

Strengthening Families Coping with Parental "Failure"

Intro: As parents we welcome our newborns into our arms with great love and hope; and we commit ourselves to raising them to know and serve the Lord. Yet our children do not always turn out the way we hoped and dreamed.

During such times parents may feel like they have been "failures" as parents--that they surely did something wrong to cause these disappointing circumstances. That certainly may be true at times; but I especially sympathize with those parents who've done the best they knew how and yet it doesn't seem to have been enough to influence their children toward serving the Lord. Their children turn out to be unbelievers, or reject the truth they have been taught either by embracing doctrinal error or an immoral lifestyle. When that happens ,parents will seriously question their efforts, blaming themselves for the outcome in their child. They will feel frustrated and guilt-ridden.

What could we say to those parents in the face of what they may think is their own parental "failure?" There are several approaches we could take; but let revisit today a parable that most of us know well--the parable of the prodigal son.

Many sermons have been devoted to looking at the prodigal and what we might learn from him. However, the primary message of the parable is to teach us something about the heavenly Father and His great love for the wayward. And as we think about the father in this parable we see him representing the attitudes and actions of God as our heavenly father.

That could be especially instructive and encouraging to fathers and mothers who feel like they've failed as parents. Notice these things we can observe about the father of the prodigal son.

Though a good father, this father had two wayward sons.

Everyone familiar with the story knows of the boy who left home and wasted his money in prodigal living. We are less familiar with the son who stayed home, but who had bad attitudes toward his penitent brother (a point that weighs heavy in the application to Jesus' hearers.)

There is nothing in the parable to suggest that the father was responsible for the bad behavior of either of his boys. In fact his actions represent the actions of the heavenly Father, a father who loved, taught, and protected his sons.

Yet, even the heavenly Father, who never does anything wrong, has children who go astray in spite of His perfect efforts. How much more

would that be possible for all of us who at best are imperfect in our efforts to raise our children?

For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. (Heb. 12:10).

There is the implicit suggestion that not everything we do will be the right thing to do. Sometimes a parent will say, "I did everything right." Really?

But if a perfect heavenly father does not assure perfect outcomes, how then can we fallible parents hope for such?

Again and again in Scriptures, we see really good people whose children rejected their values and godly lifestyle.

Good king Hezekiah was the father of the wicked Mannaseh (2 Kg. 21:1-3).

Good king Josiah was the father of the wicked Jehoahaz (2 Kg. 23:31-32)

Of course we must recognize that being a good person does not always equate to being a good parent. (cf. David for example).

Yet in these cases the impressions of the father are very good and godly; yet the offspring of these great men were quite the opposite.

Maybe then we should be more cautious with how we use texts that are intended to offer assurances of success in childrearing like Prov. 22:6:

Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it. (Prov. 22:6)

No doubt the proverb was given to encourage parents to dedicate themselves to their children's guidance and to assure them that their work will have lasting effect. However, proverbs are general maxims of life and not absolute statements of outcome without exception.

All things considered the parable of the prodigal makes clear that the bad behavior of children should not always be blamed on the parent.

The father of the prodigal realized that the son was developing and gave him freedom to make his own choices.

The son comes to him with a request:

And He said, "A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.' And he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. (Lk. 15:11-13)

This godly father might have anticipated that his son would misuse the wealth entrusted to him. Yet he did not seek to extend his control in a way that overpowered the will of his grown child.

In fact, it could be suggested that his son's departure was heart-breaking to him. Did he not know that there was great risk for his son in what he was doing?

It is good for parents to remember that children are free moral agents who must ultimately make their own choices and be accountable for them. We must accept the risks that go along with that without blaming ourselves when they make bad choices.

The father of the prodigal did not enable his rebellious son in his misbehavior, but rather let him experience the consequences of his actions.

This is important because the quickest path for a rebellious child through his rebellion is to reach the bottom without bailouts.

Every time we injudiciously provide an escape to the consequences of the bad behavior, we postpone the needed turnaround.

Think of what at last caused the prodigal to make a change.

Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' And he got up and came to his father. (Lk. 15:14-20)

What happens here is classic. It was only when the young man realized that he was the one who had put himself in that position and that there was none to help but the father whom he had rejected, did he purpose to make a change.

The reality is, some young people just can't find a way to look up until they are flat on their backs.

Perhaps some parents might find it intolerable to think of their son eating pig slop; but sometimes that's what it takes. As painful as it is, we may have to let them eat slop until they find the inner motivation to do better.

The father of the prodigal raised him in such a way that the boy knew the way home.

Give the father credit that His love and guidance were strong enough to cause the wayward prodigal to know where he could go in his time of need.

When the prodigal speaks, he knows that he is not worthy of the all the blessings he had once enjoyed; but he is not, on the other hand, afraid to go back home. There were no memories of a father who had said, "Get out; and don't ever come back!"

So as parents we need take seriously the need to obey parents injunction to parents:

And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. (Eph. 6:4)

And then after we have raised them so that they know the way "home", we can stay engaged with our erring children, praying for them, and keep a dialogue open to influence their thinking if we have that possibility. Just don't shut the door on them.

The father of the prodigal did not give up hope.

We must envision this father waiting, longing, and praying for his son's recovery. One wonders how many times he had looked out over the horizon for a glimpse of his son coming back and seeing nothing.

But then that day came when the son returned:

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. (Lk. 15:20).

As parents of disobedient children, it is easy to lose hope. We've invested so much already, we may think that there is little more we can do. But let the story of the prodigal encourage you. There is always hope that things will change. Pray for it.

The father of the prodigal responded with forgiveness when his son was ready to change.

The father was ready to provide help and restoration when there was clear evidence of repentance.

The son shows the first signs that things have changed.

He didn't say, "Father, I'm broke and need a few hundred for another road trip."

"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' (Lk. 15:21)

Had some fathers been there they might have said, "Are you kidding? You've spent all your money; and now you want me to take you back?" Or, "Do you not realize how much we've suffered while you've been away? How could you do that to us?"

There was not even a hint that the son was relegated to "second class" status for all that he had done. Instead:

"But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' (Lk. 15:22-24)

Conclusion: As parents we may relive this story; but if we do, I hope that we relive it all...especially part when that son or daughter comes back home. In the meantime, don't beat yourself up. Take responsibility for your mistakes; but recognize your limitations. And don't ever give up.

And it might be helpful for all of us to remember that each of us is the prodigal in this story who left home; but our loving heavenly Father has made a way for us to come back home!