

## **Letting the Prodigal Go – Dan Hitz**

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***Jesus continued: “There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them.”***

*Luke 15:11-12 [NIV]*



So far in this series we've looked at building a relationship with our kids, correcting them in a way that empowers them, and repenting to them for any wounds we've inflicted on them. This can be a tremendous blessing and offer a fresh start to family relationships. But what happens when our love ones are unrepentant? There are times when those we love embrace sin and rebellion to the point where they

bring stress and dysfunction to the family. It is at those times that we must implement appropriate boundaries and require that those who are engaging in willful sin honor those boundaries or face the consequences for their own actions.

One of the challenges that many parents face is allowing their kids to face the consequences of their own actions. We want the best for our son or daughter and we don't want him or her to experience discomfort. We might be tempted to swoop in and fix a mess that they have made rather than to teach them how to admit their mistake and fix the mess themselves. We might be so bothered by their poor grade that we yell at the teacher, rather than confronting our child for not bothering to pay attention in class or do their homework. Kids will let you take as much of their own responsibility as you're willing to take. If we're so afraid to allow them to experience the discomfort and pain of their own unhealthy choices, they will never develop the motivation to stop making those poor choices and overcome their challenges.

I'm not advocating being a harsh drill sergeant and never properly assisting our kids as they learn how to handle life, but it is important to teach them responsibility and consequences early on in life when the stakes are small. Otherwise, they have to learn those lessons later when the stakes are much higher. It is one thing to bring a forgotten lunch to a child who usually remembers to bring it with him, but if we are driving that lunch to school every few days, we are teaching him that he really doesn't need to practice responsibility because mom and dad will always be there to take the consequences for his lack of responsibility. He learns that mom or dad are willing to be inconvenienced by having to drive the lunch to the school and arrive late for work. It is far better to deliver a lunch or two to the school with the warning that the next time he forgets his lunch, he will have to go hungry until he gets home from school.

The stakes get higher as the child gets older. Paying a son's cell phone bill for him when he has neglected to pay the bill and spent his money on movies and fast food fails to allow him to experience the consequences of poor financial management. Allowing his phone service to be shut off may feel heartless at first glance, but in the long run we are teaching our kids responsibilities that will carry them through their adult lives. It is far better to learn financial responsibility by having a cell phone shut off than by having a house repossessed.

Another place where parents often have difficulty allowing their son or daughter to experience the consequences of their own actions is when he or she is engaged in habitual destructive sin. Parents are sometimes so afraid that their adult son or daughter will experience the legal consequences for their sin that they can put themselves in legal and/or physical danger to cover for their kids. They may be so afraid of their son or daughter being homeless that they allow drug and alcohol abuse in their home, rather than to implement healthy boundaries and require their son or daughter to abstain and/or seek rehab as a requirement to live in their homes. Other times parents will be so afraid of their angry teen or adult child and they allow them to be verbally and/or physically abusive to them and perhaps younger siblings.

If you are at this point in your relationship with your son or daughter, it is important that you seek the assistance of a professional therapist to guide you through the process of addressing the unacceptable behavior. An experienced therapist can help you implement proper boundaries, navigate the risks involved, and cope with the response from your son or daughter. If your child has made suicidal threats in the past, the idea of confronting him may be terrifying. A professional therapist can also help you assess and address the suicidal statements appropriately and learn not to be held hostage to their threats. All suicidal threats should be taken seriously and your professional therapist can help you know the right steps to follow in a given situation.

Even though the thought of addressing the angry and/or inappropriate behavior may be overwhelming, it is far more damaging to the rest of the family to allow the negative behavior to continue in the home. A trained therapist can help you make a plan to take appropriate action and reestablish healthy family dynamics.



As heart breaking as it is when our prodigals decide to leave home and begin to experience the consequences of their actions, those consequences may be the very thing that he needs to help him decide to make drastic changes in his life. He may realize that mom and dad's rules weren't so bad after he has spent a season sleeping on a friend's couch or sharing an apartment with a few other people who also refuse to follow house rules. Those of us who have been in recovery can share many testimonies from men and women who only came to the end of themselves and repented after they spent a season in the pig pen craving a few corn cobs. It was then that they realized that the rules weren't so bad after all and that living life like mom and dad have been trying to teach them actually might be better after all.

Of course there are no guarantees that a prodigal will ever repent and come home, but the prayers of Godly parents who allow him to experience the consequences of his poor choices stands the best chance of reaching a sinful heart. When he returns home repentant, may we have the heart of the father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son who sees the son a long way off and welcomes him back into the family.

*"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." Luke 15:17-20 [NIV]*