

When the Prodigal Comes Home

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How do you react when a brother or sister in your physical or spiritual family confesses sin in their life and repents of it? While the world around us often seeks revenge and can be very good at holding a grudge, the Lord teaches us something very different—in fact, quite the opposite. Jesus teaches forgiveness of one who repents without placing a limitation on the number of times we should forgive (Luke 17:4). Also, we know that upon repentance, our sins are no longer held against us by God (Acts 3:19, Heb. 8:12). What then are we to do and how should we act toward a loved one who repents? One of Jesus' parables beautifully portrays the actions of a loving father who warmly forgives and welcomes back his sinful son. Let's observe some of the characteristics of the father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15).

The first is the father's *compassion* as evidenced in Luke 15:20. He sees his son's condition (destitute and wretched in appearance) and pities him. Feelings of deep compassion and love move the father because of his sincere desire for the spiritual well-being of his son. As a result, he immediately runs to embrace and kiss his son and welcome him home. The father's desire to renew their relationship, verse 22, by ordering his servants to dress his son in a robe, a ring, and shoes serves as proof of the concern and love he had for his son. In this story, Jesus so perfectly describes the compassion of God toward His children today. Even David acknowledges the Lord as "...gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and great in mercy" (Psalm 145:8). What a wonderful example of the compassion we should have toward a repentant family member.

Another notable characteristic of the father is his *readiness and willingness to forgive*. The father recognizes his son from a distance and runs to receive him (verse 20). Notice that immediately upon the son's confession of sin, the father forgives him. Nowhere is there any indication that he questions his son's sincerity or motives. Instead, because of the unconditional love for his son, he readily and willingly forgives him without hesitation. Again, David recognizes this characteristic of God in Psalm 86:5, "For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in mercy to

all those who call upon You." Jesus and Stephen serve as great examples, when before their deaths they willfully implore with the Lord to forgive their adversaries. Through a heart of compassion we will be drawn to forgive those whom we love and care for.

Finally, the father's *rejoicing* over his son's repentance is exhibited in verses 23-24, "...let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry." The father and his servants joyfully celebrate the return of the sinful child. God so infinitely values and loves His children, that He rejoices and celebrates a penitent sinner's return unto Him. In the preceding two parables of Luke 15, Jesus illustrates the joyous reaction over something (of value) lost that has been found. Verses 6-7, "...Rejoice with me...", and "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance." Likewise, verses 9-10, "...Rejoice with me...", and "...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." With a ready and willing heart to forgive, we too, can rejoice with the angels over the repentance of a loved one.

In conclusion, there are undoubtedly certain circumstances which are more difficult than others, but we must still possess a heart of forgiveness. Though the stakes may be high, and the consequences of sin may be overwhelming, it is our duty to forgive a family member who repents. We can clearly see the value God places on each soul, even the sin-sick soul. It is His desire that all people everywhere be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and we know there is great rejoicing in heaven over a repentant sinner (Luke 15:7). If God receives sinners, and angels rejoice at their return, then we should most assuredly do the same. Notice how the attributes we have observed naturally lend themselves to each other. Proper compassion and love will enable us to be ready and willing to forgive. Upon forgiveness, we can then rejoice with God and the angels that our brother or sister has renewed their commitment to obey God. May God bless us as we strive to emulate and practice each of these characteristics in our own lives. ✚

When the Prodigal Won't Come Home

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We love happy endings! Perhaps that is why the parable of the prodigal son is so appealing to us. The younger son followed a destructive road, but he “came to himself” (Luke 15:7). His repentance and his humble confession to his father are intensely moving. What if, however, the prodigal son (family member) doesn't come home? What if he stubbornly persists in his wayward course, refusing to repent? Experience reveals that often the story of unfaithfulness takes this path and, unfortunately, Christians sometimes commit two grave mistakes in their response to sin in the life of a family member.

Two Common Mistakes

The first mistake is to fail to properly value the soul of the sinner. It is all too common for Christians to refuse to follow the instructions of the Scriptures for fear of damaging the intimacy of the physical family relationship. Such failure is tantamount to the admission that maintaining pleasant social relations is more important to us than obeying the divine prescription for discipline. Jesus said that those who act in this fashion are not worthy of Him because they fail to elevate God over everyone else (Matthew 10:34-37). Such behavior also fails to demonstrate “neighbor-love,” choosing the cultivation/preservation of temporary social relationships over the eternal salvation of the erring family member.

The second mistake is to conclude that the Lord's plan for restoration will not work and so it is abandoned before it is even tried. It is reasoned that attempts at restoration will only drive the sinner away and thus we should take no “negative” actions, merely hoping that the sinner will come to his senses sometime in the future. It is certainly true that repentance can only be encouraged, not coerced, but it is an evil heart of unbelief that refuses to follow the Lord's clear instructions.

What Should We Do?

God's word must be followed. Using scripture, we should identify sinful behavior and patiently encourage repentance (2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:14; Luke 17:3-4). The erring family member must be rebuked with gentleness and humility and with the intention of restoration (Galatians 6:1). The Pharisees

and scribes were adept at identifying sinners, but they viewed themselves as superior and lacked the compassion and concern exhibited by the father of the prodigal son.

Jesus indicated that it might be necessary to involve other Christians. “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that ‘by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established’” (Matthew 18:15-16).

Not even repeated rebuke and exhortation may be enough to bring the prodigal home. The local congregation may have to become involved. “And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). It is difficult to shun any erring brother, but the task becomes especially difficult when he is a member of our physical family.

The purpose of congregational withdrawal is two-fold: to save the sinner and to protect the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:4-5). The sinner is to be shunned with the objective of causing him to be ashamed; he is no longer walking in the light (2 Thessalonians 3:14; 1 John 1:7). Corrective discipline is not intended to be pleasant, but it is the sure manifestation of love (Hebrews 12:11; Revelation 3:19).

Sometimes the “prodigal” is not a part of the local congregation. Are faithful family members then excused from any form of discipline? Shall we maintain our family relationships as though there has been no change in the prodigal's relationship with God, giving the impression that we condone the sinner's behavior? Knowing how best to impress the prodigal with his dire spiritual situation can be difficult, but we must find a way to signal to him that he is out of step with God and thus out of step with the Christians in his physical family. Our physical family relationships bring responsibilities mandated by the Scriptures. Parents must care for children who are minors, spouses have duties toward one another. However, the overall purpose of corrective discipline should be remembered and respected even as these physical responsibilities are fulfilled.

It takes courage to discipline a wayward family member. He may never return home, spiritually speaking, but our task remains the same: to love him and work for the salvation of his soul. ✚

Let us Reason Together



Irrelevant Attacks

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“Can you see from 1 Peter 3:21 the necessity to be baptized?” “You’re just spreading lies from the devil!”

In almost any kind of religious discussion or exchange people will employ some kind of defense against the truth. The truth discomforts us, and it is hard to admit we are wrong, so quickly we run out something that says “No, I’m not in error and here is why I’m not in error.” Of course, if I can show from the Bible that my conduct, action or belief is scriptural than all is well and good. However, when people are violating the Scriptures (in practice or belief) nothing can be said except “God is right, and I am wrong. I must change.” Not many want to say that! Instead, various matters that are irrelevant to the issue of truth are often pushed into the discussion. Let’s learn how this works so that we will not use such false tactics, nor be distracted by them as we reason with people from the Bible.

Some people appeal to force. In Acts we read that the Sanhedrin couldn’t deny the miracle Peter and John had done. “Seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it” (4:14) but they still refused to accept the truth Peter and John preached. Their response instead was brute force! “So when they had further threatened them, they let them go” (4:21). This is to argue through intimidation: “See it my way or you will wish you had!” Yet, as the Sanhedrin found, beating people or even killing them did not change what was true, nor did it stop the Gospel.

Fortunately, in our society we don’t experience this tactic often. However, if a man is told he will lose his job over his beliefs, or if someone begins to hint “I just couldn’t be friends with someone who believes —” then the attempt to squash truth with force is being made. A brother or sister who is unhappy with something in the church may announce he or she is leaving. This is another attempt to coerce people to one’s views through unpleasant immediate consequences. The disciple’s response to this must be the same as the apostles: “So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name” (Acts 5:41). Truth cannot give in to error, even when error puts on brass knuckles!

Some people will abuse the messenger of truth.

This is formally called “*argumentum ad hominem*,” a Latin term for “attack the man.” If someone says “You are in sin” and you reply with “Your tie is ugly” you have introduced something that has nothing to do with truth or the charge about your behavior. However, the chances are good your assailant will be rocked back on his heels and begin to defend his tie. In the process, your sin may be forgotten. Since Jesus’ enemies could not convict of Him sin we should not be surprised to see this tactic used against the Lord. In Matthew 11:19 some reject Him because He was “a friend of sinners.” In Matthew 13:55 others refused Jesus’ teaching because He was a “carpenter’s son.” Rather than deal with the evidence Jesus presented that proved He was deity, people preferred to call names and smear Him due to His humble beginnings.

Sadly, this tactic still is employed. In the institutional struggle of the 1950’s those who argued that congregations could not participate in the sponsoring church arrangement were often branded “anti.” The name means little. Aren’t all disciples “anti” sin? Yet it was a very powerful argument because people didn’t want to be called “anti.” Further, the tag colored people’s perceptions of the reasoning done by those who were “anti.” It made those arguments sound like they were made by negative people who would oppose anything. What a powerful word “anti” became, and yet it had nothing to do with whether the sponsoring church arrangement is scriptural!

Others met arguments that the church was limited in its benevolent work to saints alone by shouting “You hate orphans.” What does that have to do with anything? If I hate orphans I am in sin, and I will be lost unless I repent (Gal 6:10). How I individually feel about orphans, and how I treat orphans as an individual, however, has exactly zero to do with the church’s obligation to orphans. It is irrelevant to the question at hand, but many were persuaded the church did have benevolent obligations to everyone because they didn’t want to be tagged an “orphan hater.”

A variant of this “attack against the man” is to attack the idea being considered. Instead of slamming the man, you slam the man’s message. For example, if you argue that the New Testament doesn’t authorize instrumental music in worship I could respond with “You are stupid!” but that is blatant abuse and might not work. Instead, I might say “What a stupid idea!” In truth, it doesn’t matter if I think the idea is stupid. All that matters is “What does the Bible say?” Designating something “stupid” or “unfair” or is only a distracting dodge but it can be very effective.

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Reasoning from p. 3

In an article about complicated questions of bioethics and what is right and wrong for a childless couple to do in order to have a child an author assailed current medical techniques by saying "It is my candid opinion that this practice has its origin in the very pit of hell and is satanic from beginning to end . . . Obviously, one should not be particularly surprised when people who do not know the Lord engage in this practice." That is not much of an argument, is it? Where is the discussion of what the Bible teaches? Yet who wants to be part of something from the pit of hell, that is satanic and that the ignorant and lost participate in? The writer has attacked the message successfully. His task is to *show* the error of these practices, not summarily announce the verdict he has reached and we must simply take his word for it.

Of late I have observed this tactic being used in what I would call the "put'em in the big bucket" argument. This is done when someone attacks the message (and the messenger) by lumping it in with indisputably evil and sinful practices. For example, if Brother X were to argue that it is not sinful for a Christian to play cards I could respond with "Playing cards are the tools of gambling, greed, covetousness, and even organized crime!" Brother X is not arguing for gambling but by shoving him

in the "bucket" with gambling and other evil people I can prejudice my listeners against him and his arguments.

This tactic is very effective whenever someone opposes something new among brethren. Sometimes new ideas are unscriptural, but not everything new is sinful. Yet, rather than showing that a new idea is unscriptural it is much easier to say "Looks liberal to me." That does it, doesn't it? Who wants to do anything the liberals are doing? Put it in that bucket marked "Liberalism" and few will have anything to do with it. Of course, we do things that liberal brethren do all the time - like build church buildings, hire preachers, print bulletins, use PowerPoint and more. Hopefully no one will notice all of that. They will just hear the word "liberal," latch on to all its connotations, and reject the new idea without anyone ever having to prove that this new method is liberal or even leads to liberalism. The message has been slandered, but it has not been shown to be unscriptural.

Appeals to force and threats, attacking the messenger and even attacking the message are popular means of defending error from truth. Let us be careful that we do not engage in such, and let us be ever ready to help others "reason together" clearly and forthrightly from Scripture. †

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