

“Was the Father of the Prodigal Son a Good Dad?”

Luke 15:11-32

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most familiar parables Jesus told. It is commonly referred to as The Prodigal Son, an indication of how much attention was focused upon him.

Since today is Father’s Day, I want to shift the spotlight to the father of the prodigal and examine his parenting skills. From your perspective, was this father a good dad? What can we learn from him about being a wise and responsible parent? Ponder these questions for a few minutes as I refresh your memory by sharing some of the details of this story.

The father in this story had two sons. The younger one approached his father and told him he wanted his inheritance, which was highly unusual.

In that culture, an inheritance was normally claimed after the death of the father. To do otherwise sent a disturbing message to the father that he had lived too long.

I don’t know if this was the message this young man had in mind when he made this request, or he just wanted to leave home and needed the resources to make this happen. Whatever his motive was, he decided it was time to act and mustered enough courage to ask for his inheritance.

His father granted his request and let him go, which meant this boy set out on his own with a lot of money and little maturity, a lethal combination. Because of his immaturity and irresponsibility, this boy lost all his money, along with his freedom and pride.

Out of desperation, he did the only thing he knew to do, return home with a broken and contrite heart. From his well-rehearsed speech, we know he was prepared to be a slave on his dad's farm since he squandered his inheritance.

To his surprise, his father welcomed him home with open arms and restored his position and place in the family. In addition, a lavish party was thrown in his honor so family members and friends could welcome him home, too.

It seems everyone was rejoicing over his return until the older brother came in from the field and heard loud music. After discovering the reason for the celebration, he refused to participate, deciding instead to have a pity-party.

The parable ends with the father explaining why he had this party for his brother, hoping to persuade him to join the festivities. This, of course, leaves us with some intriguing but unanswered questions.

Did the angry brother succumb to his father's wishes and join the festivities? Was the father's radical grace matched by the prodigal's change of heart and improved work ethic? Did the younger brother influence others to learn from his mistakes and be more respectful and responsible?

We don't know; Jesus doesn't say. Maybe the ending was deliberately left open for us to speculate and discuss, as Jesus hoped the Pharisees would do.

I suppose more sermons have been preached on this text than any other. Without a doubt, it is a gold mine that never disappoints us.

As I said earlier, I want to focus this morning upon the father in this story. I find him to be a fascinating character, and now that I have adult children, I think I understand him a little better.

Looking back, I realize this parable has helped me to be a better father. As strange as it may sound, I have learned some things about parenting I needed to know by analyzing the decisions this father made. Let me share them with you.

There will come a time when every parent will need to open his or her hands and let their children go. This may be one of the hardest things you will ever do.

When his son came and asked for his inheritance so he could leave home, the father of the Prodigal gave him what he asked for and let him go. I wonder how hard this was for him, especially knowing his son might not make wise decisions with this windfall.

Was this the first time his son made this request? Had they discussed this previously? Did he try to talk his son out of leaving?

Jesus doesn't tell us, does he? He merely said the father divided his property among his two sons, implying each was free to do what he wished.

Knowing when to let children go is a sign of wisdom. I must tell you, though, it is never done without pain and reservations. At least it never was for me.

Each time a child left home, I had a knot in the pit of my stomach, and I shed tears of joy and sorrow. I thought it would get easier the second or third time, but it did not.

Soon after Jason left for the Marine Corps, I found myself helping Amy select a college during her senior year of high school. Every day I knew I was getting closer to saying goodbye to another child, and I wasn't handling it well. I called my mother to talk about it.

After describing what I was experiencing and feeling, I asked her, "Mom, how did you do it? How did you let my brothers and me leave home without completely falling apart? I'm turning into mush and it is not getting easier."

I'll never forget her reply. "At times," she said, "I hurt so badly I thought I would die. I was too happy for you boys and too proud of you to have it any other way, though. I wanted you to enjoy your life as I have mine, and that meant you had to leave this home your dad and I provided to make your own."

Little did I know this would be the last conversation we would have. She died suddenly a few days later. Once again, I had to open my hands and let go of someone very dear and precious to me.

I delivered the eulogy at her funeral. I talked about how brave, strong and wise she was.

“One of my mother’s greatest virtues was her ability to let her children go.” I said. “Like a mother bird, she reared us four boys to fly on our own and soar.

She encouraged us to chart our different courses and pursue our dreams and passions. She never interfered or tried to re-attach the umbilical cord, but instead was our biggest fan.

Life was never about her needs but what she wanted for us. She truly embodied the words sacrifice, independence, encouragement, strength, courage and self-discipline as she opened her hands and let us go one by one.”

Letting go is an important part of parenting. We do our children no favor by making them hopelessly dependent upon us. This may feed our ego, but it will destroy theirs.

This is why wise parents prepare their children to be independent. I believe letting go is a little easier when that time comes if this has been your ultimate goal from the moment they were born.

One reason parents are reluctant to let go is because they have neglected to prepare their children to make wise decisions on their own. Time has slipped up on them, and they feel the need to hold on to their children longer to say and do the things they may have neglected.

I know being the parent of young children is stressful and demanding. When you are running in every direction with no time to call your own, it is hard to imagine your home empty and quiet.

That day will come, however, and usually it occurs when the children are ready to leave home, not when you are ready for them to go. This was certainly the case with the Prodigal and his father. Their separation was not determined by the father but the son. The father merely honored the son’s wishes, opened his hands and let him go.

One day you will be called upon to do this if you have children. Prepare for it while they are young.

Decide what you want to pass along to them that will enable them to fly and soar to great heights and take advantage of every opportunity to teach and model it. If you do, it will be easier to let go when they are ready to leave home.

What have I learned about parenting from this parable? **Your children's plans will not always work out the way they hoped. Be prepared to catch them when they fall.**

When the Prodigal's dreams did not materialize as he hoped, he did the only thing he knew to do. He went back home.

How did that go? What was the father's response?

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him. He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him." (Luke 15:20)

Is there anything more welcoming and affirming than a bear hug? I don't know what it would be.

To me, a hug says you don't have to be perfect to be loved, which is good. No one is perfect, and we all need a safe place to fall and hugs to let us know we are not alone.

Can you imagine how relieved the Prodigal felt when his father hugged him? Jesus made it clear this boy was apprehensive about returning home. He even prepared a speech revealing his remorse and low expectations and rehearsed it on the way back home. He never got to deliver it in its entirety, though. His dad interrupted him and began making plans for his welcome home party.

The hug this disgraced boy received from his father tells me nothing was more important than his safety and well-being. His rebellion and poor judgment would be dealt with at the proper time and in the best way, but it was not then and there.

At the front gate, it was time to let a scared and humiliated boy know he had a home to return to because he was still loved. Nothing else mattered until he understood that. So, at the right time, the father of the Prodigal opened his arms and welcomed him back.

How could he do this? He did what every parent must do. He had to open his heart and forgive his son, which he appears to have done with absolutely no hesitation.

In Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead*, the characters in John Ames' family come to the realization that at times it is easier to love the world than their own kin. The same could probably be said of the Prodigal's family.

For sure, neither one of these boys made it easy for their father to love them. Both of them gave him plenty reasons to abandon them.

This meant he had to love them at their best and their worst. He had to love them when they did not love themselves. He had to love them when no one else did, which he did. Why?

He did it because love is willing to do the difficult. It knows no limits. It will find a way to redeem the most rebellious and irresponsible person, make a way forward out of a mess and provide hope for a better life.

A Spanish story says that a father and his son became estranged. The son ran away and the father had no idea where to look for him.

After months passed with no communication, the father put an ad in a Madrid paper that read, "Son, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father."

At the appointed time, over 800 boys showed up hoping the request was from their father.

Who needs you to love them this much? Who needs you to be this kind of parent?

I have to believe the one who told this parable wants to help you and me to be like this father. This is why I am confident God will help us to open our hands, our arms and our hearts.

I also believe God will help anyone here today respond to this kind of unconditional love. Perhaps this is the message you need to hear this morning.

You identify more with the Prodigal Son than the father. You have made mistakes and squandered opportunities to make something of yourself and be a mature, responsible, independent adult.

Must you live forever with this guilt and shame? Is there any hope for you to chart a new way forward?

Of course there is. Approach your heavenly Father with a broken and contrite heart and ask for forgiveness.

Own up to your mistakes and apologize for trampling over the love of those who have offered to help you time and time again.

Seek the help you need to make changes in your life that will benefit you and everyone around you.

It is never too late to go home and start again. Ask the Prodigal Son.