**The Plan**

**Prodigal Message 19**

**Weekly Scripture memory verse:**

**Hebrews 12:1** Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

*Dan and Brenda, after no children of their own and two failed adoption attempts, 2 children from Russia ,aged 9 and 11, almost fell in their lap and they felt it was God at work. A few years later…*

“*It wasn’t because we weren’t looking for help, I think we were looking in every direction that we could, from counselors to lawyers to policemen. Sometimes we found sympathetic ears, but often people didn’t really know what to do or say. It was very frustrating and very lonely to be in that situation. I knew that our family was totally out of control. It felt like I had two full-time jobs and the second job was almost like war. I never knew if any of my family would be there when I came home from work. Sometimes the boys were taking off and Brenda got to the point that she wanted to leave too.*

*I could see that the wheels were falling off of this thing and I didn’t have any more answers. I got to the point where I recognized I didn’t have any control. That was a hard and scary place. I realized God didn’t want me to have a sense of control, and I had to decide if I could really trust him with my life”…*

**…Dan and Brenda came to Prodigal. They needed a Plan.**

**Introduction**

The commonality of people who walk through the doors leading to the Prodigal ministry is that they have a Prodigal. However, the overwhelming desire they share is to have a “Plan”. Please note : “*if you like where you are, then keep doing what you are doing*.” The motivation for almost every person that walks through the doors of the Prodigal ministry is they reach a bottom where they are sick and tired of being sick and tired. They are searching for someone who understands and for a plan that will eliminate chaos and restore order in their lives.

A good plan will do that and much much more. This week will focus on how to develop just such a “Plan”.

From the outset you must realize that **a Plan is primarily for you,** **not your prodigal**. However shocking or troublesome that seems , you must realize that you can not control your prodigal’s response to your plan. It will almost certainly bring them life if they obey but you can’t control their obedience, only your obedience. If your plan is scripturally based and processed soundly in community then all you have to do is be obedient and follow this plan, your own plan, and *it will be successful.* A plan can be successful even if the prodigal does not respond as you desire and stays on a destructive path. The plan’s purpose is for you to restore order and peace in your life, family, and home as well as grow your faith as you depend on God for the outcome.

**What does a “good plan” produce?**

As leaders in the Prodigal ministry, we have prayed hard and long about what fruit a good plan would produce and what “victories” we feel God would want the participants to take with them into the world as they depart the ministry. We have defined those goals clearly as listed and explained below.

* **Hope** and belief in Jesus Christ.
  + God has given us hope in one entity alone and that is in the person and godhead of Jesus Christ.
  + Each person should be able to give their story of grace verbally and as clearly and simply as possible. We ask each person to write out their individual stories so that it is clear and understandable. We must stand ready to give an account of the hope we have in Jesus Christ. (I Peter 3:15)
* **Deeper Relationship** with Jesus
  + Manifest by greater faith and trust in God
  + Belief that God is in control, good, and enough
* **Personal Mission Statement** (PMS) that is Biblically sound
  + Focused centrally on God’s glory , rather than our own
  + Simple
* **A PLAN!**
  + **Minimize chaos** through reasonable boundaries and enforced consequences
  + **Model’s Godly leadership**
    - Shows your faith in God above all else
  + **Provides the optimal recovery environment** for your Prodigal to come home

**When Do You “NEED”a Plan?**

It is hard to envision any task that is undertaken that does not benefit from a well thought out plan**.** The answer is **“Now!”** Everyone should have a plan for their life, even if they are not in Prodigal chaos. Before you get out of bed tomorrow morning ask yourself this question. “Why am I getting up today?” or “What is my purpose today?”

A good plan evaluates where you are now and envisions where you want to go. A successful plan anticipates all obstacles and your PMS defines your goal also helps you navigate your choices along the way. Your PMS defines your choices in dealing with the troubles and obstacles you face along the way. Your PMS reflects your character and values so that must be defined to help you make tough decisions.

You might want to gain power and influence today. However you might decide that it is best to glorify God. If you choose the latter then you begin to focus on people and relationships and service instead of things and being served. You focus on others instead of self. Your life just looks different and you make your choices based on your beliefs.

That PMS not only helps you navigate your entire life, it defines your plan for parenting. We believe that the best plan restores order and provides a safe and loving environment, by placing following and glorifying Jesus above all else. The need for a plan is even more obviousl and pressing when trouble strikes. Chaos calls for restoration of order and order is restored with a good plan. So if you don’t have a plan then you should develop one immediately.

**When are you “READY” for a plan?**

You are ready for a plan **when you can finally handle the TRUTH**. There is a truth about your prodigal, about yourself and about God that must be realized.

The truth about your prodigal is that this is their journey. Their journey is unique, as is your own. We all individually have a race marked out for us . (Hebrews 12:1 and Eph. 2:10) We are only in control of one journey, our own. We are to raise our children in their youth to be responsible, but how they handle those truths in adulthood is solely their responsibility and not yours. You can not control their decisions or their safety no matter how hard you try. Once these truths are realized, then you can appropriately give your Prodigal to God and allow them to reap what they sow, for their own benefit. We learned last week that process is called “laying your Isaac down”.

So you are not ready for a plan until you can truly lay your Isaac down. We learned that being able to do that requires that you hit your own bottom. You must realize that your current plan is not working and you have come to the end of yourself.

Once realized that your plan is non-existent, inadequate, or failing, then you must identify what it wrong plan. In the overwhelming majority of instances the plan fails because of control issues and lack of trust in God.

This lesson comes near the end of our curriculum in hopes that the principles learned and the work you have put in will have led you to the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2). Hopefully this process will lead you to the understanding of your responsibility. You are to be a watchman (Ezekial 33:1-9) for your Prodigal, pointing our the dangers ahead and the proper path, but yet allowing pain and failure to shape your prodigal if they disregard your guidance. Hopefully you will have developed a clear understanding of the role of discipline and how such discipline is often the most loving thing you can do. Only through such transformation can you trust God fully with your Prodigal. Therefore, when you realize that God is supreme, that He is in control, that He has a plan for you and your prodigal, that He is good, and that He is enough, no matter what circumstances you face, then and only then are you finally ready for a plan.

**Elements of a Good Plan**

As we have mentioned at length, your purpose determines your plan. We believe in the Prodigal ministry that the best plan is based on Truth, as defined by the Word of God. So a good plan must be scripturally guided. (II Tim 3:16) Once a plan is developed it must be processed carefully by wise Biblical counsel. (prov 15:22) Such counsel must be chosen wisely. This counsel must share a priority for God’s word but it is critical they they also have Prodigal experience. Even the wisest of Biblical scholars may struggle if they have no experience in dealing with addiction, manipulation, and the Prodigal chaos.

A good plan follows the well-known “KISS” principle. “Keep It Simple Stupid!”. Such simple plans are objective and measurable. The great part of such simple, reasonable plans are that they are easy to understand and follow. The bad part is that simple, obhjective plans point out clearly when boundaries are crossed and therefore when painful consequences must be carried out.

Finally it should be pointed out that plans are more likely to be implemented and successful when all responsible parties are on the same page. One of our most seasoned leaders humorously, but all too truthfully, pointed out that “Prodigals always catch the slowest gazelle”. In other words, if there is a weak enabler in your herd, the Prodigal will identify them in an instant and work feverishly to manipulate them to undermine the plan and the accountability it contains.

**Plan Development**

We have recently discovered over the time Prodigal that although plans are highly sought after, they are difficult for many to develop. Therefore, we have seen a much greater success in plan development when our leadership leads the way in helping you understand your chaos and develop your plan.

After completing newcomer and open group, we have collected data on your personal story of grace, your personal mission statement, and your plan questionnaire or worksheet. As you integrate from an open to a closed group, your closed group leader will process all of this information and compile it with their own personal and purposeful information gathering from your first few weeks in closed group. Putting all of this together they will put all of your information on a “working diagram” that they will present to you and to your closed group. That diagram will initially be a picture of your current “chaos”. We have found great clarity and help in being able to visually process your issues.

Your closed leader and fellow experienced closed group participants will help you process your situation Biblically, compassionately, and honestly. Issues to be considered will be factual and tangible and will include prodigal privileges provided, prodigal actions, rather than words or promises. (I John 3:18) it will also be critical to review honestly your fears and obstacles to developing and implementing your plan.

It is helpful to define boundaries and just what boundary violations are “deal killers” which demand the sternest of consequences that we call “nuclear”. Nuclear consequences are usually defined as withdrawal of all financial support and housing. It is almost always comes after a significant period of trying lesser consequences with repeated rebellion. There is not a black and white clear line in this journey and that is why processing these issues in a loving supportive but honest closed group setting is critically important to make sure decisions are Biblically sound.

Such a nuclear consequence is the final and most severe consequence in any plan, so it must only be triggered when such punishment fits the crime. Such crimes might include the commitment of a felony, drug abuse, arrest or lying. Lying, at first glance, might be out of place on this list. However when we counsel parents, siblings, or children of Prodigals, we make the point that lying might be the worst infraction of all, as it undermines trust faster than any other act. For example, it is easier to tolerate a admitted relapse in a repentant Prodigal than repeated lies, denial, and manipulation. When giving wise counsel we give “direction, not directions”. The specific boundaries, consequences and details of the Plan are determined by the Participants themselves after considering wise Biblical counsel.

**Spouse Plans**

Spouse plans look different from plans involving parents and their children due to the marriage covenant itself. Marriage is regarded in the highest esteem by God as it models the “marriage” or relationship that Christ has with each one of us in the church. (Eph. 5) We live in a world where the sanctity of marriage is increasingly minimized. Current popular worldview would say that you deserve to be happy, so if you are not happy in your marriage you should divorce and find someone else that makes you happy. God looks at marriage much differently. He sees marriage as a union of two people to become one. That union molds and and shapes each partner to be better because of the sharpening relationship. Full discussion is beyond the scope of this lesson. However, suffice it to say that there are deal killers in a marriage that can lead to separation or even divorce but this is the small exception and a last resort in God’s eyes. Please see Watermark’s position on *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage* which is posted on their website for further information. For those participants with spousal Prodigals, wise counsel among prodigal leadership is offered in working through a plan and such a plan is often developed with the help of our marriage ministry. Suffice it to say that Plans that define boundaries and enforce consequences in a marriage covenant are complex and they cannot be generalized here. They must be worked out individually with great care and prayer.

**Expectations**

Keep in mind that in your prodigal journey, expectations are only planned disappointments. What we think should happen and the timetable on which they should occure rarely if every occur. We have one human perspective but God is good and is juggling the Universe in his hands. Trust Him!

We should always have high hopes and optimism, as all things are possible with God. (Matt. 19:26) However it would be irresponsible not to have a healthy understanding of the realities of dealing with Prodigals and addiction. Relapse is common. It is common for parents to naturally assume that once a plan is delivered, the Prodigal will test the shallow waters for a while before escalating to the possible nuclear consequences. Unfortunately this is often untrue. That is why a plan must not be presented until the ultimate consequences can be enforced. The “nuclear option” often presents itself much sooner than anticipated.

**Plan “Pearls”**

* Make the consequences commensurate to the offense
* If the crime is not doing work, then a consequence to do more work is usually not helpful (loss of privilege would be better choice here)
* Consequence of “getting a job” is more difficult to monitor than simply setting the need to provide a certain rent due or payment on a certain day
  + In regard to the payment is it best to specify a certain dollar amount rather than a % of paycheck
* Keep plans simple, objective and measurable
* ALWAYS PROVIDE A WAY “HOME”
  + “Home” does not mean your physical home but it means reconciliation of relationship. Just like the Prodigal parable, God was waiting at the window ready to welcome his prodigal “home” , if only he had come to the end of himself and was truly repentant. You need to always let them know you love them. Love should be unconditional, just like the Heavenly Father’s love for us. Trust, however, must be earned. You desire a relationship, but not on inappropriate terms.

**Questions to ask when analyzing your plan?**

* Can I really monitor this plan ?
  + Drug testing? Etc…
* Can I really enforce this plan ?
* Am I tired just from reading this plan ?
* What message does my plan send to my prodigal ?
  + Capable or Incompetent ?
  + Our prodigal usually can do much much more than we imagine

The answers to these questions should indicate whether your plan can be enforced and followed. It should be simple and not require an inordinate amount of effort on your part. The plan should tell your prodigal that he or she is capable of carrying it out and that you believe in them.

**Stand Firm or Stand Down?**

Most prodigal parents or participants have cried wolf too many times. They have had past plans that were ill conceived and/or could not be carried out due to fear and lack of trust. You must be honest about your fears and overcome them or they will destroy the plan. The greatest fear of any parent or loves ones of a Prodigal is the fear of death. If you are paralyzed by the fear of death of your prodigal, then most prodigals will use that to their advantage, as painful as that truth is. You must deal with the reality that you can not control the life and death of your prodigal. Once you trust God with your child then you can move on with your plan.

There is a point where your prodigal will stop listening if you keep throwing out empty threats. So if you are not ready to implement your plan, it is best to wait until you are. Just as your plan helps your Prodigal hit their bottom, you too must first hit your own bottom before you are truly willing to develop a good plan and implement it once and for all.

You must envision your prodigal triggering the harshest consequence in your plan and if you are not willing to enforce it without question, then you are not ready to present your plan.

On a positive note, implementation and obedience to a plan that puts God in control and places your trust in him alone brings God glory. Such faithfulness models belief and commitment to Jesus Christ. I would encourage you to make developing your plan and following it a top priority.

**Remember Dan And Brenda ?**

Well, they developed a plan and with the help of their Prodigal ministry family, they painfully, but faithfully followed it. There are no guarantees of outcome in your Prodigal journey and in life, but as you read below….Be encouraged.

*…The hardest thing was asking Nathan to leave our home. I could see it coming for almost a year before it happened, as we watched the direction of their lives careening toward self-destruction. I asked him to leave and that was the hardest thing for me….He left the house with very little money, no job, no driver’s license (he had never learned to drive), no car. He walked out of the door with a suitcase. It was not an easy morning watching him pack. … I feel like we have learned that God really can help you live in the midst of turmoil, doing what he has called you to do. Before we came to Prodigal, we allowed our boys to take control of our lives. I was not available to the Lord or living victoriously. It was consuming me. I believe the Lord has taught me things that I would never have learned otherwise. God has also shown me that letting our son suffer and letting him reach his bottom is part of loving him.*

*…Now we can see that our suffering was God allowing us to go through a process that helped us learn who he was and who we were.*

*We had gotten to the point where we could say, “Lord, whatever it takes for him to get where you want him to be…I’m all in.”*

*…Nathan began this nine month journey of absolute, utter failure in everything he did.. He was fired from jobs. He lived with friends and was repeatedly kicked out. Within nine months he was on the streets, destitute…*

*Nathan was finally desperate enough to listen to someone, maybe for the first time in his life. He chose to go into rehab. He went in as a non-believer, but three months later, he listened to the voice of the Lord and accepted Christ as his savior.*

*When we came into Prodigal it was a great reassurance to hear that this could actually be about me. I realized that my boys weren’t changing at all, but I was. I was learning things I had never learned before. I was learning more about who God was and seeing myself more clearly. The most amazing part is seeing a new baby Christian, our son Nathan, ministering to other people. How does that happen?*

*Excerpts from Dan and Brenda Nale’s testimoney (written at a time when their youngest son, Luke, was still on the streets and living a rebellious prodigal lifestyle)*

Later in their journey….with Luke, their youngest son, now in the same rehab Nathan had been in and Dan recovering from emergency surgery to repair a fractured hip, Dan updated prodigal leadership via email the following.

*…Seriously it is amazing to see Ephesians 3:20 in this. Last evening Brenda contacted Breaking Free to inform Luke ( our youngest prodigal). While in the program they keep the guys on a pretty short leash, for obvious reasons. Normally the guys get a 5-10 minute call each weekend to a family member. (Imagine ANY 21 year old restricted to 10 minutes a week). Luke has been there 11 months which is miraculous. Luke got a 20 minute call to me last night and we talked about how he was doing and He asked Me advice on how to better process some of the accountability things he struggles with in the program. Then at 18 minutes he stops and asks if he can pray for me! Were it not for a broken leg, I might have fallen out of bed. Then for two of the more memorable moments of my life, my prodigal son prayed a beautiful prayer for his dad.*

*Then today I got to share with one of my nurses, our prodigal journey.*

*God is good. All the time.*

**The PLAN is for YOU.**

**… but it just might bring your prodigal “home”. Trust God by making your Plan and faithfully following it in obedience. Trust the only One who is trustworthy and the only One who is in control.**