

Parenting The Prodigal

Introduction:

One of the most challenging tasks of all time is parenting. There are some challenges, though, more difficult than others—for instance, the challenge of dealing with a child who, after years of training, decides to turn his back on the instruction of his parents and the will of God. The prodigal causes a great amount of anxiety, worry and disappointment for a parent. How should this child be dealt with? We find some answers in the Parable of the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15**. I recognize that the father in this parable is representative of our heavenly Father. However, I also recognize that as He is the perfect Father, we who are fallible parents ought to emulate Him. Notice four attitudes and actions the Father has over wayward children, learning to apply these things to your parenting.

Discussion:

- I. Remember, your child must make his/her own choices.
 - A. In parenting, our number one responsibility is to train our children. Under the New Covenant, instruction is one of the greatest commands of parenting taught in **Ephesians 6:4**. This teaching will not be picked up by osmosis just because they have been brought to church sometimes.
 - B. However, when we have spent years of our lives training our children, we must understand, in the end, they will make their own decisions. Our actions cannot save them and we cannot make their choices for them. In the story of the prodigal, we only see the son when he starts making his own choices. We miss the years of training the father had put him through, but no doubt, since this father represents God, it happened. **Hebrews 12:7-11** demonstrates that the Father disciplines and trains His children. Yet this son stepped out and opposed his father's training and instruction. What a sad day for this Father. Yet, the father let the son make his own choice.
 - C. This is not an exhortation to give children over to their own desires and choices. This is rather a statement of the way things are. Our children will make their own choices. While in our homes, we have the right as parents to govern decisions, no doubt. But eventually in our homes and out of them, children will choose for themselves. Our duty is to prepare them for that moment. In that day, we must do as the prodigal's father did, remember that the child will and must make his own decisions. The fact is, if the child's only basis for doing things is, "That is what Mom and Dad said." They are walking on shaky ground anyway.
 - D. As difficult and depressing a thought as it is, we must remember that our actions cannot save our children. **Ezekiel 14:14, 20** clearly teaches that one man's choices cannot save another. **Ezekiel 18** brings the point home to the family. The righteousness of a father will not and can not save a son. The son himself must submit to God for himself. There is however, a certain amount of comfort from understanding this. The prodigal's father was not lost and dead just because his son was. **Ezekiel 18** demonstrates that if a child casts off the good training of a good parent and decides to run after wickedness, the father will not be condemned for it. The father will be judged based on his service and faithfulness to God. Therefore, while understanding this point brings some sadness, let us also be made glad that we need not wallow in the pit of despair over our doing in a child's loss. That child made his choice, not us.
- II. Allow your child to learn from his/her mistakes.
 - A. There is no doubt the father loved his child. The prodigal's reception back home demonstrates that. But notice what the father did while the son made his bad choices. The father stayed at home. The father did not follow the child into the distant country to clean up the messes the boy made. The father allowed the son to live with the consequences of his own choices.
 - B. Far too many parents of prodigals think that they must demonstrate their love for the child by cleaning up after them. But that is not what we see from our heavenly Father. We as parents must let our children choose, fail and learn from failure. That is the purpose of consequences. That is God's way of disciplining our children in hopes to turn them back to the fathers.
 - C. **Proverbs** is a great book of advice for child-rearing. In this book, the Proverbialist offers wisdom and instruction to his son. Over and again the Proverbialist says something like, "My son, give attention to my wisdom, incline your ear to my understanding" (**5:1**). Over and again the Proverbialist tells the child the consequences of certain actions for instance in **Proverbs 5:3-23**.

More than once the Proverbialist points out how painful it is for a parent to have a foolish child who doesn't seek after the instruction and wisdom taught him by his parents, i.e. **Proverbs 10:1**. The Proverbialist even gives advice to sons who have made foolish decisions, i.e. **Proverbs 6:1-5**. But not once, of which I am aware, does the Proverbialist ever say to his son, when you disregard the wisdom and instruction of your parents and of God, then come back to me and I will fix everything. In fact, the one example of advice above shows the father saying, "When you goofed up, deliver yourself."

- D. Yet parents today rarely force children to learn from their mistakes by having to face the consequences of their choices, whether spiritual, emotional, financial or relational. If you really want your children to wise up, let them learn by having to face the consequences.

III. Maintain your hope for the child.

- A. How easy it would be for the Prodigal's parents to lose hope for their children. Yet, we need to be as Jochobed must have been with Moses. According to **Exodus 2:6-10**, Jochobed was able to nurse her son, a process which lasted for a couple of years. No doubt, for those years, Jochobed taught Moses who he was and instilled in him his heritage before he was taken off to the Egyptian palace to be indoctrinated. Can you imagine the prayers Jochobed and Amram uttered for their son? According to **Hebrews 11:24-25**, Moses did not decide to embrace his heritage as a Jew until he was grown up. **Acts 7:23** is a little more specific, saying he went to visit his brethren when he was forty. Never give up hope.
- B. Consider the prodigal's father. I know it is possible that the father saw the son afar off because he just happened to look up and see him. However, I prefer to believe the father was looking down that path in hope and prayer that he would see his "lost and dead" child coming back to him. In fact, based on the parallel parables making the same points about the Father, I understand that whatever the prodigal's father was doing in the parable, God does in fact look for us diligently when we are lost (**Luke 15:4, 8**).
- C. Additionally, the mere fact that this prodigal came back after such a time demonstrates we can always maintain our hope and our prayer for our children's return to our Father's household. I can anecdotally point to my own family's circumstance as my grandparents faithfully raised four children in the knowledge of the truth and God's way and have watched three of them depart for the distant country. It took more than 20 years, but two of them returned. In returning, grandchildren that were being raised in the distant country have also come home to the Father's house. One of them is standing here before you. There is of course the third child in the distant country, but the other two have taught us all to maintain hope for his salvation as well.

IV. Rejoice and accept them when they return.

- A. When children live as the prodigal, turning their backs on the instruction and wisdom of their parents, it is easy for a wedge to be driven between the family members. Thus, even when the child returns, the parents sometimes continue punishing the child.
- B. The prodigal's father had no such problem. When the child returned, he accepted him with open arms and rejoiced at his arrival. We too should be like this with our children who return. We should accept them back with rejoicing. Of course, I am dealing here with spiritual acceptance, not living arrangements. Though, at times, there might be that acceptance as well.
- C. Paul's admonition regarding fatherhood in **Colossians 3:21** addresses this issue. The issue of being discouraged and downhearted here deals greatly with a child who finds that even when he does what is right, it is not right enough for his parents. They continue to criticize and punish.
- D. In the family we should model what the church is taught by Paul in **II Corinthians 2:5-8**. This is in reference to the brother in **I Corinthians 5** who had been committing fornication with his stepmother. He had obviously repented and now the church needed to reaffirm its love and forgiveness. They needed to accept him back with rejoicing. So should the prodigals' parents.

Conclusion:

Parenting a prodigal is, no doubt, a difficult thing to do. Yet the scripture has not left us without advice to help us deal with it. My prayer is that no one here ever has to parent a prodigal. However, if you do, follow these guidelines to see yourself through in God's grace.