



LESSON 6 Beloved

This is our last week of the series and we will be looking at the story of the prodigal son – a reminder that God’s unfailing love is not based on anything we do or how we feel.

We’ll look at self-harm and eating disorders and how prayer can assist with these mental health issues.

Read Luke 15:11-32

Questions: What does the prodigal son do wrong?

How do you imagine the son feels in verses 16-20?

Why does the father respond the way he does?

Why does the older son respond the way he does?

The son had damaged so many aspects of his life:

- Broken family relationships
- Religiously unclean through living with pigs
- Financial disaster, losing his entire inheritance
- Moral bankruptcy – spending every penny on wild living

But he learns that nothing he does makes him more or less loved. Even in this total mess, he is intrinsically loved.

One of the most important characters in this story is the older brother. Like his younger brother, he believes that being loved is about being worthy. Unlike his brother, he has worked hard, trying to earn his father's love, not realising that his diligent work makes him no more loved than his prodigal brother.

As Christians we need to avoid being like the older brother. If we believe that God's love should be earned by 'correct' beliefs and actions, then we put up barriers which prevent people from reaching God, especially those who feel unworthy and unlovable.

Questions: What do you know about Eating disorders? Do you think it is only something young girls suffer from?

What about self-harm – like cutting or burning, punching walls or even suicide attempts.

Both self-harm and eating disorders usually develop as a way of dealing with difficult feelings or emotions. An eating disorder develops when someone struggling with other things begins to try to control their eating, believing this will make everything better. They often aim to eat very restricted diets, or to lose a lot of weight.

Some are successful in keeping up this control, but as their emotional state does not change, they carry on losing weight in the hope things will improve. These people are at risk of anorexia nervosa. They can become convinced they're still overweight even when dangerously thin.

Others find their control breaks down and they experience binges - where they feel a sense of losing control and overeat foods they would normally forbid themselves, sometimes in large quantities. Some gain

weight rapidly and often end up obese – this is known as binge eating disorder.

Those who take action to avoid putting on weight due to their binges often make themselves sick or take laxatives. This is called purging. This pattern of restricting, then bingeing and purging becomes the vicious cycle that defines bulimia nervosa and can go on for years.

Eating disorders affect people of all ages, both male and female, and can develop quickly, or over a number of years. They can be very serious and cause great distress.

Self harm is a sign that someone is struggling with powerful emotions, and that they don't know what else to do. It is an attempt to manage, to keep going - and as such is very different from suicidal harm, although the actions may be very similar.

Apart from both in-patient and out-patient treatment, many people benefit greatly from the opportunity to talk about how they're feeling, and why self-harm seems to help, before exploring alternative ways of coping. A supportive network of family and friends can make a real difference.

What about faith? Philip Yancey says: 'There's nothing we can do to make God love us more and there's nothing we can do to make God love us less.'

We live in a society obsessed with appearance, where perfection is worshipped and what you look like determines what you're worth.

The Bible tells us just how wrong that is. We are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ much-loved children of God not because of anything we have done. It’s easy to get caught up in the pressure surrounding what we look like; we must remember that God ‘does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart’ (1 Samuel 16:7).

The act of harming ourselves does not change God’s view of us. The Bible says we’re ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ and that our bodies are a ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’, but for self-harmers these verses can be difficult to read or hear quoted to them. We can perhaps help more by reminding sufferers that the Bible says God’s love isn’t conditional upon who we are and what we do (Romans 5:8).

God doesn’t ask us to be perfect – he frequently uses people with different struggles and ‘limps’ to achieve his purposes. Just think of the list of flawed heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11!

Self-harm might be one part of who we are, but it’s our Father God who gives us our value.

Tricky issues Should we pray for healing for people living with mental health issues? What do you think?

When it comes to healing, there are big differences of belief both between and within our churches. Some churches have a very strong faith healing model and others are much more cautious about what we can expect this side of heaven. The Bible too shows us a mixed picture - some verses appear to offer us the power to pronounce complete healing while others suggest that suffering and pain will continue to be our reality.

This is a large topic; it will be hard to do it justice in a short discussion. But here are some ideas for consideration:

Why do we pray? Is it out of a desire to see suffering end?

Don't forget that God can use our trials and suffering – He may have a purpose in allowing this challenging situation to continue.

Is our motivation in prayer to see the person become 'normal' – by which we mean more like us?

This can lead to them feeling very rejected – not acceptable until they are changed. God longs to heal, but doesn't promise medical cure.

The answer to a prayer for healing may be in renewed relationships, healthier self-esteem or a change of heart, rather than a medical cure.

When praying for people, it's vital we don't give them even more burdens. We must avoid implying that lack of cure is due to: - sin in their life that is blocking the healing - not having enough faith to enable the healing - a lack of desire to be healed.

Today's Bible passage was one of our best-known stories, illustrating the steadfast love that God the Father has for His children. No matter how far we stray, how unworthy we feel, how ashamed, God is ready to welcome us with open arms.

As Christians how do we present that love to those in our communities that may be struggling with mental health issues – problems that leave them feeling like outsiders, unworthy, embarrassed or unlovable.

And when they do move towards God, how do we avoid being like the older brother, but rather join our father God in embracing and celebrating the returned son?

Meditation

Think of a time when: - You felt truly loved. - You were valued. - You were cared for. - You were listened to. - You were accepted. - You were loved. It might be recent, or it might be long ago.

There are so many people in our community who feel so far away from that kind of love – both human love and the love of God. What can you do to share the love that you have received with them?

Prayer - Lord, we pray for Your mercy on us for the times that we have erected barriers to exclude those who we experience as different from ourselves.

Lord, please have mercy on us for the occasions that we have avoided contact with those who behave differently from ourselves.

Lord, please have mercy when we have failed to see the light of Christ in those who appear different from ourselves.

May the Source of all life forgive us whenever we exclude others. Please remove any fear of any difference from our souls, and help us to embrace all who are created in Your Image. Amen.