

Prodigals: Hurt! Help? Hope!
Martin Schmidt – Faith Bible Church
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If you would open your Bibles to **Luke 15**. One of the most beloved and familiar stories in all of the Bible, the Prodigal Son.

Luke 15:11-32

¹¹ And (Jesus) said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹² And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. ¹³ Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. ¹⁴ And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

¹⁷ “But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! ¹⁸ I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’” ²⁰ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. ²¹ And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²² But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

Let’s bow our heads as we pray.

Lord, as we have just raised our voices in song in that last hymn, it is simply amazing to us that Your love is such that You would die for each one of us. Those of us who have that amazing relationship with You because we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ, look forward to the joy of heaven when we will stand before You.

And yet, there those in our midst, maybe even in our own families, who go about life without the knowledge of saving the knowledge of a savior who loves them.

Lord, we would continue to pray for them and lift them up and love them, and that's what's this message is all about today.

Lord, how can we reach those in our midst who are far from You? Help to put aside the things of the day, the week, whatever we may be thinking about and focus on this amazing story.

It is in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

The title of our message is "Prodigals: Hurt! Help? Hope!"

Frank was a problem child. When he was thirteen, his parents sent him away to boarding school in New York, and as soon as he got there, he begged them to let him return to his hometown high school in North Carolina. After two years they relented, but he didn't last long in his hometown. Drinking and fighting caused him to be expelled from school. And so Frank was sent in a different direction, to Texas this time, Christian school there, didn't last long there, either. Stayed all night, out all night with his girlfriend. So he comes back home, again.

A few years later he finds himself trekking across Asia and Europe with his passport in one hand and a bottle of scotch in the other. He ends up in all places in Jerusalem all by himself in a motel room, and he opens his Bible to **John 3**. He had heard the story before, but for the very first time this prodigal came home and placed his faith in Jesus Christ.

Frank is not his complete name. His complete name is Franklin Graham. Of course, his dad is Billy Graham. If Billy Graham can have a prodigal, then it is possible that it could to happen to us. Perhaps it already has.

Today we want to look at this very familiar and beloved story, but we're not going to do an exposition on it as much as look at it from a little different viewpoint asking three questions. We seek to answer three questions: How does a prodigal think? Common traits of prodigals. Point number two, question two: How do prodigals impact us? And question three: How can we reach the prodigals in our lives?

How does a prodigal think? Well, I guess it's pretty obvious. Prodigals reject everything that followers of Christ have accepted. In the case of the prodigal that's mentioned in **Luke 15**, he rejected his father's faith, his father's values, and even his father's love. If you look at these words again, this time I want you to picture in your mind the face of the prodigal and the face of the father.

Luke 15:12

... give me (the prodigal says) the share of property (that's) coming to me.

Can you see the arrogance all over the face of the prodigal? Can you hear the tone of his voice? Can you see the disappointment and the anguish that is written all over the father?

Why is dealing with prodigals so difficult? Well, I suppose the number one reason is because they consider it to be trash what you and I consider to be our highest treasure, our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

And also there's their willingness very often to steamroll to get whatever they want. At the core of all that they are is selfishness. Now we look at our own hearts, even those of us who are followers of Christ, we say, "Well, I'm selfish, too." But as someone has said, "Selfishness becomes an art form in the prodigal's life."

Prodigal didn't care about his father, didn't care about his brother, didn't care about the rest of his family. He cared about one thing, and that is to get as much money as his hands could hold so he could go off and do whatever he wanted to do. And under the laws of that time, he certainly was able to receive one-third of the estate. But usually, as you know, estates are divided when the parents are gone. And so, he was as much as saying, "I really don't care if you're dead or alive."

What are the characteristics of prodigals? What's in their behavioral DNA? Prodigal disobeys rules and crosses boundaries, shows active or passive disrespect for authority, is unteachable and refuses to accept responsibility, persists in self-destructive behavior – drugs, drinking, sexual activity, stealing, violence, lies – and continues seek even after being caught, and is out of control.

The definition of a prodigal, the core meaning, is waste. It's really what it means. So, he wasted the amount of money that was granted to him by his father, and he wasted the relationship of his father, too.

Solomon's analysis is as blunt as it is spot-on:

Proverbs 20:11

... a child makes himself known by his acts.

Proverbs 15:5

... a fool despises his father's instructions

Question two: How do prodigals impact us? Well, for one thing, if you've ever known a prodigal, loved a prodigal, ever been a parent to a prodigal, you've asked the question a thousand times, "What in the world did I do wrong?"

Allison Bottke was on James Dobson's radio broadcast, and she as much as said when asked the question, "What did I do wrong," she said, "I did everything wrong." She wasn't married when Christopher was born. She abused alcohol and drugs. She led an immoral life, and so when Christopher was old enough to start acting out on his own, he just did whatever his mother did. She became so embarrassed because he kept getting into trouble that she tried to rescue him and tried to swoop in and save him and made excuses for him. She said, "I better try to get some parenting advice from somewhere," and in the office where she was working there was somebody who was listening to James Dobson. She didn't know that he was a Christian, she just was interested in his parenting advice, and when he presented the Gospel at the tender age of thirty-five, Allison Bottke turned her life over to Christ.

Her love for her son, Christopher, now a full-fledged prodigal didn't change but her methodology did. She said, "The hardest thing I ever did is to lock him out of the house knowing that he was going to go live under a bridge," which is what he did until the police caught up with him, and he ended up in jail. The good news is that now both Allison and her son, Christopher, are both followers of Christ.

Now we hear a story like that, and we say, "You know, that makes absolutely perfect sense." Prodigal parents raise prodigal children – makes perfect sense. But there are many parents who love Jesus and provide stable homes for their children. They teach their children well, and they follow what the Bible says is our marching orders as parents, and that is ...

Deuteronomy 6:5

⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ⁶ ... these words ... shall be on your heart. ⁷ ... (and) teach them diligently to your children

They practiced the truth of ...

Ephesians 6:4

... do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

They not only drop off their children to Sunday school, but they go to Sunday school themselves. They attend worship. They take them to AWANA. They understand they have one job, and it has three parts, and that is to love and discipline and teach their children. And yet, the stories are legion of Christian parents who have prodigals for children, and sometimes there just doesn't seem to be any identifiable reason why.

Billy Graham had five children, two of them wandered as did John Piper's son and James Dobson's son. Whether or not we can point to a particular reason, we trust the Bible's insight.

Proverbs 22:15

(Foolishness) is bound up in the heart of a child ...

What that means is that each child that draws a human breath has a bent toward foolishness, and in some children that foolishness sprouts and blooms into prodigal behavior.

Now one of the reasons why when Tom asked if I would share the Word on this particular date, one of the reasons I chose this text is because this story, hits pretty close to home. In our family, in my wife and my family, we have more than one prodigal. We have someone who said a few years ago, "I don't believe, and I never did."

Another family member, an extended family member this Easter did not attend Easter services, again, and when someone asked why they didn't go, they said, "Why should I go and participate in an imaginary story?"

So, what actions should we take with prodigals? How can we reach the prodigals of our life? As amazing as this may seem, the first point, Point A is, let them go. Isn't it amazing that that's exactly what the father of the Prodigal son did? He didn't argue with him. He didn't raise his voice. He didn't entice him, didn't shame him. He just let him go. Why?

Well, if you look again at **Luke 15** beginning at the first verse, you'll see that Jesus didn't tell just one parable, there were there right in a row. There's the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, the Lost Boy. We have every reason to believe that when Jesus told these parables he told them as one unit.

Isn't it interesting that in the first story when the sheep goes missing, the shepherd goes to look for it. When the coin goes missing, the woman sweeps until she finds it. When the boy goes missing, the father lets him go.

Someone asked the question, "So is the point of this that a sheep or a coin is more important than a boy?" And, of course, we know the answer to that. I think one of the things that God is reminding us is that there is a great difference between sheep and coins and boys. God has created each of us who draws a human breath with this thing called free will. No one ever came to Christ, no prodigal ever returned, unless they came of their own volition. As we deal prodigals, in our family or in other people's families, we can't argue them into the faith, we can't badger them, we can't shame them. We simply have to let them come. The only way that they will come, and that is willingly.

They need to understand and believe the truth that every believer has understood, and that is, as it says in ...

Romans 3:23

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Romans 6:23

The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We all came willingly. We understood that we were sinners. We understood that the wages of our sin ultimately was going to be eternal destruction apart from Jesus Christ. And we understood that Jesus Christ paid the penalty for our sin, and He has a place for us in heaven.

Though we cannot understand perfectly the interplay between God's sovereignty and human freedom, we know that both are true. God is sovereign. He is sovereign over the salvation of our loved ones. Nothing takes Him by surprise. Nothing is ever out of His control.

At the same time God has granted us free will, and as we look through the Scriptures and look at the ministry of the Apostle Paul ...

Romans 10:13

... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved.

Freedom

But also we have that passage where the Apostle Paul was preaching in Antioch and Pisidia, and was amazed at all of the Gentiles who were coming to faith in Jesus Christ and He says ...

Acts 13:48

... as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. God chooses who will be saved.

Parents of prodigals don't know if their children ever will come to Christ, but we can take great comfort in the heart of God, how God feels about the human race.

Ezekiel 18:23

Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?

And Jesus' own words about Himself to Nicodemus ...

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son

... and regarding the perseverance of the saints we have that amazing passage where Jesus assures those who have confessed their faith in Christ will hold them. He says ...

John 10:27-29

²⁷ My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and (then He says it again) no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

In the Parables of the Lost Sheep and Lost Coin and also the Lost Boy, the Prodigal Son, there's that reoccurring theme of joy. And Jesus didn't want us to miss it. There is joy in heaven over the sinner who repents. This is the heart of God. He sent His son so that there might be joy in heaven, and God might be glorified. And everyone who trusts in Him alone. And that's what every parent of a prodigal is praying, that some day there might be some kind of joy celebration that occurs at the end of **Luke 15**.

So, we're asking the question, "How do we reach, how do reach the prodigals?" Point B is letting go doesn't mean cutting them off.

Now in the story of the Prodigal Son, **Luke 15**, you will notice that the father has no contact with the son. He couldn't because he didn't know where the son was. But there wasn't a day that went by he didn't think

about the son, probably prayed for the son, and as we'll learn at the end of the story, was looking for his son. You never shut the door on him.

Sometimes dealing with prodigals is so frustrating. The parents of prodigals will say, "Doesn't the Bible talk about how we're supposed to separate ourselves? Isn't there's kind of a church discipline or something where we cut ourselves off from those that don't believe? It's a great, great question.

John Piper, who himself dealt with a prodigal child, has indicated that the rules of church discipline may not directly apply to our children. He was careful in his comments to say that his answer is not applicable in all situations, but this is what he said ... it's a long quote, but I think what he said is so important so I just want to read it verbatim what John Piper said.

"One of the things that makes a relationship with a prodigal so difficult and complex is the interplay between passages of the Bible concerning church discipline and passages concerning parenting. One of the hard church discipline issues is that on the one hand we have the call, for example, not even to eat with someone who is a professing believer and living in immorality."

And then cites that passage from **1 Corinthians 5**. Then on the other hand, John Piper says ...

"Normal expectations of what godly parenting is might make that kind of guideline very difficult to carry through. And there are many other kinds of ambiguities as we try to sort through the special role of a parent in the life of a child who does not submit to his parents' authority any longer or doesn't believe any longer what his parents believe.

The reason I think these questions matter is because they are the sort of thing we have to ask about, all of our generosity toward others, especially those who mistreat us. (And John Piper says) I'm thinking of Jesus' words.

He says ...

Matthew 5:38-39

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

"However as radical as those words are, it's plain from the Bible itself that there are structures of society, spheres of society where the Bible puts limits

on those teachings, for example in the family. Children should obey their parents, and parents should discipline their children rather than always turning the other cheek.”

And then he cites ...

Ephesians 6:1, 4

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Ephesians 6:4

Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

“In government, the state has the right to punish criminals rather than turning the other cheek.

Romans 13:1

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

Romans 13:4

for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

“In school, teachers have the right to give failing grades to students who don't do their work.

“In business, employers have the right to see that employees fulfill their expectations in order to earn their salary, otherwise they could lose their jobs.

“In the church people didn't get excommunicated.”

John Piper says, “I don't think there is a simple rule that will dictate when you help a prodigal and when you don't. We just need the Holy Spirit to direct us.”

How do we reach our prodigals. How do we minister to them? Well, connect with them.

John Piper has more to say. He says, “I think that it is a significant principle that if you have to say, “No,” in one area because the child's

expectation is harmful as you see it, you should try to help him see your heart is still there for him and pouring yourself out in other ways, you will continually reach out to him rather than write him. You will continually offer yourselves even if you don't offer your money. And that may be much more difficult to get on a plane and go across the country. It might more difficult than wiring money. You will go out of your way to be there for your child. Above all, I would just say to this parent. Immerse yourself in the Word of God and join hands with your spouse in continual prayer for wisdom and live and boldness, and even joy while your heart is breaking. I think God out of that will show you the way forward."

That's the end of John Piper's quote.

How do we reach the prodigal? Point D, establish boundaries. I think John Piper's right when he says we need to look for all different kinds of ways to connect with our prodigal children. But we're also reminded that we're never to accept abusive, destructive behavior from a prodigal that lives with us or just interacts with us. We have to draw boundaries.

It's necessary according to what the Bible says to lay down the rules and let the young people know what those rules are and what the consequences will be. Parents of prodigals who tend to have those abusive words need to come to the place where they say, "I love you. I will always love you, but I'm not going to put up with the words, and we're not going to put up with the behavior, and if this continues and you're living here, we're going to have to ask you to go somewhere else."

How do you reach a prodigal? Point E is, pray for them.

Sarah Wilton is now a Christian blogger, but she was a prodigal herself. She says, "I was that prodigal child, lost, angry, struggling to find my identity, hardened on the outside, deeply hurting within. The pain of my choices was not only destroying me but creating heartache within our family and severing my relationships with the people who love me most."

As she reflects on what brought her back, she attributes that to the faithfulness of her parents and prayer.

Point number one is pray for a heart of brokenness no matter the earthly cost.

Raising children is one of the most wonderful things we can do and one of the most difficult things we can do. We're living in an age where the examples of what it means to be a godly parent sometimes are few and far between. We certainly don't get from the media. And there's a tendency among parents when they know they've made mistakes is to say, "I don't want my children to make those mistakes, so like a helicopter, I'm going to hover over their lives, and I'm going to insert myself, I'm going to swoop down whenever they're about to make a mistake, and when they get into trouble, I'm going to take care of that, too."

Other people say these are lawn-mower parents, they're going ahead of their children always trying to clear the way. Our natural inclination is to do that, and yet Sarah Wilton says, "My parents did exactly the opposite." And what they did was they prayed that God would deal with me in my brokenness, no matter what. That He would break me just like the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15** was broken. Lord, do whatever it takes."

It reminds me of that passage in **Isaiah 5**. You might just look that up this afternoon. God is kind of pouring out His heart, He's speaking to Israel. He says, "I put you in a beautiful land. You are like a vineyard to me, and I put a hedge around you and I built a watchtower, and I'll tell you what I'm going to do now, I'm going to tear it all down. I'm going to let your enemies come in and take it over. I'm removing my protection from you."

And this is the prayer that Sarah Wilton prayed, "God, do whatever it takes to bring the prodigal home."

Point number two, Sarah Wilton said, "Pray Scripture over their lives." Prodigal children don't want to listen to the Bible. They don't want to listen to Spiritual things. They don't want to talk about it. But Sarah Wilton says that doesn't keep us from praying Scripture over them, praying Scripture for them.

Psalm 18:16-19

- 16** He sent from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of many waters.
- 17** He rescued me from my strong enemy
and from those who hated me,
for they were too mighty for me.
- 18** They confronted me in the day of my calamity,
but the LORD was my support.
- 19** He brought me out into a broad place;
he rescued me, because he delighted in me.

So we pray for our children.

Point F: Keep your emotions in check.

Dealing with the prodigal is one of the most frustrating things we can do because a prodigal ignores, rejects, even mocks what is our greatest treasure, our faith in Jesus Christ. There are times when we say to ourselves, “I think I’ve just about had enough.” And we want to rise up in righteous indignation like Jesus did in **Matthew 21** when he cleared the moneychangers out of the Temple, and we say, “They’re going to get a dose of what’s coming to them,” or something like that.

We have to resist the temptation to do that because directing our anger at our prodigals will only drive them further away. And the reminder in the story is that it is love, the welcoming love of the father that brought the prodigal back.

Proverbs 15:1

A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.

James 1:19-20

¹⁹ ... let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger;
²⁰ for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God.

And Isaiah the prophet, seven hundred years before Christ was crucified and raised again, He predicted that in the midst of the turmoil of Jesus’ life when there were those who were in His face, mocking Him, it says ...

Isaiah 53:7

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.

Our prodigals may have rejected our faith, lied, stolen from us, or their actions may be repulsive to us, they may have embarrassed us and rejected us, yet anger is never the answer.

Then, Point G, how do we reach them? Get help from the body of Christ.

Proverbs 11:14

Where there is no guidance, a people falls,
but in an abundance of counselors there is (victory).

We need an abundance of counselors. We need our brothers and sisters in this place to come alongside of us and to advise us and to pray for us and to pray for our prodigals. We need the leaders of our church to advise us as to what we could do differently, what we can do better, or just to support us with listening and caring words. We may need other godly professional counselors and advisors. We cannot let the shame, the pride, the fear, or anything else from helping us to get what is needed to deal with the prodigal.

Just as a side note: A particular vulnerable area during a family crisis is the husband/wife relationship. There needs to be an honest discussion between Mom and Dad about the prodigal child because it seems like the prodigals have a way, they have a bent for putting a wedge between family members. So, we need to pray for unity, pray to be united, and pray for the prodigal. The ultimate hope of any Christian parent is that God will reach down and profoundly touch His child. We want them to come to faith in Christ.

And then asking the question, “How do we reach our prodigals?” The last point is to love them. Somebody might say, “That should have been the first word.”

OK, I get that. But it is the word, that word “love,” that action “love,” is the foundation for everything that I’ve said so far. It is the primary motivator of those who care about prodigals and pray that they come home. Love is the key. We don’t know how long it was that the prodigal was gone. But there’s one thing that we do know, and that is that the father always loved the child. He was always thinking about his son. He was always praying for his son. His actions were flowing from a heart of love.

If you look at ...

Luke 15:20

... while he (that is the prodigal) was still a long way off

... you get the impression that the father was checking the horizon, and he’d been doing it for days, weeks, months, maybe years. He kept looking. Then, also in **Luke 15:20**, he saw him. “There he is. I recognize his familiar gait, the way he carries himself. I know my son that well.”

And then he felt compassion for him.

The biblical word “compassion” is different from “pity.” When we pity someone, we feel sorry for them, but pity seldom motivates someone beyond the sentimental.

Compassion is a different kind of word. It’s a different kind of action because it always drives us to involvement. So, the father is looking. He sees his son. He has compassion. He’s not going to wait. He couldn’t wait because compassion drives one to involvement, and he ran and embraced him and kissed him. As you know in that culture an older man running is considered to be, well, not very dignified. That was the last thing that was on the mind of this father. And he embraced him.

How did his son look? After all those days in the pigpen, how did he smell? Well, love overrides it all. Love acts. Love loves, no matter what. Ultimately what brought the prodigal back was the memory of the love of the father. That is found in ...

Luke 15:17a

... when he (the prodigal) came to himself ...

... you can translate this one, “When sanity returned, when he got it, when things finally made sense, when the consequences of his reality struck home, he decided to repent and return to his father.” What brought him home? The memory of the love of the father. He said ...

Luke 15:17

How many of my father’s ... servants have more than enough (to eat), but (here I am starving to death.)

Will our prodigals come back? Well, only God knows. God has offered eternal life to everyone who will believe.

In the first two parables of **Luke 15**, there’s that phrase, “There’s joy in heaven over the one who repents.” And in the third parable, it’s the outpouring of joy that is made manifest in the actions of the father. This is the secret hope of every parent of a prodigal, that there might be a joy celebration one day.

I got to looking at the text, and it said something about a fatted calf, and I thought to myself, “I don’t access at this point to a fat calf or a skinny one for that matter, but, you know, I might consider looking for one if it ever happened. However, the rejoicing in heaven is going to be even greater than the rejoicing on earth.” Let’s pray.

Heavenly Father, whatever our feelings are about our prodigals, Your feelings are stronger. Whatever our actions are, Your actions are stronger and more persuasive.

Lord, we just pray for all the prodigals in our lives, some are in our families, some are in other people's families. There might be prodigals who are here today, and may You in Your amazing power and through the power of The Holy Spirit help the prodigals to see how much You love them and how much we love them and how important it would be for them to trust You as Savior and Lord.

Lord, would You bring the prodigals home? In Jesus Name. Amen