

SHOOTING THE PRODIGAL

“Raises some issues for churches to discuss - from acceptance to vulnerability to control. The humor softens, yet clearly confronts these concerns in ways that aren’t preachy.” – John Pierce, Nurturing Faith Journal

SHOOTING THE PRODIGAL is a different kind of faith-themed film. It brings humor, hope, and honesty to an otherwise polarized and judgmental world. The film also provokes some questions that people are thinking about these days... issues that the church sometimes has been reluctant to deal with. Through humor and humility, this film provides a starting point for timely conversation. We’ve planted plenty of nuggets in the film. We hope you enjoy discovering them.

So gather a group of friends (or strangers!) and enjoy the film. Then talk about what you’ve seen and heard.

There are two versions of the discussion guide here: one for adults and one for young people. We present the themes and questions only as suggestions. We encourage you to expand and modify these ideas to fit your group.

Most of all we hope **SHOOTING THE PRODIGAL** opens doors for a deeper understanding of what Jesus meant when he said, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

David E. Powers, Director, Shooting The Prodigal

Adult Discussion Guide

Exploring the biblical text...

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is recorded in Luke 15. Jesus had been speaking with the tax collectors and sinners. But, as verse 2 records, “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Jesus responds as he typically does... not directly but by telling a series of parables: the Lost Sheep (verses 4-7), the Lost Coin (verses 8-10), and the Lost Son (verses 11-32).

What similarities and differences do you see among the three parables?

In the Parable of the Lost Son, do you see any modern counterparts to the three main characters – the Younger Son, the Older Son, and the Father? Do you see yourself in any of these characters?

At his lowest point, the prodigal son recognizes his sad estate and decides to go home. Is this repentance? Is repentance necessary for forgiveness?

Jesus leaves the parable open-ended. We don’t know whether or not the older son eventually came into the house and joined the welcome-home celebration. Why do you think Jesus left it this way?

What is the main message Jesus was trying to convey with this story?

Reflecting on the message...

Author and pastor Tim Keller says there are two ways to be alienated from God. One, represented by the younger brother, is to have no interest at all in God... turn your back on Him and remain closed to any possibility of relationship with God. You may feel intellectually superior, have other priorities, or just don’t care. The other way to be alienated from God, represented by the older brother, is to keep all the rules, slavishly obeying them, but ignore the relationship with God. Both of these people are, in effect, “earning” their own salvation. In both of these cases, there’s no need for a savior and God’s free, unearned grace. They’re both providing their own salvation. (see [The Prodigal God](#) by Timothy Keller, 2008, Dutton)

Questions for discussion...

(Time notations in parentheses indicate the location of the scene in the movie.)

The board members of Eternal Hope Baptist Church confront their pastor, Brother Bob Cross with their concerns about declining attendance and finances. They remind him, “We can’t keep the doors open at this rate.” (4:32) Even the church’s neighbor, wealthy timber baroness Aunt Judith knows about the church’s difficulties. “It’s a small town and people talk. Everybody knows your church is on the skids.” (9:56)

Brother Bob’s church is not alone. It is a well-documented fact that church attendance and membership are declining in North America and Europe. What do you think are the reasons for this decline? What, if anything can churches and Christians do about it?

How important is it to maintain the church as an institution?

Is it possible to be spiritual but not religious? If so, how does being “spiritual” contrast with being “religious”? Can you be a Christian without being part of a church? Why or why not?

The board members remind Brother Bob they’ve “been here from the beginning, paying our tithes, keeping this church going.” They resent the attention the “outsiders” are getting from their pastor. (1:05:28) Older church members sometimes have a greater sense of responsibility for the institution because they’ve been there all along through good times and bad. How can this investment in the church be appropriately embraced and passed on to the next generation without creating a climate of exclusivity?

- What are the unique characteristics of the generations that have lived during your lifetime & what qualities do they each have to offer the others?
- A clash between generations often exists due to technology advances, media focuses, and the incessant pushing of boundaries. How can the church better engage in the conversation & create opportunities that create bridges between generations?

Adversity often brings people together with each other & with God. As Old Fred says near the end of the film, “Looks like folks been to a funeral. Still... most life I’ve seen around here in 20 years.” (1:16:00) How has adversity strengthened relationships in your congregation? In your own life?

Perhaps all of us, as we mature in faith, play out the roles of the younger son (rebellious), the older son (resentful), and if we mature enough, the father (grace-filled). How have you seen these three roles play out in your own life? Which of the three most resembles your life right now?

- Do you see any parallels to the three characters in the parable among other personalities in the Bible?
- Which characters in the film most closely reflect the characters of the father, the prodigal son, and the older son?
- What is the driving motivation for each of the three characters in Jesus' parable?
- Do you see these motivations played out in people you know? In yourself?

Brother Bob peppers his conversations with many “churchy” phrases such as “praise the Lord” and “amen.” Are these kinds of terms a barrier to conversations with non-Christians, or is it a witness of the speaker's faith?

- How do we stay true to our faith while being relevant to those outside of the church?
- What new forms of communication have replaced the older, more traditional ones?
- Personal reflection: Think about past conversations you've had with unbelievers. Have you used “insider language” or words & phrases that were confusing? How would you phrase those thoughts now?

As the film begins, Brother Bob seems focused on fulfilling his father's dream and calling for the church... living up to his expectations and those of the church while repressing his own unique gifts. (:41, 10:30, and 31:00) How can Christian parents instill and encourage the faith development of their children while leaving them room to express their faith in their own unique ways?

- The push for autonomy often creates a push back from an opposing side. Is this true of churches as well as individuals? – If so, which side of the equation does your church typically fall on?
- How does our Heavenly Father influence our decisions, or does He allow us the freedom to choose for ourselves?
- Personal reflection: Am I focused on God's calling for me, or am I trying to fulfill expectations of others?

There is some debate about whether Christians, Jews and Muslims all worship the same God. If we do... or don't, how does it influence the way we relate to one another?

- Consider what's currently going on around the world. There continues to be a rift among the world's religions and violence among their followers. Each claims to be the "right." What is the best way to practice evangelism in this environment?
- How can we deal with religious, racial and cultural differences in more effective ways?
- How have September 11th & the War Against Terrorism created harmony or discord among our communities?

At his lowest point (1:14:54), Bob confesses "the old Brother Bob was an act. Like some mediocre cover band. You recognize the tune. The words sound the same. But it's just not the real thing." In what ways do we play the roles expected of us in our church, or family, or workplace? Does that prevent us from living our unique role in life?

In the final church service scene (1:16:42), Brother Bob has boiled his faith down to "the basics: Love God, and love one another." In today's polarized culture, what does it look like to love God and love one another?

Later in that scene, (1:20:00) Brother Bob says, "We've spent a lot of time protecting this comfortable little nest of ours. But God's bigger than the boxes we try to put Him in. So why don't we stop trying to protect the boxes." (paraphrased from Richard Rohr with his permission) Sometimes our concept of God is a reflection of our own desires... or reflections of our culture. In what ways does your concept of God reflect the culture in which you live? How does that concept compare with the image of God embodied by Jesus?

The Heart of the Message...

Author David Kinnaman's research led him to conclude that, "Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose, rather than who we are for." He says, "Only a small percentage of outsiders strongly believe that the labels 'respect, love, hope, and trust' describe Christianity." Kinnamon writes, "Should Christians talk about the moral appropriateness of things like homosexuality and divorce? Of course. Yet in our efforts to point out sin, we often fail to do anything for the people who are affected by sin."

Author and speaker Margaret Feinberg responds, "One of our weaknesses is that we're far more concerned with being right than being righteous. We become like the Pharisees whenever we focus on issues rather than people. Judgmentalism creeps in whenever we deal with issues as if they were black and white, rather than flesh-and-blood humans in need of redemption." [see [Unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... And Why It Matters](#) by David Kinnaman (Baker Books, 2009)]

Author and pastor Eugene Peterson says, “unlike the sins that are commonly noticed and repented of by a worshiping congregation, self-righteousness is almost never recognized in the mirror. Occasionally in someone else, never in me.” In fact, Peterson says that it is to just such an audience that Jesus directed the parable of the lost sons. He used the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7), the parable of the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) and the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11-24), “in order to bring in this fourth story of a lost person who has long since lost any sense of being lost, to get past the self-perceptions of the insiders in congregations who never think of ourselves as lost.”

For as long as we hold on to any pretense of having it all together we are prevented from deepening and maturing in the Christian faith. For as long as we avoid recognition of our lostness we are prevented from experiencing the elegant profundities of foundness. For as long as we insist on maintaining safe moral grids in which we always know where we stand (and where everyone else stands!), these poses of self-sufficiency, we disenfranchise ourselves from the company of the found sheep, the found coin, the two found brothers, and the celebrating angels.

Could it be that those of us in the church need to awaken to the fact that it’s not just “the heathen” outside who need Jesus? We, too, need God’s grace and forgiveness every day. And just as grace has been given freely to us, we need to offer grace to those around us. We have often been un-Christ-like in the way we’ve practiced our “faith.” Some of us have been too focused on maintaining the institution and protecting our Christian bubble from intrusions by secular society. Many of us have lost sight of the grace that brought us into the family of God in the first place. [see Tell It Slant: a conversation on the language of Jesus in his stories and prayers by Eugene Peterson (Eerdmans, 2008)]

- Do you agree with Kinnaman and Peterson? Why or why not?
- Is this a modern phenomenon, or has the church always struggled with these issues?
- How can Christians and churches embrace both grace and truth without being judgmental?

Something needs to be said on behalf of the church. As Peterson points out in his book Practice Resurrection: A conversation on growing up in Christ (Eerdmans, 2010):

If the church is intended as God’s advertisement to the world, a utopian community put on display so that people will flock to it clamoring to get in, it has obviously become a piece of failed strategy. And if the church is intended to be a disciplined company of men and women charged to get rid of corruption in

government, to clean up the world's morals, to convince people to live chastely and honestly... it hasn't happened. We've been at this for two thousand years now, and people are not clamoring to join us... Obviously, the church is not an ideal community that everyone takes one look at and asks, "How do I get in?" Clearly, the church is not making much headway in eliminating what is wrong in the world and making everything right. So what's left?

What's left is this: we look at what has been given to us in our Scriptures and in Jesus and try to understand why we have a church in the first place, what the church, as it is given to us, is. We are not a utopian community. We are not God's avenging angels... Do you think that maybe this is exactly what God intended when he created the church? Maybe the church as we have it provides the very conditions and proper company congenial for growing up in Christ, for becoming mature, for arriving at the measure of the stature of Christ. Maybe God knows what he is doing, giving us church, this church.

- How can Christians support and encourage one another as we grow together in the context of the church?

- What is your unique role in the life of your congregation?

- In a cultural climate of declining church attendance and suspicion of institutions in general, how can Christians embrace and support the church? Or should that even be a priority for Christians?

Youth Discussion Guide

EXPLORING THE PARABLES

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is recorded in Luke 15. Jesus had been speaking with the tax collectors and sinners. But, as verse 2 records, “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.’” Jesus responds as he typically does... not directly but by telling a series of parables: the Lost Sheep (verses 4-7), the Lost Coin (verses 8-10), and the Lost Son (verses 11-32).

What similarities and differences do you see among the three parables?

What are the qualities or characteristics of the younger son, older son, and father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son?

If you could take each one separately out for coffee, what would you want to ask them? What would you want to say to them?

Which character do you most identify with? Do you see any of your friends or family members in the three main characters?

REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

At his lowest point, the prodigal son recognizes his poor choices, and decides to return home. His father receives him with grace and open arms.

How does the father’s response represent your idea of what ‘grace’ means? How do the son’s actions represent your idea of what ‘repentance’ means? When was the last time you exercised or experienced this type of grace and/or repentance? What did being repentant feel like? What happened after you forgave or someone forgave you?

What is the relationship between repentance and forgiveness? How does the feeling of guilt play into repentance or forgiveness, if at all? Do you feel that being repentant is necessary in order for another person to offer forgiveness?

Is there someone that you need to ask forgiveness from? Is there someone you need to forgive, whether they ask for it or not?

THE RELEVANCY OF TODAY’S CHURCH

Jesus leaves the parable of the Prodigal Son open-ended. We don’t know whether or not the older son eventually came into the house and joined the welcome-home celebration. Why do you think Jesus left it this way?

How does the story of the Prodigal Son relate to the church?

What is the main message Jesus was trying to convey with the story?

Is there a difference between being religious and spiritual? If so, do you think one is more relevant than the other?

Is it important to go to church? Why or why not?

Some churches struggle with creating an environment where young people feel welcome and comfortable. What do you feel churches could do to create a more comfortable environment for you and your friends?

LEARNING FROM THE FILM

(Time notations in parentheses indicate the location of the scene in the movie.)

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- What are the unique characteristics of the last four generations & what qualities do they each have to offer the others?
- A clash between generations often exists due to technology advances, media focuses, and the incessant pushing of boundaries. How can the church better engage in the conversation & create opportunities that create bridges between generations?

Adversity often brings people together with each other & with God. As Old Fred says near the end of the film, “Looks like folks been to a funeral. Still... most life I’ve seen around here in 20 years.” (1:16:00) How has adversity strengthened relationships in your congregation? In your own life?

In the film, Brother Bob Cross wrestles with feeling like he is stuck in his father’s shadow. For much of the film, his pursuit revolves around fulfilling his father’s dream rather than his own. (:41, 10:30, and 31:00)

Do you think the adults in your life encourage your faith while leaving you room to make your own choices and express your faith in your own unique way?

- What is God’s role in this? Does God influence our decisions, or does God allow us freedom to choose for ourselves – is there a balance between the two?
- What is the relationship between your own free will, your natural talents & abilities, and God’s calling for your life?
- Share what you think God’s vision and purpose is and how you fit into God’s purpose.

In the film, we can observe characters of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim faith. Consider what’s currently going on around the world with religious, lifestyle, and cultural divides – these divides often lead to isolation, misunderstandings, and in some cases, violence. Each also claims to be “right.” Have you experienced this in your life?

It can be said that Christians, Jews and Muslims all worship the same God. If that is true, how does it influence the way we relate to one another?

- In considering you and your friends, how can we address religious, racial and lifestyle differences in more effective ways?
- What is the best way to share your faith in an environment where these differences exist?
- Is it possible to maintain a ‘learning’ position when talking with people of other faith backgrounds while remaining faithful to your own faith? If so, how?

Brother Bob often uses phrases such as “praise the Lord” and “amen.” Are these ways to express your faith, or barriers to communication?

- What new forms of communication have replaced the older, more traditional ones? What forms of communication do you prefer?
- Do you have friends that choose different lifestyles, or simply not look like you?
- Can we be more gracious and inclusive regardless of whether we agree with people’s decision making – if yes, what would this look like?

Go deeper...
some books you may find helpful:

The Return of the Prodigal Son by Henri J. M. Nouwen (Doubleday, 1992)

The Prodigal God by Timothy Keller (Dutton, 2008)

Tell It Slant: a conversation on the language of Jesus in his stories and prayers by Eugene Peterson (Eerdmans, 2008)

Practice Resurrection: A conversation on growing up in Christ by Eugene Peterson (Eerdmans, 2010)

Unchristian: What A New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... And Why It Matters by David Kinnaman (Baker Books, 2009)