

The Principles of Prodigality

by an anonymous other of a wonderful prodigal

One can almost hear the tongues of the neighborhood gossips wagging. “That man must not have a lick of sense. Anyone with an ounce of common sense would have known not to give *that* boy money. And to think that he gave that son his inheritance! It would have been far better if that man had just told his son that he was not dead yet and put him in his place.” One of the first principles of prodigality found in Jesus’ story in Luke 15 is that sometimes prodigals’ parents must make decisions that do not seem right to others who do not have full insight into the situation. They are sometimes judged for making a decision that they themselves did not want to make, perhaps seeking the lesser of two evils.

When our children were born, we wanted first and foremost to be good, loving parents; and to raise our children to love and follow the Lord Jesus. Having done our best, acknowledging our own mistakes and circumstances beyond our control; our hearts ache with a depth of pain that others cannot comprehend as we watch our children walk away from the Lord they loved in childhood. They are living lives that we warned them would lead to a broken relationship with God and the consequences of sin that we had wanted them to avoid. Jesus’ story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 is rich with understanding and comfort for those of us who have prodigals.

It seems strange to us that the prodigal’s father gave his younger son his inheritance. However, a discerning parent can see into the heart of a child. The father must have known that it would be far worth the cost, not only monetarily but also spiritually and emotionally, for the son to venture into the far country. If the son had stayed at home, in his heart he would have remained in his prodigal state. This father was willing to go to great expense and risk to release his son for a greater good. Undoubtedly, the father was not surprised when his son took off with the money.

The next principle of prodigality is that the father let his son go. He did not follow after him to bring him home. The father very likely knew what would happen in the far country, but he loved his son enough to let him go so that his heart condition would be revealed. The son needed to see that he would have many friends as long as his money lasted. The son needed to learn that sin is pleasurable for a time but that when the pleasure ends, as it must, the consequences are steep and painful.

The money ran out and the famine hit the land. The father must have heard of the famine and could easily have guessed the predicament of his son. It must have been exceptionally hard for the father not to run after him. However, the famine was being used by God. If the father had run to the son’s rescue, the prodigal would have remained in his hard-hearted state. Therefore, it is a principle of prodigality to let the consequences come and not too quickly come to the rescue. As Amy Carmichael wrote in her little book IF, “If I cannot bear to be like the father who did not soften the rigors of the far country; if, in this sense, I refuse to allow the law of God (the way of the transgressors is hard) to take effect, because of the distress it causes me to see that law in operation, then I know nothing of Calvary’s love.” In fact, a wise parent will ask the Lord to bring forth the famine of His choosing.

It is interesting that when the famine hit hard and the son was in want, when he came to his senses, his first thought was of his father's house. When the son was at home with his prodigal's heart in full bloom, the father must have still shown great love and grace to his son. A principle of prodigality is that we must love and extend grace, even while not softening the "transgressor's way." The father had lived before the son in such a way that the thought of returning to his father's house seemed inviting. There was no fear in returning to the father, just guilt for his heart's attitude toward the one who loved him so deeply.

When the son said to himself "how many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread," another principle is unveiled. Parents of prodigals often have ministries where they are providing spiritual food for others, often even for those of the same age as their prodigals. It can be bitter-sweet to see young people seeking after the Lord and finding spiritual nourishment through your ministry while a deeply loved prodigal is spiritually starving. We can trust, however, that what we sow, we will also reap. As we pour your lives into others, we can trust that others will pour their lives into our prodigals.

The father saw the son while he was still a far distance. One wonders how often, how many times a day, the father looked toward the horizon in hopes of seeing his son return. Seeing him, he ran and embraced him. The father had waited in active hope for the return of his son. Grace was extended. There was no condemnation or guilt trip placed on the son—just a welcome home party quickly planned—a very extravagant party! The son was not even allowed to finish his confession that he seemed to have been rehearsing along the road home. So another principle of prodigality is to wait patiently but with active hope. We must have promises given by our Father to which we hold with confidence as we wait for the awakening of our own prodigals. The son was immediately restored to his place in the father's house. The father quickly claimed the prodigal as his own! Jesus also willingly numbered Himself with the transgressors. So also must we not give way to shame and guilt but willingly number ourselves with our wayward children. (Isaiah 53:12)

This wise father undoubtedly knew that he actually had two prodigals—one prodigal in action but another just as far in his heart from the father. The reaction of the older brother reveals that he also had no true understanding of the love of his father. Another principle of prodigality is that our churches are filled with people with prodigal hearts. Our prodigals might actually be walking in greater integrity. Some who are prodigal in heart may just think that the price is too high to pay to openly travel in the far country. They travel there in covert ways in hope of not getting caught. The older brother's judgment and criticism rose not only against the brother but also the father. His true heart was revealed. Another principle of prodigality is that we must each guard and test our own hearts. First of all, that we have no hidden prodigality in our own lives. Furthermore, we must take care to remain in a posture of grace toward those who are yet wandering and toward those who are slowly making their way back to the Father's house.

I have learned a number of insights through walking this road with a prodigal child. Perhaps I have gained some understanding of the "whys" of prodigality.

- Some of the deepest intercessors I know are parents of prodigals. Is there any prayer as passionate as the heart cry of a parent to the throne of God for the restoration of a prodigal son or daughter?
- Returned prodigals often have a greater love for the Father. All my life, even when I was single, the Lord impressed upon my heart that I must tuck away every insight I heard from the lips of a prodigal's parent. I have often had the opportunity to ask parents if their prodigals have returned. Many times I hear joy in their voices as they recount that the returned prodigal has a greater love and passion for God than their children who never strayed. It is true—he who is forgiven much loves much!
- J. Edwin Orr said that when God wants to bring revival He sets His children praying. If God wants prayer for the outpouring of His Holy Spirit upon our children and our offspring, allowing prodigality definitely would bring it forth. Most prodigal's parents awake in the night and cry out to God with a passion that only a parent could understand.
- I have a greater burden for the lost than I would have if I had not had a prodigal. Sometimes we resent the prodigal's friends because we want to blame them for our prodigal's wandering. However, we need to extend love and grace not only to our prodigals but also to their friends—building a bridge from our hearts to theirs so that Jesus might walk across. Our prayer focus must have a continual rippling effect. The scope of our intercession should continually be fanning out to include more and more of those who are wandering. Our prodigals have people who love them so much that they are willing to persistently go to our heavenly Father asking for their return. But how many people, even some friends of our prodigals, have no one to represent them before the throne?
- I have a greater understanding of the heart of the heavenly Father for those He would have in His family but they are still wandering away from Him.
- Walking by faith and not by sight is more intense as we are holding on to the promises and the sovereignty of God to bring our prodigals home. Spiritual backbone is built as we pray and wait. The tried and tested faith is then able to be applied to other areas of life to see God's purposes and kingdom come forth. (Isaiah 44:3; 49:24, 25; 54:13)
- There is a clinging to the promises of God that pleases His heart.

God has His purposes for prodigality, many of which we will never understand. Philip Yancey says that God loves rascals like Jacob. Many prodigals are “rascals.” Many prodigals carry wounds that were inflicted by Christians who have been less than Christ-like. Only the Father sees into the heart of each prodigal. Therefore, only He is able to bring forth His purposes and plans that He has for their lives. Often there is greater fruitfulness in the later life of one who has traveled in the far country and a greater understanding of the heart of God in the lives of prodigals' parents.

So we will trust and wait patiently. Ps. 40 begins with “I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined to me and heard my cry.” There are times when I have waited patiently. However, I love the last verse because it is where I often find my heart—“Make haste, O Lord, make haste!”