

“Prodigal Love”

A lesson about God’s unending ability and desire to love us!

By Katie McRee

Key verses:

Luke 15:11-32

Objectives:

- To identify God’s love for us as one that is lavish, spent recklessly, and unending—it’s prodigal!
- God’s resources to share his love with us never run out. **He cannot go bankrupt!**
- To think about how we can respond to God’s prodigal love.

The Set up: Minimal

The Plan:

- Hook: Balloon Rescue (10 mins): playing a simple game that illustrates how our ability to love is limited by our resources.
- Book: The Prodigal Father (10 mins): Considering how the father in the Prodigal Son parable exhibits the same extravagant spending as his son.
- Look: “I didn’t do enough.” (10 mins): Watching a clip from Schindler’s List where he mourns the fact that his ability to save people was limited by his resources.
- Took: Responding to Prodigal Love (5mins): naming specific ways to respond to God’s love for us.

The Supplies:

- Copies of lesson
- 2 different colored balloons, 20-50 of each color
- Bibles
- White board/markers
- AV equipment that will allow you to show the video clip
- Markers, paper, other supplies to make simple love notes for God.

(Open in prayer, announcements, and any other start of gathering traditions)

Balloon Rescue (Hook, 10 mins)

You will be playing a game with balloons that illustrates how our ability to love is limited by our resources. ***It seems complicated, but it's actually very easy! Read though all the instructions before getting started and it should be easy to run.

- You will need at least 2 teams of students, but you can have more teams. If you have a smaller group, you can make it work with teams of 3 students each, and if you have a large group, you can have teams of 5, and you can also allow some students to just watch.
- Assign your teams, making sure that they are even (choose either teams of 3 or teams of 5)
- Once you have your teams, give each team 30 seconds to decide two things:
 - Choose one team member to be a “holder”, leaving the other 2 (or 4) to be “makers.”
 - Have them decide on 2 different people/creatures or groups of people/creatures that they LOVE and would save if they were drowning. It can be serious (their youth minister and mother) or it can be silly (puppies and their barista)
- Have them share the two groups/individuals they will be saving.
- Explain the game play:
 - Half of the “makers” will be blowing up one color of balloon as fast as they can, and the other half will blow up the other color. Each color represents one of the groups/individuals they are saving.
 - Give them 10 of each color of balloon, so that half the “makers” have ten of one color, and the other half have 10 of the other
 - When they blow them up (and tie them off), they will then pass them to the “holder.”
 - In order to save the group/individual, the “holder” must hold all of the balloons passed to them WITHOUT help! If the balloon touches the ground, then they are not able to save that group/individual.
- Let them ask questions.
- Count them down, and let them play. When the “holders” arms start to get full, yell, “STOP!” Don’t let the “holder” put down the balloons, but tell them they have another option: if they want, they can choose to drop all the balloons of one color so that they can hold more of the other... but that means they are sacrificing that group they drop!
- Give them 10 seconds in their group to decide, and then they can either continue on with both balloon colors, or drop one color.
- Restart the game

- Continue until either a team has successfully “saved” one of their groups/individuals (the “holder” is holding 10 of one color balloon), or all teams show they are unable to save anyone (they have dropped a balloon of each color.)

Process the Game, Talk about...

- The level of difficulty, frustration, etc.
- Why you would choose to keep both colors or just try for one.
- In real life, would it be that easy to make a decision to sacrifice one group for the benefit of another?
- How could you have played to have a more successful outcome?
- What limited the “holders” ability to save? (Their size/strength/ingenuity/etc)
- With these rules, would it have been possible to save 3 people? 4? 5? What is the most that is humanly possible, given these rules?
- What limited the holder?

Say something like:

This game was silly, but ultimately, even if the holder was amazing in every way, they are limited in the number of balloons they can keep off the floor, and therefore, can only save so many groups/people. In other words, they have limited resources.

The Prodigal Father (Book, 10 mins)

You will be reading the well know parable of the Prodigal Son and focusing on a trait about the father that often goes unnoticed. There are 2 main points we are trying to make in this section: 1. We are the son, and God is the father (in this story), and 2. The word “prodigal” is thought of as negative because we assign it to the son, but it can just as easily be assigned to the father... and then it becomes hopeful and life giving!

- Have everyone look up Luke 15:11-32
- Before reading, tell them that this is a parable- a story that was told in order to help us understand something about God.
- Ask them to, as you read the verses, make a mental note of words that could be used to describe the younger son, as well as the father.
- Ask one (or more) students to read, and have everyone else follow along. I have listed the verses here for your planning purposes:

11 Then He said: “A certain man had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.’ So he divided to them his livelihood. **13** And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. **14** But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. **15** Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. **16** And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. **17** “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, **19** and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.””

20 “And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring[a] out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. **23** And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; **24** for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ And they began to be merry.

25 “Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. **26** So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. **27** And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf.’

28 “But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. **29** So he answered and said to his father, ‘Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. **30** But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.’

31 “And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. **32** It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found.””

- When you finish reading, write the word “Younger Son” on one side of the white board, and “Father” on the other. Allow them to offer up words to describe these two people. (example: Son- selfish, wasteful, stupid, etc., father- generous, loving, forgiving, etc.)
- Once you have a pretty exhaustive list, ask them if there are any traits that the Father and Son shared. They may easily be able to pick it out- they were BOTH wildly extravagant in their spending. The difference is that the son spent for his own gain, but the father spent for someone he loves!
- Ask:
 - Why did the son have to go back to his father? (he ran out of cash-money!)
 - How did his father respond to him? (with love and forgiveness)
 - How are the father’s resources different from the son’s? (he has MUCH deeper pockets than his son!)
 - If the son did the same thing over again and came back to the father after wasting what was given to him, how do you think his father would respond?
 - Do you think there is a limit to what the father was willing to share with his son?
- Once you have discussed those details and they have a pretty firm understanding that the father was willing to be just as wasteful with his resources (but for completely different reasons!), remind the students that this is a PARABLE... so, who then is the son suppose to represent? Who is the father suppose to represent? Cross out the words “Young Son” and “Father” and replace them with “Us” and “God”

Mini-Lecture/say something like:

You may have heard this story before, and have maybe even understood that we are like the son and God is like the father. But what we don’t always focus on is that, in some ways, the father was just as “wasteful” in his extravagant use of resources as the son was! He has no guarantee that his son won’t turn around and do the same thing again, or that he will receive any sort of return on his investment. That father had a LOT of love for his son. He would be willing to sacrifice it all!

“I didn’t do enough” (Look, 10 mins)

Watching a clip from Schindler’s List where he mourns the fact that his ability to save people was limited by his resources.

- Before you watch the video clip that comes at the end of the movie, give them a simple explanation of what has happened. Something like: this clip comes from a movie called “Schindler’s List,” which is based off a true story of a very wealthy business man who lived during the time of the Holocaust. He used all of his wealth to buy Jewish prisoners so they could work for him, but really, his objective became to rescue as many people as he could from concentration camps, and ultimately save their lives. Every penny he makes goes back to rescuing more prisoners and he ends up going bankrupt. In the scene we are about to watch, the war has ended, and his employees are thanking him for his sacrifice.
- Show the video clip: https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=qlp_8RNNX4k

Discussion Questions:

- How is Schindler similar to the father in the bible story we just read?
- Did Schindler have good intentions?
- What caused him so much frustration at the end of the scene?
- **How are Schindler’s resources different from God’s? ***** This is super important! Schindler is super wealthy, but he still has a limited number of resources. God has UNENDING resources, which means he can continue to love on us lavishly without any fear of it running out. He CANNOT GO BANKRUPT! We can go back to him an indefinite number of times and he will still have more to offer!***

MAKE SURE THEY UNDERSTAND THIS KEY POINT:

*****Every analogy we make is imperfect- the balloons, the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, Schindler rescuing the Jewish people. These comparisons are lacking because we live in a world of limited resources. GOD is the only one with understanding and resources that NEVER. RUNS. OUT. He is able to be lavish, extravagant, and even wasteful in his love for us, because there is ALWAYS MORE! HE CANNOT GO BANKRUPT! He can be prodigal with his love every single time!**

Responding to Prodigal Love (Took, 5 mins)

Creating simple love notes for God as a response to his love for us.

Say something like:

The beauty of our God and faith is that it is not dependent on us. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more or any less. If we consistently obey him, he will lavish his love on us. If we consistently disobey him, he will still lavish his love on us! His well of love is bottomless!

But just like with any other loving relationship, if someone loves us and we want to love them back, the best way to do that is through showing our love... not being hostile or defiant!

- Tell your students that you are going to have them write very simple love notes for God... but they don't have to be sappy!
- What you want them to think about is something concrete they can do to show their love for God. It may be helping someone, forgiving someone, spending a certain amount of time in prayer, or stopping a bad habit. It should be something that stretches them.
- Hand out paper/markers/love note supplies and have them fill in the blanks to this statement:

God,
I will show my love for you this _____
(day, week, month, etc.)
by _____.
(something measurable. "Being nice," would be a bad example. "Putting away the dishes every day without being asked," is a good example.)

- Give them 2 or 3 minutes to complete their love letters. They can take their notes home as a reminder of what they committed to, give them to a friend so they can hold them accountable, or put it in the offering plate at church.
- Close in prayer, PRAISING God for his awesomeness and unending love... THANKING him for continually showering us with love, even when we don't deserve it... and ASKING him to help us be a reflection of his love.