceptance from others, the dependence on self-satisfaction, the need for power and achievement; all these things are just our wandering in a faraway land. Am I willing to come home where these things are not important? Am I willing to stop searching for unconditional love in places where it can't be found? To be a child, that doesn't need to do anything to be loved? To accept a second innocence through birth from above which I can't in any way earn myself in the house of my Father?

Prayer Points:

- Prayerfully search where you have distanced yourself from the Father's house. Where do we search for acceptance from others through our achievements and react with anger at criticism? Where do we compare ourselves with others? What are our addictions that prevent us from resting in the Father's embrace?
- Pray for our mothers and fathers; search and see how far we are from them and how far away they are from us. Give thanks for our parents and ask for reconciliation or forgiveness where it is needed.
- Plea for those around us, who are wasting their abilities and gifting on useless things, because they don't know God. Pray that God would use them for his masterpiece.
- Search for the places where we are wasting the wealth which we received from God on things that will not last in the Kingdom of God.
- Pray that the church will not waste the potential that is hidden in her people; but rather, give it space to multiply.

TUESDAY – TURNING POINT

Luke 15:17-19

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’

When children don't turn to God or when they leave the church, their parents often reproach themselves that they were not good enough parents or Christians. Raising children is at its core a very hard job that is beyond human strength and that is why it always depends on God's grace, which covers all our sins as parents. Our children will find the way home to their real Father. However, many parents cannot forgive themselves for their failures.

A big problem in the relationships with prodigal sons is resignation and giving up on them, which prevents many people from still having faith and praying for them. Here are a few possible guidelines for a new hope through prayer:

The Journey Back

When we look at the prodigal son's journey back to the father, we can find nine prayer topics. Some of them we can use in our prayers for our prodigals, be it our husband or wife, our children, or parents, who have either walked away from God or do not know Him yet.

- The situation, in which he finds himself, is beyond his control or experience.
- He is becoming aware of his real needs, and that even after all his attempts, he is not able to fulfill them (verses 14 and 17).
- He has time (alone at work), when he begins to think and realize what is happening to him and how he is doing.
- He remembers the blessings of his Father's house.
- He begins to see things as they really are. Pray for a spirit of revelation (Ephesians 1:17) and truth (John 16:13), that he would be able to see (Luke 4:18) and be free from lies and deception.
- He realizes that what he did was wrong. Pray that the Holy Spirit would convict him of his sin (John 16:8).
- He reacts with a humble and repentant heart. Pray that his heart would resemble that of David (Psalm 51).
- He remembers (or he is shown through revelation) the true character of the Father. Pray Bible passages over him, for example Numbers 14:18a, Romans 8:38-39.
- He has the courage to return to his Father. Pray that he would see Jesus as “The Way” (John 14:6).

Prayer Points

- Pray for parents, who don't know what to do with their children.
- Encourage parents, whose children have abandoned God, to talk about their feelings and then pray for them.
- Pray for the parents of young children in the church. Pray that they would not rely only on themselves in their children's upbringing, but would rather rely on God who knows what every child needs.
- Pray for the deliverance from feelings of guilt and unforgiveness towards ourselves.

WEDNESDAY – TO BECOME A FATHER

Luke 15:20

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."

God very strongly wants to find me, always more than I want to find Him. He does not wait until we return home, until we ask for forgiveness, until we beg and promise that we will do better next time. It is always He who runs out of the house and offers us His embrace.

The return of prodigal sons will be slowed down or even stopped if the family or church is not prepared for their arrival. The father threw away all social standards and ran towards his son, even though he was still far away. He did this to protect him from the gossip, anger, humiliation and contempt of the whole community. A man of his position in the Middle East never runs. Most likely, the father is again saving his son's life, who would otherwise never be accepted by the community or by his brother, at least not as a rightful son. Even though he returned as a slave, it matters greatly to the father that his son would return home with all that belongs to him. He shows everyone that to him, his son is alive again. The father kills a calf, so that the whole community would come and see that his son is dressed in his father's best clothes, that he has the ring with a seal and also so that everyone would share in the father's joy of his son's return.

Whether we are the younger or older sons, we must realize that we have all been called to be fathers. It is not enough to read this parable as a story about sons or to read it as a lecture to the Pharisees about their relationship toward sinners. Nor are we called to choose which one of the sons we are. We are not here to remain as children. We are called to Agape - God's fatherly love - which is the goal of discipleship and Christianity as well. We are called to be fathers.

Prayer Points

- Ask God the Father to soften our hearts, to resemble his heart. Pray that it would be full of compassion and unconditional love. Profess 1 Corinthians 13:5-8 and ask God, through his love, to teach you to love like this. It is not humanly possible to love this way.
- Ask that our Father would help us to walk out towards our prodigal sons, before they reach home.
- Bless our church leaders, so that they would have the same attitude of acceptance, unconditional love and respect towards others as the father in this parable did.
- Search your heart in quiet contemplation to see if you are willing to identify with the old man who doesn't have anything to lose because he lost everything and can now only give

- Invite fathers in your church to come before the congregation and pray for them in their fatherly roles. Too much pain stems from a broken relationship between fathers and their children. Pray for fathers and their relationships with their sons.
- Intercede in prayer for our spiritual fathers.
- Ask God for the Spirit of fatherhood to penetrate the structure and culture of our churches.

THURSDAY – CELEBRATION

Luke 15:21-24

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.' So they began to celebrate.

When the prodigal son returns home, an ordinary dinner or another traditional gathering is not enough; it is time to celebrate.

"God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been resolved, or because human pain and suffering is ended, and not even because thousands of people have been converted and now praise him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because one of his children that was lost, has been found. That to which he invites me, is for me to enter into this joy. It is God's joy, not joy that the world can offer. It is joy that a child is returning home in the midst of horror, destruction and despair... God rejoices when one repentant sinner returns. Statistically it's not very interesting, but God has never been interested in numbers. In God's eyes, it only takes one hidden act of repentance, one small gesture of selfless love, one moment of real forgiveness to have God descend from his throne and run towards the returning son; to have the heavens be filled with sounds of God's joy." - *Henri Nouwen*

We can see in the older son how distorted his concept of joy is. The whole village hears music and hurries to the celebration; only the brother stays outside and is unnaturally suspicious. By not entering right away into the home of his father, who organized the celebration, he is publicly showing his resistance towards his father, which in this culture is very offensive. It is an action comparable to the attitude of the younger son at the beginning of the parable. The situation repeats itself; a son is again lost. The father should have ignored him or punished him. However, he again goes out towards his son, he humiliates himself in front of everyone and in an unexpected gesture of love, he tries to convince his son to enter into the house.

The older son does not even show basic respect and does not address him as Father. On the contrary, he accuses his father that he is only his slave and not his son. He has just publicly disgraced his father and he dares to say that he "never disobeyed any of his commands." He does not feel like he is a part of the family. Emotionally he belongs to different community. His joy comes from having good food with his friends and not from the return of his brother, who was dead and now is alive. The older son wants only a piece of meat, so that he can indulge in a different type of joy. As a church, where does our joy come from?

Prayer Points:

- Praise God and express to him your thankfulness. Tell God at least one specific thing that you are thankful for today, or what God delighted you with last year.
- Invite to the front of your church those who have believed or have joined your fellowship this past year. Pray for them.
- Prayerfully search for what is the greatest joy in your church.
- In quiet devotion, think about the passage in John 16:22 "So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." Is it true about you? Is there a joy deep in your heart that no one can take from you? Is your grief only on the surface or is it the opposite?
- Go to someone in your fellowship and encourage them with what you enjoy about them, what inspires you, what you respect about them, and how they made you happy.

FRIDAY – THE OLDER BROTHER SYNDROME

Luke 15:25-30

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 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. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

The reaction of the older brother is harsh, full of criticism, contempt and judgment. He doesn't realize how far he is from true love, compassion and acceptance. He is so occupied with managing the property, that he is blind:

- to his father's heart and acts of love
- to the return of his brother and his complete renewal
- to his own life and to the fullness of his father's blessing

Maybe you also grew up in the church, always obedient to your parents and to God. You never ran from home, you didn't squander your money on different pleasures. You were responsible and kept traditions your whole life, but you still felt as lost as the younger son.

Henri Nouwen writes about his experience as the "older brother": "All at one I saw myself in a completely different light. I saw my jealousy, anger, egocentrism, obstinance, inflexibility and, of them all the most hidden, self-righteousness. I saw what a crybaby I was and how many of my thoughts and feelings are driven by bitterness... I was for sure like the older son, but just as lost as his younger brother, even though I had stayed at "home" my whole life.

In prayer we can:

- Repent of the times when we have the same attitudes as the older brother.
- Repent of the times when, in our endeavors we have been more like slaves, who are constantly wanting to please their parents, God or people and fulfill their expectations.
- Confess our bitterness and bad temper for the times when we don't see that there is no reason for self-pity since we have gotten a hundred times more than we ever had to give up. Confess your jealousy of the spontaneity, playfulness and joy of younger sons.
- Pray for first-borns, often the model and perfectionist children, to find freedom.
- Pray for the removal of pharisaism and legalism from church and from us personally. Pray against moralism, exaggerated seriousness, uptightness, strictness and lack of good humor.

SATURDAY – ALL I HAVE IS YOURS

Luke 15:31-32

“My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

2. Peter 1:3

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness

Someone once said that we will get the most out of our prayers and reading of the New Testament if we read them as if we ourselves were Pharisees. This parable about the lost sons was originally meant for the Pharisees standing nearby. It was they who stood challenged to finish the end of the parable - to decide whether or not they would enter into the house of their Father, who rejoices over the second birth of his sinful son. Whether they would join in the celebration, accept sinners and rejoice together with the Father. Whether they would believe the assurance of the Father, that all he has is theirs.

Everything I have is yours

It is a problem all of us have, that we constantly think we need something more, or something else or new, so that we can be good Christians and so that we can do the things which he has called us to do. We often lack the simple everyday happiness of being where we are right now, even through all of the visible obstacles. **It is hard to believe that the riches that we are searching for are hidden under our own feet.** Hard to believe that the treasure is Christ in us and the fact that God has made his home in us. It is hard to believe that we have everything we need for a godly life. As the church in Europe we sometimes resemble Jacob, who exclaimed upon waking, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I wasn’t aware of it!” The words: “Son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.” apply for us as well in the most atheistic continent of the world. We have all we need for a fulfilling life with God and all we have to do is enter. God will take care of the rest.

Pray ...

- ... for the renewal of church in its love for people.
- ...that we as a church would be willing to leave the safety of our ghetto and search for the lost
- ... that we would grow in the understanding of the richness and greatness of life in Christ; that we, as God’s people would walk in this assurance of God’s presence every day.
- ... for a new generation of evangelists in the church, who will be able to portray the fullness of God’s kingdom and share the gospel with the power of the Holy Spirit and wisdom from above.
- ... that in this next year, your church would be able to rejoice over more people, who have accepted the invitation of the Father and believe in his Son.
- ... for your loved ones who are dead spiritually and your desire for them to have spiritual life.

SUNDAY – CHURCH SERVICE FOR THE PRODIGAL SONS

Philippians 2:5-8

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

“Jesus himself became a prodigal son for our salvation. He left the home of his heavenly Father, came to a foreign land, put away all that he had and through his cross he returned to his Father’s house. He gave up all, which his Father entrusted to him, so I could become like him and return with him to the Father’s home.”

Henri J. M. Nouwen

Jesus didn’t go to the cross so that we would not have to, but so that we could follow him there. Jesus came, so that he, as an obedient son, could lead all of God’s lost children home. Jesus’ home is our home as well. There is no other return and no other way to the Father except through him and his return.

On pieces of paper, write the names of all of your prodigal sons, of all of those who for different reasons left God or who do not know him – your children, friends, parents and partners. Bring them to the cross that is hanging in your church or chapel and ask God:

Prayer for our prodigal sons

Lord, only you know where our prodigal sons are. Not only physically, but also in their hearts, thoughts and spirit. No one can hide from you and who is so lost that you can’t find him?

We pray for them Lord, bring them home – not only to us, not even foremost to us, but to yourself. Forgive us as parents, friends or churches, if we have helped or encouraged their departure, or if we are making their return more difficult.

No matter where they are and no matter what they are doing, touch their lives, And when they return home, give us the spirit of the father, not the older son.

And Lord, there are some of us, who although we have not visibly in front of the world or others left the house of our fathers, we ourselves know how far we have wandered. Please, lead us home as well.

And when we return home, be it from afar or from close by, teach us all, that in your kingdom there is sometimes a need for more than just another church service – rather we need to celebrate together that we are alive and home again.

Amen