

Praying Your Prodigal Home

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I. Introduction

A. Franklin Graham Story

Some years ago, in a small town in North Carolina, a local police car was trying to catch up with a teenage boy in a speeding Triumph Spitfire. Just as they both came close to the family property, the brash young man pushed the button to close the security gate, managing to squeeze through just in time, and then watched with delight as it closed in front of the pursuing police vehicle. Riding on the thrill of adrenaline, the boy ground the car to a halt in front of the house, ran inside, and dashed up to his room. But soon the booming voice of his father called him down. The young man met his dad in the study, where his father's grim stare removed any remaining thrill. "I've just spoken with the officer at the gate," began his dad. "He's on his way up, and if he wants to arrest you, son, I'm going to support him."

The boy was young Franklin Graham and his father was world famous evangelist and advisor to presidents, Billy Graham. In later years, Franklin Graham, would describe his years as a prodigal son in rebellion against his parents in his own book, "Rebel Without a Cause." He recalls sitting around the kitchen table with his father and the local police officers discussing whether he was going to spend a night in jail. He distinctly remembers that his father did not back him. A few years later, he was reading the Gospel of John in a hotel room and read that Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3 that he needed to be born again, and he realized that that message was for him too. That night he prayed to receive Jesus Christ as his Savior and Lord and his life began to change. Today he travels as the head of Samaritan's Purse, a global Christian relief organization that provides relief supplies to those in need in the name of Jesus Christ, and he preaches to tens of thousands.

B. In the introduction to Prayers for Prodigals, Ruth Graham talks about life as Franklin's Mom:

"God blessed me with two prodigals. I use the word blessed because they are a gift, just like every child. Prodigals are an especially precious gift because they teach us much, including patience, the depth of our own need for forgiveness, and continual dependence on God in prayer. When our children bring us to our knees, we're in the best position for God to help us. Some of God's best lessons are His most challenging. When we come to the end of our own strength, we learn to rely on His. Through prayer He takes us by the hand and leads us to fresh places of grace that we never would have seen if the challenges had not come."

Ruth Graham in Prayers for Prodigals, by James Banks

C. Today's focus is on Jesus' story of "The Prodigal Son" in Luke 15—also called "The Lost Son"

D. The word "prodigal" is not found in scripture, but defined as wasteful, reckless, extravagant

E. Parable is a concise synopsis of the Gospel itself—what it means to be "lost," what is God's heart toward lost people, and how we can come back home into a relationship with the Father

II. Context of the Parable

A. John 15:2 tells us that Jesus was speaking to two groups at opposite ends of social spectrum

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." John 15:2

- B. Jesus attracted those rejected by the religious establishment—including tax collectors, prostitutes, and other assorted “sinners”—because he projected grace, love and compassion
- C. Pharisees and religious leaders prided themselves on their Jewish heritage and their rigid adherence to the ceremonial regulations—incensed that Jesus would associate with “sinners”
- D. Jesus responded to their complaint with three parables about “lost” things: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and finally, a lost son—in order to illustrate how God pursues us when we are lost and how He rejoices when we come back to Him

III. The Younger Son

A. **Read Luke 15:11-32**

- B. The Younger Son’s Demand: “Give me the share of property that is coming to me.”
 - 1. Jewish law provided for the division of property between heirs upon the death of the father, with the eldest receiving double what his brother received—with distribution upon death
 - 2. Mideastern culture of the time revered the elderly—especially parents, and Jesus’ hearers would have been shocked by the younger son’s disrespectful demand
 - 3. Would have been equivalent to wishing that his father was dead—publicly dishonoring him
 - 4. Demanded not only the division of the property, but the right to dispose of it as well, which was unusual because the father had the legal right to use and control the assets until his death
 - 5. Would have required the father to sell off land that had been his family’s for generations
 - 6. Entire situation would have been considered scandalous and dishonoring to the father and his family by Jesus’ hearers—father would have been justified in disinheriting his son
 - 7. The father didn’t do that—he perhaps reluctantly but graciously granted his son’s demand
- C. “He gathered all he had, went to a far country and squandered his property in reckless living”
 - 1. Would have required selling off property and converting everything to disposable cash
 - 2. His self-centeredness and callous indifference to his father’s feelings are an indication of the depth of his willfulness and rebellion against his father
- D. **Question:** What caused the younger son to rebel against his father and leave home?
 - 1. Hint: It wasn’t poor parenting—the father represents God, who was the only perfect parent
 - 2. Younger brother deliberately chose the allure of sin and wild living over life with his father
 - 3. Augustine (4th century prodigal turned church father came to faith on his mother’s prayers):
 “It is not reason which turns the young man from God; it is the flesh. Skepticism but provides him with the excuses for the new life he is leading.” Augustine, *Confessions*
 - 4. James provides additional insight as to how the progressive slide into sin occurs:
 But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.
 James 1:14-15
 - 5. **Lesson #1:** Stop blaming yourselves as parents. Even perfect parents have prodigal kids.

When asked what we could have done differently after one of our sons had a problem with alcohol, he told me, “Dad, it wasn’t anything you and Mom did. I simply made bad choices and bad things happened. Now I’m making better choices and good things are happening.”

6. Carol Barnier, a self-described prodigal from a great Christian home, who returned to faith after 13 years as an atheist, writes about overcoming her guilt over her own son’s rebellion:

“It had never even occurred to me that my son had the capacity to make a bad choice in opposition to good parenting... When I stopped claiming the guilt that I hadn’t earned, it changed many things for the better.” Carol Barnier, Engaging Today’s Prodigal: Clear Thinking, New Approaches and Reasons for Hope

E. Enter the Pigpen

1. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. *But when he came to himself, he said.....*

John 15:14-17

2. Jesus couldn’t have painted a more disgusting picture for the listeners—a Jewish boy up to his knees in pig poop—pigs were considered unclean—worst possible job, despicable

3. Notice the effect of the hunger and the pig pen on his attitude: “He came to himself.”

4. **Lesson #2:** You can’t save your prodigal child, spouse, parent or friend—only God can

But if we pray, God will orchestrate circumstances in our loved one’s life to bring them to a place of brokenness and repentance that will ultimately lead them back to Him. Our job is to release them to God, to pray and to wait patiently on God for Him to act in His timing.

The temptation with a prodigal is to “rescue” them, when that can actually interfere with what God is trying to accomplish in their lives through self-inflicted hardship and difficulty. Sometimes God knows what we don’t—That is, exactly how much time they need in the pig pen.

5. Assurance of answered prayer:

And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him. I John 5:14-15

There is nothing that is more “in God’s will” than bringing your prodigal to faith in Jesus Christ

‘You can also be very sure that God will rescue the children of the godly’ (Prov. 11: 21, TLB).

F. The Running Father

1. Notice the father taking the initiative to demonstrate unconditional love, grace, compassion

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. John 15:20

Before the son could say a word, the father ran to him, embraced him and kissed him

Notice no recriminations, no lectures, no time in the penalty box—just overwhelming grace

2. Again, this would have shocked Jesus’ hearers, for two reasons:

- Mideastern patriarchs did not run—ever—but Jesus wanted to vividly illustrate the intensity and joy with which God pursues us and how He receives us when we turn back to Him
 - Hearers would have been astounded by the radical extent of the father’s grace and love toward a son who had dishonored him in a way thought unforgiveable in that culture
3. **Lesson #3:** We need to demonstrate the same unconditional grace and love toward the prodigals in our lives that God has toward us. (While we were yet sinners Christ died for us)

Quinn Sherrer and Ruthanne Garlock, in Praying Prodigals Home, share the story of a Mom whose son Ken came to Christ at age 8, before he later rejected his faith and became angry and bitter toward God. His Mom describes how they related to their son:

“We learned some lessons in loving unconditionally and loving the unlovely,” she said. “We learned to not preach but simply to trust our God. He kept telling us we should talk to Him more about Ken and less to Ken about Him! Ken’s life was becoming deplorable, but we kept loving and praying. Eventually he began to trust us to not preach to him or condemn him, and he would turn to us when he was hurting. Once, he called and was hinting for us to pray for him. Then one day we had the courage to ask if we could pray for him, and he allowed us to. That was a real breakthrough.” Praying Prodigals Home

She went on to say that as they prayed for God to direct Christian friends into Ken’s life, God did just that. Ken began to attend church with them, ultimately repented, recommitted his life to Christ after 25 years as a prodigal son, and his life began to change.

Key is demonstrating unconditional love and grace toward the person, while not condoning or enabling their sinful behavior, in a way that leaves the door open to come home in God’s timing.

G. Repentance and Reinstatement

1. Younger brother expressed heart attitude of repentance and brokenness over his sin:

Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.
John 15:21

2. Father immediately responded to his repentance with forgiveness and reinstatement

But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.
John 15:22-24

Note: The robe, the ring and the shoes were marks of the prodigal son’s reinstatement into the family. Hired hands didn’t wear robes, rings and shoes.

Lesson #4: Repentance alone triggers God’s forgiveness and reinstatement into His family.

Notice that the father received him as he was, without regard to his stinky pig smell. He didn’t say, “Why don’t you clean up a little bit first and then we’ll talk about it?” He didn’t say, “Well, we’ll have to put you on probation for six months to see if your performance makes you worthy to be back in the family.”

God does not grade on the curve and God’s forgiveness does not depend on our performance or worthiness. It is always a free gift of grace.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9

IV. The Elder Brother

A. The Angry Confrontation

1. The elder son refused even to go into the party, publicly dishonoring his father.
2. Just as he ran to the younger brother to embrace him, the father extended grace and unconditional love to the elder brother, begging him to come into the party and celebrate
3. The elder brother rebuked his own father with his angry response:

“but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ John 15:29-30

In a culture where fathers were honored, revered and addressed with terms of respect, like “My esteemed father,” the elder brother’s use of look, would sound insolent, like, “Look, you!”

4. His manner betrayed the reality that he too was just as alienated from the father by his own anger, self-righteousness, and sense of entitlement as his brother was by his sinful behavior.
5. He could not receive the father’s grace and love because he didn’t think he needed it.
6. The elder son thought because he had served his father diligently and done everything right, he deserved his father’s reward—in fact, that he was entitled to it based on his performance
7. Because he had never been able to truly receive his father’s love, grace and forgiveness, he was incapable of offering that same love, grace and forgiveness to his younger brother either (in the same way that the Pharisees were angered when Jesus extended grace to “sinners”)
8. **Lesson #5: We need to forgive in order to empower our prayers and love unconditionally**

Stormie Omartian, in The Power of Praying for Your Adult Children writes on that point:

Forgiveness has to flow in us before the power of the Holy Spirit flows through us when we pray. The Bible says, “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Psalm 66: 18).

Stormie Omartian, The Power of Praying for Your Adult Children

9. **Lesson 6: Celebrate the small wins and wait patiently on God for the rest**

When we begin to see change in a loved one, we tend to want to see a complete transformation all at once, where all the bad habits and sinful behaviors disappear and are replaced by regular church attendance, mid-week Bible study and daily devotional times. But more often, the Holy Spirit transforms a person gradually over time as we pray, and wait patiently for Him to work.

Quinn Sherrer, in Praying Prodigals Home observes that it is a journey and HS sets the pace:

“I realized anew how counterproductive it is for us to expect prodigals to attend church when their hearts aren’t yet ready. Many of them believe they will only be rejected by people in church anyway, so why bother to go? As in the parable—first the prodigal must come to himself; then he’s ready to go to the Father’s house.”

Quinn Sherrer and Ruth Garlock, Praying Prodigals Home

B. Different Flavors of “Lostness”

1. Jesus’ point: Whether we are engaged in the overtly sinful lifestyle of the younger brother or the secret sinful attitudes of the heart, like the elder brother, we’re all “lost” apart from God’s grace
2. Both the younger brother and the elder brother rejected their father in different ways, but they were both equally “lost,” in that they were both at one time alienated from God’s grace/love.
3. Jesus left the story unfinished—only the younger brother was reconciled to his father, while the elder brother never entered into the celebration with his father—he remained outside
4. Pharisees relied on two things to give them right standing with God: 1) their status as Jews, God’s chosen people, and 2) their rigid adherence to rules of external conduct
5. Jesus was reaching out to save them with God’s grace and love, but they rejected Him because they thought they could be their own Savior—and so they remained lost.

C. Living Out God’s Grace and Love in the Church

1. **Question:** As Christ’s representatives in this world, do we the church attract the same kinds of people He did? If not, why not? Could it be that we project an elder brother image?
2. I have to confess that there is a lot of the elder brother in me, impatient with the brokenness in other people, but blind to my own, quick.
3. Then the Holy Spirit reminds me that the church is not a country club for holy people, but rather an ER for broken people—and we’re all broken people saved by grace alone.

V. Practical Prodigal Prevention

A. Live out an authentic life with God before your children

1. Let them see you read the Bible, pray, talk about what you’re learning, answered prayers
2. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. Deuteronomy 6:6-7

B. Teach them how to cultivate their own relationship with God and lead them to faith in Christ

1. Guys in the EMAW groups are learning the practical skills involved in hearing from God daily through His Word and prayer—so they can pass them on to other guys and their own kids
2. Teach your kids to study the Bible, to pray, so that they can grow in their own life with God

C. Deliberately cultivate a relationship with each child that includes two-way communication

1. Set aside regular one-on-one time with each child to build closeness, trust in the relationship
2. “The level of closeness that a child has with his or her father greatly impacts their self-image—and eventually, their own relationship with God.”

Lonnie Berger in Every Man a Warrior-Book 2: Marriage and Raising Children

D. Focus on training them rather than controlling them

1. “Instead of focusing on controlling our teenagers, our focus should be on their training, their ability to think, and their capacity to make good decisions without our help. This way over time they gain experience in learning the consequences, both good and bad, of those decisions. This is also the road to becoming a self-sufficient adult.”

Lonnie Berger in Every Man a Warrior-Book 2: Marriage and Raising Children

2. Overemphasis on control makes it more likely that they will reject our values as adults
- E. Learn how to pray for them more effectively and then pray for them every day
1. Pick up Banks' Prayers for Prodigals or Stormie Omartian on Praying for Your Adult Children
 2. Come to the Thursday night prayer session and let us lift up your child with you in prayer
- F. Educate yourself to help them overcome specific kinds of struggles as they arise
1. If your child becomes entangled in pornography, drug or alcohol abuse, depression, an abusive relationship, a homosexual lifestyle, etc., there are resources to help you understand those issues and how best to respond to them in truth and love. Don't flounder—learn!
 2. The way we respond may determine whether our child can overcome that issue and move on in life or whether it will become a debilitating hindrance to their growth as a child of God.
- G. Get support from others
1. Don't go it alone—find others who will support, encourage and pray for you and your child
- H. Recognize that we are in a war—and the prize is the hearts of our children
- The great battle of our spiritual lives is “Will you believe?” It is not, “Will you try harder?” or “Can you make yourself Worthy?” It is squarely a matter of believing that God will do what only he can do.
- Pastor Jim Cymbala, Fresh Wind, Fresh Fire