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## A MODEL FOR HURTING PARENTS

Luke 15:11-32

By

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Luke Lesson 73

### A Model for Hurting Parents Luke 15:11-32

Last week we looked at the parable of the prodigal son from the perspective of what it teaches us about God's abundant mercy toward sinners who repent. This was our Lord's main reason for giving the parable, to teach the self-righteous Pharisees that God is rich in mercy toward every sinner who turns to Him.

While that is the main application of the parable, the father of the prodigal also provides some valuable lessons for parents. So in this message I want to look at the parable from the standpoint of what we can learn as parents, especially focusing on parents whose children have rebelled. There is probably nothing more painful for Christian parents than to have one of our children rebel against the Lord and against us. You could almost cope with your child's death more easily than with extreme rebellion, since in death at least there is a sense of closure. After you've spent years loving your child and hoping the best for him or her, the pain of having that child reject you and your Lord goes deep. It makes you feel like a failure. It makes you question and even doubt God. It fills you with grief that just won't go away.

So the question is, "How should Christian parents respond toward children who rebel?" The human tendency is either to withdraw emotionally in order to protect yourself or to get angry and lash out. There used to be a sign in a health clinic where we took our children that read, "Avenge yourself: live long enough to become a problem to your children." That may be tempting, but as Christian parents we must ask, "How would God have me act in this difficult situation?" And, even if our children have not gone off the deep end in rebellion, every parent has to deal with kids who hurt us with wrong behavior. How should we relate to our children as Christian parents?

As I mentioned last week, the father in the parable represents God and His response toward sinners. It is no accident that the Bible repeatedly calls God our Father and us His children. In my thinking, the basic, all-encompassing principle of Christian parent-

ing is, as *God relates to me as His child, so I must relate to my children.* Thus all of Scripture becomes our manual on how to raise children, because it reveals to us what God is like and how He relates to His children. While this one parable is not comprehensive, it does provide us with an important aspect of parenting, especially for Christian fathers, namely, that ...

Hurting parents must demonstrate God's  
love and forgiveness to their children.

The parable does not teach us about how to discipline our children, and that is an important matter that we cannot ignore. But in my experience, many Christian parents are heavy on discipline, but they fall short on showing love and grace to their kids. I am not diminishing the need for consistent discipline. It is crucial, especially in the early years, to teach children to obey and to discipline them lovingly if they disobey. But I contend that love must be the foundation and the atmosphere surrounding discipline. If the children feel the parents' love, they will respond more readily to their discipline. God's love and grace are the greatest motivation for our obedience. I want my kids to know that God is gracious and loving because they have seen me demonstrate His grace and love toward them. Before we look at the love and forgiveness exemplified in the father of the prodigal, we need to look at his hurt.

1. This father was hurting.

Every parent has expectations for his or her children. Every parent desires that his kids would grow up to embrace his values. Every Christian parent wants his children to be a contributing member not only of society, but also of the cause of Christ. And so the pain runs deep when a child rebels. This pain can be broken down into at least three component parts:

A. The pain of rejection.

*\*Rejection of his person:* We read over verse 12 very quickly without stopping to consider the tremendous pain this son's action would have caused his father. Can you imagine going to your own father and saying, "I want my share of my inheritance now"? If the father raised the issue, that is one thing. But it is rude and shocking for a son to raise this issue with his father. In effect he is saying, "I don't care about you; all I want is your money. Give it to

me now so I can get out of here and enjoy myself without you around.” Dr. Kenneth Bailey studied this parable for over 20 years and he has lived in the Near East and studied the culture. He says that there is no example in history or in that culture of a son asking for his inheritance before the father’s death. He dug up one modern example in Iran of a similar situation, and he said that the parents were shocked and viewed the son’s action as tantamount to wishing for the father’s death (on “Expositapes”).

*\*The rejection of his heritage:* Dr. Bailey says that the inheritance would have been primarily the family land which was passed down from one generation to another in that agrarian society. Thus the father would have divided up the land, and the prodigal son would have sold off his portion to get the cash he needed for his fling. Such a thing was unheard of in that society. It was a public disgrace. The boy was saying, “I don’t want to be associated with the family any longer. I don’t want to live here or to raise my family here. I want nothing to do with my family heritage.” It would be like one of our children leaving America to follow a guru in India.

*\*The rejection of his values:* The boy did not join the local synagogue in the distant country and model his life after his father. Instead “he squandered his estate with loose living” (15:13). He wasn’t following the Lord. That tears up any godly parent. The father felt the pain of rejection!

B. The pain of humiliation.

These things do not happen in secret, especially in small towns. As soon as the boy tried to sell off the family property, it would have been known all over town. Everyone would be shocked at his brazen attitude toward his father and at his callousness in selling the family property. Some may have criticized the father for permitting it to happen or for not raising his son properly. He would have had to endure whispers and stares in the marketplace. Even to receive the sympathy of those who were more understanding would have been humiliating.

C. The pain of guilt.

While this father represents God and God has no guilt because He always acts perfectly, on the earthly plane, any parent is going to feel some guilt when his child goes astray. Some of it will

be true guilt, because what parent has not made mistakes that he would erase if given the chance? But much of it will be false guilt, based on the nagging feeling that he has failed as a parent.

The church ought to help alleviate the pain of hurting parents. We can't do much to lessen the pain of rejection (although we can show our acceptance), but we can help diminish the pain of humiliation and of false guilt by not being judgmental. We need to understand that God has wayward children, and yet He is not a failure. While parental training and influence are major factors, kids also are bombarded with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Even the child from a model Christian home is at best an immature believer who can easily fall into terrible sins.

Thus godly parents, who to the best of their ability seek to raise their children in the faith, can still have children who turn away. This will be the exception, not the rule. But it can and does happen. We have wrongly interpreted Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it," to mean that if you train them properly, then it is guaranteed that they will follow the Lord. Thus if the child goes astray, the parent must be to blame. But the Proverbs are not ironclad promises. Rather, they state general maxims about life. It is generally true that if you train up children properly, they will follow the Lord as adults. But it is not a guaranteed promise, and therefore it is not necessarily a sign of parental failure when a child rebels. If there has been obvious parental failure, then we, as the church, should help a hurting parent to deal biblically with the area of failure. But it is wrong for us to be judgmental.

The father in the parable was also hurt by his older son. The boy refused to come into the celebration for his younger brother. His father had to go out in front of his guests and appeal to his son to come in. The son was rude and disrespectful (15:29). He accused the father of being unfair. He even implicates the father in the actions of the prodigal (15:30): "this son of yours"; "your wealth." He is accusing his father of endorsing his brother's sin.

But in spite of the older son's impudence, the father acted with grace and love toward him, just as he did toward the prodigal. Though hurting, this father was loving and ready to forgive.

2. This father was loving and ready to forgive.

A. The father's love:

Note seven sides of this jewel:

(1) Relinquishment without rejection.

The father let the prodigal son go, but he did not reject him. In his hurt, he could have said, "I'll give you your inheritance, but if you take it and leave, I never want to see your face again!" He granted his young adult son the respect of making decisions, even poor decisions, without rejecting him as his son. The younger the child, the more parents must control the child's choices. As a child nears adulthood, the parent is not acting in love if he refuses to let go and attempts to control every aspect of the young person's life. From the time children are old enough to know right from wrong, parents need to be instilling in them the fact that they must answer to God for their moral decisions. If you love your child, you will be able to relinquish control as the child matures without rejecting the child for making wrong choices.

(2) Deep concern.

This father was constantly scanning the horizon looking for his son's return (15:20). Even though the boy had wronged his father, the father still cared deeply for his son. He didn't protect his hurt feelings by hardening his heart. A self-focused parent would have said, "After what he's done to me, I couldn't care less what happens to that ungrateful boy!" But this father would have said, "I couldn't care more."

(3) Heartfelt compassion.

When he saw his boy in rags, his bare feet bloodied from his journey, smelling like the pigsty in which he had worked, the father did not say, "How disgusting! It serves you right. I told you so! Go clean up and dress properly and you can come home!" No, he felt compassion. He hurt with his son.

(4) Outward affection.

The father ran toward him, "embraced him, and kissed him" (15:20). He doesn't even know yet whether the boy is repentant. It is enough that he has returned. The father's love gushes out in this

demonstration of physical affection. He could have waited at the house until the boy was all the way there and then have given him an icy stare and said, "So you came back, huh?" But he ran to him and openly showed him his love. Dads, don't hesitate to show physical affection toward your sons as they grow older!

(5) Unaffected humility.

In that culture, it was disgraceful for an older man to run. To run in a robe, a man had to pull it up, which was thought of as undignified for an older man. But this father was not concerned about public opinion. He girded up his robe and ran to his boy. He valued his son more than he cared about what other people thought about him.

(6) Undeserved generosity.

He brought out the best robe, a ring, and sandals. He killed the fatted calf. Did the boy deserve that? He had already wasted his share of the inheritance. This was pure grace! To his other son, even though he was rude and impudent, the father said, "...all that is mine is yours" (15:31). He was a generous man.

There is a balance, of course, between such undeserved generosity and the need for discipline. We don't know, but probably the prodigal son had to experience the consequences of squandering his share of the estate. Grace does not abrogate the principle of sowing and reaping. But my guess is that most Christian parents err on the side of being overly stern. Our kids ought to be able to understand God's grace because we have been gracious toward them. Are you as gracious with your kids as God is with you?

(7) Undeserved acceptance.

The boy was not put on probation. He was not accepted home on the condition that he meet certain standards. True, he had repented of his wrong as his confession shows. But the most likely reading of verse 21 leaves off the last phrase, "make me as one of your hired men." The father cuts him off and showers him with blessings to show his undeserved acceptance of his son.

Although he had been hurt very deeply, the father loved his son totally. That's how God's love is toward each one of us.

That's how our love must be toward our children. But not only did this father demonstrate God's love toward his sons. Also we see...

B. The father's readiness to forgive:

The boy could not receive or experience the father's forgiveness until he repented. But the blockage was on the boy's part, not the father's. The father was ready and eager to forgive at the first sign of repentance from the boy. He wasn't bitter. He wasn't going to make the boy pay for what he had done. Note seven aspects of his forgiveness:

(1) It was immediate.

Making someone earn forgiveness over time is not forgiveness. Making someone pay is not forgiveness. Who need forgiveness when they have to pay off their debt? To say, "I'll forgive that boy when I'm good and ready and not before" is not to forgive. Forgiveness must be an immediate, decisive action.

(2) It was total.

He didn't leave the boy with the burden of something to live down. He forgave him totally, once and for all, and it was over.

(3) It was forgotten.

Once forgiven it was put away. The father did not keep part of the boy's wrongs in reserve to use as ammunition in a later disagreement. Obviously the father could never erase what had happened from his memory. But to forget is a decision that the wrongs will never be dredged up again. That's what God means when He says that He will not remember our sins against us.

A friend of Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross, once reminded her of an especially cruel thing that had been done to her years before. But Miss Barton seemed not to recall it. "Don't you remember it?" her friend asked. "No," came the reply, "I distinctly remember forgetting it." That's how God's forgiveness is toward us; that's how we must forgive our children when they wrong us.

(4) It was costly.

Forgiveness always is! When you forgive, you bear the cost of what the other person did, and that person goes free. If he bears

the cost, that is justice. If you bear it, that is forgiveness. The father did not have a martyr complex: "Look at what you have put me through!" He did not demand pity: "Look at how much I hurt!" He simply absorbed the son's wrongs.

(5) It was restorative.

The father restored his son to the full privileges of sonship. He did not have servant status. He was not a hired hand who had to earn his keep and could be fired. He was a son, with all the rights and privileges of a son. Forgiveness means full restoration.

(6) It was not the guilt-blame approach.

Instead of really forgiving, many people establish a scorecard of guilt and blame. To the extent that the son was guilty, the father feels justified in maintaining blame against him. And the father excuses his own guilt by blaming the son. But this father did not do this. He truly forgave his son.

(7) It was active forgiveness, not just passive.

Passive forgiveness says, "OK, I'll let bygones be bygones." But it stops there. The person does not go on to re-establish the relationship. But active forgiveness adds kindness to forgiveness. It brings out the best robe, the ring, and the sandals, and kills the fatted calf. It is anxious not only to forgive the past, but also to restore the relationship.

## Conclusion

I have piled up a lot of points this morning in an attempt to get you to see the main point, namely that this father *lavished* love and forgiveness upon his son. Even though both sons hurt their father, he demonstrated the gracious love of God toward both boys. Even though both sons wronged him, the father was willing to forgive them both quickly and totally. The prodigal received it; we don't know what the older son did. The word "prodigal" means "extravagant" or "excessive." What we see here is "prodigal love for the prodigal son," as Spurgeon titled one of his sermons on this text.

Each person here, but especially those of us who are fathers, must ask ourselves, "Do I demonstrate this kind of love and forgiveness toward my children? Would my kids gain any idea of what

our gracious God is like by the way I treat them? Could it be said that I have prodigal, extravagant love for my kids, whether they are prodigals or not?"

The late Joe Bayly was a gentle, godly Christian leader. I once heard him tell how one of his sons rebelled back in the days of the hippie movement. He grew his hair long and moved into a communal flophouse. Late one night, Bayly received a call informing him that his son was being held at one of the Chicago police stations. He got out of bed, got dressed and went down to the station, but they had no record of his son being there. He made the rounds to several police stations before he realized that the call had been a prank.

Even though it was about 2 a.m., before he went home Bayly went to the flophouse where his son was living. He went in (the door was always unlocked), stepped over several sleeping bodies strewn on the floor, and found his son asleep on his bed. He gently bent over and kissed his son on the cheek before he went home to bed.

When Bayly told the story, he said that his son was now a pastor. Years later, the young man told his father, "Dad, do you know what turned me around?" Bayly said, "No, son." His son said, "It was that night you came into my room and kissed me. You thought that I was asleep, but I wasn't. I thought, 'If my dad loves me that much, I had better get my life right with God.'"

Even if your children have hurt you through their rebellion, you are to show them God's abundant love and mercy. Through your love, your children should be able to see that God "is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in loving-kindness" (Ps. 103:8).

If you have rebelled against God, you need to know that He stands ready to pour out His love and forgiveness on you. Like the father of the prodigal, God is eagerly watching for you to turn in repentance toward Him. When you do He will run toward you and embrace you and kiss you and lavishly welcome you home, forgiving all your past. He is that kind of a gracious, loving Father!

## Discussion Questions

1. How can a parent distinguish between true and false guilt? How should a Christian deal with each kind of guilt?
2. Agree/disagree: If parents err, they should err on the side of too much grace rather than too much discipline. Where is the balance between grace and firm discipline?
3. If Proverbs 22:6 is not an ironclad promise, how can an elder be required to have his children in line (1 Tim. 3:4; Titus 1:6)? How can he be responsible for his children's actions?
4. How can a parent know when to allow his child to go down a wrong path and when to prohibit him?
5. Should we forgive before a child repents? Should forgiveness restore trust? Is forgiveness incompatible with consequences for wrong behavior?

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