

TEACHER PREPARATION

KEY CONCEPTS

1. We tell ourselves lies, based on the experiences with our own fathers that hurt us emotionally and spiritually. We often adopt false beliefs (heart lies) as a result of emotionally and spiritually painful experiences we have had with our own parents.
2. Heart lies can be overcome and healed.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students should be able to:

1. List the various types of fathers in the story.
2. Describe in detail the characteristics of the forgiving father.
3. Reflect on how these different kinds of fathers (except the one that forgives) confuse our understanding of who God is and what our relationship with Him can be.

MATERIALS / PREPARATION

In the Box: The Grandmothers' Letter.

This lesson is built around a fictional retelling of Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. In this retelling, the first part of the story is recounted followed by six alternative endings. Only the sixth and last version ends like the original story with the father forgiving the son.

There is a large body of clinical evidence that all children in their early years develop a largely unconscious image of God from the attitudes and behavior toward them of their early caregivers, particularly their fathers. [See Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 1979.] Interestingly, there is evidence this image develops in children even when they are raised in a thoroughly atheistic environment. There is also considerable evidence that a negative view of authority (beginning with an unconscious view of God) makes young people more vulnerable to the dream breakers discussed in this curriculum. The story and activities in this lesson encourage students to explore their (possibly mostly unconscious) emotional image of fathers and of God. If their image of fathers and of God is a negative one, this lesson allows them to begin the process of replacing the negative image with a positive one.

This lesson requires some deep reflection on the part of the students. These are heart issues that should not be dealt with hastily or flippantly. Due to the length and emotional depth of the Grandmothers' Letter and

story, we recommend that after reading the first part of the letter, you give time for the students to digest it by writing down their thoughts and feelings. Don't rush into the next version of the letter's story. It is also best if you can allow significant discussion time when analyzing "The Pigsty Story".

Before each section of the Grandmothers' Letter and story, there are a few questions to write on the chalkboard. To save time, make sure you have written these questions on the chalkboard before the beginning of the lesson, surrounding each set of questions with a chalk line rectangle. Then, before you begin to read each section, point to the box that corresponds to the section you are about to read.

Each of the six versions (endings) of the story is crucial to the message of the lesson. If you feel the need to adapt the lesson due to time constraints or the maturity of your students, you might eliminate or adapt the learning activities associated with versions two through five. However, the learning activities connected to versions one and six (Punishing Father and Forgiving Father) should not be skipped.

Here are some ways you might simplify or adapt the lesson:

1. Read the story through to the end of version one and do the accompanying learning activities. Then just read versions two through five and have your students record in their journals how strongly they relate to or identify with each version. You could suggest a simple scale, 0-5, where 0 means they do not identify with that type of father at all and 5 means their experiences resonate strongly with the father depicted in that segment. Then, read the final version of the story and complete the accompanying learning activities.
2. Read the story through to the end of version one and do the accompanying learning activities. Then, read out loud the rest of the versions of the story except the last one (six). Arrange the class into four or more groups. Hand each group a copy of one ending of the story (versions two through five). Have the groups discuss their assigned ending, but do not report back to the whole class. Then, bring the whole class back together, read the final version of the story and complete the accompanying learning activities.
3. Spread the lesson over two class periods.

LESSON

BEGINNING THE LESSON

INTRODUCTION

[Before reading the Grandmothers' Letter to the class, give this introduction:]

Today, you are going to hear a fairly lengthy letter from the grandmothers, which will be read in sections. There is a story in the letter that we will want to discuss after I read the letter. Here are three questions for us think about while I read. Some of you will have an opportunity to share your answers after I read the first section of the story.



INTEGRATIVE STORY

ABOUT 30 MINUTES

[Write the following questions on the chalkboard:]

1. Why do you think the younger son asked for his share of his father's wealth?
2. How did the son end up in a pigsty?
3. Why did the son decide to return home?

[Read "The Pigsty Story":]

The three friends quickly settled into their seats as their teacher pulled out the letter from their grandmothers.

Dear Sasha, Natasha, and Dima,

Everyone has his or her own stories. We've been telling you some of ours in the hope that you will be able to find your place in a story that ends with you fulfilling your very best dreams. Dima, you may not remember, but when you were younger, you used to beg me to tell you the story you called "The Runaway Boy". You never seemed to grow tired of hearing it. I guess it's not surprising — that story has been a favorite for nearly 2,000 years. It never seems to grow stale or wear out.

We want to tell you the story one more time, but a little differently from the way you heard it as a child, Dima. The story begins like this:

"A man had two sons, and the younger one went to his dad one day and asked for his share of all his father owned. I guess he wanted to skip the traditional rites of passage and step directly into adulthood. 'I can do it on my own,' he thought. 'Everything takes too long when I have to go at my father's pace. I want out!'

"His father gave him what he asked. The next day, the younger son set off to places unknown, planning to put as much distance between himself and his father as he could. In a faraway country, he was free to do just as he liked, and he liked the very things that were forbidden back home. He did most of the things we've cautioned you about. Drugs, alcohol, and sex were not strangers to him. But I don't think you could call them his friends, either. In fact, when his money ran out, so did the crowd he ran with; they had problems of their own and couldn't be bothered with his troubles.

“Things went from bad to worse, and he ended up feeding pigs for a fellow who thought no more of him than he did of his pigs. He felt so hungry and hopeless that as he sat on the fence of the pigsty, the pigs’ food started to look pretty good to him. That’s when he came to his senses and thought, ‘Back home even the least of my father’s workers are better off than this!’

“Pretty soon, his mind was filled with thoughts of home. He couldn’t think of anything else. He began to dream of going home, having a warm place to sleep, taking a bath, eating a home-cooked meal. Day gave way to night as he allowed himself to dream. But in the dark, he began to think about approaching his dad. What could he say? How could he ever make things right? He worried about his confession, as the pigs became nothing more than grunts and a nauseating stench in the night. In his head, he rehearsed what he would say to his father.

“ ‘I’ve made a mess of everything,’ “ he thought. “I have no right to even be called your son. Please, if you could just see your way clear to give me a job – any job. Please, Daddy!’ ”

Let’s see whether you have answers to my questions.

[Point to your first question and read it:]

- 1. Why do you think the younger son asked for his share of his father’s wealth?**

[Get two or three students’ comments, reinforcing accurate responses to the story.]

Follow the same process with questions 2 and 3.]

- 2. How did the son end up in a pigsty?**
- 3. Why did the son decide to return home?**



FATHER’S RESPONSE PREDICTION

Before we continue with the grandmothers’ story, I’d like us to take a few minutes to get your predictions about how this story might end. What are some possible ways the father might react when the son comes back?

[Accept three to five answers, without evaluation, writing a brief summary of each one on the board. If the students have trouble thinking of any alternatives or run out of ideas after only two or three options, you can add the following paragraph.]

Think about what your own father might say if you, or your brother, had acted like the son in the story. Think about your uncles or your grandfathers – might they have responded differently? Would all fathers respond in these ways? What might some other kinds of fathers say or do?

Now that we have looked at some possible responses, we’re going to continue with the story that the grandmothers are

telling. They are going to give several different versions of what might happen when the son goes home and pleads with his father.

I want you to listen closely, keeping in mind my questions on the chalkboard, because after each version I'm going to call on one of you to come up to the board and write a brief description of what kind of father that version of the story is depicting. For example, you might write "compassionate and accepting", or you might write "angry and vengeful".



STORY CONTINUES

[Write the following question on the chalkboard or point to the box with this question you've already written on the board.]

What did the son expect, and what did his father do?

Here is the first version of how the grandmothers' tale might end:

VERSION 1: Punishing Father

"The son was just about to leave his perch on the fence of the pigsty when a voice interrupted his plan. 'Better think it through before you head home,' the voice said. 'Here's how it will play out.'

"Once he has decided on the appropriate words, the son's pace quickens. He hurries down the road to his father's house. At last the house is in sight, and the young man sees an older man burst from the door and run down the road toward him. It's his father! Perhaps – the young man's heart pounds loudly in his chest – perhaps his father will be glad to see him after all. Once his father is within earshot, the son calls out to him. While the father is still a few steps away, the son begins his rehearsed speech. But the speech is never finished. For the father's arm, strong from years of faithful work, darts from his side and with a mighty fist, strikes the son across the face, landing him in the dust. The father stands over him with an angry glare and kicks the son until the young man crawls away with a tear-stained and swollen face to the sound of his father's voice, 'How dare you show your face here after what you've done!'"

Reinforce listening

What was the son's expectation, and what did his father do?

[Call on one student to go to the board and write his or her answer.]

Whatever he or she writes, thank the student and ask him or her to return to his or her seat. After the description, write on the board the words: Punishing Father.]



STORY CONTINUES

[Write the following question on the chalkboard or point to the box with this question you've already written on the board.]

Now the grandmothers are going to tell us a different version of the story.

Here's my question to keep in mind as I read. How do you think the son feels at the end of this version of the story? Again,

VERSION 2: Absent Father

Each of the six segments of the story is crucial to the lesson. However, to save time, you may wish to limit or change

the learning activities that accompany these middle segments of the story (two through five).

Make sure you read the suggested options in MATERIALS/PREPARATION at the beginning of this lesson.

be prepared because I'm going to ask one of you to come to the board and again summarize what kind of a father is being described.

Here is the second version of how the grandmothers' tale might end:

"The young man hears some murmurs of assent in the chilly night. And then another voice from across the pen offers a different tale:

"Ah, no, I think the story goes like this: The son hurries down the road toward his father's house. When he reaches the last rise before his father's property, the young man begins to run. He recognizes none of the servants in the fields as he passes, but no matter. Perhaps he is running too quickly to see the faces clearly. He reaches the house at last, and hesitates for just a moment to catch his breath and calm the nerves that hit him in that moment. Then, he knocks on the door. A moment later, the door opens, but it is a stranger who stands there. The young man is suddenly conscious of his ragged clothing and filthy appearance. 'Is this not my father's house?' he stammers. He gives his father's name and asks to see him. The stranger's face grows angry at the intrusion, and before the young man is thrown off the property, he learns that his father sold the grounds of his estate and moved elsewhere with his household. And no, he left no indication as to the whereabouts of his new residence."

Let's see whether you heard the answer to my question. How did the son feel at the end of this version?

[Get two or three answers.]

*Have a student summarize on the board (under the first description) as before. After the description, write on the board the words: **Absent Father.**]*



STORY CONTINUES

VERSION 3: Demanding Father

If time is running short, just read the story and skip the Question/Answer. Remember, version six is the most important to discuss.

Now the grandmothers are going to tell us a third version of the story.

Here's my question to keep in mind as I read. Do you think the father's response was fair? Why or why not? Again, be prepared because I'm going to ask another of you to come to the board and again summarize.

Here is the third version of how the grandmothers' tale might end:

"Scarcely has this voice subsided when a third voice reworks the story yet again:

"The father is home when the young man knocks. He greets his son with a stony face and hears out the practiced speech. The father agrees with the young man's assessment of the situation and assigns him a place in the servant's quarters and a job in the fields. At first, the young man is happy, for though his clothes are simple, they are clean. And though his food is humble, it is plentiful and better than that which he had pilfered from the pigs. But as time goes by, the young man's happiness is replaced by a dull ache. Daily, he works in the fields that could have been his. Often, he sees his older brother dressed in fine robes, walking on the rooftop of the house, deep in conversation with his father.

“He could have had such conversations, such companionship and love. Sometimes, the father himself walks through the fields where his servants work. And each time the father comes near him, the young man doubles his efforts. His heart pounds until it nearly bursts aching as the young man steals glances at the father. For he dares at times to hope that someday his current efforts will outweigh his past sin, that someday the father will look at him and the stony face will melt in compassion and that he will see his son in the sweaty fieldworker before him. The young man dares to hope. But the father always looks down on him with a face of stone.”

Let’s see how you answer my question.

Do you think the father’s response was fair? Why or why not?

[Get two or three answers.]

*Have a student summarize as before. After the description, write on the board the words: **Demanding Father.**]*



STORY CONTINUES

VERSION 4: Cold-hearted Father

If time is running short, just read the story and skip the Question/Answer. Remember, version six is the most important to discuss.

Now the grandmothers are going to tell us a fourth version of the story.

Here’s my question to keep in mind as I read. What do you think the son would do at the end of this version? Again, be prepared because I’m going to ask another of you to summarize.

Here is the fourth version of how the grandmothers’ tale might end:

“Another voice rises now from among the pigpen chorus:

“The young man returns home and approaches his father out in the fields. He stands in front of his father and, through tears, chokes out the words he has prepared. And then, head bowed, he waits for the father’s response. But there is none. The only sounds are the voices of the laborers and the rustlings of the fields of grain in the afternoon breeze. He dares to steal a glance at his father. And then, astonished, he takes a longer look. For his father is staring right through him at the fields. ‘Father?’ the young man says in a trembling voice. ‘Father?’ But the older man does not hear him. The son reaches out a timid finger and touches the father’s arm, and then grabs at his sleeve and tugs. But the father makes no move, no indication that he has even felt the son’s touch. It is as though the young man were suddenly invisible. He can see the father and watch him at work. But the father does not see him or hear his voice. The young man slumps to the ground at his father’s feet. ‘Father . . . Daddy, please hear me,’ he whimpers. But the father turns and walks toward his house. ‘Father!’ the young man screams. But he receives no answer.”

Let’s see how you answer my question.

What do you think the son would do at the end of this version?

*[Get two or three answers. Have a student summarize as before. After the description, write on the board the words: **Cold-hearted Father.**]*



STORY CONTINUES

VERSION 5: Helpless Father

If time is running short, just read the story and skip the Question/Answer. Remember, version six is the most important to discuss.

Now the grandmothers are going to tell us a fifth version of the story.

Here's a question to keep in mind as we continue to read. What would you say to the father at the end of this version if you were the son? Again, be prepared because I'm going to ask another of you to come to the board and again summarize.

Here is the fifth version of how the grandmothers' tale might end:

"The night is at its darkest in the pigpen when yet another voice takes up the tale:

"The boy goes home, finds his father and begins his confession. He can't bear to look at his father as he speaks. When the young man finishes his practiced speech, he hears sobbing. He looks up to see his father crying. The boy seeks to hold the older man who collapses into his arms. 'It is going to be all right,' thinks the boy. 'My father still cares about me!' But his father starts to mumble something through his tears. At first, the boy doesn't understand the meaning behind the words. 'I'm so sorry,' he hears his father say, 'if there were anything I could do to help you now, I would.' The young man steps back in confusion as he tries to fathom his father's meaning. 'I gave you all that you asked; I held back nothing,' the father continues. 'There's nothing left that I can do for you. Oh, how I wish there were.' The boy feels the cold reality of the words wash over him as he realizes that his father is helpless to intervene. All the chances have been used up."

Let's see how you answer my question.

What would you say to the father at the end of this version if you were the son?

[Get two or three answers.]

*Have a student summarize as before. Following his or her description, write on the board the words: **Helpless Father.**]*



STORY CONTINUES

VERSION 6: Forgiving Father

Do not shorten this section. It is a very important concept.

Now the grandmothers are going to tell us a sixth version of the story.

Here's a question to keep in mind as I read.

If you were the son in this version of the story, would you accept what the father offered? Why or why not?

Again, be prepared because I'm going to ask two more of you to come to the board and summarize what kind of a father is being described.

Here is the sixth version of how the grandmothers' tale might end:

“The chorus of voices falls silent. Then, after a moment, a new voice speaks softly into the night. It’s right next to the runaway. This voice, as though the speaker were leaning against the fence almost brushing up against the young man with his shoulder, says:

“The young man slows down as he comes near to his father’s land, not knowing how his father will greet him. But he forces his feet to move steadily forward to the rhythm of the words of confession that run through his head. He is still quite a distance from his father’s home when the young man sees a little puff of dust on the road ahead and, in the midst of the dust, a man. The man runs up the road toward him and, as the puff of dust comes closer, the young man sees that it is his father. He stops in his tracks and waits, his knees weak.

“He tries to steel himself against the anticipated blows or stony-faced silence, but he cannot hold his voice steady as he starts to speak. ‘Father, I’ve sinned against heaven, and I’ve sinned against you. I’m not worthy to be called your son . . .’ But that is as much of the speech as the young man is able to deliver. For even before the son begins to talk, the father is wrapping strong arms around him. Even as the son’s eyes tear up in remorse over his sin, the father’s eyes are dripping tears of joy into his son’s tangled hair. The father shouts for joy to his servants for them to prepare a celebration, and then he places his coat on his son — his son who has finally come home.”

There was something in this newest voice that reached into deepest Earth and into highest heaven to pull from them the solid story from its core — not the story of our own making, but as it’s meant to be — as it truly is. There was something in this newest voice that makes one yearn to rest within it, to live within the story that it told.

And that, dear ones, is the true ending of this ancient story.

Your Grandmothers

 = 30 minutes

EXPLORING THE LESSON



DISCUSSION

ABOUT 5 MINUTES

Do not shorten this section — it is very important.

On the board you should have written:

1. The Punishing Father
2. The Absent Father
3. The Demanding (legalistic/exacting) Father
4. The Cold-hearted (distant) Father
5. The Helpless Father
6. The Forgiving Father

Let’s see how you answer my question.

If you were the son in this version of the story, would you accept what the father offered? Why or why not?

[Have a student summarize as before. Following his or her description, write on the board the words: Forgiving Father.]

Ask the students:]

Do any of you know where this story comes from? Yes, it is from the Bible. It’s called “The Return of the Prodigal” and comes from the book of Luke.

The grandmothers gave a descriptive title for each of the fathers, as I’ve put on the board.

At the end of today’s lesson, you will have an assignment to talk to your parents about their fathers. What were their fathers like? How did they get along with them? How would they describe their fathers in one word? This assignment is important not only

NOTE: You have several options. You might want to share the story of how your experiences with your own father (or stepfather) influenced your own image of God and attitudes toward God the Father.

Optional Story Summaries of Grandmothers

Olga was three years old when her grandfather died. He was an exacting man who seldom gave her father any encouragement. "Make him prideful if I were to praise him to his face," her grandfather would say. And so he never said the words her father longed to hear. That's in large measure why he did the same to her. Something like that can't help but affect the way one sees God. Her "head" knew that God is loving and kind, but her heart feared God as one very demanding and difficult to please. The thought of Him missing her and expressing it with His tears was hard to grasp with her heart for it was there that the lie resided.

Ludmilla's father died when she was twelve. That loss translated into the incorrect view that God would eventually desert her or become helpless to respond to her need. For her, it became a matter of fighting through her heart-lie that God couldn't ultimately be trusted. She used to have panic attacks about ending up on the street in her old age. Telling her God isn't like that wasn't enough. It wasn't until she made peace with her Heavenly Father (until she "went home" and saw for herself) that the lie was broken.

because it helps us get to know our family better, but it also can help us get in touch with the spiritual dimension of our lives. As one of the grandmothers, Olga, put it:

"All earthly fathers are reflections of our Heavenly Father. Some do a better job than others. But none of them gets it exactly right."

[Or you could read these summaries of the experiences of one or both of the following grandmothers' experiences.]



= 35 minutes



WRITE IN NOTEBOOKS

ABOUT 5 MINUTES

[Now ask the students which story about the father they most identify with. Have them write it down in their notebooks.]

Let's assume for the sake of this next exercise that it's true that our experiences with our human fathers tend to shape how we emotionally experience God. I'd like each of you to take a few minutes to write in your notebooks which of the views of God you most likely have, based on your experiences with your human father. It may be very much like one of the ones we heard in the grandmothers' story. You may tend to view God like one of the fathers described on the board. Or maybe it's a combination of two of the descriptions or perhaps something very different.

[As you have opportunity to review your students' work, look for clues to your students' struggles, and then ask them how one might go about changing some of these wrong views. Take some time to explore this question and their answers. They may answer: willpower, simply bringing up these lies robs them of their power, read the Bible, pray about it, and other answers. This may be something that you follow up on outside of class with individuals.]

The grandmothers' story (and Jesus, the one who first told the story) would say that ultimately the answer is to "go home to the Father". Knowing the truth in one's head is important. But information alone doesn't change the heart. Olga would likely say, "You have to walk into His loving embrace for your heart to be changed."

 = 40 minutes

ENDING THE LESSON



CONCLUSION

ABOUT 5 MINUTES

REMINDER: Be sure to remind students to bring their personal journals to the next lesson.

Before dismissing your students, remember to dictate the Parent-Teacher questions to them.

 = 45 minutes

What do you think it means to make peace with God or to "go home" to God the Father?

[Accept the students' answers, discuss them as needed and then say:]

In the stories of the next few sessions, we'll hear more of the grandmothers' thoughts on what it means to "go home".

RESOURCES

GOING DEEPER

In the grandmothers' story, we heard about six different kinds of fathers. As you know, Jesus is the one who originally told this story in the Bible. Jesus' story included only the last of the six descriptions, the Forgiving Father. According to the Bible, that is the only true picture of what God the Father is like. In fact, the Bible directly says the other five pictures of God are not true. I would like to briefly review passages that contradict each of the five false views, and then we are going to do a poster project.

GOD IS LIKE... POSTER ACTIVITY

[As you read each passage, write it on the board or have a student write it on the board.]

According to the Bible, God is not:

- **A Punishing Father**

[Read this verse from your Bible or read the following paraphrase, or both:]

"There is no fear in love. Perfect love puts fear out of our hearts. People have fear when they are afraid of being punished. The man who is afraid does not have perfect love. We love God because He loved us first" (1 John 4:18-19).

God is not:

- **An Absent Father**

[Read this verse from your Bible or read the following paraphrase, or both:]

"Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you' " (Hebrews 13:5).

God is not:

- **A Demanding Father**

[Read this verse from your Bible or read the following paraphrase, or both:]

"Don't you see how wonderfully kind, tolerant, and patient God is with you? Does this mean nothing to you? Can't you see that his kindness is intended to turn you from your sin?" (Romans 2:4, NLT).

God is not:

- **A Cold-hearted Father**

[Read this verse from your Bible, read the following paraphrase, or both:]

“This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins” (1 John 4:10).

God is not:

- **A Helpless Father**

[Read this verse from your Bible or read the following paraphrase, or both:]

“But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!)” (Ephesians 2:4-5, NLT).

[Now arrange the class into five groups, one for each inadequate picture of God. Instruct each group to make two posters, one representing their assigned “wrong view of God”. The other poster is to represent the view Jesus presented in His original parable, the Forgiving Father. Students may employ pictures, symbols, or words. Suggest that they might want to include the verses that contradict the wrong views, either the whole passage or some key words from the passage. When the groups are finished, have a spokesperson for every group hold up students’ work and explain what they were trying to communicate with their posters.]

FOCUS POINT

Be sure to leave time for discussion at the end of the learning activity so your students can discuss the connection between the learning activity and the lesson. Listen to see whether they seemed to understand the key points listed. If you sense that one or more of these points may have been lost, be sure to guide the discussion to make sure they get these main ideas.

1. **The Bible clearly teaches the opposite of the five wrong pictures of God the Father.**
2. **The Bible portrays God as a Forgiving Father.**

PARENT-TEACHER CONNECTION

For Family Discussion:

1. Tell your adolescent about your own father. What was (or is) he like?
2. How well did you get along with him when you were the age your adolescent is now?
3. If you had to describe your father in one or two words, what would you say?