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WHEN THE PRODIGAL DOES NOT RETURN

Luke 15:1-3, 11-32 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

How many of us lived prodigal days as teenagers – telling our parents, “Leave me alone! You don’t understand anything! I can’t wait to get out of this boring place and live on my own!” Ah, our teens and twenties – when we would do anything to be on our own, live life the way wanted to live it, do as we pleased! And yet, somewhere along the way, in our later twenties, after we’d made some poor financial decisions, befriended some questionable people, made some embarrassing mistakes and learned hard lessons the hard way, we began to realize that our parents were not as dumb as we thought they were, and maybe their advice could help after all. Maybe a trip back home and dinner at their table would be worthwhile. Maybe we *could* learn a thing or two.

All of us have been the older prodigal brother too. The responsible one, the one who’s always right, quick to tell you how to do things, proud to say “See, I told you so!” We whined to our parents about younger brother’s curfew, “How come he gets to stay out as late as I do? You don’t let ME stay out that late at his age! How come SHE gets a piece a cake as big as mine? She’s just a kid!” “How come she gets to watch TV later than I did at her age? He’s bounced another check? I NEVER overdrew MY checking account!” In the word of that great theologian Tommy Smothers. “Mom always liked you best!”

Both sons are prodigal sons. They BOTH are lost, they BOTH are cut off from their Father. The very same father who offers BOTH sons a chance to come home and receive what they need, but do not expect. The father did not give either boy what he expected, what he asked for, but he gave both boys what each one needed.

The younger son comes home prepared to be his father's slave. The father says, "No, you're my son, with all the rights and privileges AND RESPONSIBILITIES that entails." The elder son resents his father throwing a party for his younger brother and asks when to expect a party in HIS honor. "I deserve it!" he says. "I've been good, I've worked hard, I never disobeyed you, I stayed home. I did what you asked. I want what I deserve!" The father says, "No, everything I have already is yours...including your brother. You are family. Now come in the house and act like family."

Who’s really the prodigal in this story? The dictionary defines *prodigal* as “recklessly or extravagantly wasteful.” By that definition, the FATHER is a prodigal too! He’s willing to let his young son go play the fool and then come back home with no strings attached, no penalty, and to celebrate his return with a party – that’s extravagant waste isn’t it? Or is it extravagant *love* - the kind of love that would allow a father to do such a thing? Amazing love, amazing grace! Love that enables us to do what is hard. The father’s extravagant love enabled him to reach out to his older son who he knew was angry – angry at his father for accepting his younger brother back home after all that he had done, all that he had squandered, all that he had

wasted, carelessly, callously – that kind of love is hard too! That is the kind of love God calls us to extend to one another. That is the love God extends to us...unconditional love, forgiving love, accepting love. That is extravagant love, tough love, amazing love...amazing grace!

When such loves conquers all and reconciliation occurs – it's wonderful!

But what do you do when the prodigal does NOT return home?

Does not even WANT to return? Or does return home but is NOT REPENTANT?

What would have happened if, when the father embraced the prodigal son, the son had said, "Yeh, Dad, I'm back. I almost starved to death out there. I figured you wouldn't want me to die, so here I am. Oh yeah, this is my girlfriend, Bambi. She's gonna stay with me or I'm gonna split, got it?"

Many a son/daughter has chosen a lifestyle at odds with their parents' values, and makes no bones about it. "Like it or not, this is the way it's going to be!" How do you handle that? How do you handle a prodigal parent, or prodigal business partner or prodigal sister or any one of the other prodigals who test our limits, defy our rules, scoff at our moral code and resist our attempts to help? As Christian parents and spouses and friends and peers, we have to be prepared to handle those kinds of situations.

There are no pat answers, but I do offer you some guidelines for dealing with conflict in moral values. These apply to parent/child situations and to relationships in general. These guidelines were offered years ago by Louise Lawson, a ministerial friend in Memphis, and I find them straightforward and helpful, Briefly they are:

1. Face the conflict openly.
2. Expect your child or loved one to act responsibly.
3. Let your child or loved one experience the negative consequences of his actions.
4. Establish rules and a middle ground.
5. Be consistent and constant.

FACE THE CONFLICT OPENLY: The conflict will never be resolved if both partners avoid discussing it. Tell the child exactly what it is he's doing that you find objectionable and why. He/she must be given a chance to defend and explain his/her actions. You may discover that his defiance and her social demonstrations are not rebellion against you, but are merely alternative positions to the views you hold. Though it may not change the final outcome, give your child or friend or spouse freedom to explain his/her rationale for decisions and actions. Squelching his/her freedom of expression closes the doors of trust and mutual discourse. On the other hand - her drug use, his pre-marital sex, her lying, his cheating in school or business, her disrespect are clear violations of Christian principles - and you compromise your integrity by not saying so.

EXPECT YOUR CHILD TO ACT RESPONSIBLY: DO NOT MAKE EXCUSES for your child's behavior by blaming society, movies, television, peer pressure, etc. There are plenty of children in the same environment who are NOT DOING what your child is doing, but are living moral, responsible, lives. Let your prodigal brother or sister, your prodigal friend, your prodigal child, know how and where and why you think his behavior is un-Christian, and why you are troubled by his choices; how her decisions and actions jeopardize your family.

SOMETIMES LET YOUR PRODIGAL LOVED ONE EXPERIENCE THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS/HER ACTIONS.

This is the hardest of these guidelines. Yet it is wrong to shield a child from the consequences of his actions, her bad choices. If you repeatedly make excuses for him/her or deny the reality of what is happening, you stunt the child's moral development, you preclude your adult prodigal from learning by his/her mistakes, they take no responsibility and think deny that they were in the wrong.

A Presbyterian Elder once shared with me that his college age son was arrested for drug use, and he phoned his father to come bail him out. His dad agreed, but his dad let him spend the night in jail. His dad explained later that to bail him out would come across as admission that the behavior was not bad after all. Though he did bail his son out the next day, the boy remembered the night of fear and shame locked up among the drunks and prisoners in the county jail. Such would be the consequences for further drug use - - and the message stuck with him.

If you have told your children that something is wrong, you have to stick to your guns. That's not easy. But you do yourself and your child no favor by giving in. True, "You don't have to burn your hand to learn that fire is hot," but unfortunately, some people DO have to learn by getting burned. Let your child suffer the consequences of his choices as long as you do not further endanger him/her. .

Of course, there are times when the consequences are so damaging that you need to waive this guideline. For example: if your child is heavily involved in drug use, then he/she needs your intervention and help, You can't wait and hope he/she will see the light. By then it may be too late - permanent damage may have been done or legal action taken. If your child is engaging in pre-marital sex, you can't wait and let nature take its course; you've got to address the behavior and the consequences. If he/she refuses to stop, insisting on birth control, while not condoning what he/she is doing, may be the only responsible option.

In contrast - LET YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCE THE POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS ACTIONS. If your child shows maturity and responsibility in his behavior, praise him! If she shows growth and positive change, praise her! Let her know you are pleased with her, proud of her! *But do not destroy it by saying, "I knew you'd come around to my way of thinking."* The point is NOT that your children should think like YOU do, but that they should think for themselves in a responsible way and learn to apply Christian morals and ethics.

SO, LET'S RECAP: You've explained to your child your position and why you feel that way. You have stated your expectation of your child to act responsibly, moral and mature. And the CONFLICT STILL REMAINS. WHAT TO DO? At least comfort yourself that you and your child have communicated openly, honestly - - even if it didn't bring a change. NOW... guidelines 4 and 5 address HOW TO COPE.

ESTABLISH RULES AND MIDDLE GROUND WHN POSSIBLE:

Establishing rules and middle ground is not compromise, it is not selling out. It is a way to recognize two different ideologies and at least offer the two parties a way to feel comfortable around each other. IT IS A WAY OF AGREEING TO DISAGREE.

For instance, family friends of ours had an adult daughter living with a man to whom she was not married. The parent did not agree with this practice and said so. After heated discussions, all parties agreed that when the children visit the parents' home, they do not sleep together or they choose to stay at a local motel. When the parents visit the children's home, they stay in one room and the daughter and her lover stay in the other room. That's fair. It's the principle of "*my house/ my way, your house/your way.*" They have established a middle ground, expectations are clear, everyone knows and abides by the rules, and each couple has their own lifestyle preserved. The conflict still remains, of course - - but everyone can cope with it well enough that they maintain their relationships.

5. BE CONSISTENT AND CONSTANT:

How often we say, "Do as I say, not as I do." But that sends mixed signals to children when parents warn against drug abuse and then abuse alcohol; or when parents warn about cheating in school and then cheat on income tax. If we're going to judge our children's behavior, we must examine our own behavior as well, And if we children are going to criticize our parents' behavior, we must first examine our own behavior!

We must be consistent, we must be constant, Constant in expressing our love to our children! Constant in offering hope, constant in offering help, constant in holding open the door to his/her return. You can hate the sin without hating the sinner! NEVER., NEVER...GIVE THEM CAUSE TO DOUBT YOUR LOVE! The prodigal son returned because deep within, he still trusted his father's love to reach beyond his disappointment, The gospel message in the parable is clear: God loves us so much that even in our worst sin, he still welcomes us back!

WHEN THE PRODIGALS DO NOT COME HOME they often feel guilt, anger, resentment, fear, worry, angst. But God our loving and gracious Father, gives us the STRENGTH, the GRACE, and the COURAGE, to love them anyway. And to pray for them over and over and over that someday, by God's grace, *we* prodigals, *those* prodigals, *our* prodigals, will come to our senses/their senses, and come home, and that we will be ready and willing to receive them and to do everything in our power to help and to heal!

DID THE YOUNGER BROTHER EVER GROW UP AND BECOME RESPONSIBLE? □ DID THE OLDER BROTHER EVER COME IN AND JOIN THE PARTY? We don't know.

Parables do not answer themselves. They demand an answer from you. You must finish the story yourself, make some response in your own situation.

- God the father is waiting for you.
- God is begging you to come in and party with Him!
- Gods is with you in this journey, you are never alone.
- God names you, claims you, has plans for you, waits and prods, invites and blesses you!

Sooner or later God the Father will reach you and you will come to your senses and come home! I pray that you will accept and apply God's forgiveness, come inside the house and join the party! THANKS BE TO GOD! AMEN!

Sources

Hugh Hamilton, "The Prodigal Sons." Trinity Presbyterian Church, Pensacola, FL, 03-25-01.

Lawson, Louise, "When the Prodigal Does Not Return," Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, TN, July 29, 1984.