

Prodigals and our Response

By Karen A. Pickering - © September 23, 2015

These three articles are dedicated to the many parents who have watched their child or children tear themselves away from the faith. For it is a tearing, a violent ripping away from the good God who loves them and a family who is left to deal with the frayed remains.

Having been where you are, I can tell you that God is faithful. Even though we are still waiting for our prodigal, God has not left us alone in the midst of the trouble.

There are no easy answers, no quick fixes. I can't promise you a three step approach guaranteed to bring results. God is the only one who brings results. The sooner we realize our children are in His hands, alone, the sooner we can leave all of this with Him.

May the few things I have learned be a help to you in your own journey. Knowing that each situation is different, I would encourage you to take in what is helpful and ignore the rest. You are welcome to pass this on to other hurting parents. Please note the copyright and include that with anything you print out.

Do not fear, for I am with you; Do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you. Surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. For I am the Lord your God, who upholds your right hand, Who says to you, 'Do not fear, I will help you.'

Isaiah 41:11, 13 NASB

Prodigal Children (part 1) - Some Definitions

What does prodigal mean? This is how Merriman/Webster defines it.

Prodigal – “Characterized by profuse or wasteful expenditure.”

When I think of children I relate it to how they are “spending” their lives. They are wasting their lives on temporary treasure. They are spending their time pursuing anything but the good God who paid an awful price for their soul.

Prodigals come in many packages. There are those that are blatantly rebellious. They refuse to follow their parents rules. Often that leads to being in trouble with the law. Pursuing physical thrills is high on their agenda which means they are involved in the abuse of drugs, alcohol and sex.

Then there is the previously compliant child who is swept away by the world’s viewpoint and values. They have “outgrown” their parents values and faith. They have found something more interesting or compelling to hold their attention. Their wanderings aren’t as violent, but they are just as dangerous.

There are some that are doing exceptionally well by the world’s standards, but they have abandoned the faith their parents so carefully taught them. They may be gifted academically, musically and/or physically and their life is spent wastefully on those pursuits. The talents they were given as a way to glorify God have now become their god.

Finally, there are those who live a double life of sorts. They come to church and may even be quite involved, but their hearts are somewhere else. They are like the Pharisees who knew how to appear righteous, but their hearts were sick. They are spending their lives on religious check lists in public and their own passions in private. This verse sums it up. “Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for me consists of tradition learned by rote.” (Isaiah 29:13 NASB)

We tend to think of the first example as prodigals. We don’t often classify the others the same way. All of them are in danger. All of them need to turn to the God who made them.

If we are honest there is a prodigal of sorts in all of us. We are wastefully spending our short and precious life on many things that have nothing to do with God. Just maybe, watching our own children pull fiercely away from God will cause us to cling to God more passionately.

“Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool.” (Isaiah 1:18 NASB)

Prodigal Children (Part 2) - Whose Fault is it?

**“Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, the fruit of the womb is a reward.”
(Psalm 127:3 NASB)**

That verse can be a puzzle to a family in crisis. They have watched this little one turn against them and the God they love with such fierceness it takes their breath away. What happened to the fairytale picture? And, frankly, this doesn't seem like much of a gift or a reward.

We all do the job of parenting imperfectly so when our children turn their back on God we blame ourselves. We were either too hard or not hard enough. Whichever side we err on we wish we had gone the other way.

There will also be plenty of people to point out our short comings. Society and the church blame the parents for a troubled child. If only you had loved them more, spoiled them less, given them more rules, given them less rules, loved them unconditionally, set more boundaries, given tough love, built up their self-esteem, given them more responsibility, worked on projects together. You should have given them more freedom and allowed them to be their own person. The list is endless.

Because of these reactions many parents of prodigals go underground. They know their child is in trouble, but they don't want to be honest with the church at large for fear they will be ostracized.

If you are under the mistaken impression that only bad parents have troubled children let's look at Genesis 3. God was a hands on parent. He formed Adam and breathed life into him. He loved Adam and Eve perfectly and unconditionally. They had an extensive father/son project in naming all the animals. He gave them the responsibility of tending and caring for the garden. He gave them many “yesses” and only one “no.” He spent time walking with them in the cool of the day. Then God, the perfect parent, watched his children turn away in rebellion. When confronted Adam tried to shift the blame to Eve and even God. (Gen. 3:12) There is no blaming God for the result. The rebellion was not because of a mistake in parenting.

This is a problem as old as time and yet we still expect children from Christian homes to fall perfectly in line. When they don't, we usually find fault with the parents. In our blame shifting world we forget that our children are ultimately responsible before God for the decisions they make. We, as imperfect parents, are going to give them plenty of excuses to disobey. But when God says, "Children obey your parents," there isn't an escape clause that says "only if your parents are doing it right."

We are responsible before God to be the best parents we can be. We need God's daily grace to even come close to that goal. We must also remember that our children are responsible before God to obey. They need God's daily grace to follow the instructions of imperfect parents.

If you are a parent with a prodigal, don't despair. The pain you are feeling has been felt by God many times over. You have something in common with the God who created you. While your pain is awful it doesn't compare with what God feels. He is showing you a bit of His own experience. I pray that it will cause you to cling to him all the more fiercely.

Prodigal Children (Part 3) – Helping Parents

Prodigal children. They seem to be more plentiful these days. Time after time I am seeing children from solid Christian homes rupture their relationships with their family and the God who loves them. They are not just leaving for a couple months. Many of them have been gone for years. The broken hearted parents are struggling to have hope their prodigal will ever return.

A prodigal can sap all the energy from a family. Their misdeeds are emotionally and financially draining. The physical toll on parents can also be substantial. The stress can cause physical illness.

How do we respond? How should we respond? Here are some suggestions.

1. Don't quote Proverbs 22:6 to them. I don't know how many times people told me, "Train up a child in the way he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." They meant it as an encouragement. What I heard was an accusation. "I must not have done it right." You need to remember that Proverbs is not a book of promises. Proverbs is a book of principles. It consists of guidelines for wise living. There are many promises in scripture. Proverbs 22:6 is not one of them.
2. Don't tell them you know their child will turn around. They just need to be patient. The hard reality is you don't know if they will. There are prodigals in my own family who never did come to faith. Certainly the hope is there, but some prodigals never repent. Our job is to pray that they do, but we can't promise someone they will.
3. Do ask the parents how they are coping. Often there is concern for the child in trouble when the parents are the ones who are bearing the brunt of all that is going on.
4. Tell the parents you are praying for them and for their child. Don't ask a lot of questions. Most parents would rather not review the latest trouble with you. If you ask them they will either answer "fine." (which isn't true), answer vaguely or won't answer at all.
5. Give them an opportunity to tell you what their latest struggles are, but don't ask them a lot of questions. Don't be offended by silence. They simply might be unable to vocalize the trouble to you. Just that you brought it up can be a comfort to them.
6. Listen when they talk about their child. That they are talking at all is good. I once had a woman ask me how I was doing. When I told her "It's been a very bad week." she responded by nodding her head, turning around and walking away. She never asked me that question again.

7. If they have to meet with law enforcement or their child has to go to court, offer to go with them. To have a familiar friend sitting beside you can be the difference between hope and despair.

8. Tell them you are sorry. They are grieving the loss of their hopes and dreams for their child. Grieving what might have been. They need to know that others are grieving with them.

9. Don't be afraid to cry with them. I once had a friend call to ask how I was doing. When I told her the awful things that were going on she didn't offer advice, she wept with me. Those tears are still precious to me.

10. Don't make a point of telling them how well your children are doing, or how proud you are of each one. If they do ask about your children, however, tell them the truth. When I was going through the worst of it with one of my children I often called a friend with charming children. I would start the conversation with, "I need to hear about some kids that are doing well." I meant it, but I was the one to ask. She never brought it up.

11. Don't tell them what they did wrong. Most people who give advice have no idea what parents are going through. They see a very different picture in public from what goes on at home. Prodigals tend to be very charming with the outside world. They also are very good at twisting reality. I remember sitting at my kitchen table with a nineteen year old who was explaining to me what we were doing wrong. I responded with one or two comments and then silently listened. He obviously believed one side and I didn't have the strength to explain it all to him. Thankfully he left after about 30 minutes.

12. Continue to include them in things. They feel isolated already. They assume people don't want to be around them. Even if they decline your invitation, they will be thankful that you thought of them.

13. Above all, pray for them. Pray that they wouldn't become utterly discouraged. Pray that their focus would shift from their own lack to God's amazing grace. Pray that their child would turn their heart back to the God who loves them and the family that longs for reconciliation. Pray for the family as they go through some of the hardest days, months or years they will ever know. Pray that they would learn day by day to cling to the God who loves them in spite of their imperfect parenting skills. Most importantly, pray that their joy would be found in God alone, not in their children.

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, preserving in tribulation, devoted to prayer, . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.” (Romans 12:10-12, 15, 16 NASB)