**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.”*

*I was asked to speak to the Dad’s club of a local high school. All of these men had sons playing athletics at the school. They met each Monday night with the head football coach to review the previous weeks game. There was always a big turnout and tonight was no exception. The head coach was a Christian and this week he had asked my pastor and I to address the group regarding parenting. I suspect they thought my prodigal journey gave me some credibility. I outlined the basic Prodigal principles of setting boundaries and enforcing consequences in light of the priority of growing our kids to be responsible, God fearing adults. I reminded them they were not in control. Not surprisingly, several dads either questioned that statement or were downright offended by it.*

*In any case, a very pleasant and sincere Christian dad came up after my talk and asked my advice. He said, “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 in his homework and hiring tutors, but he doesn’t even appear to be trying. I am torn. On one hand, I hear what you say. 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 have no reason to discontinue his drug use and rebellion. I love him so much. I don’t know what to do. Can you help me?*

**Introduction**

Defining what love should look like towards our prodigal is, for many, what drives them to the Prodigal ministry. Jesus states that we are identified as his follower by how we love each other. This includes everyone: friends, enemies, and prodigals (Luke 6:27-36).They may not even realize it when they enter the doors, but the relationship between discipline and love is one they desperately need to clearly understand.

Loving your prodigal, who causes so much heartache, is hard. Sometimes, they may even feel like our enemy. Our answers will be found, as always, in his Word. Biblical wisdom helps us discern that we always love our prodigal, but that is not the same as trusting them. Unfortunately, as sinners, we often have to learn the hard way. (Prov. 19:18,19, Prov. 29:19). God 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. (Heb. 12:7) This paradigm is most helpful for those caught in the chaos of a prodigal situation.

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. As a parent of a prodigal we often vacillate wildly between loving them too much or not feeling love for them at all as they emotionally and possibly even physically attack you and your home. You vacillate between anger and pity, fear, and heartbreak. The parenting principles we will cover will hopefully help in navigating these emotions by basing our decisions on wise truth rather than these emotions.

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.

**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, specifically 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. Values must become *their* own 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 and make their own choices is healthy. 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. Addictive behavior complicates any situation obviously. 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**

We are not in control of the chaos, but we can control both ourselves, and the decisions we make that impact prodigal/child development and maturity.

God’s model of love for us is that it should be 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.”*  See also Romans 8:38, which reminds us that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God.

These verses clearly state that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more, or make Him love us less. The Old Testament is replete with examples of Israel’s rebellion and the consequences they suffer as a result. Oftentimes those consequences are harsh, but always lovingly purposed to refocus Israel back to God, where there is true joy and life. 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*."

Jesus himself shows the ultimate picture of His love for us in the New Testament on the cross. Despite our sins nailing Him to that tree, and the Jews rejection of Him as Messiah, He cried out in his last moments for His Father to forgive us. He argued to the Father on our behalf that we simply did not understand what we were doing. That is a love that is difficult to comprehend.

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 God is not obeyed, 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:…”
  + See also Proverbs 13:13 and Ephesians 6:1-3

**Parenting Applications for Us**

A key concept of unconditional love is to not just *love them enough to be their friends but love them enough to shape their character*. It is easy to give gifts to our children and attempt to buy their love through materialistic possessions. However, it is important to realize that those gifts are worldly and fleeting. Godly parents realize that 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 priority passionately 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.”*

Those we disciple are looking at our example, not our words.

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

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 (be Godly) 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. It makes me want to serve her out of love, not because of an obligation. This is true of any relationship, including our relationship with Jesus.

We get to know Jesus’ love for us through His words in the Bible and through His example. Real growth is applying His precepts to our life tangibly ie…not only accepting Him as our Savior but **making Him Lord of our lives.** Making Him Lord is a step of dependency on Him in all things and then watching Him show up. His evident work in our life and His love for us allows us to trust and love Him more and more as we “exercise” our faith. ***The more you realize Jesus truly loves you, the more Godly you will become.***

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

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

1. **Teach 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 and Trust**

As we referenced earlier in I John 3:18, God want us to worship him with actions, not just words. 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 truly impacted by how we live, above all else.

Isaiah 29:13 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 saw that in His people. He sees it in our children and can see it in us as well.

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

**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
* **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.
* **See also John 17:24,25**

**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 by 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 would no doubt include discipling our children and all of those around us well.

*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 not overlook:

* Jesus knows more than anyone the sin struggle we face. HE CARES! 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. ***Knowing how to “love” is critical*** in our role as parents/disciple makers.

**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. 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 is God’s will and following it is an opportunity to trust Him, obey Him, and grow in character.* Fortunately it also provides the best chance and best environment for our child to walk with God.

Unconditional love does not guarantee unconditional blessing. Just look at the following verses that clearly support 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 understand and accept 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 loss, we can be strengthened by Truth. We have a choice. We can give into the hardship and be beaten down, becoming lame and disabled and of little or no use for God. Or we can choose to be trained by it; to be more Christ-like because of it. We can choose as a parent to discipline our children in LOVE as God calls us to do or to give in and rescue them from this refining pain. Tragically a decision that inappropriately rescues our children 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).”

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**

Because outcomes are up to God alone, we should, once again, 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 every step of our journey.

*So what about my friend at the Dad’s club? By God’s grace, He gave me an answer in that moment. I admitted to him that either scenario could play out. His son could spiral downward and turn deeper into drugs in either scenario. I reminded him that it appeared that he was trying to make a decision that he felt offered the best chance of success or “victory”. I reminded him the Victory rests in the Lord alone, so I encouraged him to make a decision that he felt would glorify God. I reminded him that it is 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 him to scriptures that encouraged purity, indentiy in Christ. He could be obedient furthermore by modeling faithfulness. I asked him to think about his decision long term. He could rescue and look the other way because he loved his son enough to minimize the current pain…or…he could enforce consequences for lazy, reckless, irresponsible behavior, trusting that God loved him more than he did. When the smoke cleared from this acute situation, what message does he want to send to his son? Did he model trust in God or trust in Himself? Could he trust that the painful consequences might grow both his own character and the character of his and faith of his son as well. I encouraged him to wrestle with this in community and to seek wise counsel in answering these questions. I offered to meet with him and prayed for him. After our prayer, he thanked me and repeated how hard this was as he walked off. I never heard from him again.*

**What path would you have chosen?**

**Audio/Video links:**

[*https://youtu.be/G0WNGuM0P3E*](https://youtu.be/G0WNGuM0P3E)

**Questions for Closed Group Discussion and Daily Discipline**

Day 1

The introductory story for this week is one that unfortunately many of us can relate to. What are some of the false assumptions and counterfeit gods the father and the son have at this time? How could they identify and eliminate these idols to gain ground?

Day 2

Do you have a problem with the love for our rebellious prodigals being “unconditional”? How did the message support or challenge your feeling 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? Give examples of how your plan has worked 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 life? Do you struggle with discipline in your Prodigal’s life? If not, why not? If yes, please explain.

Day 6

After studying this weeks lesson and answering the daily questions, how has your view of unconditionally loving your Prodigal changed and are you totally comfortable trusting the outcome of your prodigal’s life to God. Explain why.

NOTES