**There’s a New Sheriff In Town**

**Prodigal Message 20**

* **Weekly Scripture memory verse:**

**John 14:15** *If you love me you will obey what I have commanded*

*Ginny and I sat our son and daughter down and made it crystal clear that the cars they would be given the privilege to use upon their 16th birthdays would be sold if they were ever caught drinking and driving. They understood that such a car was a great gift and not a right. They were fortunate to receive it but there were rules that must be followed.*

*A few months later we received a phone call one night from our son. He had a flat tire and needed help sorting it all out. I went immediately to help him. He was appreciative and unusually talkative and I was actually enjoying the bonding experience. However, at one point we were both laying on the ground manipulating the jack and I smelled the unmistakable smell of alcohol on his breath. Every parent of a prodigal knows that know in your stomach that was immediately present. A pang that elevates you above the mundane acts you are carrying out to a place rapidly trying to figure out implications, the pain, and the reality.*

*When the spare had been put in place and our job was complete, I asked him to get inside the truck where I joined him. I then told him I knew he had been drinking. I reminded him of my promise to sell the truck in this circumstance, but selfishly and shamefully, I had thought of the chaos this would cause and how much it would upset Ginny. I rationalized the burden this would place on her driving him to school and on us in driving him to the events he was participating in. I also wanted to be his friend and let him know I loved him. So I looked him in they eye and said that I still meant what I said, but I was going to give him* ***one more chance****. The “next time” this happened I would sell the truck. I made this decision in isolation in the spur of the emotional moment. Selfishly I didn’t need this problem and I wanted to gain his obedience kindness and mercy. Sadly at this point in my life my decision was made by emotion as I was not led by the Truth of God’s word or by community. What my son concluded easily and logically was that I didn’t mean what I said and that he had power that he never fully realized until that moment.*

**Introduction**

To many prodigal parents, this story rings all too familiar. You may have given similar ultimatums, only to give in when the going gets tough. All too often we are like the boy in the famous story who “cried wolf” too often. If so, your prodigal may be at the point where they don’t take your threats and boundaries seriously anymore, and for good reason. They have been empowered by enablement. You can be assured that they will fight hard, long, and ruthlessly to maintain their addiction, whatever it may be. They love you, but you stand between them and their idol.

This message is only for those who are finally ready to deliver a plan obediently and faithfully. Once you finally have a solid Biblical plan that is developed and processed with wise counsel, you must deliver it in a way that that will get your prodigal’s attention. Your deliever must be meaningful, powerful, and unwavering.

The most common reason a plan fails is simply a failure to enforce it. You must overcome having your prodigals see you as the old sheriff, who lets things slide, who seems scared, and relents under pressure. In order to be successful, you must become the *“New Sheriff In Town*”.

**Why Do We Need a “New” Sheriff?**

Let’s look a little closer at the reasons you need to be the “New Sheriff”, a sheriff who finally means business. The “old sheriff” did not do a great job of enforcing the rules. Let’s look at possible reasons that “sheriffs” struggle.

* Fear
  + If the sheriff is paralyzed by fear then it will be impossible to do a good job. There can be fear of the prodigal themselves as they are a real threat at times both physically and emotionally. More commonly there is a fear that the consequences will result in pain that is too hard to bear. That pain can be in the form of lost opportunities, lost or damaged relationships, loss of education, or felony arrest and incarceration. The greatest fear is death.
* Too close to the Prodigal
  + Parents often want to be friends rather than parents. Good Sheriffs cant be concerned about friendships with the people they enforce consequences upon. Our motives are pure. We love our prodigals so much that we hate to see them suffer in any way. We fear discipline will negatively impact the relationship. This is a lie from Satan as he distorts our view of what love actually is. We have learned in previous lessons that prodigals benefit from boundaries and will, in the long run, respect and love those who care enough to discipline. (Hebrews 12:7-11)
* Lost our Sense of Purpose
  + We must remember that our children/our Prodigals are not ours, but rather, God’s. We have a responsibility to them to establish healthy parenting or spousal relationships that are guided by Biblical truth. Our prodigal children are gifts from God and He wants them back! Our prodigal spouses are to be matured by the marital relationship as we sharpen each other. (Ephesians 5)
  + A Sheriff can only do his or her job if there are clear laws in place. The more clear, objective and understandable the law, the easier it is for the sheriff to do the job. Likewise, without a good and clear plan, it is impossible to be the prodigal sheriff.

Therefore, we must realize that under the “old sheriff”, there was chaos. Everyone under the care of that sheriff was in jeopardy. No one felt safe. We need a New Sheriff that will restore order and peace, and instill hope.

**Motivation to Change and become the “Sheriff” you need to be**

Motivation to change is really no different for the parent or the prodigal. Pain is our greatest motivator. Chaos cries out for change. There are two great quotes that summarize this situation well. “If you like where you are, keep doing what you are doing. “ Also, “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result”. Therefore, just like your Prodigal, you must hit your bottom to realize it is time for a change.

“*The reason why many are still troubled, still seeking, still making little forward progress is because they haven't yet come to the end of themselves. We're still trying to give orders, and interfering with God's work within us. ”*

A.W. Tozer

We must realize, however, God alone opens our eyes by His grace. Prayer is instrumental in our journey as we call on him to open our eyes.( Job 42:4-5) . Faith, Trust and Obedience are directed supernaturally by a heart change directed by the Holy Spirit. However our response to that Holy call is how we are judged, as strange as that mystery is.

*And I will give them a singleness of heart and put a new spirit within them. I will take away their stony, stubborn heart and give them a tender, responsive heart, so they will obey my decrees and regulations.* **Ezekial 36:26**

*I had heard about you with my ears but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes***. Job 42:5-6**

**New Sheriff: Job Description**

If we were going to post for the job of New Sheriff, the ideal qualifications might look something like this:

* Knowledge of God
  + Knowledge of the Law(God’s Word)
    - The Law is simply the principles found in God’s word. He has given us every principle we need to both trust him and parent well.
  + Experience with God. John 15:5 *I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.* 
    - The more intimate we know God and love him the better we will be at any job we do, including relationships with our Prodigals.
* History of dependence on God and Trust in Him
  + The more we step out in trust in God, the more we will see His love for us. We might not understand His ways and He might take longer that we like, but God promises he will deliver. (Nahum 1:7) Nothing like seeing God show up to build faith in Him.
* Clear understanding that obedience is the Sheriffs job, not outcome.
  + A good sheriff will not get overly concerned with outcomes, realizing he or she can only enforce consequences. Prov 18:1 defines our prodigals in that they quarrel against all sound wisdom. Our “bottom” is different than our Prodigals bottom. The pain that causes each one of us to respond in humble obedience is different for each person. Such a response is a gift of God’s grace alone and as a result we are only responsible for doing our jobs as parents/sheriffs.
  + **Fear of, or obsession with outcomes will paralyze parents/sheriffs**

**When Do I Accept the New Sheriff’s position?**

We should have a written plan and be committed to every single step of that plan down to the nuclear consequence of allowing them to tackle life on their own. (“laying your Isaac down”) We should accept being the new sheriff only when we are certain that we are **totally committed**. However, take heart. Abraham was not ready to sacrifice Isaac on his first introduction to God. He stumbled and sinned along the way, but he kept persevering and learning from his experiences. Over time, he grew into the man God wanted him to be. So if your fears and reservations are too much right now, then don’t despair and leave community. Just keep showing up. Be obedient to your daily spiritual disciplines and ask God to help you everyday. He has promised us this in Proverbs 8:17. *I love those who love me and those who seek me find me.*

Nahum 1:7 *The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who put their trust in Him.*

Simplistically but powerfully stated, “ You are ready when you have the right view of God.” Possibly Tozer’s most famous quote says it best.

*“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us...Worship is pure or base as the worshiper entertains high or low thoughts of God. For this reason the gravest question before the Church is always God Himself, and the most portentous fact about any man is not what he at a given time may say or do, but what he in his deep heart conceives God to be like.“*

How powerful and profound. Satan whispers in our ears every day the same lie he whispered to Eve in the garden. He whispers that God can’t be trusted. He tells us that God doesn’t truly have our best interest at heart and that we know what’s best for us. Its so easy for our sinful selfish nature to believe that lie when things don’t go as planned and take longer than we like.

However if we believe in our heart that God is truly good, totally in control, has our best interest at heart and is all we need, then we are ready to be the new sheriff in the lives of our prodigal and in the lives of our family and friends.

**Announcement: There’s a New Sheriff In Town!**

As a reminder we can only cry wolf so many times when our declarations become muted and discarded. You actually may be disregarded already. So if this time is different and you are really ready, how can you deliver this message in a meaningful way? The answer is *differently from the way you have done it in the past!* The principles are listed below:

* **Unemotional** – no anger, This can not be stressed enough. The prodigal needs to know that you are serious and resolute, not angry and emotional. You must be logical and committed.
* **Focused** – you must be well prepared. You must have a written plan that has been processed by Biblical counsel, who are experienced in this prodigal journey.
* **Simple**. Your presentation must be simple and easy to understand.
* **Ask Forgiveness** from the start. Usually as a parent in your current situation, you have made some mistakes. So be honest and admit them and ask your prodigal for your forgiveness. This is usually the most powerful tool in your presentation and one in all likelihood ,they have not seen. You ask forgiveness for your enabling, for not leading yourself well, and for not trusting God. You ask forgiveness for putting them above God. You ask forgiveness for not applying the very Biblical truths that you have been pleading with them to follow.

In prodigal we give direction, not directions, so the example below might not apply directly to your specific situation but it might just give you a template to modify.

*Son/Daughter, I want to say once again how much I love you. Everything I have ever done and every emotion you have ever seen from me is out of love for you. I want the best for you and for life to go well with you. Today I have a plan that I want to present to you that will allow me to lead myself well and lead our family well. It is a plan that I need to restore order and alleviate the chaos that is occurring. I can not control your response to this plan but I sincerely think it will also provide you with the best opportunity to succeed. It is a plan that we believe is wise and has been processed with other wise Biblical friends who have walked many years down a similar path.*

*However before we talk about the plan, I want to honestly and sincerely ask your forgiveness for the way I have parented you so far. I have been angry at times and I have worried so much that I believe I may have given you the impression that I didn’t have faith that God was in control. If I were you, I wouldn’t blame you if you questioned whether my faith is real, as I have not followed God and trusted Him and His principles so far in our journey together. I have at times not followed the very principles of trust in Him and faith in Him that I have urged you to follow. I have forgotten that you are on loan to me from God. You are a gift that I am simply here to protect and care for. I am responsible to teach you about God and his goodness. When I am done doing that, I am obligated to give you back to Him. I see that I have been holding on too tight. Because I love you so much, you have become an idol to me, as I have placed our relationship above my relationship with God. I have acted like God couldn’t protect you as well as I could. How silly and misguided. He made you! God has told me in His word that we must reap what we sow. That means that you must suffer consequences and pain for your rebellion. It is what is best for you.*

*Also, I now clearly see that your struggle and rebellion has caused me the pain I needed to return to God more fully, to know Him better, and to be more closely the man He wants me to be. His Word and my faithful wise community has helped me see that my actions have not been loving at all. I prevented you from fully experiencing the consequences of bad choices. The pain incurred from making bad choices is the very motivation we all need to learn from our mistakes.*

*So forgive me once again in the way I have parented. From this point forward, I will remember that my job is to raise a God fearing, responsible adult. That is more important than being your friend. Now make no mistake, I want to not only be your friend. I want you and I to love one another deeply. However if I can parent you well to the point that you fall in love with God, follow Jesus in obedience out of a love for Him, then we will have the best relationship a father and son/daughter can have. So from this point forward I will set clear boundaries and I will enforce them strictly. I know that will be difficult for you to believe, because I have caved so often in the past. However this time God is directing the program, not me. I believe you are about to see the difference when He is in charge.*

*Thanks for listening to my apology.* ***Will you forgive me?*** *(GET AN ANSWER!)*

*Thank you, now let’s go over this written plan so there are no questions….*

**Scriptural Encouragement and Warnings to Guide Us**

As you contemplate becoming the new sheriff let me remind you that you are at a Crossroads and Satan is coming to try to destroy your mission. These scriptures are worth looking up and meditating on. You will need the truth of God’s word in your journey.

* *Lamentations 2:14*
* *Prov 27:6*
* *Ezekial 2:4*
* *Jeremiah 1:17*
* *Matt. 10:37-38*
* *James1:23-25*
* *II Timothy 3:1-7*

In summary a good sheriff and a good parent is simply a good disciple of Jesus Christ. A good disciple prioritizes obedience and striving to be Christ-like in spite of circumstances and outcomes. (John 14:15 *If you love me you will obey what I have commanded*)

Traveling the Prodigal road is tough, but tough times are promised to us as we have discussed many times. (John 16:33). I love this ministry as it is an opportunity to grow every person who walks through our doors. There will be only two kinds of people.

1. People who don’t believe or trust in Christ. This ministry will point out they are not in control and give them an opportunity determine if Jesus Christ is the answer. We can not control their response. We can only be obedient to the Truth as we believe it leads to peace and life.
2. Believers in Jesus Christ. “Believers” will be at various stages of their faith walk. For such people, this ministry is simply discipleship. Although painful, it is an amazing opportunity to grow believers in their faith and deepen their relationship and intimacy with and love for Christ. Many believers who find themselves in Prodigal chaos know the “playbook” of the Bible well and can even teach it’s precepts. However, when facing Prodigal crisis, God asks you to put down the playbook, walk on to the actual playing field and faithfully run His plays. That is faith in action. I John 3:18 For those who meet this challenge they are rewarded with a relationship with God that is deeper, and richer than anything they could have imagined and a relationship that allows them joy in any circumstance.

Being a good sheriff is being *submitted* rather than being *committed.* (idea taken from a sermon by Todd Wagner at Watermark Church) We can be confused by these terms, but the following comparisons will help explain the difference. **Committed** : tend to follow rules and act out of a motivation to perform and compete with others. They may be motivated by a “works based” faith.

* **Submitted** : maintain a posture of humility and dependence on Jesus; they abide in Him and walk in the Spirit because they love Him, not because they have to.

**Committed**

* Partner with God
* God co pilot
* Goal = consuming end
* God helps them “succeed”
* Work before worship
* Identity is works
* Desire secretly to share glory with God

**Submitted**

* God is boss
* God is pilot
* Goal = Process
* Success= God’s agenda
* Worship continual
* Identity in Christ
* God shares glory with no one

**Committed**

* Do good things
* Laugh less
* Judges/legalistic
* Time with God is another thing to do
* Come to God when we need him
* Rarely if ever enter God’s rest

**Submitted**

* Yields fruit to eternity
* Laugh more
* Grace / forgiveness
* Time with God is life itself
* Abide continually
* Lie down in green pastures/souls restored

God is calling all of us to follow him in obedience rather than only talk about Him. Jesus gives us a stern warning in Luke 6:46-49

*Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I say?**I will show you what he is like who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice. He is like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on a rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who build his house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.”*

God is simply asking us to build our house on the only foundation that will withstand all the troubles Satan throws at is, the solid rock of Jesus Christ. If you do that you can become the Sheriff and parent he calls you to be.

*Years later after my enabling truck episode, my wife and I found ourselves deep in the chaos that defines parenting a prodigal. After a disastrous college misadventure replete with rebellion, drug use, and anger, we had arranged for him to be mentored in a Christian camp environment for a year. Towards the end of that year, his mentors began to notice red flags. We soon discovered that he was still using drugs despite the rules we had demanded of him. This discovery led to a meeting with my pastor and a dear friend and Elder to help us decide the next steps. They reviewed the truth of God’s word, but the truth of Ezekial 33:1-9, considered for the first time, cut me to the quick. I heard about the responsibility and blame that I would share if I did not “blow the trumpet” and allow my son to suffer the consequences of his actions. My pastor knew the fears my wife, Ginny, and I had as he asked us if we were prepared to “stand over our son’s grave.” This sounds cruel or even harsh at first, but fear of death is the central fear that has to be overcome to carry out a good plan. If I wasn't prepared to stay the course against all fears, then my pastor knew my prodigal, all prodigals, would manipulate this fact to make us give in once again.*

*Ginny and I shed many tears that night as wrestled with God, but we decided that we were ready to stand our ground, little knowing this was indeed being “the new sheriff”, that we would encourage others to be one day. The next day the camp leader called my son into his office and put us on speaker phone. We asked him to give his truck keys to his leader and in return he was handed an envelope with 87 dollars in it, the exact bus fare from his location to Dallas. We told him he could use that money for the trip home or to start his new life without us. We told him that if he arrived in Dallas the next day that we had next steps waiting, but if he did not get off that bus, he was on his on.*

*Fortunately, he arrived in Dallas the next day and he was in a rehab facility the next day. Our son’s journey is still rocky and far from over, but when Ginny and I decided that we were going to became the Sheriffs God always wanted us to be, we began to restore our relationship with each other and with God. That decision was the beginning of getting our life back and leading ourselves, and our family well. That decision ultimately led to a journey which included the Prodigal ministry, the greatest blessing of out lives. We encourage you to trust God and take that next step. You have no idea what God might have in store for you!*