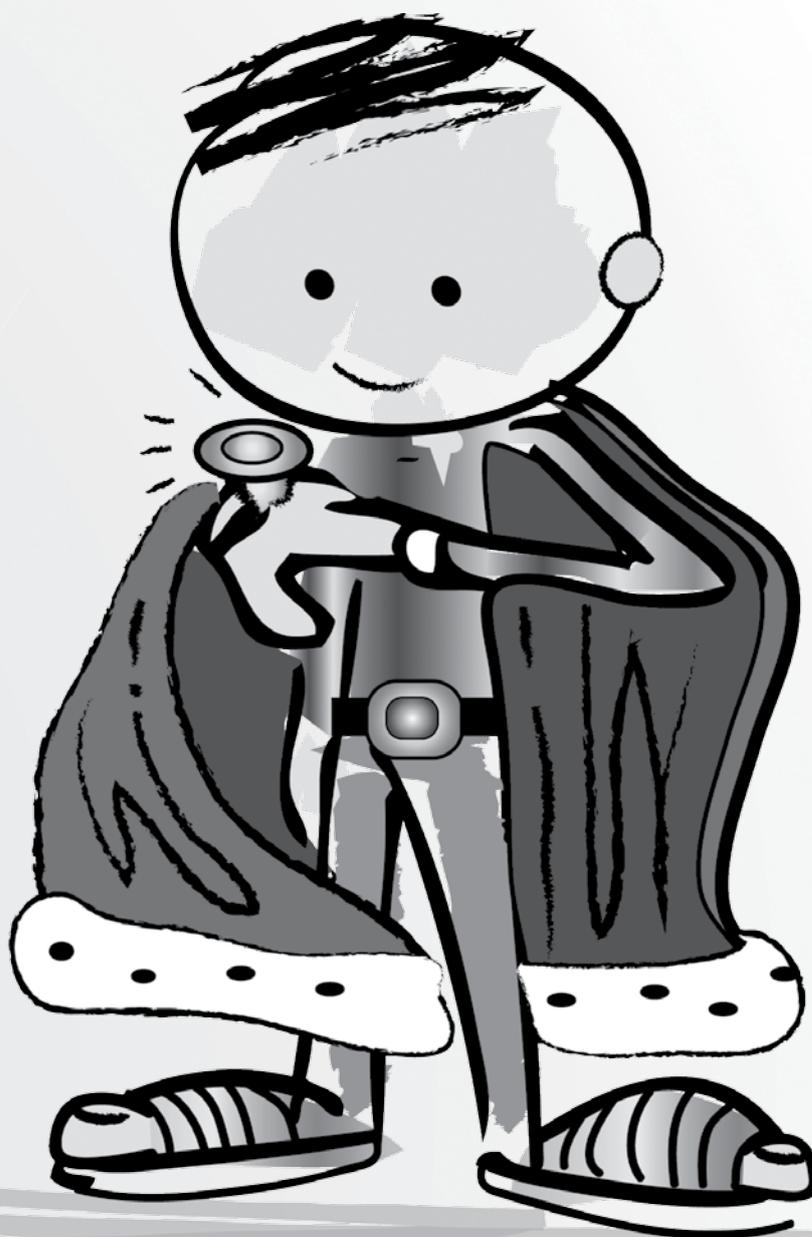


Session 1: FREE!



Session 1: Free!

FOCUS VERSE:

1 Samuel 16:7b: "For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

OBJECTIVE:

To understand that what really matters to God is not only **what** we do but **why** we do it.

FOCUS TRUTH:

In Christ we are perfectly loved and accepted for who we are, not what we do. From that position of security, we can make a free choice to serve God because we love Him, and get rid of any other false motivation.



Leader's Notes

The theme running through this first session could be defined as "sonship versus slavery".

We will focus on the story Jesus told that is generally known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. We prefer to call it the Parable Of The Two Sons because the context makes clear that the focus of the story is not so much the younger son who went astray but rather the elder brother who appeared outwardly to be doing everything right yet inwardly was far away from his father.

The story appears in a string of parables in Luke 15 dealing with things that are lost: the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the Parable of the Lost Coin, and then this one which could easily be entitled the Parable of the Lost Son. The question is, which of the sons was lost, the younger, the elder or both? By the end of the story it's clear that the younger son, though once lost, has now been found, but the elder son is still lost.

Although the elder son is free to enjoy right now everything his father owns, he is deceived into thinking he has to "slave away" to earn it as a future reward. This attitude keeps him from intimacy with the father and makes him behave in ways that are more in keeping with a hired hand who "slaves away" rather than the son he is.

The key point we want to help participants understand is that they are not just in the position the younger son was in immediately upon his return, that of a "forgiven sinner", someone who has been forgiven but is still essentially the same no good person they always were. We want them to know that, even though they don't deserve it, they have become "sons" with all the authority, responsibility and privilege that implies. From their position as sons, they are free to choose whether to live for the father or not. But when you understand just what this father is like and what he has done, why on earth wouldn't you want to serve him?

We finish the session with something of a paradox. Having said that we don't need to "slave away" for God, we note that the New Testament actually often gives a positive slant to the word "slave" (*doulos* in the Greek), with Paul, for example, calling himself a "slave of Christ" (Romans 1:1). Even though we are free not to serve Him, when we understand how good He is and how loving He is, of our own free will we can commit ourselves to becoming His bondslaves.

The Danger Of Antinomianism

Antinomianism is an old heresy that has afflicted the Church through the ages. The term means “anti-law” and was coined by Martin Luther to refer to the practice of pushing the doctrine of justification by faith alone too far and saying, in effect, that since Christians are saved by faith alone, it does not matter at all how they behave.

The teaching in this session may sound to some as if it is heading in that direction but that is categorically not the case. Encourage any who express concern to bear with it and reassure them that, as the course develops, they will see the whole picture.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great proponent of evangelical theology and minister of Westminster Chapel in London, who was prominent in the middle of the 20th Century, said:

“There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it that it really amounts to this: that because you are saved by grace alone, it does not really matter at all WHAT you do, you can go on sinning all you like...”¹

Note how he says that interpreting Gospel preaching as meaning that it doesn’t matter how you behave is to misunderstand it. His point is that, if you don’t find some people misinterpreting your teaching in this way, then you are not actually preaching the true Gospel of grace. He goes on to say even more directly (and in capital letters!):

“I would say to all preachers: IF YOUR PREACHING OF SALVATION HAS NOT BEEN MISUNDERSTOOD IN THAT WAY, THEN YOU HAD BETTER EXAMINE YOUR SERMONS AGAIN, and you had better make sure that you really ARE preaching the salvation that is proclaimed in the New Testament.”¹

Our objective in this course is to help people receive a revelation of God’s grace. Most people find that revelation profoundly shocking when it comes. On the face of it, it may seem that we can behave however we like, but anyone who persists in that way of thinking has not had a genuine revelation of grace. Those who truly understand it, go in the opposite direction: they fall more in love with God and want to serve Him with all that they are and have.

1. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans, An Exposition of Chapter 6, The New Man*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), pages 9–10.



Small Group Timings

The following plan is designed to help those leading the course in small groups. It assumes a meeting of around 2 hours in length, and suggests how long each part of the session should last, with an indication of cumulative elapsed time. You will find a time plan in each session.

| | | |
|-------------------------------|------------|------|
| Welcome | 9 minutes | 0:09 |
| Worship, prayer & declaration | 5 minutes | 0:14 |
| Word part 1 | 22 minutes | 0:36 |
| Pause For Thought 1 | 18 minutes | 0:54 |
| Word part 2 | 19 minutes | 1:13 |
| Pause For Thought 2 | 12 minutes | 1:25 |
| Word part 3 | 18 minutes | 1:43 |
| Pause For Thought 3 | 12 minutes | 1:55 |
| Word part 4 | 5 minutes | 2:00 |



The time allocated for the Word sections is based on the length of the corresponding section of the accompanying DVDs. The Witness section is not included in the time plan as it tends to be used in place of a Pause For Thought section. You will need to add on 5 to 10 minutes if you want to include it separately.

Registered users of the course (see page 10) can download an Excel spreadsheet with these timings. Simply enter your own start time, adjust the length of the various components if desired and you will have a timed plan of your session.



WELCOME

One definition of grace is “getting what you don’t deserve”. Tell about a time you got what you didn’t deserve. What did you deserve? What did you actually get?



WORSHIP

Suggested theme: You belong! See 1 John 3:1.

You could ask people to reflect quietly on God’s wonderful love for us in making us His sons and daughters. Then ask each person in the group who is willing to thank God for one, or more, of the many privileges of belonging to God’s family by His grace.



PRAYER & DECLARATION

In every session, we want to encourage people to pray out loud and to make a declaration out loud together. A prayer is addressed to God while a declaration is spoken out to the spiritual world in general. Encourage people to make their declaration boldly!

Dear Father God, thank You for adopting us as Your children through Jesus Christ, and for giving us the privilege of calling You “Abba, Father”! Please open the eyes of our hearts so that we may really understand what this means for us. Amen.

I have been bought out of slavery by the blood of Jesus. I choose to submit myself to God and I resist anything that would drag me back into slavery.



WORD

Introduction

Welcome to *The Grace Course*!

What's your favourite hymn? Different people like different ones. If you were a dentist you might perhaps go for "Crown Him With Many Crowns". If you were a paramedic, you might be whistling "Revive Us Again". I guess if you were a baker it would be "When The Roll Is Called Up Yonder"!

For many people, their favourite hymn is "Amazing Grace": "Amazing grace (how sweet the sound) that saved a wretch like me." Apparently John Newton's 250-year-old hymn is sung around 10 million times a year. I've been a Christian a long time and I think I have probably sung it nearly as many times myself!

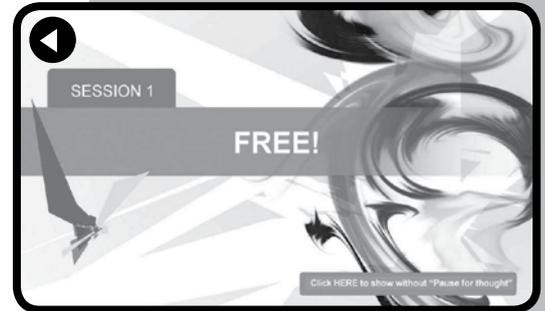
This course is all about grace. Paul tells us in Romans 5:2 that we have obtained by faith "our introduction... into this grace in which we stand" (NASB). When I first became a Christian, I understood grace as being primarily about God's love when He sent Jesus to die for me. Peter tells us that God wants us to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 3:18). The grace that God wants us to experience is for every moment of every day, and that's what this course is about.

And, although John Newton's great hymn starts by talking about the grace that saved us the moment we first turned to Christ, it goes on to say:

Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come;
'Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far
And Grace will lead me home.

The objective of the course is to help you know what it means to experience God's grace every day so that you can be fruitful to the fullest possible extent. And that's an exciting prospect.

[Do you have a story of God's grace and what it has meant in your life that you could share at this point?]



Grace is so needed in the Church. In preparation for writing a book on legalism and grace with Dr. Neil Anderson and Paul Travis, we contracted the George Barna Research Group to do a scientific survey of American Christianity. We asked followers of Christ to respond to six statements. One of them was: “The Christian life is well-summed up as trying hard to obey God’s commands.” To our astonishment, we discovered that 82% of those surveyed agreed with that statement; 57% strongly agreed! Well, there’s nothing wrong with that statement aside from the fact that it’s totally wrong! There’s nothing in there about grace... about faith... about love... about relationship. There’s nothing in there about Jesus! Our conclusion was — and remains — that law-based living rather than grace-based living is endemic in the Church.

▶
“If you love me, you will obey my commands.”
John 14:15 NCV

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Understanding grace

▶ To get us started, I want to ask you to consider a question. Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey my commands” (John 14:15 NCV). Imagine Him saying that personally just to you. How do you hear Him saying it? What expression is on His face? ▶ This?... ▶ Or this?... What expression is in His voice? Before we finish this session, we’ll do our best to resolve that question.

The story of the two brothers (Luke 15:11–32 NIV)

Let’s look now at a story that Jesus told that will really help us come to grips with God’s grace.

The younger brother

And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ▶ ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’” (Luke 15:11–12a)

Do you realize that he might as well have said, “I wish you were dead”? A father’s inheritance was to come to his sons after his death. But this son just couldn’t wait.

► 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 servants 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 servants.” So he got up and went to his father (Luke 15:12b–20a).

The younger boy had turned his back completely on his father and the way of life he had been brought up in.

What Jesus is doing here is painting a picture of someone whose behaviour was the worst imaginable in his culture. He showed no respect whatsoever for his father. He engaged in adultery, spending money on prostitutes. Then, when he had no money left, he even stooped so low as to take a job looking after the animal that to Jews represented the height of uncleanness — pigs. It’s difficult to imagine that he could have behaved any worse, or any



less deservingly of his title as son. He himself knew that he had blown it completely and decided to return to his father, not expecting to be received any more as a son but hoping simply for a job as a hired hand, one who would have to earn anything that might come from the 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 (Luke 15:20b).

Note that the father ran — in that culture, wealthy men never did that. Love for his son overcame all the social norms.

And the son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son” (Luke 15:21).

Was that true, that his sin made him no longer worthy to be called a son? Yes, undoubtedly, though of course nothing could change the fact that he was a son, and always would be. But watch how the father reacts: It’s almost as if he was not even listening to the words of his son’s well-rehearsed confession. The father knew the son’s heart and that he was sorry and had come back. And that’s all that mattered!



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. [This is the only character in the story for whom the whole thing is really bad news!] 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 (Luke 15:22–24).



► The son expected to be disowned or at best to be severely punished — and that would have been what he deserved. Yet the father immediately embraces this smelly, dirty, broken individual, puts the best clothes on him and throws a party to end all parties!

He also gives him three things that had great significance:



► First, the **robe** wasn’t any old robe but was the best robe in the house, perhaps the father’s own robe. It symbolized that the son had once again been given the right to enjoy the place of “right standing” with the father. He had always been loved, but now he was completely restored.

► Second, the **ring** would have been a signet-type ring that would make a mark on official documents and could be instantly recognizable as the father's mark. Without that mark or seal there would be no authority behind the instructions in the document. The ring symbolized power and authority to carry out the father's business.

This boy, who had squandered his father's wealth in wild living, is being re-commissioned and honoured with the trust of his father to go about his father's business once again, telling people what they need to do. And they will have to do it, because he wears the ring on his finger.

The third thing he tells the servants to bring is ► **sandals**. In a Jewish household, the only people allowed to wear footwear in the house were the father and his sons. The father was declaring in no uncertain terms that the boy, despite everything he had done, was still his son, entitled to the rights of a son.

This is *The Grace Course*, but what is grace? Let's pause for a minute and take in that scene. A son who has behaved in the worst way imaginable returns. His father, however, restores him simply because he loves him and wants a relationship with him. This is grace: A child utterly bereft of anything throwing himself on the mercy of his father who picks him up, dusts him down and restores him.

This son who has completely and utterly blown it, who has no right whatsoever to expect anything from his father except what he might be allowed to earn, who doesn't deserve any favour whatsoever, stands there in his rich robe, with his ring of authority and the sandals that mark him out as one of the family. This is grace.

Those of us who have been Christians a while know this story well and we tend to relate it to the time that we first came to God, gave our lives to Him and accepted His free gift of grace. But what about now? Does this part of the story have anything to say to us as we live our Christian lives today, or does it just reflect a one-off moment in the past?

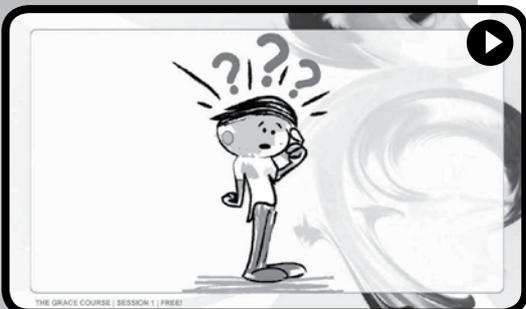
[Do you have an incident from your own experience like the one below from Rich Miller that illustrates such grace?]



When I was a kid, I wanted just about every kind of animal that I saw on TV, but what I wanted most was a horse. I didn't know how much a horse cost, but I knew it was more than I had. So I concocted a plot. One Thursday evening I discovered my Mom's purse with a roll of \$20 bills in it. My Dad had just been paid. I figured they wouldn't miss one of them, so I took a \$20.

The next day I grabbed an envelope and the \$20 and went to the woods where I often played. I put the \$20 into the envelope and rubbed it in the dirt to make it look like it had been there a while. Then an hour or so later I rushed home and yelled to my Mom, "Hey look! I found \$20 in the woods!" My Mom said, "Great, you can use that toward your horse." I thought I had committed the crime of the century. But I didn't count on one other factor... my conscience. The next day I was playing baseball and my Dad was watching from a low hill nearby. When I finished playing I started walking toward him and the closer I came, the worse I felt. Finally when I got to him I sort of blubbered, "Dad, I didn't find that money. I stole it!" My Dad said, "Son, your Mother and I knew that you stole the money. We were just waiting for you to come and tell us." And with that he hugged me and I was bawling.

Even though my Dad wasn't a follower of Christ at that time, I still remember that moment as a place of grace where my Dad was like my Father. And things are the same with us and God. He knows all that we've done yet still loves us. He's just waiting for us to come and talk to Him about it.



► What is the worst thing you have ever done? Have you got it in your head? OK, write it down on a piece of paper and hand it to the person sitting next to you... Just kidding! But what if you went out of here and did it again or did something even worse... and then sincerely came back to God, what reception would you get? The logic of this story is that you would be treated in exactly the same way as this boy.

This is grace. And it genuinely is amazing.

Does the thought that you as a Christian could behave in the worst way imaginable and then come back to God with the relationship still secure not sit quite right with you?

The context of the story

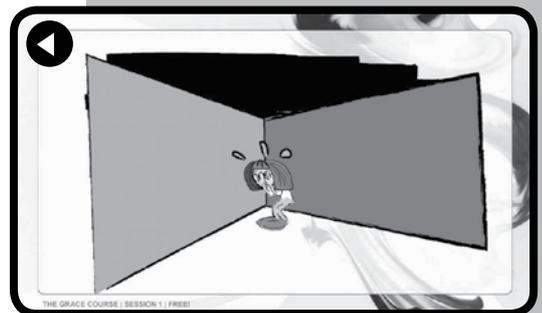
Let's step back and look at why Jesus told this story in the first place. The context is that He was clearly setting Himself up as a religious teacher but He sure didn't act like one. He was always mixing with the "wrong" crowd, tax collectors and so-called "sinners", and the religious people complained, saying "This man welcomes sinners and even sits down to eat with them." In response Jesus told a series of stories, of which this is the third. So He told it in response to the accusation that His behaviour was wrong — that it was displeasing to God. The whole point of the story is that it is not our behaviour that puts us into a right relationship with God — it's His grace.

But behaviour does matter

As we will see, it's not that the son's behaviour did not matter. It did. Sin has consequences. But the ending of his relationship with his father was NOT one of those consequences. That's what it means to be a child of God. You will always be a child of God. ▶ Even if you fall flat on your face and make a complete mess. God gives you freedom to fail. He is rooting for you and has given you everything you need so that you do not have to fail. But if you do, ▶ His loving arms are there to welcome you back and pick you up no matter how badly you have messed up. This is genuinely shocking, don't you find? But that's exactly what the Bible says in 1 John 2:1 NIV:

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence — Jesus Christ the Righteous One.

There's an old heresy — nearly as old as the Gospel itself — called antinomianism which pushes biblical truth too far and says that, since we are saved by God's grace through faith, there is no need for a moral law, so our behaviour doesn't matter. If it's starting to sound a little like that's where we're going, let me reassure you that it isn't. If you bear with us, you'll get the full picture.



See the section on antinomianism in the Leader's Notes on page 29 for more information on this.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 1

OBJECTIVE:

TO HELP PEOPLE START TO GET TO GRIPS WITH THE SHOCKING CONCEPTS OF GOD'S GRACE AND PARTICULARLY THEIR NEW POSITION AS CHILDREN OF GOD.



► QUESTIONS (ON PAGE 11 OF THE PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE):

WHAT DOES "GRACE" MEAN TO YOU?

THE FATHER GIVES THE YOUNGER SON THREE GIFTS WHICH SYMBOLIZE THINGS THAT GOD HAS GIVEN TO YOU. WHICH GIFT IS MOST MEANINGFUL TO YOU? WHY?

IF YOU KNEW FOR SURE THAT GOD'S ACCEPTANCE OF YOU AND LOVE FOR YOU DID NOT DEPEND ON HOW WELL YOU BEHAVED, HOW MIGHT THAT CHANGE THE WAY YOU LIVE?



The elder brother — slaving rather than serving

► Maybe you think that it's your behaviour that makes you acceptable to God — as the religious people clearly did. If so, you will struggle to make sense of what we just said. But you're not alone, as the story goes on to show.



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. [Somewhere on the farm a goat looks up with a worried expression!] But when this son of yours [notice how the older brother has rejected his relationship with the younger brother] who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"



► “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” (Luke 15:25–32).

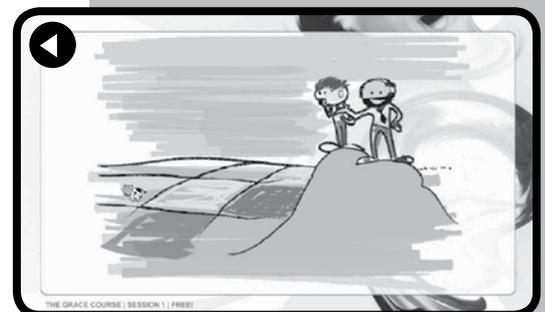
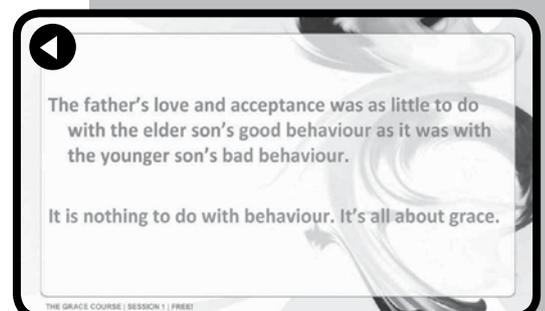
There is this other character in the story who is often overlooked, but in many ways he is the one that Jesus was specifically addressing: The elder brother who did not throw everything back in his father’s face. He stayed and worked hard. He always toed the line and did what was expected of him. He clearly represents the religious people of the day, the ones who thought they could please God by doing the right things, by behaving the right way.

He was completely unable to get his head around the concept of grace. To him, it’s quite straightforward: You earn the father’s favour by what you do. When his brother returned after all that he had done and, instead of being turned away or at the very least severely disciplined, he had a party thrown for him, this elder brother was incandescent with rage. You can almost hear him spluttering, “But, but, but... All these years I have done everything right. I’ve played by the rules. And you never threw a party for me. It’s totally unfair!”

► He didn’t understand that the father’s love and acceptance was as little to do with his good outward behaviour as it was with the other son’s bad outward behaviour. ► It is nothing to do with behaviour. It’s all about grace.

This elder brother had an eye on the inheritance that he would one day receive in return for “slaving away” day after day as he put it. ► We imagine fathers taking their sons around the estate and saying, “One day son, all this will be yours.” That’s what this son was thinking. But this father says, “Everything I have is yours”. “Look around you. It’s already yours. Everything I have is yours.”

He could have been enjoying everything the father had for years... ► but instead he slaved away thinking that he would have to earn the father’s approval and his inheritance. In fact, the father just loved him anyway and the inheritance was there all along for him to enjoy. What a tragedy to go through life slaving away for something that in fact you’ve already got.



Most Christians I know are like the elder brother. We do not know what we already have — or who we already are. Although theologically we know that the Christian life is about grace and not about obeying rules, we live in practice as if it's about how we behave. We know we are saved by grace but, although we would never put it like this, we end up thinking we have to maintain that salvation by what we do. We may not say it but in practice we show that what we believe is that what determines our right standing with God is how we behave.

The staggering point of the story that Jesus is telling is that your acceptance by God has nothing to do with how you behave. It's entirely down to His grace.

I am well aware that left to my own devices I would be very like the elder brother. Thinking back to when I was a teenager who had just become a Christian, when I went wrong and sinned — usually it was something like lustful thoughts — I didn't realize I could come straight back to God like the younger brother, but I somehow felt I had to earn my way back into God's favour. Yet I didn't dare approach Him because I felt I had let Him down, so I would spin off into the rough for weeks. When I finally did crawl back, I didn't feel worthy until I had had three really good quiet times in a row. That is not how God wants us to be.

The story of the labourers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16)



► There is a story you may not be familiar with, that Jesus told about some labourers in a vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). The owner hired some workers in the marketplace early in the morning and offered them the standard payment of 1 denarius for a day's work. The owner went out a little later and hired more workers promising to pay them "whatever is right". He went out three more times and hired even more workers, the final time being "the 11th hour" when there was only an hour left to work.



► When it came to paying them, they all received the same wage of one denarius no matter how long they had been working. The workers hired initially — even though they received exactly what they had been promised — were outraged. The owner's response was, "Am I not allowed to

do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?" (Matthew 20:15)

Again, the point is that, what you receive from God is determined by His generosity, not by our hard work. This is grace.

Are we “slaving” for God?

► The younger son traded in the place of grace and privilege that he had been born into, and chose to walk away from relationship with his father. The elder brother didn't do that. Or did he? Actually he did.

It wasn't just the younger son who was having an identity crisis, and who had removed himself from his position of intimacy and joy of being at home with the father. In reality, neither of them stayed in relationship with him.

The younger brother found himself “in a far country” with the pigs. Although the elder brother never left home physically, in his heart he was a long way away too. ► In the story, Jesus places him not with the father inside the home, enjoying fellowship as you might expect. Instead he is out in the fields with the hired servants, working hard or as he himself describes it, “slaving away”.

This was a dishonourable place for the elder son to be. Instead of taking his place at the father's side, and enjoying the favour and blessings of being in the father's company that were his by right, he had, in effect, taken the identity of a hired servant, the identity that the younger son was also heading towards, thinking it was the best he could get in the circumstances.

The father's presence alone wasn't enough for the elder son. Rather he preferred to strive for what the father could give him, and was trying to make his father bless him by seeking to do everything right externally. But internally his heart was far away.

The younger brother walked away from his identity as son, but joyfully received it back through grace because he chose to turn back to the father. The older brother — who represented the religious people — walked away from it too but did not turn back. The father's grace was available to him just as it had been to his brother — but he didn't experience it because he chose not to turn away from his wrong thinking and turn back to his father.



Jesus was showing the religious people that if they thought that outward behaviour was what it took to earn God's favour, they were terribly deceived.

But what we do is still important

We want to make it clear that what we actually do in this life is very important. Paul tells us that, at the end of the age, there will be a day when what we have done... our works... will be tested. He uses the image of a building and says that Christ is the foundation and that we have a choice of how we build on that foundation:

► Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. [1 Corinthians 3:12-15]

► So there is a foundation of Christ laid by God's grace — and we have a choice as to how we build on it. When

But what we do is still important

Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw — each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:12-15

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these works are tested, fire will come and the works that are of no value... those done in our own strength, created by our own minds, designed to make us look good... the Bible calls them "wood, hay, straw" will be burned. While works that are of value... those God wants done and are done in His strength, for His honour — "gold, silver, precious stones" — will remain.

I don't know about you, but I'm not interested in one day watching much of my life go up in smoke.

► Now, Romans 8:1 assures us that there is no **condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus. It is clear that, even if your work is burned up, this is not a salvation issue. You are still saved but “only as through fire”, turning up before God with nothing but a pair of singed eyebrows! But the big question is, ► will there be any **commendation**? Will the things we do in this life actually be of any value for eternity? The religious people thought that their religious works were good in themselves, but Jesus told them that since they were doing things just to impress other people they had already received their reward... men's approval. But there would be no reward from God.

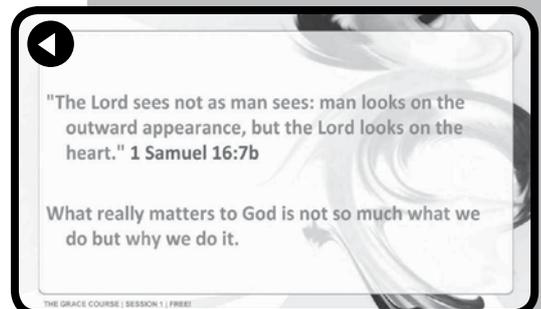
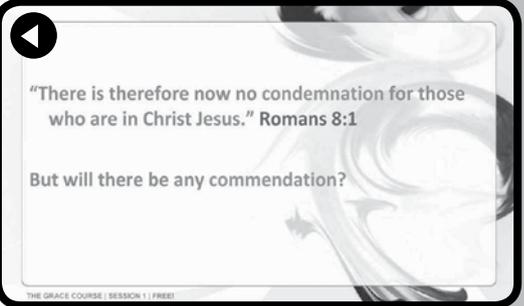
So it's crucial that we understand how to build with gold, silver and precious stones.

Do you think you can look at what someone is doing and tell whether it is pleasing to God or not? Sometimes you can, but by no means always. Jesus tells us that some will come to Him and say, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness”. (Matthew 7:22-23).

Two people can be doing exactly the same thing — feeding the poor perhaps, or spending an hour a day reading His word and praying. One will be delighting God, the other not. What's the difference?

It's not what, but why

When God chose David to be King of Israel, his family couldn't believe it because he was the youngest and smallest. His oldest brother thought he was a pest. But Samuel said, ► “The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7b). Towards the end of the Old Testament, God makes a promise that He will write His laws not on tablets of stone but on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).



► What is important to God is not so much **what** we do but **why** we do it. God has never taken pleasure from people just obeying a set of rules outwardly if they are not doing it from the heart.

► That's the whole point of 1 Corinthians 13, the great "love chapter".

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

The difference is what's happening inside. God judges the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. It is not to do with our behaviour per se. It's all about our motivation. And if that motivation is not love, then what we do, no matter how good it looks, is worth precisely nothing. It's wood, hay or straw.

► In 2 Corinthians 5:14 NIV, Paul says, "For Christ's love compels us". God wants our motivation to be love and nothing but love. But we can easily end up motivated by other things:

► Guilt — I don't want God to be upset with me so I try my best to avoid going wrong. But I do what's wrong anyway, and end up feeling even more guilty and in a joyless cycle of self-condemnation.

► Shame — this is where I know I am a disappointment to God and to others, but feel that if I can just be a better person maybe He'll think I'm worthy of His love.

► Fear — I'm scared that God might be angry with me. I've heard the promises but they don't really seem to apply to me. Maybe I'm not a Christian at all. Maybe I've committed the unforgivable sin.

► Pride — pride is like bad breath. Everyone knows you've got it except you! It can go something like this... I know I don't measure up to God's standards but there again who does? I feel much better if I compare myself with other people. I've really studied doctrine and theology and made sure that mine is absolutely right. I measure what others say against it.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing." 1 Corinthians 13:1-3

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What is our motivation?

"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."

2 Corinthians 5:14 NIV

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Or are we compelled by....

- Guilt?
- Shame?
- Fear?
- Pride?

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In future sessions we will look at each of these issues and we'll have the opportunity to root out these false motivators, and ensure that it's love for Christ that compels us and nothing else.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 2

OBJECTIVE:

TO EXPLORE THE CONCEPT THAT WHAT MATTERS TO GOD IS NOT SO MUCH WHAT WE DO BUT WHY WE DO IT AND TO UNCOVER SOME WRONG MOTIVATIONS.



► QUESTIONS (ON PAGE 15 OF THE PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE):

AT THE END OF JESUS' STORY, THE YOUNGER BROTHER HAS BEEN RECEIVED BACK AS A SON BUT THE ELDER BROTHER CONTINUES TO ACT LIKE A SLAVE. HOW MIGHT THEIR ATTITUDES DIFFER TOWARDS THE WORK THEY DO FOR THEIR FATHER?

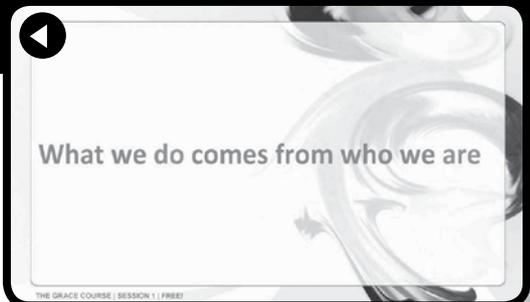
GOD WANTS WHAT WE DO FOR HIM TO BE MOTIVATED PURELY BY LOVE. WHAT OTHER THINGS CAN MOTIVATE US INSTEAD? IF YOU ARE ABLE, SHARE HOW YOU HAVE BEEN MOTIVATED BY THESE THINGS.

IF WE REALIZE THAT WE HAVE BEEN MOTIVATED BY THINGS OTHER THAN LOVE, HOW CAN WE CHANGE?

What we do comes from who we are

► Let's understand a key concept: What we do comes from who we are. Can I invite you to pause with me and consider two pictures:

► The first picture, with the younger son at the point that he collapses into his father's arms and casts himself on his mercy. He can scarcely believe his father's grace as he realizes that, even though he richly deserves it, he will not



be punished. He knows that he is forgiven and accepted but he also knows that he is dirty, smelly and broken. He is acutely aware of his failure and deeply ashamed of what he has become. This is how many Christians see themselves: Forgiven but believing they are still essentially the same no-good, rotten people they always were.

It's as if our understanding of the Gospel stopped with Good Friday: Jesus died for my sins and I'm going to go to Heaven when I die. But nothing much changes right now.

But the father does not leave the son there.



► Here's the second picture. The same son just a matter of minutes later is dressed in the finest robe, with the ring on his finger and the sandals on his feet, feasting on the finest food. He is still aware of his past failures, yet it is dawning on him that he has been not just forgiven but completely restored to his position as son, with free access to everything his father owns, along with great power and authority. He knows he doesn't deserve it at all. He realizes he is totally dependent on the father. It's almost unbelievable but it is actually happening.

Which picture most accurately represents how you see yourself in relation to God? In my experience most Christians get stuck on the first picture, knowing they're forgiven but still feeling like miserable sinners, constantly letting God down.

May we encourage you to move onto the second? We need to make it past Good Friday and through to Easter Sunday. I know you celebrate Easter Sunday, but what do you celebrate? That Jesus rose from the dead. He did, of course, but the whole point is that we rose from the dead with Him and became someone completely new; we need to know that we are now holy ones, saints, that we share God's very nature (2 Peter 1:4). And that's not all. We have also ascended with Christ to the right hand of the Father, the ultimate seat of power and authority in the whole universe. Like the younger son, we have been completely restored to the place of authority and honour.

In order to be free to be motivated by love, we have to know that we are more than just forgiven. We need to know that we are completely restored and deep down

inside absolutely acceptable, and indeed a delight to God. And we can stay in that place of utter amazement at the Father's goodness and grace, and retain the healthy awareness that without Him we can't do a single thing of any eternal significance.

This concept that our acceptance by God and our new identity has nothing to do with our behaviour goes against the way you think it should work, doesn't it? It's not what many of us have learned as we've grown up as Christians. We have tended to be like the elder brother, acting as if what we do is the primary thing:

"What must I do to be accepted by God?"

"If you're a Christian, you're already accepted by God!"

"Yes, but what should I DO?"

Most churches have been happy to come up with a list of things to do: Read your Bible every day; come to church every week. Are those good things? Of course! But the problem is that discipleship often ends up becoming a load of rules. And we struggle to obey those rules because we've got things backwards. We think that God is "into" rules, when He's most concerned about relationship.

As part of the research done by the Barna Research Group, we asked people to respond to the statement: "Rigid rules and strict standards are an important part of the life and teaching of our church." We even used words that typically people would recoil at: "Rigid" and "strict". Still, do you care to know what percentage said they agreed with that statement? 66%! Two thirds! Now, I realize that some churches preach grace, but sadly people take it through their own clogged filters and still hear "law". In reality too many churches teach that you've got to work hard and "toe the line" for God to smile at you.

But the way it's supposed to work is that what we do comes from who we are, not vice versa. First we need to know who we are in Christ... God's loved, accepted and secure children.

Read many of Paul's letters to the churches and see how far you get before he gives an instruction on what to do or how to behave. You'll get halfway through at least. The first half is all about what has already been done, what

▶
“If you love me, you will obey my commands.”

John 14:15 NCV

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▶
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you already have, who you already are in Christ. Paul knows that if you grasp that, the rest will flow naturally.

▶ “If you love me, you will obey my commands” (John 14:15 NCV).

▶ Come back to that picture of the younger brother standing there with the full rights and privileges of a son, yet knowing that he doesn’t deserve it one bit. How do you think he will act from that point on? Won’t he just want to do his very best for his father? Will it feel like “slaving away”? No! He will be grateful just to be in such an honoured position, and to have a father who loves him that much.

God’s love and acceptance of you has nothing — nothing! — to do with your behaviour. But here’s the rest of the story: When you stop trying to “act like you think a Christian should act” and just simply live from the truth of who you are now... guess what? You’ll find you want to do what’s right and you will! You will naturally... or rather SUPERnaturally... obey God!

Steve Goss says: I have spoken many times on the phone to a guy who had been diagnosed as paranoid schizophrenic, but found his freedom simply listening to our teaching and taking himself through *The Steps To Freedom In Christ*. He went from someone who was in



and out of mental institutions and on lots of medication, to someone who keeps leading people to the Lord. He has apparently lost 7.5 stone — that’s over 100 pounds. I’ve never met him so I hope he didn’t start at 9 stone.... He called me most recently because he had got into sexual sin with a girl. He had already resolved that God still loved him and dealt with the condemning voices. He had also broken off the relationship to ensure the sin did not repeat and then said, “I used to think God was a guy with a big stick. But now I know that He loves me. The reason I want to stop sinning is because I don’t want to keep hurting Someone who loves me so much.”

Paradoxically, understanding this concept is the key to behaving in a way that really honours God.

Bondslaves

► The word that the elder son uses for “slaving away” carries the meaning that you would expect from the translation, that of a slave with no rights whatsoever who is forced to obey his master. The New Testament term for a slave with no rights was “bondslave”. Despite the fact that he was a son, the elder brother acted like a bondslave.

Interestingly this word “slave” seemed to take on a positive light in the early Church. Paul describes himself as a “slave of Christ” (Romans 1:1); in Mark 10:44 the disciples are called upon to be the “slave of all”. How can slaving be good?

In New Testament times, it was very common for Roman masters to free their slaves. Perhaps they had completed their required service, or their masters were simply being generous. The slaves then became fully-fledged Roman citizens and many went on to do very well for themselves.

► They were absolutely free to leave — but sometimes of their own free will they decided to stay and continue to serve in the household simply because of love for their master. From the outside what they did day-by-day probably didn’t look very different, but there is in fact a world of difference between doing what you do because you are forced to and doing it simply out of love because you make a free choice.

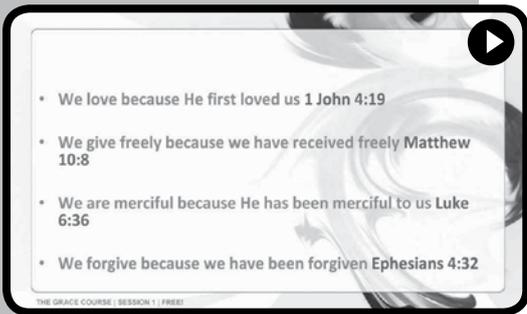


You may need to explain what *The Steps To Freedom In Christ* process is. See page 19. Also recommend that participants make it a regular practice perhaps on an annual basis like a regular service for a car.

◀ Bondslaves

- Owned by someone else
- No rights whatsoever
- Had to do whatever their master commanded
- Yet former slaves who had been set free sometimes chose of their own free will to stay and serve

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▶ We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).

We give freely because we have received freely (Matthew 10:8b).

We are merciful because He has been merciful to us (Luke 6:36).

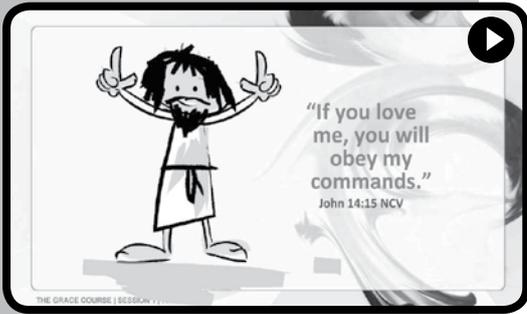
We forgive because we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32).

In Christ you have been set free. But when you know His love as it really is, you are likely to decide of your own free will to make yourself His bonds slave. We cannot do this if we have not yet understood what His grace means for us.

God the Father — looking for relationship



▶ So, Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey my commands.” (John 14:15 NCV) ▶ How do you hear Him saying that now? What expression do you imagine on His face? I hope you can see that He is simply stating a fact: “If you love me, you will obey my commands”. He’s not making a threat, “IF YOU LOVE ME, YOU’LL DO WHAT I SAY!” ▶ I’m certain He’s smiling gently at you as He says it. It all starts by really getting to know the One who is love. Everything flows from that intimate relationship.



At the start of our experience of Jesus, we know we’re the younger son. We know we need Him.

At that point we’re meant to go on a journey of becoming like the Father, but most of us in fact end up becoming like the elder brother instead... slaving away for God.

Yes, we are bondslaves with a master. But consider this master. Is He a good master? Absolutely! He’s a GREAT master! He has some significant works that He has prepared in advance for you to do, but He doesn’t force you in any way to do them. He will love you whatever you do.

However, as you make a choice to serve Him just because you love Him, you’ll find it becomes a real pleasure to do the work He gives you to do! But it all starts with knowing and growing in your understanding of the God of grace.



PAUSE FOR THOUGHT 3

OBJECTIVE:

TO UNDERSTAND THAT WE CAN MAKE A DECISION TO BECOME BONDSLAVES OF GOD BECAUSE HE IS THE PERFECT KIND, LOVING MASTER.



► QUESTIONS (ON PAGE 19 OF THE PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE):

WHY MIGHT A BONDSLAVE WHO HAS BEEN GIVEN HIS FREEDOM CHOOSE TO REMAIN IN HIS FORMER POSITION, WITH HIS MASTER HAVING COMPLETE OWNERSHIP OF HIM AND CONTROL OVER HIM?

DO YOU FEEL READY TO MAKE A COMMITMENT TO GOD TO BE HIS BONDSLAVE, TO SERVE HIM NOT BECAUSE YOU ARE IN ANY WAY COMPELLED TO BUT SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU LOVE HIM?

Uncovering faulty thinking

► Jesus said that it is knowing the truth that will set us free (John 8:32). If that is true, then it is believing lies that keeps us trapped. When the Spirit of God touches our lives, He often first exposes to our minds any faulty thinking we have picked up.

At the end of each session, we're going to pause and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us any areas where our belief system is not in line with what God tells us in His word is actually true. At the back of your Participant's Guide, there is a section entitled *Lies List*. This is a place where you can keep a running journal of what the Lord shows you during each of these sessions, and when we get to *The Steps To Experiencing God's Grace*, between Sessions 5 and 6, you will have the opportunity to deal with them and formulate a longer-term strategy for renewing your mind.

Let's pray: Lord, we have considered that amazing illustration You gave of the two brothers and their loving father. Would You draw our attention now to areas where





This would be a good point to hand out the “Welcome Home” Biblical Truth postcard (see page 15) and encourage people to use it to remind themselves of the truths learned in this session.

we are struggling to believe what is actually true about You and our relationship with You. We ask that in the name of Jesus, the One who made our return to You possible. Amen.

As God draws your attention to a possible lie you have believed, write it down in the left-hand column of the *Lies List* on the last two pages of your Participant’s Guide.

Maybe this session has highlighted lies such as:

- what I have done is too bad for God to forgive me or to accept me back
- God loves other people but He can’t really love me
- I have to live up to a certain set of standards for God to be pleased with me
- God loves me more when I work hard for Him.

Before the next session, try to fill in the right column of the *Lies List* too by finding one or more verses from the Bible that state the direct opposite to the lie.

Imagine how different your life would be and how different your relationship with God would be if you didn’t believe those things, but you were able to take hold of what God says is true in your heart — not just your head. As we go through this course, our prayer is that that is exactly what you will see taking place!



WITNESS

People who don’t yet know God as their Father are like spiritual orphans. What do orphans need? How can I help meet that need?



IN THE COMING WEEK

The story of the two sons turns on the character of the father who, of course, represents God. He is not an inspecting sergeant-major figure looking for us to put a foot wrong. Jesus portrays a father who longs to fellowship with his sons. He runs to meet the younger son. He goes out to plead with the older son.

Sometimes our earthly fathers have not been all they might have been. Maybe we never knew our father. This makes it difficult to know God as the perfect Father He is because we tend to project our experiences onto Him. Use the My Father God statements overleaf every day this week (and for as long as it takes after that) to renounce lies that you may believe and joyfully affirm what is really true about Him.



The “In The Coming Week” sections are designed to help people bed down some of the truths they have learned. Encourage people to do them (but try to resist making it sound like compulsory “homework”!). Some people will derive significant benefit from this week’s exercise.

My Father God

I RENOUNCE THE LIE THAT MY FATHER GOD IS:

distant and uninterested in me.

insensitive and uncaring.

stern and demanding.

passive and cold.

absent or too busy for me.

impatient, angry or never satisfied with what I do.

mean, cruel or abusive.

trying to take all the fun out of life.

controlling or manipulative.

condemning or unforgiving.

nit-picking or a demanding perfectionist.

I JOYFULLY ACCEPT THE TRUTH THAT MY FATHER GOD IS:

intimate and involved
(see Psalm 139:1–18).

kind and compassionate
(see Psalm 103:8–14).

accepting and filled with joy and love (see Romans 15:7; Zephaniah 3:17).

warm and affectionate (see Isaiah 40:11; Hosea 11:3, 4).

always with me and eager to be with me
(see Hebrews 13:5; Jeremiah 31:20; Ezekiel 34:11–16).

patient and slow to anger and delights in those who put their hope in His unfailing love (see Exodus 34:6; 2 Peter 3:9, Psalm 147:11).

loving and gentle and protective (see Jeremiah 31:3; Isaiah 42:3; Psalm 18:2).

trustworthy and wants to give me a full life; His will is good, perfect and acceptable for me (see Lamentations 3:22, 23; John 10:10; Romans 12:1–2).

full of grace and mercy, and gives me freedom to fail (see Hebrews 4:15–16; Luke 15:11–16).

tender-hearted and forgiving; His heart and arms are always open to me (see Psalm 130:1–4; Luke 15:17–24).

committed to my growth and proud of me as His growing child (see Romans 8:28, 29; Hebrews 12:5–11; 2 Corinthians 7:14).

I am the Apple of His Eye!