

The Prodigal Father

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Good morning, today we begin a sermon series on relationships titled, "Alive and Well." The series will explore relationship issues in parenting, being single, marriage, and friendships. Today, I'm going to be sharing our first of two messages on parenting from the perspective of a NextGen Pastor and a young dad with four little ones. Next week, Steve will be sharing more about parenting from the perspective of a father with grown kids. Side-note, Happy Father's day to all the dad's who have raised grown children, are presently raising children, or desire to be raising children, you are gifts to your families.

I don't know about you but picking out picture frames is not my favorite task in the world. My wife right now likely has a puzzled look on her face... Because I actually never do pick out frames. There are reasons for that. First and foremost, it is crafty and I am not the most craft inclined person in the world. Second, most all frames come with pictures in them. I look at those pictures and start comparing my family to the ones I see in the pictures. Here's a few examples of pictures one might find coming in a new frame.

I see this picture and I start immediately making my self-improvement list. Okay, need to get more active with my family. Bike riding, picnics, catching butterflies... Let's throw in the tent and make it an overnigher. And... look at that dog. Time to check out some training books, ours would never sit that well for a picture.. Or, how about this one.

I can only imagine how this picture would go down for my crew. Hey family, how about a picture on the merry go round? Let's give it a spin for good measure and get some sweet motion blur in the background. At least one of my children would be in the emergency room. Whether from a loss of balance or a misplaced shove in an attempt for humor or possibly revenge for an earlier dispute.

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Yes, I'm exaggerating, a little. I don't get too caught up with comparing myself to pictures in the frames at the store. Yet, I do see many of my friends posting stuff online and sometimes catch myself dreaming of what it might be like to be them. I can look at someone else's life and believe that they don't have the same kinds of struggles that I do. After all, I don't typically get to see all the hard stuff in your lives in the same way you don't get to see all the things going on in mine. Nonetheless, I'll see family pictures and begin to wonder am I the father my children need me to be? Am I giving them the life I want them to have?

And from the beginning can we just acknowledge there is a tension when it comes to this subject. I remember when we struggled with infertility and would look at families with kids and LONG for the opportunity they had been give. Now with four of our own there are days I wish I could forfeit all parenting responsibilities, because parenting can be hard and there are days where I can't see past the pain and difficulty involved.

We're taking a look at the story of the prodigal son found in the book of Luke chapter 15. The word prodigal is an adjective used to describe the young son and his actions. It comes from a latin word that means lavish. If you're not familiar with this parable, the son takes his money and spends it in a reckless and lavish way. Yet, the word prodigal can also be used to describe another character in the story, the father.

Being a parable, this passage is a story Jesus made up to make a point. When Jesus tells this parable he's surrounded by a diverse group of people. In verse 1 of chapter fifteen we read:

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

Luke 15:1-2, ESV

We see these two groups of people being mentioned often in the gospels. The first group, tax collectors and sinners, was often involved in nefarious activities such as theft and prostitution amongst other things clearly condemned in the Old Testament. Pharisees and scribes were educated men who had authority and tried to adhere to religious law. These two groups didn't mix much, but when Jesus was near, people from all walks of life wanted to be present.

Finally, there are three main characters in Jesus' parable; the younger brother, the older brother and the father. The tax collectors and sinners should have been able to identify that they were the younger brother in the parable, the Pharisees and Scribes were the older brother and the father in the story is God. For today's purpose we're going to focus mostly on the God's role as the father figure.

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living.

Luke 15:11-13, ESV

Some scholars say this request would be the equivalent of the younger son saying to his father I wish you were dead.

Staying focused on the father's actions, his son's request puts him in a precarious situation. In this moment, he has a choice to make. I don't think the father had any hope that his son would take that inheritance, invest wisely and make a life for himself. As a result, the father's actions of giving in to the request may seem foolish to many.

On the other hand, what is the consequence of not giving his son the inheritance? One can only guess, but, an embittered son who would possibly leave anyway is a strong possibility.

14 And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. 16 And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

Luke 15:14-16, ESV

The son spends everything, calamity hits the region and he's forced to feed pigs for a wage that is seemingly less than the cost of what it would take to buy a single portion of food that was fit for the pigs.

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants."' 20 And he arose and came to his father.

Luke 15:17-20a, ESV

His journey home was surely a miserable one. He was hungry, filthy and walking in the shame of his previous decisions. I can imagine the weight of his actions as he crests the last hill before his old home comes into view, likely rehearsing his prepared statements over and over, anxious about how his father might respond. Hoping that, at best, his father would hire him on as a servant. Then, something something happens.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

Luke 15:20b-21, ESV

His journey home is cut short. His father sees him. His father could have justifiably stayed right where he was seething with contempt over his son's actions. But he didn't. He runs to him and embraces him with a love and excitement that had to be so surprising to the son. The son knew what he had done, he felt the weight of it. The son starts his rehearsed speech and before he can even finish, the father interrupts him. Before the son can even say to the father, "Treat me as one of your hired servants," the father cuts in.

22 But the father said to his servants,⁴ 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23 And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. 24 For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Luke 15:22-24, ESV

No son, you will not be treated as a hired servant. You are my child. Your identity does not depend on your actions. Welcome home. I am so delighted you are here.

As I mentioned earlier, the word prodigal is often used to describe the son's lavish waste of his inheritance. But the father can also be described with the word prodigal. His lavish giving of love, acceptance and identity by his actions would have been so very unexpected and over the top. Stepping out of the parable, the hearers of this story would never imagine that the father would respond in such a way. Jesus was telling the sinners and tax collectors that there is a place for them in the family of God. They were welcome.

There is another brother coming into the story now.

25 "Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. 27 And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.'

Luke 15:25-27, ESV

28 But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, 29 but he answered his father, 'Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!'

Luke 15:28-30, ESV

31 And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. 32 It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

Luke 15:31-32, ESV

Again, another translation has the father saying, "Look dear son, you are always with me." The party is just as available to the older son as it is the younger but his pride prevents him from entering in. The same was true of the pharisees and scribes. Jesus was a threat to their authority. He was a threat to their power. They loved their position and status more than they desired to draw near to God.

The prodigal father offered love and fellowship to both his sons in equal measure. Despite their very different life choices their need for their father's grace and love was the same.

I have two points of application for today.

The first is this, if you lose relationship you lose influence. The amount of influence we have is closely related to the strength of relationship we have with our children. The father in Jesus' parable prioritized the relationships he had with his sons.

To understand how we deepen our relationships with our kids I think it is important to understand two different kinds of influence we have.

This graphic, from our curriculum company, Orange, shows how our positional and relational influence changes over the course of our children's lives. When our children are first born we have a high level of positional influence. They must depend on us to keep them alive. Our positional influence comes in handy when we warn a toddler not to touch a hot pan.

As our children age, relational influence become more important. Instead of creating safe boundaries for them to operate inside of, we become confidants and advisors. We stop telling them what to do and we help them process the situations they find themselves in so that they can make their own decisions.

As our children grow, the two influences start to converge until they eventually cross typically in the middle school years and then diverge at a fairly rapid rate. You might also note, from this chart, that our influence potential, measured in hours a day, decreases significantly as our children grow. Starting at around 12 hours a day in the preschool phase, decreasing to around 6 hours per day in the elementary phase, 4 hours in Middle School and ending at 2 hours in high school.

Currently, Amy and I have children who are 7, 5, 3 and 9 months old. Life is full. My wife and I have all the positional influence we've ever dreamed of having. Yet, we talk often of how we don't want to lose sight of the fact that we'll need more relational influence in the not to distant future. Thus, we attempt to be very intentional about gaining relational capital in this phase of life.

How you parent when you have positional influence has a direct correlation with how much relational influence you will have when your children are older.

Reggie Joiner, a highly influential figure in NextGen Ministry, in a recent blog post titled, "Advice I'd Give Myself If I Were Starting Over as a Dad" listed eleven things that I think are fantastic ways to help build relational capital in the preschool and elementary phases. He mentioned that he would:

- Listen more, and talk less.
- Not “send” his kids to bed, but instead put them to bed.
- Ask better questions.
- Guard Saturdays to create family traditions.
- Not sign his kids up for everything.
- Play more games.
- Not take things too serious.
- Never punish anyone relationally.
- Do chores together.
- Say “I love you” everyday.
- Apologize often.

That’s not an exhaustive list and your list may not look like his but the important thing is for us as parents to know how we’re trying to grow our relational capital with our kids just as the prodigal father had done with with his.

If your kids are older and you find yourself squarely in the relational influence stage of life, bless you. Seriously. It’s hard. Knowing when to use your influence to push or pull and in what measure, is not easy. I’ll tell you something that we tell our MS and HS leaders often. No matter what your kids bring to you it’s okay to freak out on the inside but you must do your very best to keep calm on the outside. If we visibly freak out they’ll shut down.

Let’s do this, take a few seconds and think about one of your greatest fears as a parent. Make it a big one. Now imagine your Sixteen year old child coming to you and saying,

“Mom, dad I _____.”

That’s what happened in the parable.

Here are a couple of phrases to use in situations like this...

“Oh wow, that sounds like a terribly hard situation.”

Showing empathy will go a long ways and give your kids permission to open up more. Kids won’t care about what you know until they know you care.

“Can you tell me more?”

Gaining deeper understanding is critical. There may be more to the situation than what meets the eye. Often youth already know the right answer but they need to talk about it out loud without getting lectured.

“How can I help/support you?”

If, in their minds, the whole world has set itself against them, will you still have their back?

“No matter what, I will love you with everything I have for all the days of my life.”

When a child knows that their parent’s love for them is unconditional the game changes. If they’re coming to you and confessing something they know you disapprove of, they likely don’t need you to tell them that you disapprove. They already know and are already experiencing some level of guilt or shame. The question they are really asking without realizing it, is, “Are you going to be in my corner?”

For our kids I hope the answer to that question, in their minds, is always yes.

There is no equation that guarantees success in parenting. Our children all have their own decisions to make at every stage of life. You might follow my advice as well as anyone could and still have a child that rebels against your hopes and wishes for them. Which leads me to my second point of application.

The most important thing you can do for your child is not actually working towards a healthy relationship with them. The most important thing you can do is live your life in a fashion that shows you’ve received the same love and acceptance from God that was offered to the two sons in today’s parable.

Our realization of our own need for grace should never take a back seat to any parenting efforts we’re making.

If I’m not experiencing grace I don’t easily give grace. If I’m not experiencing forgiveness I don’t easily forgive. We reflect God’s character to our children in the same measure that we experience Him as a loving parent.

And if these words make you start crafting a self improvement plan for your spiritual life (I need to read my bible more, pray more etc.) that is likely not where you actually need to begin. Maybe what you need most is to experience the father, seeing you, where you are at right now, running to you, embracing you, clothing you with the finest robe, placing his ring on your finger and saying, “You are my child. Your identity does not depend on your actions. Welcome home. I am so delighted you are here.”

Coming back to the family photos, we had ours taken recently with mixed results. Lucy for one, was not having a good day. Yet, we got a few good ones too.

As I studied in preparation for today and reflected on my own life, I came to a few conclusions. My comparisons have more to do with my failure to fix my eyes on God and what He has said is true about me. The way that shows itself in my parenting is that I will often use my positional influence to control my kid’s behavior because I am overly concerned about what others will think of me based on how they behave. Then, as a result, I lose some of my relational influence in my kid’s lives. If my behavior sounds familiar, know this, trading relational influence for better behavior is a bad trade. Luckily, kids are gracious and understanding when we honestly come to them confessing our shortcomings and demonstrate efforts to improve.

May we all learn how to lavishly love our families in the same manner the prodigal father loved his children.