**Family Dynamics**

**Message 10**

**Memory Verse:**

**Proverbs 27:23** *Be sure you know the condition of your flocks, give careful attention to your herd.*

*My wife, Ginny, told me Molly was “struggling”. Rather than deal with it, I dismissed it out of hand as being ridiculous. Molly was our “star”. She was captain of the Cross Country team. She made great grades, never complained, and was the “mom” to all of her friends as she gave wise counsel and was filled with compassion and service to others. I saw no signs of an issue, quite the opposite, in fact. The last thing I needed was another problem. I decided that Ginny was just blowing this out of proportion. My dismissal worked for a while, but Ginny insisted Molly was struggling with depression.*

*So I finally addressed the issue with Molly and asked her to describe what was happening. Instead of telling me she didn’t have any issues, as I had assumed, she began to tell me that she felt darkness. She said that she could not explain any circumstances that would make her feel that way, but often she would feel this heavy cloud descending on her.*

*Hearing those words from her was chilling and disturbing, so we sought counsel and after two sessions with a Christian counselor, he called us all in together and explained the problem. The problem was her brother, the Prodigal! I was shocked. She had never admitted or mentioned it, but she began to realize, as she explored her feelings honestly, that she was torn. Her brother was adopted 6 months before she was born so they were in the same grade. She knew everything he was doing so she felt guilty when she told us as she saw the pain and anguish it brought. However, she also felt guilt when she didn't tell us, as she knew he was headed for trouble. The darkness was real and it was the last thing I expected.*

**Introduction**

There is a common perception early on in the Prodigal journey that if we can “fix” the Prodigal then order will be restored and all will be well. The truth is that the Prodigal issue usually uncovers pathology involving the entire family that needs to be addressed. For Prodigal issues to continue there is an unhealthy environment of enabling and rescue that perpetuates it. The Prodigal chaos affects the entire family and therefore the issues involved should be dealt with as a family.

**A Healthy Family**

Even a healthy family struggles with sin and is far from perfect. However, a healthy family ideally has strong leadership that sets clear rules or boundaries that are enforced consistently. These boundaries and consequences are set on an underlying foundation of unconditional love for one another. Such an environment provides a safe place to live, which also creates the freedom to communicate honestly and openly with one another.

A healthy Christian family has the same environment, but the leadership submits itself to the leadership of God. Such leadership is guided by Truth found in His Word. Biblical principles are not only known, but followed consistently. Every family member is secure, placing their identity in Christ who loved them enough to sacrifice himself to cover their sin. As they learn about God by following His Word, they realize that they are not in control, but God is. (Proverbs 21:31) They also realize that God loves them (John 3:16), has their best interest at heart (Jer. 29:11), and will use all things for good. (Romans 8:28) Ideally, each family member has a Personal Mission Statement that wants to glorify God in all things. As such, they allow God to work in the life of every other family member, allowing them to reap what they sow, knowing they are not responsible “for” the other family members but only responsible “to” the other members. In short, they let God be God and do not assume that role.

**Abnormal Family Dynamics : Where it all goes wrong…**

A perfectly “healthy” family is rare, but they can function adequately and appear perfectly functional until a “storm” hits. Pathology is uncovered in times of trouble. Addiction, or any Prodigal rebellion, can plunge unhealthy families into chaos.

When an addict or Prodigal spins out of control, we must remember that family members are deeply “connected”. When one person goes awry, it affects all relationships and interactions within the family. Envision a family as a “mobile” with multiple pieces hanging on individual strings but all interconnected. Now imagine striking one member of the mobile. All of the other members are affected and begin to swing wildly in response to the first member’s acceleration. Every other member of the family responds and reacts to the Prodigal spinning out of control.

**The Family Response: Assuming New Roles**

In response to a prodigal acting out and creating chaos, family members often take on new “roles” in order to produce order and peace. In other words, they take on these roles in an attempt to eliminate or minimize the pain. The following roles are classically encountered when viewing unhealthy family dynamics encountered in Prodigal situations.

* **Addict**
  + Center of family attention
  + The key to his/her own recovery
  + ***Their personal recovery is not mandatory for family health and recovery***
* **Hero**
  + Tries to be perfect in order to not cause any more problems within the family
  + Often a perfectionist
  + Often presents things in an unrealistic positive light
  + Underlying feelings
    - Fear/guilt/shame
* **Mascot**
  + A “joker”, using levity to reduce tension
  + Hinders the addict’s/Prodigal’s recovery by deflecting the focus off of the real issues
  + Underlying feelings
    - Shame/anger
* **Lost Child**
  + Withdrawn and quiet
  + Avoids the issue of addiction altogether
  + Gives up their own needs and avoids any conversation about the prodigal or addiction
  + They come home and stay to themselves or leave home as often as possible
  + Underlying feelings
    - Guilt, loneliness, neglect, anger
* **Scapegoat**
  + Often acts out in family situations
  + Deflects the attention away from the prodigal by rebellion and diversion
  + Underlying feelings
    - Shame, guilt, empty
* **Enabler**
  + The ***KEY TO FAMILY RECOVERY***
  + Makes all the other roles possible
  + Tries to keep everyone happy
  + Tries to maintain family balance
  + Makes excuses for all behaviors
  + Minimizes addiction issues
  + Delays or denies the need for help
  + Underlying feelings
    - Inadequacy
    - Fear
    - Helplessness
    - Loss of control

Enablers are not bad people. They often have pure motives in wanting the best for their prodigals and they usually love them intensely. Motives must be carefully evaluated, as they can be pathologic at times such as in codependency. Codependents can benefit from secondary gain in feeling needed. Codependent enablers who lack proper identity in Christ can also gain self worth from the success of their children/prodigals.

Enablers are often caring, compassionate and loving but are often not fully dependent on God or led by Him. This results in the mistaken belief that they are responsible for the prodigal or can somehow control him or her. Feeling in control leads to feeling responsible FOR the Prodigal. Not knowing God fully leads to a misunderstanding of pain and hardship. Such a perspective leads to harmful rescuing of the prodigal and the family from pain. The enabler gets in the way of God by eliminating the law of reaping and sowing that He set up as a healthy feedback loop to grow character and responsibility.

**Identify the Idols !**

Anything that we place as a priority above God is an idol. It is helpful for everyone in the family to identify and acknowledge their idols, if possible.

Prodigals often put themselves on the throne and worship their addiction in whatever form. They can worship drugs, sex, gambling, alcohol, hedonism, pleasure, self, or a combination thereof. Enablers place themselves on the throne and often worship pride, reputation, power, or the need to have value. ***The most troublesome idol of an enabler is, in fact, the Prodigal.*** It seems impossible that we can love our children too much. However if we love our children more than God, they are idols and idol worship in any form will eventually lead to frustration and disappointment. The problems of idol worship are accelerated in Prodigal situations. Other family members can worship parents, reputation, siblings, or peace at all cost.

**Unhealthy Prodigal Family Paradigm**

When a Prodigal spins out of control, causing pain and chaos, families are usually taken by surprise and are scrambling for answers. The most common misperception is to believe that the key to restoring peace to the family is “fixing” the Prodigal. *Prodigal dysfunction needs only to be problematic for the Prodigals themselves.* The Prodigal chaos exposes family issues which are the real problems, such as denial, poor leadership, fear, enabling, and lack of dependency on and trust in God. Open honest discussion is minimal to non-existent.

**Restoring Healthy Family Dynamics**

Healthy families are made up of healthy individuals. Therefore, each family member should realize that they can only control themselves. Ideally, parents lead themselves well and model following God. God will be placed as the supreme authority and His Word will be followed.

Ideally, each family member will develop a Personal Mission Statement that defines glorifying God as their ultimate purpose. If that is done, then they will view trouble and hardship as God views it.

* Hardship is to be viewed as discipline. No discipline is pleasant at the time but later on it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who will be trained by it (Heb.12: 7-11)
* Consider it joy as we face trials because this is a test of our faith and this testing produces perseverance and in its fullness this perseverance leads to complete maturity. (James 1:2-4)

A healthy family leader or family member will ask God what He wants to teach them in a challenging situation, rather than focusing on trying to avoid the pain, or feeling victimized by hardship.

As believers in Christ, we trust in God and what He is doing in every circumstance. Therefore, we trust in Him and communicate openly and honestly about what is going on. Conflict is dealt with directly following Matthew 18 principles. We know our boundaries and set them for other family members. Consequences are enforced consistently if those boundaries are violated. Discipline is seen as loving, just as God disciplines us. (Prov. 29:15)

Finally, in families with healthy dynamics, they have a PLAN and it is followed strictly. The plan is based on the Biblical principles of dealing with Prodigals. This Biblical plan is worked out with wise Biblical counsel to deal with all possible outcomes.

Having a Biblical plan and following it provides a safe environment in the home for all family members. It models trust in God and glorifies Him in the process. If you can navigate the Prodigal chaos by trusting in God, the world will want to know the God you serve and your PMS will be accomplished. Furthermore, if you can navigate this “trouble” you are prepared to navigate the promised storms to come in this world until you reach ultimate paradise in heavens where there will be no more tears. (Revelation 21:4)

**What if this is about YOU ?**

We have discovered in this message that this is a family issue. Prodigal chaos affects not only the prodigal, but everyone who loves and cares for them. Family dynamics will get healthy only as the individuals in the family get healthy themselves. It is initially a strange and crazy concept that family members need recovery while their children or prodigal loved ones are the ones who are using drugs or are in rebellion of any kind.

However, what if God is using this pain to show you that you are not in control. What if God is trying to get **your** attention? What if He has been trying to get your total dedication for years? What if He loves you enough to let you experience Prodigal chaos that you cannot control in order to put your faith in Him in ways you never knew possible?

If you have never known or trusted God, maybe now is the time. If you have known about Him your whole life and know His Word, and maybe even taught it, maybe He is asking you to take your relationship to Him to a different level. He wants you to trust Him with your prodigal, and in doing so, eliminate your last remaining idols so that you might have the joyous life He came to give you. (John 10:10) He wants you to have a life filled with a joy that can experience pain and sadness as a way to a deeper relationship with the Savior and a joy that is, therefore, independent of our circumstances. That is a life that glorifies God, which is His ultimate purpose for us all.

(Hebrews 12:1-13, James 1:1-4, II Cor. 4

*One night during the Prodigal we held a panel discussion on Family Dynamics. Molly was a member of that panel discussion. This was years after I had discovered how much our Prodigal chaos was affecting not only her, but every individual in our family.*

*I had long understood my role in the chaos. I was an enabler. I had buried my head in the sand. I had not led my family well during the early years of this journey. However I still remember Molly’s honesty to the crowd. She said, “My dad handled everything that came along. He was smart and logical and my hero. I just couldn't understand how he couldn't understand what was going on and could be fooled over and over again. It was so frustrating!” Even years later, that stings…badly! It stung because she was right. However that pain has helped me grow and encouraged me to be even more committed to leading myself well. I was so thankful that I was still not in a bad place and had realized that this journey was about me and that my son/my prodigal was not the key to restoring the health of my family. The key to regaining my family’s health was me!*