**Loving Your Prodigal**

**Message 12 Handout**

**Memory Verse:**

**Ephesians 6:4** “*Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”*

**Introduction**

Jesus states that we are identified as a follower by how we love each other. This includes everyone: friends, enemies, and prodigals (Luke 6:27-36).

Loving your prodigal, who causes so much heartache, is hard. Sometimes, strangely enough, they feel like an enemy. Knowing what love looks like in such situations is ill-defined and often confusing. Biblical wisdom helps us discern that we always love our prodigal, but that is not the same as trusting them. God’s preferred means is for us to simply follow the commands in His Word. That is why He gave it to us, so that we would find true life and freedom by obedience to it. However, as sinners, we often have to learn the hard way. God’s example is that He often loves us by disciplining us and allowing us to suffer pain in order to sharpen us and grow us closer and more dependent on Him. This model is a great lesson for those in the middle of a prodigal situation, whether we are parents and our prodigals are our children, or whether our prodigals are our spouses, siblings, or parents.

Mark Twain humorously defines the difficulty of raising teenagers. He states, “*When your children turn 13, I suggest you put them in a barrel, put the lid on it and feed them through a hole…when they turn 16, plug the hole.”*  As ridiculous as that sounds, we all laugh because there are days when our parenting job seems impossible. Prodigals make child raising exponentially more difficult. As difficult as it is however, we are called to love them. Let’s explore how we do that best.

**How to Love Your Prodigal**

We have learned over the last few weeks that emotions are both God-given and powerful, but they should not dictate our decisions. When a prodigal is in your life, emotions run the gamut from guilt to anger to sadness to fear and all points in between. On any particular day you might struggle with unconditional love after they have destroyed your home emotionally or even physically. You might see them as incapable of surviving and withdraw discipline out of pity and “love them too much”. Is that possible? The crux of this message focuses on how a parent loves not only their prodigal, but all of their children. The parenting principles and the love we feel for our children should be the same. Those principles are simply more difficult in prodigal situations.

If your prodigal is not your child, but rather your spouse, parent, sibling, or dear friend, the principles are the same in regard to how you love them. We can gain insight on how to love our prodigals if we look again at God’s example of how He loves each one of us. We will look at that more closely in this message.

**Child Development**

A detailed review of normal and abnormal child development is beyond the scope of our purpose here. We have neither the time nor expertise to review that topic fully. However, there are basic highlights that are important to keep in mind. We must understand that every infant needs love and care to be assured that they are safe and secure. Such unconditional love is important to convey throughout the parenting process, so that the child continues to feel secure and safe even when they are disciplined. Beginning at 18 months to 2 years of age, children begin to determine their own boundaries. They explore to determine what is their domain and what is not. The word “no” is used often during these times. It is easy to see that we are loving when we say “no” as they grab an electrical cord at 2 years old or attempt to walk out in the street. During the early stages of their development we are responsible “FOR” them and for their security and safety.

Later on in adolescence and teenage years our “no” is just as loving, even though we may get more pushback. “No’s” shape us and allow us to reap the consequences of the decisions we have sown (Gal. 6:7). This is true for us and for our children.

As our children and prodigals begin to mature, it is both normal and healthy for them to question values. Their values must be *their* values, not ours. At some point in their development, we must switch paradigms of parenting. We change from being their security and being responsible “for” them to being responsible “to” them. As believers, our job is to simply teach them proper Christian values, model those values, and allow them to suffer the consequences of poor value choices. Allowing them the freedom to explore is healthy, but we must allow them to experience the consequences of good choices, as well as fully experience the consequences of poor choices.

**Development gone awry**

So what causes this normal process of exploration to go awry? There are several possibilities. There could be physiological factors such as ADD and learning disabilities. There are psychological factors such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia that do not allow proper processing. Such issues are beyond the child’s ability to control and will be helped by medication and/or special counseling. No doubt external factors such as family problems, stress, peer pressure, and parenting style may negatively impact development and maturity. Abnormal behavior can be as simple as poor choices such as addiction. It can also be a result of a battle out of our control as angels and demons wage war in the heavenly realms over our souls (Ephesians 6).

**God’s parenting model : Unconditional love**

So many of the issues are out of our control and must be submitted to prayer and surrendered to God. However, we can control ourselves, and the decisions we make that impact prodigal/child development and maturity. Looking to God’s instruction to us through His Word and His example give us great direction. He is our heavenly Father and the Father of us all. He is perfect; therefore we can learn a great deal by His instruction to us.

God model of love for us is unconditional, pure and simple. Romans 5:8 tells us this: *“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*.” Ephesians 2:8 further explain God’s love for us, “*For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-not by works, so that no one can boast.”*  Consider Romans 8:38, “*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

These verses give us great insight into the truth of God’s love for us. There is nothing we can do to earn God’s love. In fact it clearly states that even when we are in rebellion to him in our sin, he loved us enough to die for us. These are not just empty words as he backs those up with example after example of that unconditional love. In the Old Testament, He continues to love Israel despite their constant rebellion. In Deuteronomy 31:8 God promises, “*The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged*."

The entire Old Testament is replete with examples of Israel’s rebellion and the resultant consequences of that rebellion. Oftentimes those consequences are harsh, but always lovingly purposed to refocus Israel to God, where there is true joy and life. Those consequences are just as loving as sending His Son to die for us. Jesus himself shows his ultimate picture of love for us in the New Testament on the cross. Despite our sins nailing Him to the cross and the Jews rejection of Him as Messiah, He cried out in his last moments for the Father to forgive us. He argued to the Father on our behalf that we simply did not understand what we were doing. Therefore, if God’s example to us is unconditional love, then we should parent with that same unconditional love to the best that our fallen human capabilities allow. Our love for our children as well as our brothers and sisters in Christ should be consistent and unconditional.

If we look closely at God’s communication and character, we can easily surmise that God prefers that we learn the “easy way”. He has given us clear instruction and if we follow his commandments, it will go well with us. God promises blessings to us through our obedience:

* + Deuteronomy 28:1-2 “Now it shall be if you diligently obey the Lord your God,… the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God:”

However, if we do not obey His direction, there will be consequences. It is critical to note that those consequences are not enforced because he is mad or angry at us, He is angry at sin and Satan. ***He enforces consequences because He loves and cares for us.***

* + Deuteronomy 28:15 “But it shall come about if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:…”
  + Proverbs 13:13 “Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.”
  + Ephesians 6: 1-3 “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”

**Parenting Applications for Us**

A key concept of unconditional love is to *love enough to care deeply about shaping their character*. It is easy to give gifts to our children and buy their love through materialistic possessions. However it is important to realize that such things are worldly and fleeting and what matters most is a heart and passion for God above all else. Such a heart is a gift from God, but our ultimate responsibility as parents is to teach them this truth and model that passionate priority for them. The priority of this perspective is well outlined in I John 2:15-17, “*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in in him. For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes, and the boasting about what he has and does, comes not from the Father, but from the world. The world and its desires pass away but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”* This eternal paradigm is not only true for us but also true for our children. The greatest gift we can give them is to make them keenly aware of that truth through exposure to His Word and through modeling our own eternal priorities to our children and anyone we are discipling.

We are also called to model this paradigm not only to our loved ones but everyone in the world as well:

* + John 14:31 “But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”

We cannot parent with words alone but with total commitment and priority:

* + I John 3:18 “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with action and in truth.”

“*The key to becoming a more effective parent is to become an increasingly godly person.” ~* Larry Crabb

**So how do we become more Godly?**

Answer: We love God more and more. We love Jesus more and more.

Jesus is our visible example as He personally lived and walked on earth. As Jesus told his disciples, if you have seen Him, you have seen the Father (John 14:7). It is very difficult to follow a set of rules unless you truly realize that the author of those rules loves and cares for you and that they are for your good.

There are things I do for my wife that I would not do for anyone else. Although I remain selfish on many fronts, I am the least selfish and the best servant toward my wife. Why? Because I know she loves me and she has proven it over and over again. Each time she tells me she loves me and serves me lovingly, I trust her love more and I trust her more. It is the same with any relationship, and our relationship with Jesus is no exception.

We get to know Jesus’ love for us through His words in the Bible and through His example of a life lived for us with the goal of encouraging us so that we would not lose heart and so that we would live forever with Him in paradise. The more we believe that, the more we love Him, and the more we trust Him. The more we trust Him, the easier it is for us to be obedient in following His commands.

**What does “Love” Look like for our Prodigals?**

**Discipleship: Teaching them to love what God loves**

1. We teach them the Word.

We prioritize the Word in our lives as we study it daily ourselves and expect the same from them. We discuss it with them as a priority. Such commitment is outlined in **Deuteronomy 6:6-9** “*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. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”*

We are encouraged in Ephesians 6:4 to not provoke our children to anger, but to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

1. Model faith

As we referenced earlier in I John 3:18, God want us to worship him with our lives. Romans 12 urges us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Our children and really anyone we are discipling and/or mentoring see through idle talk. They are motivated by how we back up our words with lives of commitment to those words. God’s Word states as much through the writings of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah29:13 states, “these people draw near to Me with their mouths, and honor Me with their lips, but they have removed their hearts far from me. “ God sadly saw it in His people and our children and friends can see it in us as well.

1. Trust God /follow His example in obedience

God knows what is best for us and wants us to follow his laws written solely for our good and His glory. I believe God’s first choice is for us to simply obey His commands, since that is for our good. However, he proves over and over again that if we do not follow those rules, if we forget him, if we go our own way that seems right but leads to destruction, He will allow hardship and discipline to shape us.

**What Does “LOVE” look like in it’s fullness: Jesus Perfect Example**

**Jesus the Lamb**

* **John 3:16** For God so loved the world he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life
* **John 15:9** As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.
* **John 17:24,25** *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see the glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them*
* **Matt. 11: 28-30** Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

**Jesus the Lion (See also Revelations 19)**

* **Matt 10:34** *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter in law against her mother in law—a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, and anyone who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.*
* **Hebrews 12:1-13 Parenting: Love and Discipline**

There are many verses that speak to this truth, but let’s just focus on God’s view of parenting and discipline as explained in Hebrews 12:1-13. We get a very detailed view of God’s parenting, and as a result, how we should love our children and parent them.

*V1 “Therefore since we are surrounded but such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off every hindrance and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”*

We are to be encouraged by the heroes of the faith that have served as role models. They lived their lives in faith and action, not mere words. They lived with a purpose and glorified God greatly in that pursuit. Furthermore, this verse clearly points out that we have a race (life) marked out specifically for us to run. Eph 2:10 tells us as well that we have good works planned out for us to do. Our race as parents would no doubt include how we raise our children and how we mentor and disciple those around us.

*V2 “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of our faith, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

Looking to Jesus as our example is the way to run our race in exemplary fashion. He never wavered from His purpose, and we should follow that example. When we stumble we should take heart that He sits at the right hand of God interceding for us.

*V3 “Consider him who suffered such opposition from evil men so that we would not grow weary and lose heart.”*

As we continue to look to Jesus it is encouraging that he suffered everything, not only for our eternity, but to comfort us in our earthly struggles. He knows we grow weary and He cares about everything we are going through.

*V4-11 “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your own blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons. My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son. Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by His father? If you are not disciplined , and everyone undergoes discipline, then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover we have all had human fathers who disciplined us, and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our Spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best, but God disciplines us for our good that we might share in His holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

These verses contain so many principles of parenting that we must keep in mind:

* Jesus knows more than anyone the sin struggle we face. Sometimes we struggle and face hardship simply because we live in a fallen world and sin exists. Jesus navigated those waters perfectly. He endured hardship and although sinless and a Son, the Scriptures tell us that He learned obedience and was perfected through this suffering (Heb.5:8).
* Although we may face struggles because of sin and a fallen world, we can learn obedience and be perfected and sanctified through the suffering and hardship we face.
* We can also face hardship as God’s will to sharpen us IN LOVE. When we get to Heaven, God knows that we want to hear “well done good and faithful servant.” He knows we struggle against sin, and because He loves us, He disciplines us as his sons and daughters. That should encourage us in times of trouble. We should be encouraged in these times by the reminder that God loves us and wants us to be righteous and share in His Holiness. He wants peace for us, but it comes from hardship and discipline that is always painful when we are enduring it.
* These truths should not only encourage us first as children of God; they should serve as examples of how to parent our own children. God loves us perfectly in this manner, and we should seek to love our children in the same way.

If these parenting principles of “tough love” seem harsh at times, I urge you to think of the opposite approach. Proverbs 29:15 describes it well “….*a child left to himself disgraces his mother.”* There is nothing sadder than a child born into this world who is neglected due to the selfishness of a parent who does not want to burdened by the responsibilities of parenthood. Just as tragic is a parent who loves and even idolizes their children but neglects to discipline them because they want to spare their children from pain. They put their relationship with their children and the need to be their friend above the ultimate goal of sharing in God’s holiness and righteousness. This paradigm is critical in order to parent as God would have you.

**Outcomes**

If we do everything right, are we guaranteed a responsible mature child who walks with God? Can we ensure we will not have to deal with a prodigal? You already know the answer. The answer is that there is no guarantee for the outcome of another person, including your child. Each one of us has a race marked out that is unique for us. That race is worked out between each person and God. So why are we encouraged to parent in this difficult way with no guarantee of outcome? We parent that way because it provides the best chance and best environment for our child to walk with God. We parent that way because God asks us to in obedience.

Unconditional love does not guarantee unconditional blessing. Just look at the following verses to clearly see this point.

* Deuteronomy 28:1 Now it shall be if you diligently obey the Lord your God,… the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. 2 All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the Lord your God. ….
* Deuteronomy 28:15 But it shall come about if you do not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes with which I charge you today, that all these curses will come upon you and overtake you:…
* Proverbs 13:13 Whoever despises the word brings destruction on himself, but he who reveres the commandment will be rewarded.
* Ephesians 6: 1-3 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (this is the first commandment with a promise), that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.

The good news is that there is one guarantee you can count on. If you fully embrace God’s discipline yourself, and then follow this example in parenting your children, then you will have been trained in righteousness and peace and you will share in God’s holiness in eternity. He says in his final verses 12, 13 in this chapter:

*“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees, make level paths for your feet so that the lame may not be disabled but rather healed.”*

God closes out these powerful verses with a summary of his purpose. He knows that the race marked out for us is hard and painful, and we can grow weary. He reminds us of these truths so that when we are challenged by the blows of pain and heartache, we can be strengthened by Truth. We have a choice to give into the hardship and be beaten down, becoming lame and disabled and of little or no use for God. We also have a choice as we parent to discipline our children in LOVE as God calls us to do or give in and rescue them from this refining pain. “Tragically that decision impacts our children and can cause them to become and/or remain lame and disabled emotionally, spiritually and possibly physically.”

. “Although withholding discipline or consequences may feel like LOVE, sadly it is just the opposite (Prov 14:12).”

Jesus talks about His love for us and gives us more insight in John 15:9-11 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in His love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” At first glance this might imply that God’s love is conditional, but we have shown that is not the case. What Jesus is pointing out is that His love is just like the unconditional love of the Father to Him, and if we respond to this love in obedience, then can we can fully experience the joy of His deep love for us. We each have a choice of how we respond to God’s love for us. Remember that Jesus states clearly that if we love Him, we will obey Him (John 14:15).

Rest in the fact you are not responsible for outcomes. Proverbs 21:31 states, ”*The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but Victory rests with the Lord. ”*

**Power of Prayer**

There is no discussion of outcomes without a reminder to us all that outcomes are up to God alone (Prov.21:31), and we are not in control. So by following God’s commands as we have detailed in this message, we are being obedient by “making the horse ready for the day of battle” but trusting that God alone is in control. For that reason we should follow Jesus’ example in times of trouble and pray. Ephesians 6 states that the battle for our souls is fought in the heavenly realms. Luke 22:31 gives us a reminder that Satan wants to harm us as he asked Jesus to sift Peter like wheat. We are further reminded in I Peter 5:8 that Satan prowls the earth like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Therefore, prayer is paramount in our journey.

**Summary**

So we love our prodigals unconditionally and continuously, realizing that loving them unconditionally does not mean we trust them unconditionally. We love them in the fullest way, which is protecting them in their youth and pointing them to the Word of God for guidance. We love them by modeling our faith, by denying ourselves, and living out a life of serving and loving Jesus in a more deep and intimate way. Motivated by our love for Christ, we trust in God more and more, enough to discipline our children in a way that optimizes their chances for righteousness and holiness. Every step of the way we place our trust in Him by staying on our knees, knowing that He is Lord of all, He is in control, He is good, and He is enough.

**Main Principles:**

* **The love for our Prodigals is unconditional, while trusting our Prodigals is conditional or earned.**
* **Our model for parenting is God’s parenting model for us**
  + **Instruct them in the Word.**
  + **Model to our children the love we have for Christ by a life lived trusting the Lord.**
  + **Love them enough to discipline them and allow pain and consequences to grow them in righteousness.**
  + **Pray for them.**
* **The Lord disciplines those he loves and punishes everyone he accepts as a son (legitimate child).**
* **Jesus shows us love in it’s fullness as we are to be shepherds guarding our helpless flock unconditionally as well as disciplining them with a dividing sword for their own growth and walk with Christ.**
* **We are not judged on outcomes but in obedience to God’s commands.**