

Loving Your Prodigal

PRODIGAL MESSAGE #12¹

Memory verse of the week:

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

One Monday night, I was asked to speak to the Dad’s Club of a local high school, all of whom had sons playing athletics at the school. Each week, these dads met together with the head football coach to review the previous week’s game. There was always a big turnout and tonight was no exception. The head coach was a Christian, and, for this particular week, he had asked my pastor and I to address the group concerning the subject of parenting. So, I outlined the core Prodigal Ministry principles of setting boundaries and enforcing consequences in light of the priority of helping our kids grow to become responsible, God-fearing adults. I also reminded them that they were not in control—not of their children and not even of their own circumstances. Not surprisingly, several dads either questioned that final statement or were downright offended by it.

In any case, a very pleasant and sincere Christian dad approached me after my talk and asked for my advice: “My son struggles at school and is a little awkward socially. He doesn’t have a lot of friends. This football team is all he has. It’s his identity. He is becoming more rebellious at home and I know he uses pot occasionally. I am helping him out with his homework and hiring tutors, but he doesn’t even appear to be trying.

“I am torn. On one hand, I hear what you’re saying. I should let him suffer the consequences of his actions. But, if he flunks a course, I can see him being kicked off the football team and becoming more depressed and falling into a downward spiral of drugs and harmful coping mechanisms! On the other hand, I can see that if I rescue him, he will think that what he is doing is working and then will have no reason to discontinue his drug use and rebellion. I love him so much, but I don’t know what to do! Can you help me?”

Introduction

We have learned over the last few weeks that emotions are both God-given and powerful, but they should not dictate our decisions. Loving your prodigal is tough because it often seems like they’re our enemies! Mark Twain famously (and humorously) defined the difficulty of raising teenagers, saying, “When a youngster turns 13, put him in a pickle barrel, nail the lid shut and feed him through a knothole. Then, when he turns 16, plug up the knothole.” As ridiculous as that sounds, we all laugh because there are days when our job as parents seems impossible. When a prodigal is in your life, emotions run the gamut from guilt to anger to sadness to fear—and all points in between. As parents of prodigals, we often vacillate wildly between loving them too much or not feeling love for them at all, as they emotionally—and perhaps even physically—attack us and drive our homes and family lives crazy. We vacillate between anger and pity, fear and heartbreak.

So, do prodigals make child-raising exponentially more difficult? Yes, but as difficult as it may be, we are still called to love them. For many people, defining what love should look like toward one’s prodigal is what drives them to the Prodigal Ministry. Jesus states that we can be identified as His followers by how we love one another (John 13:35). This includes everyone:

¹ The video version of this message is available at: <https://youtu.be/GOWNGuMOP3E>.

friends, enemies, and prodigals (Luke 6:27–36). Prodigals may not even realize it when they come through the door of our homes, but the relationship between discipline and love is one that they desperately need to understand and experience.

And, as always, the answers to our prodigal difficulties are found in God’s Word. The parenting principles that we will cover in this message are intended to help us navigate our erratic emotions by basing our decisions on biblical truth and wisdom rather than wildly fluctuating emotions and impulses. Consequently, biblical wisdom will help us understand that while we always love our prodigals, loving them is not the same as trusting them. Unfortunately, as we are *all* sinners, we often have to learn the hard way (Proverbs 19:18–19; 29:19). God often loves us by disciplining us. He allows us to suffer pain in order to sharpen us and grow us closer to, and more dependent on, Him (Hebrews 12:5–11). This paradigm is most helpful for those caught up prodigal chaos because by looking at how God loves each one of us, we gain insight into how we can love our prodigals well.

So, in this message, we will explore how we can do that best. Even 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 should love them well.

Child development

A detailed review of normal and abnormal child development is beyond the scope of this message, as we have neither the time nor the expertise to review this topic comprehensively. However, there are basic principles of such development that are important to keep in mind. 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 safe and secure even when they are disciplined.

From 18 months to 2 years of age, children begin to determine their own boundaries. They explore their surroundings to determine what is their domain and what is not. And, during these times, the word “no” is used often and repeatedly. It is easy to see that we are loving when we say “no” (or “No!”) to our 2 year old grabbing an electrical cord or attempting to walk out into the street. During the early stages of their development, we are responsible *for* them—specifically, for their safety, security, and well-being.

When our children reach adolescence, our “no” is just as loving, even though we may get more pushback. “No’s” shape our children and allow them to reap the consequences of their decisions (Proverbs 11:18; Galatians 6:7). This principle is true for us just as much as it is for our children and our prodigals.

As they begin to mature, it is both normal and healthy for our children to question the values of those around them. Such values must become *their own* values. At some point in their development, therefore, we must adjust our parenting paradigms. We must change from being their security and from being responsible *for* them to being responsible *to* them. As believers, our job is simply to teach them proper Christian values, model those values, and allow them to suffer the consequences of any poor value choices. But remember, we must allow them to experience the consequences of good values choice as well! Allowing them the freedom to explore, make their own choices, and receive feedback is healthy. Such an allowance is an aspect of loving them well.

Development gone awry

So, what causes this normal, healthy process of development go awry? There are several possibilities. There could be physiological factors such as ADD and learning disabilities, or

psychological factors such as bipolar disorder and schizophrenia, which inhibit the proper processing of information and stimuli. Such issues are beyond the child's ability to control and can be addressed with medication or specialized psychiatric counseling. No doubt, external factors such as family problems, stress, peer pressure, and parenting style may negatively impact development and maturity. And, of course, addictive behavior complicates any situation. Finally, demonic influence may be a factor impeding one's healthy development (2 Corinthians 4:4; 11:14–15; Ephesians 2:1–3; 6:12).

God's parenting model: Unconditional love

We are not in control of our prodigal chaos, but we can control both ourselves and the decisions we make which impact our children's (or prodigals') development and maturity. God's model of love for us is that it should be *unconditional*—pure and simple. As Romans 5:8 tells us, “But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” And Ephesians 2:4–7 further explains God's love for us: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.” Finally, Paul says in Romans 8:38–39, “For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

These verses clearly state that there is nothing that we can do to make God love us any more or any less. Now, the Old Testament is replete with examples of Israel's rebellion and of the consequences that they suffered as a result. Oftentimes, those consequences were harsh, but they were always lovingly purposed to bring Israel's focus back to God, in whom there is true joy and life. For example, God promises Israel in Deuteronomy 31:8, “It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.”

Jesus Himself demonstrates the ultimate picture of God's love for us by His death on the cross (Romans 5:8). Despite the Jews' rejection of Him as Messiah and despite being nailed to the cross by sinful humankind, Jesus cried out in His last moments for the Father to forgive us because we didn't understand what we were doing (Luke 23:34). *That* is a love that is difficult to comprehend.

Therefore, if God's example for us is unconditional love, then we should parent with that same unconditional love—though we are still sinners—to the best of our abilities. Our love for our children as well as for our brothers and sisters in Christ should be consistent—that is consistently unconditional.

God has repeatedly given us clear instruction in Scripture. Obviously, He would prefer us simply to obey these guidelines and, thus, avoid the hardship and pain that results when we go our own way. Our lives would be much less painful, more simple, and more fruitful if we could only follow His commandments. However, most of us have a way that seems right to us but in the end doesn't turn out well (Proverbs 14:12). If we do *not* obey God, then there will be consequences (Proverbs 13:13; Ephesians 6:1–3). It is critical to note that God doesn't enforce such consequences because He is enraged at us, His beloved children in Christ; He does so because He is wrathful toward unrighteousness and the spiritual powers of darkness. **God enforces consequences because He loves and cares for us.** That should be a powerful reminder and example to us as we lovingly enforce consequences to our prodigals.

Parenting applications for today

A key concept of loving our prodigals unconditionally is to not just love them enough to *be their friends* but to love them enough to *shape their character*. It is easy to give gifts to our children in an attempt to buy their love through material possessions. Such gifts, however, are shallow and fleeting. Godly parents realize that what matters most is a heart and soul that seeks to glorify God above all else. Such a heart is ultimately a gift from God, but our responsibility as parents is to passionately teach and model to our children that God-glorifying priority. The Apostle John well outlines this God-centered perspective, saying, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:15–17).

Those whom we parent and disciple are looking at our *actions*, not our words. As John tells us again: “Dear children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18; see also 1 Corinthians 4:20; James 1:22). And Jesus Himself is our example, for He said, “But I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31).

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

– Larry Crabb²

How do we become more godly?

Jesus is our living example as He personally lived and walked on earth. As Jesus told His disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). It is very difficult to follow a set of commands—that is, to be godly—unless you truly realize that the Author of those commands deeply loves and cares for you and that those commands are for your ultimate good.

There are things that I do for my wife that I would not do for anyone else. Although I remain selfish on many fronts, I am least selfish and most servant-hearted toward my wife. Why? Because I know that she loves me and has proven such love over and over again. Thus, out of love, I am compelled to serve her—not out of obligation. This is true of any relationship, including our relationship with God in Christ.

We get to know God’s love for us through His Word and works and, especially, through the example of God incarnate, Jesus Christ. However, our faith and trust grow even more powerfully when we practically apply Christ’s commandments to our lives—that is, not only accepting Him as our Savior but also **making Him the Lord of our lives**. As Jesus says in John 14:15, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Furthermore, making Him the Lord of our lives is the act of depending on Him in and for all things and then watching Him show up. His evident work in our lives and His love for us allows us to trust and love Him more and more as we “exercise” our faith. Thus, **the more you realize how much God in Christ truly loves you, the more godly you will become**.

What does “love” look like for us today?

Love looks like *discipleship*. We prioritize God’s Word in our lives as we study it daily and encourage our prodigals to do the same. We make it a priority. The Apostle Paul highlights the importance of God’s Word in 2 Timothy 3:16–17: “All Scripture is breathed out by God and

² Larry Crabb and Kevin Huggins, *Parenting Adolescents* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1989), 258.

profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” And, in Ephesians 6:4, Paul commands: “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and **instruction of the Lord.**” Such a commitment is also outlined at length in Deuteronomy 6:6–9.

As we mentioned earlier with regard to in 1 John 3:18, God want us to worship him with *actions*, not just words. And He sees when we our worship is hollow, as He says with regard to the people of Israel, “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13). So, in Romans 12:1, Paul urges that our spiritual worship should take the form of presenting our bodies “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” In other words, our entire being and every aspect of our lives are to be offered in submission and service to God. Our children, and really anyone whom we disciple, see through idle talk; they are truly impacted, above all else, by how we live.

What does “love” look like in its fullness?

True, godly “love” requires both grace and truth, love and discipline. And Jesus is a perfect example of such a paradigm (see John 1:17)—He is both **lamb**, exemplifying grace and love, and **lion**, exemplifying truth and discipline (or judgment).

Jesus the Lamb

- John 1:29: “The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘**Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!**’”
- John 3:16–17: “For God so loved the world, that **he gave his only Son**, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order **that the world might be saved through him.**”
- Matthew 11:28–30: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for **I am gentle and lowly in heart**, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”
- See also Revelation 5:6–14; 7:17.

Jesus the Lion

- Matthew 10:34–39: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. **I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.** For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. **Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.**”
- Revelation 5:2, 5: “‘Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?’ ... ‘Behold, **the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered**, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.’”
- See also Revelation 19:11–21.

Hebrews 12:1–11 parenting: Love and discipline

Just as Jesus serves as an exemplary paradigm of love and discipline, so also does Hebrews 12:1–11 shed light on God’s view on how we should parent—that is, love and discipline—our own children today.

Hebrews 12:1 reads, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” We are to be encouraged by the heroes of the faith whose lives serve as models for us to follow (see Hebrews 11:1–40). Their lives were characterized by faith and action—not by mere words. They lived with a purpose and greatly glorified God in that pursuit. From this verse (Hebrews 12:1), we also cannot miss that we have a race (*life*) specifically marked out for us to run. As Ephesians 2:10 similarly informs us, we have good works planned out for us to do. Our race no doubt includes—as our highest priority—loving and discipling our children and all those whom we care for.

Verse 2 continues, “...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus is our example of how to run our race in exemplary fashion. He never wavered from His purpose, and we should follow that example (see also Paul’s charge and example in 2 Timothy 4:1–8). And when we stumble, we should take heart that He sits at the right hand of the Father interceding for us (Hebrews 7:25; 10:12, 14, 19–22).

Verse 3 says, “Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.” As we continue to look to Jesus, it is encouraging that He suffered everything not only for us to live with Him for eternity but also to comfort us in our earthly struggles. He knows that we grow weary and He cares about everything we’re going through (see also Hebrews 2:14–18; 4:14–16).

Finally, verses 4–11 read, “In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. **For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons.** For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

These verses contain so many parenting principles which we must not overlook. Jesus knows more than anyone the struggles that we face—and *He cares!* Sometimes we struggle and face hardship simply because we live in a fallen world where sin still exists. Jesus navigated the very same circumstances, though perfectly and without sin (Hebrews 4:15). He endured hardship and—although perfect deity as God the Son—He learned obedience through what He suffered and, thus, was made perfect (Hebrews 5:7–8; see also Luke 2:52). And so, we too can learn obedience and be sanctified perfected and through the suffering and hardship that we face (Romans 5:3–5; James 1:2–4).

We can also face hardship as God wills to sharpen us *in love*. When we appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10), God knows that we want to hear, “Well done, good

and faithful servant. ... Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 23:21, 23). God knows that we struggle against sin, and because He loves us and wants us to be righteous and share in His holiness, He disciplines us as His sons and daughters. That should encourage us in times of hardship! God wants peace for us, but such peace comes from hardship and discipline that is painful to endure.

These truths concerning Hebrews 12:1–11 should not only encourage us as children of God but also should serve as models of how we parent our own children. God perfectly models love and discipline toward us, and we should seek to love and discipline our own children in the same manner. But, if these parenting principles of “tough love” seem harsh at times, I urge you to think of the opposite approach, which Proverbs 29:15 describes well: “The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother.”

There is nothing sadder than a child who is neglected due to the selfishness of someone who does not want to “burdened” by the responsibilities of parenthood. Just as tragic are parents who love and idolize their children but neglect 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 directing them toward God’s holiness and righteousness. So, above all, it is critical, in our role as parents and disciple-makers, that we know *how* to love and discipline our children and those in our care.

Outcomes

So, if we do everything right, are we guaranteed mature and responsible children who walk with God? Can we ensure that our “children” will not become our “prodigals”? *You already know the answer.* There can be no guarantee for the outcome of another person, including your child. Each one of us has a unique race that is marked out for us by God. Why, then, are we encouraged to parent in such a difficult way—one with no guarantee of a positive outcome? *We parent in such a way because it is God’s will and because it is an opportunity to obey Him, trust Him, and grow in character.* Fortunately, it also provides the best chance and environment for our children to walk with God themselves!

Unconditional love does not guarantee unconditional blessing. But, the good news is that *there is one guarantee you can count on.* If you fully understand and accept God’s discipline yourself, and follow His example in parenting your own children, then you will become trained in righteousness and peace and will share in God’s holiness in Christ Jesus for all eternity. And so, the author of Hebrews ends these verses with an encouraging summary of his purpose: “Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed” (Hebrews 12:12–13).

God knows that the race He has marked out for us is hard and painful and that we often grow weary. So, He reminds us in Hebrews 12:1–13 that when we are challenged by the blows of pain and loss, we can be strengthened by truth. We have a choice. We can give into the hardship and get beaten down, becoming crippled by despair and, thus, of little use for God’s purposes in the world. *Or* we can choose to be trained by such hardship—to become more Christlike because of it. As parents, we can give in to our children and rescue them from the consequences of their actions and, thus, rob them of the refinement therein. *Or* we can choose discipline our children in love as God calls us to do.

Remember this: a decision that prematurely and inappropriately rescues our children could lead them toward emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and possibly even physical harm. Although without discipline or consequences may *seem* like love, sadly, it is quite the opposite

(Proverbs 5:23; 14:12; 19:18–19; 29:15). But, rest in the fact you are *not* responsible for outcomes—only the Lord can. As Proverbs 21:31 states, “The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord.”

Conclusion

Because outcomes are up to God alone, we should, once again, follow Jesus’ example in times of trouble—and **pray**. For, we battle against the “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12), and our “adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). **Prayer**, therefore, is paramount in every step of our journey (Matthew 6:9–13; 26:41; Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17; 1 John 5:14–15; see also Prodigal Message #16: Prayer).

So what about the struggling man at the Dad’s Club who asked me for advice? God, in His grace, gave me an answer in that moment. I admitted to the man that either scenario which he brought up could potentially play out. In either scenario, his son could spiral downward and turn more toward drugs. I told him that it appeared as if he was trying to make a decision that he felt offered the best chance of success or “victory.” He was trying to control an outcome. So, I reminded him that victory (or an outcome) rests in the Lord alone and encouraged him to make a decision that he felt would glorify God.

I emphasized that it’s a long race and, ultimately, he only had to answer to God. God was asking him to trust Him with his son, and he could do that by pointing his son to Scriptures which encouraged purity and identity in Christ. Furthermore, the man could be obedient by modeling faithfulness in all aspects of his life—his son would see that. I then asked him to think about the long-term implications of both choices. He could rescue his son and look the other way, because he loved his son enough to minimize his current pain and distress. Or he could enforce consequences for his son’s lazy, reckless, and irresponsible behavior, trusting that God loved his son even more than he himself loved his son.

As I often do, I tried to encourage the man to think past the current crisis to the more important long term principles to consider. What message did the man want to send to his son? Did he want to model trust in God or trust in Himself? Could he trust that painful but appropriate consequences might grow the character and faith of his son, but also his own character and faith but as well? I encouraged him to seek wise counsel in answering these questions and to wrestle with his decision in community. Finally, I offered to pray for the man and he accepted. After our prayer, he thanked me and repeated how hard his decision was as he walked off.

I never heard from him again.

So, what path would you have chosen? What choices will you make today?

CLOSED GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Day 1

Unfortunately, many of us can relate to the story of the man at the Dad's Club. What are some of the false assumptions and idols that both the father and his son had? How could they have identified and eliminated these idols in order to be more certain of making the proper choices ?

Day 2

Do you have a problem with the love for our rebellious prodigals being "unconditional"? How did this message support or challenge your conception of "loving your prodigal"?

Day 3

The key to being an effective parent is becoming more godly. What is your plan to become more godly? What steps have you taken recently in this regard? How has your plan succeeded or failed?

Day 4

How has Jesus been the Lamb to you? How has He been the Lion? In which role do you view Him most of the time? Do you love him equally in either role?

Day 5

Do you still struggle with God's discipline in your own life? Do you struggle with discipline in your prodigal's life? Why or why not?

Day 6

After studying this week's message and answering the daily questions, how has your view of loving your prodigal unconditionally changed? Are you totally comfortable trusting the outcome of your prodigal's life to God alone? Why or why not?

NOTES