



**LESSON 2**  
**PREPARATION NOTES**

**Love's**  
**Initiative**

## **LOVE'S INITIATIVE IN BRIEF:**

The Father takes the initiative to reconcile our relationship with him.

## **KEY ELEMENTS:**

- We see that God gave human beings free will.
- Participants review the story of the fall of Adam and Eve. They look at what sin is, the attitudes behind it and its consequences.
- It is important to understand the “bad news” of sin and death in order to grasp and appreciate the Good News offered by Jesus.
- Romans 5:6-8 is a pivotal Scripture verse for this lesson:

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

- The story of the Prodigal Son emphasizes that God’s love is merciful, proven and offered. Prepare this section well so that you can draw participants into this picture of the Father’s love.
- The challenge sets up a wonderful opportunity for you to invite group members to go to Mass with you. Begin by asking if anyone does not know where to go to Mass or how to find Mass times. Suggest going to Mass together and then out for coffee/breakfast.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

- Read Genesis chapters 2 and 3 and CCC 385-421 to prepare for this lesson.

“ Original sin refers to the first (or original) sin of our first parents. It was the original sin that led to all the other sins in the world. Original sin also refers to the “sin” that we inherited from them. How did the sin of Adam become the sin of all his descendants? The whole human race is in Adam “as one body of one man”. By this “unity of the human race” all men are implicated in Adam’s sin, as all are implicated in Christ’s justice. Still, the transmission of original sin is a mystery that we cannot fully understand. But we do know by Revelation that Adam had received original holiness and justice not for himself alone, but for all human nature. By yielding to the tempter, Adam and Eve committed a personal sin, but this sin affected the human nature that they would then transmit in a fallen state. It is a sin which will be transmitted by propagation to all mankind, that is, by the transmission of a human nature deprived of original holiness and justice. And that is why original sin is called “sin” only in an analogical sense: it is a sin “contracted” and not “committed” - a state and not an act.” ”

CCC 404

- Before the fall, all the inclinations, appetites and passions of Adam and Eve were under perfect control of their souls; all the powers of their souls were oriented to God (they loved God, thought of God and spoke to God). This was called original justice. After the fall, however, they suffered disharmony within themselves. Their bodies (inclinations, passions and appetites) were no longer completely subject to their souls, and their souls were no longer perfectly oriented to God. They experienced separation from God, hardship, sickness, death, a propensity toward sin (concupiscence), and the loss of God’s divine life within themselves. Adam and Eve were separated from God and banished from paradise. The result of original sin in our lives is the same: death (spiritual separation from God), for there is no life apart from God.

- But all of us have also sinned on our own, which is called *actual* sin (the theological term referring to the sins we commit by our actions or in what we fail to do). We cannot place all the blame on Adam and Eve. We choose to sin in what we say, think and do. Questions may arise during the lesson about *venial* sin and *mortal* sin. Mortal sin is present when a sin of grave matter is committed with full knowledge and full consent of the will. Look at Eve’s sin. It was a grave matter with full knowledge and full consent of her will. The result was the loss of Divine Life. Venial sin is less serious sin; it does not completely separate us from God’s life in us, but it damages our relationship with him.
- Additional information regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: the early Church Fathers have conjectured that, had Adam and Eve matured and perfected the exercise of their freedom, they may have been permitted to eat the fruit of that tree and the tree of life later on.

“ This being He placed [man] in Paradise, having honoured him with the gift of Free Will... Also He [God] gave him [man] a Law, as a material for his Free Will to act upon. This Law was a Commandment as to what plants he might partake of, and which one he might not touch. This latter was the Tree of Knowledge; not, however, because it was evil from the beginning when planted; nor was it forbidden because God grudged it to us... But it [fruit of the tree] would have been good if partaken of at the proper time. ”

St. Gregory Nazianzen  
 Oration 38, XII—On the Theophany or Birthday of Christ  
*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series,*  
*Vol. VII—Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen, p. 349*



**LESSON 2**

# **Love's Initiative**

# 1 Discuss how last week's challenge went.



## Introduction



Last week, we focused on God's personal love for us. He knows our names and every detail of who we are. In today's lesson, we will begin to look at how God's love is proven, merciful and offered. God's love is good news for our lives. Before we can truly appreciate this news, however, we must understand why it is so good and why we need it.

## Love is Offered



The Book of Genesis tells us that God created everything in the heavens and the earth out of nothing, and that everything he created was good. The world reflects his beauty, creativity and glory. The crown of his creation was man and woman. In the creation narrative, we are told that in the middle of the garden of Eden there was a tree—the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” This was the only tree in the garden from which Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat. We know the rest of the story: Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent and ate the fruit from the tree. This was the original sin.



**2 Read Genesis 3:1-7. We learned last week that God's love is unconditional, personal and secure, so there must be a loving reason why he would put one tree in the garden from which Adam and Eve were not to eat. How is this consistent with who God is?**

**ANSWER:** God, in his love, created Adam and Eve. God did not create robots or avatars for Eden—he created human beings in his own image, with free will. Adam and Eve were given the ability to freely choose, to reason and to love. They were not intimidated, frightened or forced to love or obey God. God created them with the capacity to freely enter and remain in a relationship of trust and love with him.

Think about this: you can force or manipulate people to do almost anything. Terrible atrocities have occurred because people have been controlled, coerced, oppressed or tormented. Despite all of this, no one can ever be forced to love another person. Love can only be love if it is given freely.

Did God put the tree in the garden to trick Adam and Eve? No! He is not a capricious god who was playing games with them. The tree was a test of what they would do with their freedom; it provided them a chance to show that their love for God was greater than their love for created things.

**A**

They had every reason not to bother with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There was a myriad of other species of trees, let alone other vegetation, animals and the whole beauty of creation to enjoy. And greater than all of this, they enjoyed friendship with God! The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was one small boundary or test of their freedom to choose. Would they love God, and trust his love and his good plan for them? Unfortunately, they doubted God's plan. They chose to second-guess God's intentions, and take it upon themselves—in prideful rebellion—to determine what would give them knowledge, goodness, enjoyment and life.

**L**

**LEADERS:** If participants are still struggling with why God has rules or commandments, you could let them know that there will be a chance to discuss these themes further in Question 5. Or, if you prefer, you could discuss the leader's content from Question 5 at this time: how freedom has boundaries and how a society without laws would find itself in chaos, using the football analogy to illustrate the points.

# An Offer You Can Refuse

20

God's love is freely offered. We *can* refuse it. The story of Adam and Eve shows us, however, that refusing God's love is a rejection of what will bring us joy and fulfillment.



## 3 What attitudes, beliefs or misconceptions were at the root of Adam and Eve's choice to disobey?

**ANSWER:** They used their free will to disobey God instead of trusting in him and in his benevolence toward them. This attitude is at the root of much of our own sinfulness too. We fail to trust that God's providence is truly good and secure.

**A** Another choice they made was to prefer themselves to God. We might call this independence, selfishness or pride—when we choose what we want over what God wants (or over what is best for others).

Perhaps Adam and Eve thought God was holding something back from them, or that they were missing out on something potentially great, and they wanted to try it out.

**L** **LEADERS:** Ask, "Can you identify with that? Do you ever feel like if you were to follow God's will perfectly that you might end up missing out on everything there is to experience in life?"

Adam and Eve chose to disobey God's directives, not trusting that his way would lead them to fulfillment. Regrettably, what they found outside of God's plan was separation, shame and death (Genesis 3). In order to genuinely understand the good God offers, we should take a moment to look at the unfortunate effects that turning away from him (sin) has on our lives.



**LEADERS:** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines sin as follows:

“Sin is an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbour ...Sin is an offense against God.... Sin sets itself against God’s love for us and turns our hearts away from it. Like the first sin, it is disobedience, a revolt against God through the will to become “like gods,” knowing and determining good and evil. Sin is thus “love of oneself even to contempt of God.”

CCC 1849, 1850

## 4 Read Isaiah 59:2. How does sin affect our relationship with God?

### ISAIAH 59:2

*Rather, your iniquities have been barriers between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*

**ANSWER:** If someone hurts or breaks their relationship with us, what happens? We recoil, we are hurt, we “turn our faces away;” it is awkward. A separation is created. This Scripture verse describes how our sin hides God from us. God does not turn his back on us—rather, our sin creates a barrier between us and him. We cannot place all the blame on Adam and Eve. We choose to sin in what we say, do and fail to do. This also encompasses our thoughts, judgments and attitudes towards others.

## 5 Read Romans 5:12. What is another consequence of sin?

### ROMANS 5:12

*Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.*

**A** **ANSWER:** Another consequence of sin is death. Sin causes a real problem that is not going to go away by ignoring it. If we do not deal with our sin (weakness or failure), it will forever be a problem. Failure to deal with hurt in a human relationship creates resentments, rifts, walls or wounds; similarly, failure to deal with sin creates barriers between us and God.

**LEADERS:** It can sometimes be hard for us to believe that choosing God's moral design for our lives will bring us fulfillment. The following football analogy might be helpful if your group is struggling with the fact that God gives us rules or commandments to follow. Ask, "What happens when we are trying to play a good game of football and some people cheat or break the rules?"

**L** Then you are no longer playing football! The behaviour of these players ruins the game for everyone else. People get upset, hurt, injured. It breaks down team unity and spirit. We resent the players who are ruining things. We cannot really win the game because it was not played correctly. It is not satisfying, just or fair for everyone—only those who enjoyed their cheating end up having a good time. Those who break the rules are self-centred and do not care about others on the field, or the integrity and purpose of the game. Eventually people will opt out of playing, and will not want to watch the game because it is not a real competition.

Why are rules important when playing football?

Everyone should understand that a game does not make sense if there are no rules. There is no way to know what you are doing, how it should be done, how to interact with others in the game, how to know whether you are winning or losing.

Society cannot exist harmoniously without laws and rules to ensure peace and justice. Try to imagine a game or society without rules. It would be frustrating, chaotic and ridiculous.

How can this analogy help us make sense of why God has given us moral rules?

The first important thing to understand is that God gave us his commandments to lead us to fulfillment. They exist so that we can be in proper relationship with him, with ourselves and with others. We read last week in Jeremiah 29:11 that God's plan for us is for our good. John 10:10 tells us that Jesus came that "we might have life abundant." God's ways bring life. We are free to choose our own path, but the consequences of going outside his rules are similar to the football analogy. Our sinful actions never affect only ourselves—they inevitably hurt others around us. Sin wounds, but following God brings life. Satan told Adam and Eve that they would be like God, and have a better life outside of God's parameters. This was a lie—the exact opposite of reality.

**LEADERS:** You could draw the analogy further by asking, "What are the consequences for those who break the rules of a game and get a penalty?"

They get time out of the game (shorter or longer times depending on the situation). They may even get kicked out of the game or suspended for a number of games. Frequent major penalties or misconduct could also ruin their careers. Sin also has consequences. Sometimes these consequences can seem like minor setbacks or inconveniences, but more serious sins will always have devastating results. The gravest consequence of sin is eternal separation from God.

When we turn away from God's commandments and his love, we hurt him, ourselves and others. Despite our turning away, however, God never stops loving us. As in any great love story, God, the protagonist, pursues us to win us back.



## 6 Think of someone who loves you. What assures you of this person's love?

**LEADERS:** Whatever participants share, most responses will indicate a proof of love (e.g. "I know my mom loves me because she cooks for me, cares for me, buys me gifts, listens to me, etc.>").

**L** If they say mom or dad, say, "OK, but why do your mom and dad love YOU? Why do they do those nice things for you? What assures you that they love you more than the neighbour's kid? They love you because you're their child!"

## 7 Read Romans 5:6-8. How does God prove his love for us?

### ROMANS 5:6-8

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

**L** **LEADERS:** This is the pivotal passage of this lesson! We will look more closely at Jesus' heroic sacrifice on the cross in Lesson 4.

**A** | **ANSWER:** Jesus died for us, not when we were good or somehow worthy of that sacrifice, but while we remained in our sin. Jesus died for each of us when we were in our very worst moments of sin and darkness.

|  
**L** | **LEADERS:** Ask, “For whom would you be willing to die?”  
|

22

## Love is Merciful



The parable of the Prodigal Son paints a moving picture of the Father’s love for us. The young man who squanders his inheritance is called “prodigal” because the word means rash, wasteful or recklessly extravagant. Prodigal can also be used in a positive sense, however, to describe extravagant generosity. In this case, the father too is prodigal. This parable shows us how God the Father proves his extravagant love for us, despite our turning away from him.

### **8** Read Luke 15:11-24. The father agrees to give the son his inheritance. What does this say about the father’s character?

**ANSWER:** The father respects his son’s free will. The commentary below shows how prodigal the father was to let the son exercise his free will. There were huge ramifications.

**A** | Division of property between sons was not ordinarily made until the death of a father. The Prodigal Son was effectively saying to his father, “I wish you were dead.”

Ordinarily, penalties were exacted when a share was taken out early. No such penalties are mentioned in this story, which reveals the father’s deep generosity.

By taking his money, the son is cutting all ties with his family, forsaking his place at the table and in the house.

A

When the son leaves the family home with his money and possessions, all members of the household suffer a loss. The Prodigal Son clearly does not care about the others—he is focused only on himself and does not recognize the rippling effects of his actions.

L

**LEADERS:** Ask, “Why is it important that the Prodigal Son, and Adam and Eve, chose freely?”

A

**ANSWER:** A response to love has to be made freely. Love that is coercive or manipulative is not genuine.

## 9 Why do you suppose the son wanted to leave?

A

**ANSWER:** Maybe he saw the father, or life at home, as restrictive or boring. Maybe he desired excitement and wanted to experience the world on his own terms. Maybe he did not agree with the father’s opinions, rules or priorities.

L

**LEADERS:** You can help participants see how this story applies to perceptions about God and the Church by asking, “How does the son’s perception of the father’s house parallel how some people perceive God the Father or the Church?”

Many people perceive God or the Church in a similar way: lifeless, irrelevant and full of rules. If we truly knew the Father’s love, and saw the reasoning behind his rules, we would understand the peace and life that God and the Church offer.

## 10 What did the son do with his freedom?

**A ANSWER:** He squandered it, just as Adam and Eve did.

## 11 What were the results of his actions?

**ANSWER:** He was left wanting, desperate, poor and separated from his father.

**A** Adam and Eve experienced something similar after they were cast out of the garden. The pattern of the Prodigal Son's sin (deeper sin, deeper problems and eventual crash) is the story of every person who tries to live apart from God.

**L LEADERS:** Ask, "How can you identify your life's story with the Prodigal Son?"

**A ANSWER:** The story of the Prodigal Son is actually the story of every person. We may not have "hit bottom," morally, or squandered everything, but to some extent, we should all be able to recognize our own spiritual journey in this young man's experience.

## 12 Why did the son decide to return home? How has his view of home changed?

A

**ANSWER:** It is important to emphasize the gravity of the Prodigal Son's situation. For the Jews, caring for pigs evoked the idea of apostasy and the loss of dignity, since by law, pigs were forbidden and unclean animals. The son, however, is even lower than the swine: he cannot even eat the pigs' husks.

Calamity finally brings him to his senses; as it is said: "Man's desperation is God's workshop."

L

**LEADERS:** A question for discussion could be inserted here: "Why does it seem to take a traumatic or horrendous event for some people to turn back to God?"

The son's desperate situation caused him to change his mind about the father's house. He saw that even his father's servants had good things and a good life. His misery made him reassess his decision to leave. He realized that his need could be met in his father's house after all. False perception often keeps us from coming back to God. We think that the Father's house is boring, lifeless, irrelevant and has too many rules. In reality, all that we could ever need or desire can be found there. Sometimes the experience of having nothing helps us to recognize the abundance that can be found in the Father's house.

Shame is likely also keeping the son from coming home at this point. (Thoughts like, "My family hates me; I can never go back.")



## 13 What is significant about the father's response to his son's return?

**ANSWER:** The father was looking for his son and waiting for his return. In the historical context, the slaves and house guards might have seen the son coming and gone out to kill him or turn him away before he even had a chance to see his father. The father did not want to see this happen, so he waited and watched intently. He was worried sick.

**A** Back to the parable: the son approached his father ragged, filthy and smelling of pigs. This did not deter the father: he let nothing keep him from embracing this prodigal child. He did not ask his son to wash up before embracing him. He did not ask him to take a bath before entering the house. He did not ask for a refund of his squandered property. The father's forgiveness was immediate and intense. His love was merciful, restoring the broken relationship. The father was so full of joy at the return of his son that he announced a feast to celebrate the occasion!

**LEADERS:** Explain the significance of the ring, robe and sandals.

**Ring:** The family ring indicates that he is a son (not a slave), and in fact an heir. The son had severed ties with the family when he claimed his inheritance—by giving him this ring, the father restores his sonship.

**L** **Robe:** Given to the guest of honour at a celebration.

**Sandals:** Worn by free men—a symbol of freedom. The father recognizes the son's freedom to leave and to come back. He would have it no other way. He wanted his son to live freely—to choose to love him rather than being obliged to love him.

**14** Consider how intense and immediate the father's forgiveness was. What does this say to you about our Heavenly Father's love, mercy and forgiveness?

## Summary

God never imposes his love on us, nor forces us to love him in return—we are free to choose him and the life he offers us. Sin is choosing that which can hurt God, others and ourselves. Even when we sin, however, our Heavenly Father shows his love for us; he patiently waits for us to turn back to him. He proved his love by sending his Son to make a way for us to be reconciled; “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

## Living It Out

### CHALLENGE

Go to Mass this week with an attentive mindset, with humble sorrow for your failures and joyful anticipation of the Father’s welcome and all that his house has to offer. Listen carefully to all the readings and prayers to catch their depth of meaning. Be prepared to share with your group next week something that stood out for you in a fresh way at Mass.

### MEMORIZE ROMANS 5:8

*But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.*

**LEADERS:** The challenge sets up a wonderful opportunity for you to invite group members to go to Mass with you. Begin by asking if anyone does not know where or when to go to Mass. Suggest going to Mass together and then out for coffee/breakfast.



# Leader's Journal



Take 15 minutes as soon as possible after finishing the lesson to reflect on how God moved during your study and how your small group participants responded.

## 1 Thanksgiving

**Reflect and say a prayer of thanksgiving for specific ways the Holy Spirit was present in that small group.**

- a. How did you experience the Holy Spirit helping you to lead the lesson?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- b. How did you experience the Holy Spirit moving in the small group today?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- c. What were the positives from today's group?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- d. What were areas for improvement?

## 2 Prophetic Listening

**Ask the Holy Spirit to help you review the lesson. Think about each person in your small group as you prayerfully reflect on these questions.**

- a. What are some indications that each participant caught the main points of this lesson?

- b. If you noticed gaps in any participant’s understanding of the main points, is the Holy Spirit inviting you to do anything over the course of this week to help this person better understand?
  
- c. Are there any other ways the Holy Spirit is inviting you to intentionally care for or nurture your individual small group participants?
  
- d. Is there anything you want to remind yourself from what played out in this lesson for when you sit down to prepare the next lesson?

### **3 Intentional Accompaniment**

**Write down a plan to intercede for your small group participants based on the specific insights above, including how you will reach out to them and/or tailor the next lesson’s introduction based on your reflections.**