

HOPE FOR THE PRODIGAL

Bringing the Lost, Wandering,
and Rebellious Home

Jim Putman *with* Bill Putman



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INTRODUCTION

The Story of Three Sons

It all starts with a story about *three* sons. Yes, three. But in Luke 15, the biblical account of the prodigal, we see a father who had *two* sons. So where does the third son come into play? And what does this have to do with us and what we're going through? Chances are good you've heard the story. Here's a paraphrase to refresh your memory.

A wealthy father had two sons who looked and acted quite differently from each other. The older boy was considered the “good” son. The younger boy was considered the “not-so-good” son. One day the younger son said to his dad, “I’m tired of waiting for you to die so I can get my inheritance, I want what will be mine, and I want it now. Give me all I’ve got coming to me!” What an insult. In that culture, a son received an inheritance only after a parent had died, or at the earliest when a father could no longer manage his estate. For the younger son to demand his inheritance up front was the same as saying, “I wish you would drop dead, Dad. Get out of my way, Dad.” It was deeply hurtful.

But the father was both strong and loving. He said something like, “Okay, son, if that’s how you feel. If you really want what you think you want, then you can have it, but I know it won’t make you happy.” So the father gave the younger son what he asked for.

It didn’t take long for the younger son to leave. He high-tailed it out of his father’s house and headed for the ancient equivalent of Las Vegas. He was hell-bent on going far away from home. The money burned a hole in his pocket, and as soon as he reached that faraway country, he spent all he had on wild living. His money vanished like morning dew on a hot summer’s day. In no time at all, he was broke. Dead broke. But he hadn’t reached rock bottom yet.

Right about then, the young man’s stomach began to rumble. Oops. He’d forgotten to save money to eat. None of his friends seemed to have any extra food to spare, or if they did, they were not willing to share. To make matters more complicated, a famine hit that faraway land. Jobs grew scarcer. People grew hungrier. Eventually the younger son took the only job he could find: tending pigs. In that culture, tending pigs was the lowest of the low. Even today pigs cannot be found in Israel. They are considered filthy animals that a Jew won’t touch. But even that job was a bust. The young man grew so hungry, he found himself seriously considering eating the pigs’ food. Picture that scene. There was the rich man’s son who at one time had lived in luxury, now in the muck and mire, starving, miserable, broke, desolate, friendless, thinking about wrestling food away from pigs. That’s rock bottom. But in that horrible and desperate and pressure-filled place, a marvelous thing happened.

The younger son came to his senses.

The son remembered life back home. His father lived well. His older brother lived well. Even his father's servants lived well. He'd been such a fool! "I'm starving, but there's plenty of food back at my father's house," he reasoned. "I should just go back home. But because of all I've done I don't deserve to be one of the family again. I'm no longer worthy to be a son. Maybe I can get a job as one of Dad's servants." So home he went.

The good father had continued his daily routine but always with an eye on the road, his hand shading his brow—watching, waiting, hoping. While the son was still far away, the father spotted him. Even though his son had left with riches and health, the father recognized him in rags, nothing but skin and bone, and the father sprinted down the road with arms open wide. He plowed into his son, hugged him close, and wept for joy.

"Welcome home, son," the good father said.

"I don't deserve to come home," the son answered. "I've messed up too much. I've hurt you too much. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son."

"Are you kidding me?" the father said. "You're my son no matter what. I lost you and now you are found—you were dead but you are alive again." He turned to his servants and said, "Quick. It's party time. Get the boy cleaned up and dressed in my best suit. Whip up a barbecue that'll make all the neighbors envious. Let's feast and celebrate, for my son was lost. But now he's found."

The servants cooked up the best kind of party. A true celebration. Great music sounded from every room. Family members and guests danced and feasted on the best food in all the land.

Meanwhile the oldest boy, the "good" son, was still out in the fields. Working hard like he always did. He heard the

music and caught a whiff of barbecue and called one of the servants over to explain what was going on.

“Your brother’s come home,” the servant said. “All safe and sound. C’mon inside and join the celebration!”

“That betrayer?” said the older son. “You are actually celebrating his return?” The older son was furious and refused to join the party. He huffed and went back to work.

Back at the house, the father heard of his older son’s behavior, so the father excused himself, walked out to the fields, and tried to coax the son to welcome his brother home.

“No way!” snapped the son. “That worthless excuse for a son brought chaos into our home. He hurt us all. I’ve never strayed from the path. If anyone should be given a party it’s me! All I do is work, never complaining, never once disobeying you. But you’ve never even given me a small platter of steaks so I could celebrate with my friends. Then, when this other son comes home after spending all our money on wild living and women of ill repute, you throw him the biggest party we’ve ever seen.”

“Hold on a moment,” the father said quietly. “You’re forgetting something very important.”

The older brother was so angry he couldn’t look his father in the eye. A few moments of silence passed, then he said, “What?”

“Everything I have is already yours. But we must celebrate—your brother was dead and is alive again—he was lost and is found. He is not just my son—he’s your brother.”

Is There Any Solution for Prodigals?

Three sons, remember? The older son who stayed home but nursed a bad heart; and the younger son, the prodigal who

took his bad heart to a distant land—that’s two. So, who is the third son in the story?

The third son is the narrator of this story.

Jesus, the *Son* of God.

The story of the prodigal son is ultimately a story of Jesus telling people about His Father. Picture the larger context. Jesus was telling this story to two groups: first, to teachers of the law, who’d been chastising Him for associating with “sinful” people; and second, to His own disciples—the young disciples He was helping to grow up in the faith. Jesus, the Son of God, wanted both groups to know more about what His Father is like. Jesus was telling them that His Father is filled with compassion, holiness, justice, and most importantly love.

The parable was multifaceted. Jesus wanted His listeners to know that He too loves prodigals—people such as the younger son. Jesus as Savior, just like the heavenly Father, never turns His back on the lost. Even when people are far from Him, squandering all their gifts on wild living, the Father is always watching, waiting, anticipating their return.

Throughout history God the Father has done more than just wait at the house for prodigals to return. He had sent messengers (the prophets) to say, “Come home.” He had allowed circumstances to cause His children to think about coming home (such as famines that would get their attention). And He had finally sent His own Son to deliver the ultimate message—“My Father says, ‘Come home.’” When sinners finally turn back, the Father runs to them. He embraces them, rejoices over their repentance, welcomes them home with arms open wide.

The parable also shows God’s love for people who never flagrantly and outwardly disobey him—people such as the

older son. Jesus wants them to realize that their works do not earn His love and that their hearts matter just as much as actions. This includes religious people, Christians, people who work hard on behalf of their Father, people who keep their noses clean. Jesus wants them to know that even if they keep their religious commitments, they can still be far away from God if they harbor bitterness, jealousy, anger, or lack of forgiveness. He wants them to realize how much the Father cares for all people—even prodigals—and how closely He values all His children. All He has is theirs.

Hope for Prodigals' Return

We have all been prodigals to one degree or another. This is a book about caring for them. It's a book of big hope. I (Jim) was once a prodigal. I was raised in a Christian home. My parents were both believers. But I strayed far from the faith as a high school and college student. I eventually declared I didn't believe anymore.

My dad, Bill Putman, was a prodigal too when he was a young man—not so much out of rebellion, like me, but out of hurt. Together we talked our way through each chapter of this book before the writing process began. He'll be sharing more of his stories and insights throughout this book, as well as adding helpful sidebars. As a young man, my dad came back to the Lord in a mighty way, and today my dad is one of my closest friends. He and my mom, Bobbi, are on staff with me at Real Life Ministries in Post Falls, Idaho.

One of my three sons, Christian, has also been a prodigal. Christian grew up in a home where both parents love and serve God. But Christian strayed from the faith as a high school student and young adult. He got involved with drugs and

Introduction

alcohol and had a baby out of wedlock. He's been to rehab twice and has spent time in jail and in a homeless shelter. But today Christian is back on track, walking with the Lord and serving as a youth minister.

In my life, my dad's life, and my son's life, a big common denominator was the prayerful role of other Christians (both our physical and spiritual families). God used other people to win all three of us back. The example and influence of others, as well as the Word of God and the Spirit of God, helped disciple the three of us back into real relationships with Jesus, and we are all actively serving the Lord today.

There is hope.

We invite you along on this good journey.

Jim Putman

Bill Putman

1



Broken Families, Broken Churches

Two parents. Two different families. Two different times of life. Two big stories of crisis.

I (Jim) actually punched my son in the face. I hit him and knocked him out cold. He'd been giving my wife, Lori, and me trouble for so many years. We'd tried everything. He was angry, sarcastic, mean, critical, and rude. Not to mention he was into drugs, sleeping with girl after girl, drinking heavily, failing in school, and generally all-around defiant.

When he came home high and started bad-mouthing his mother, I'd had enough. I was furious. He called his mom some unmentionable names, and I just snapped. For the first time in twenty-plus years, I hit a man in anger—I punched my own son and actually knocked him out. The son I had fallen in love with at birth, protected, taught to play baseball

in the backyard, and to wrestle; I had taught to know Jesus, had high hopes for—this son I had just punched in anger. How could this happen?

Our family was a mess. My wife, Lori, and I could not get on the same page about how to handle it, but we both agreed the way I had just reacted wasn't right.

Oh, and to top it off—I was a pastor.

What were we going to do?

I (Bill) was ready to leave my marriage, family, and ministry.

My wife, Bobbi, and I were hopelessly in debt, the total bill upwards of \$96,000. Our daughter was pregnant at age fourteen. My oldest son, Jim, was an angry alcoholic. Bobbi and I were struggling in our marriage, just going through the motions, hoping to stay afloat. We didn't have answers for ourselves, much less for anyone else. The rebellion of our five children had sunk us into a crushing despair. For all our great efforts in life, our family was a mess. We had broken hearts and we were a broken family.

Oh, and to top it off—I was a pastor too.

What were we going to do?

Welcome to the World of Prodigal Care

Maybe you can really relate to one or both of those stories right now in your life. Your family is in crisis, maybe because of a prodigal child or a prodigal spouse. Or maybe you simply know someone who's going through a really rough time. This person may be in your extended family, your neighborhood, or your church. You care and want to help.

Welcome to the world of caring for prodigals. This book is for you.

It's no secret that we've got a prodigal problem in the Western world today. In the United States alone, research shows that the number of people claiming to be Christians is dropping, while the number of people who don't identify with any religion is growing.¹ Today, more than one in three millennials don't affiliate with any religion at all.² And some three out of four teens who currently attend church will soon drop out³—a statistic with a twist, which we'll tell you about in a moment.

I (Jim) have been a pastor for about three decades, my dad Bill for over fifty years, and we regularly meet with families whose kids have walked away from the faith. They've lost their kids to a culture that tells them the Bible isn't true. The media either attacks our concept of God or seeks to make Jesus only one of many ways to get to heaven. The culture undermines the biblical view of family and pushes kids into believing that Christians, churches, and the Bible are sources of bigotry and intolerance instead of the opposite. Most churches and Christian families have not done an adequate job of preparing kids for the assault on their faith.

Recently I had to tell some parents that they were making a huge mistake. They had missed church for a better part of two years, following their kids to every soccer game and tournament in the region. All for the hope of scholarships. They were losing in two ways. First, their children would need good spiritual friends to help keep them connected to Jesus in the future, but because of involvement in other things, their children had no real friendships in youth group and church. I told these parents that their kids needed to be taught about Jesus so they could answer the hard questions, but because they were not in places where spiritual truth could be learned, their kids were ill prepared. Making matters worse, spare time

at home was spent working on soccer in the backyard rather than talking about spiritual things. Second, if their kids did get scholarships, the college they were aiming for likely would do its best to indoctrinate them in ideas such as the theory of evolution and the concepts of pluralism, so-called diversity, and tolerance, and would surround them with peers having completely different lifestyles and philosophies. I told these parents they were working hard to hand their kids over to a college and society that would likely destroy in them the godly values they said they cared most about. I told them that if they didn't change their priorities, they would one day hear things coming from their children's mouths that would break their hearts. How do I know this? Because I see it all the time. Because it is the story I see all around me now from others who traveled the same road.

I am constantly approached by parents who believe their children once walked with the Lord but are now apathetic or antagonistic toward Christianity. For many, their kids are now actively addicted to drugs or alcohol, or engaged in wild living, and the parents don't know what to do. Their hearts are broken, and they need encouragement and counsel. The unresolved crisis with their prodigal puts stress on the marriage, the other children, finances, and emotional health. They live on the edge as a result of the pressure and the cost of trying to save their kids.

How Can the Family of God Help Parents of Prodigals?

I believe there is much a church can do to help. Prodigals can be won to Jesus or back to faith! But too many churches fail to address the real issues and often make them worse by saying nothing or by saying the wrong things. Many parents feel

bad, as if the failure of their children is all their fault. “If we had raised them right, then this wouldn’t have happened,” parents lament. Parents feel hopeless, fearing the situation with their prodigal children will never change.

There are no perfect human parents, so of course we make mistakes. We may need to make some things right, but blaming ourselves alone isn’t going to fix the problem. Parents and churches can play a positive role in helping our prodigals come to their senses. Even if we do our part perfectly, it does not guarantee that they will choose to come home. But with our Father’s help, we can play a strong part in opening the door to this possibility.

Will the Real Prodigal Please Stand Up?

What exactly is a prodigal? Often when we define the word *prodigal*, we use it only in the context of kids whose parents raised them in the Christian faith, but then the kids went off the rails and walked away from Christ outwardly and dramatically. That’s definitely one picture of a prodigal, but to truly define a prodigal, we must broaden the definition.

A prodigal may be a Christian who once got saved but then drifted away from the Lord and no longer claims to follow Jesus. In other words, they are no longer saved. In my mind, the story of the prodigal son itself tells us that is possible. Now, I understand that this view may be controversial depending on your theological bent. There are a few ways we could look at this. Scripture tells us that not everyone who says “Lord, Lord” is really known by the Father, but only those who do the Father’s will (Matt. 7:21–23). So it’s possible that a person who is far from the faith but once claimed the faith never really had it to begin with. On the other hand,

many seem to have a true conversion experience, begin to follow Christ, then walk away. God has chosen us and wants a relationship with us and will never change His mind. But some believe that a professing Christian can drift from the faith so far that they eventually give up their faith. Whether or not that person loses their salvation has been the subject of debate for a long time. Honestly there are Scripture passages on both sides of this argument. Either way, Jesus tells us we can know a tree by its fruit.

First John 3:9 tells us that no one born of God continues in sin. This does not mean that a Christian doesn't sin, because John also tells us that if we claim to be without sin we are liars. It means that a born-again person doesn't continually, habitually sin, or better said, they don't make a practice of sin. I once wanted to be a great wrestler, so I practiced wrestling in order to be good at it. I loved it. This vividly illustrates a person who is practicing sin. They love it and practice it as much as they can because they want to get good at it. A believer who has Jesus living within cannot love sin and want to practice it. When they sin, it doesn't feel right. They respond with something like, "Man, I can't believe I did that again." They feel inner turmoil as the Holy Spirit does His work. It may take a while, but they come to the Lord for forgiveness. John said that if we confess our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us of all unrighteousness.

Many parents don't think of their child as a prodigal—spiritually lost—because this child once said the sinner's prayer. The parents may admit the child has slipped into a sinful lifestyle, but they are not concerned about their child's salvation because the child once spoke the correct words. But they admit that no fruit can be seen in their child's life. That's a red flag. Better to assume they need salvation. A

parent will not rush to save a child in the river if they don't think the child is in danger, and a parent with no concern about their child's salvation does not seriously pray.

I am dealing with a man who once led worship in a church and later went to college to become a science teacher. Along the way, he began to have questions about his faith, and because he was busy and enjoying life, he didn't make time to talk about them. At the same time, those who were supposed to spiritually shepherd him didn't notice his absence or seek him out. He says that he eventually gave up his faith and now claims he is an atheist. He has a nice wife and two beautiful children. He has a moral set of values that looks Christian because he says that morals evolved to protect the species. He does not drink or cheat on his wife or get angry and say harsh things. However, he is a prodigal because he has no faith in Jesus; in fact, he believes Jesus was just a good teacher. This prodigal is no longer or maybe never was connected to the Lord or the family of God and is walking in a lifestyle and embracing heart attitudes that are inconsistent with the teachings of Jesus Christ. In this case, the relationship with the person's parents is not broken, but the issue is a broken relationship with the Lord. Fifty years ago we might have called this person a "backslider," although we don't use that term much today. This person is a prodigal who has turned away from the Lord and from the Lord's family, the church, and when we use this broader definition, more people can be defined as prodigal. It's not just a parenting issue, it's an issue for all believers. Thus many more people have an interest in helping prodigals find their way back to God.

We tend to view prodigals as addicts or rebels. But in this broader view, the prodigal can be clean and sober, succeeding at many areas of life. The prodigal might be married,

educated, hold a good job, have kind and smart children, and be an all-around upstanding citizen. Parents may say, “Oh yes, Johnny is doing really well. He graduated from university and married his college sweetheart. He’s working hard as a lawyer. They own a big house in the suburbs. I’m not worried about him at all.”

Do you see the problem? Because the child is doing so well by the world’s standards, the parents don’t define their child as a prodigal. But we must use a definition that’s measured by biblical standards. Teenagers from Christian homes who do drugs are not the only prodigals. A prodigal could be a good citizen. A family man. A member of the PTA. Someone living the American Dream. A church leader. The biblical standard is that if he’s far from Jesus, then he’s a prodigal.

An additional subset of prodigals aren’t typically acknowledged as prodigals because they’re still active in the church. They might call themselves Christians, be casual or active church attenders, pour their lives into ministries, and consistently work hard at doing right. They may have all the right answers when people question their beliefs, but they don’t have a relationship with Jesus that is vibrant and growing. They have little real love for other believers. They’re mired in anger, jealousy, bitterness, greed, lust, unforgiveness, or other sins. They may believe that being faithful means working hard and looking like a good Christian outwardly. But that person is a prodigal.

Remember, there are three sons in the biblical account of the prodigal son. The “good” son was just as far from his father as the son who left home. The older son undoubtedly looked good in society. But he didn’t have a heart for God. He actually told his father he’d slaved for him for years. He didn’t see his service as a response to the father’s love but saw

himself as a slave. He didn't understand the father's heart. He didn't understand the relationship he was invited to have with the father. Also, he didn't love or forgive his brother. He was bitter and angry and fuming and frustrated. He was just as much a prodigal as his brother.

So, based on the biblical pictures of a prodigal, we need to use a broader definition of the word:

Anyone who has known God or appeared to know Him but who is now not walking with God is a *prodigal*.

We might say it this way: an unsaved prodigal is part of the human family and has wandered away from their Creator; a saved prodigal is part of the family of God and has wandered away from their Father.

Picture it this way: there are outward, public prodigals and inward, private prodigals. Outward prodigals are living in defiance. They might be teens or adults, have Christian parents or not. They outwardly defy Jesus Christ and reject His church. Inward prodigals, likewise, might be from any age group or background. They try to look good on the outside but are inwardly defiant to Jesus Christ, their parents, and His church. The difference is that often outward prodigals aren't found at church, while many inward prodigals are still there, going through the motions. They appear to have the right beliefs. They may be working hard in the church. They're deacons. Elders. Ushers. Church van drivers. Church secretaries. Small group leaders. Sunday school teachers. Sometimes even pastors. They see themselves as slaves to God and do their work out of duty, but they don't grasp a true love relationship with the Father. They don't love their brothers and sisters. They're living with the Father, but their hearts are far from Him.

And the results of the prodigal's lifestyle and heart attitudes are heartbreaking.

I have so many stories of ministering to prodigals, it's hard to choose a few examples. Here are several:

- A mom in our home group has a child who was a worship leader during high school. Then he went to a secular college, unprepared for the hard questions about the faith from his professors. The limited answers he had in hand just didn't stand up against their so-called intelligent arguments. The son now considers himself an atheist. Every week, this mother asks for prayer for him in our group.
- A young man I know was brought up in the faith. He was a strong leader in our church for years. As a young adult he went through several difficult dating relationships. Then he met a girl who absolutely captivated his heart. Problem: she belonged to the Jehovah's Witnesses cult. Her definition of Jesus and the gospel didn't line up with his—or the Bible's. He fell in love with her anyway, and now he goes to a Jehovah's Witnesses group and considers himself one of them.
- A middle-aged couple in our church has five daughters. For a long time, the husband and father was considered an example of Christian maturity. But he went through a midlife crisis and abandoned his wife and family. He had an affair with a woman half his age. Now she's pregnant. The whole thing is such a mess. It's caused heartbreak for many people.
- A helper at our benevolence program that feeds the hungry has been faithfully undertaking her ministry

for years. But she sat down with her small group leader recently to talk about a problem with another woman in the church. They just don't get along, and there's no movement toward restoration. When the leader questioned the first woman about her relationship with the Lord, she admitted she hasn't been reading her Bible or praying. Her heart is far from the Lord. She's been serving faithfully, but that's the extent of her faith. She's been going through the motions with the Lord, but that's it.

- Christian parents have two teenagers, a boy and a girl, both raised in the church. The boy is walking with the Lord, while the girl is far from God. She is defiant, sulky, rude, and often in trouble at school. She's dating a boy who's not a believer, far from the Lord, and openly using drugs. The parents strongly suspect their daughter is sleeping with her boyfriend. The parents are so troubled. They can't understand why one of their kids is turning out so well, while the other isn't.
- One of our faithful servants in the church raised his son to know Jesus from the beginning. He was a part of our youth group and went on many mission trips. He went to college and got into a relationship with another young man. He says he is gay but is a gay Christian. The father is at a loss.

No Hopeless Prodigals

The good news is that there's help for prodigals—and for people who care about the well-being of prodigals and want to see them restored to the heart of God. As long as the

prodigal is alive, there is hope because of the third son in the story—Jesus! Prodigals don't need to live their whole lives far from Christ, their biological family, and the family of God.

I'm grateful we have a lot of prodigals in and around our church so we have a chance to love them back to Christ, but I rejoice that we also have many, many prodigals who've come back to the Lord after a season or two away. We are seeing those prodigals return to walking with the Lord and being restored to their immediate family and the family of God. It's so great to witness.

Earlier I mentioned that today more than one in three millennials don't affiliate with any religion at all and some three out of four teens who currently attend church will soon drop out. Here's the encouraging twist. For some of those teens, the dropout is a hiatus, not a permanent departure.⁴ But what of the rest?

Is there something we can do that might help bring the prodigal home? Can we shorten the time it takes for them to return, or remove the hiatus season altogether? There's not one magic silver bullet, one single solution. We as the spiritual parents can choose to do the right thing, but this does not guarantee the right reaction. People have free will; they walk away from the Lord for many different reasons, and return for many reasons. However, we can follow some principles on our side of the equation to make things easier for the prodigal to return, and we'll talk about these throughout this book. The overarching solution is for parents and churches to know and love the Lord and to disciple their children before children are old enough to move toward rebellion. Real discipleship that leads to spiritual maturity both defends against people walking away from Christ and helps bring people back.

Discipleship is the process where people are not only converted to the Christian faith (Matt. 28:18–19) but brought into spiritual maturity (Matt. 28:19). God uses three main vehicles for doing this: the Word of God (the Bible), the Spirit of God (the Holy Spirit), and the people of God (the physical family and the church).

The missing ingredient is often the third piece—quality spiritual relationships with other believers. Relationships with other Christians are like ropes that help bind us to the Lord and hold us fast to what’s good and honorable and right and true.

Discipleship happens in relationship, and the result of being well discipled is that young believers enjoy relationship with God and other believers in both the physical and spiritual families. Without strong discipling, they don’t have the strength and support that helps them unpack real questions and problems that arise from life in this spiritual war zone. They might have made a decision for Jesus at camp. Or maybe they accepted the Lord at Sunday school, but that was pretty much it. They were helped to be born again into infancy but never spiritually parented to grow into the mature person God desired them to be. They never grew in the faith. Maybe their parents didn’t disciple them because they were never discipled themselves. The parents may have thought that discipling their children was all the church’s job. And the church thought that was the parents’ job.

In the end, nobody was getting discipled. But there is hope.

Light One Candle

One Christmas Eve, my father, my son, and I (Jim) preached a sermon called “Passing Down Christmas.” We preached the

message in parts, all three of us on the platform in front of the auditorium at the same time. It was a candle-lighting service that focused on not just passing down various traditions of the Christmas season but also passing down our faith (the essence of Christmas) to our children and grandchildren.

The message started with a picture of my grandfather on the big screen and an unlit candle on the stage. My father, Bill, shared how his grandparents and parents had put a lot of effort into the Christmas celebration every year, but his father, when he died at age seventy-one, had not shared what he believed or his testimony about what Jesus had done in his life. He had not really taught his son about Jesus.

My dad had always felt far from his father, and though they all went to church, he'd grown up with no real faith. But when my dad was older and going through difficult times, nearly suicidal, an older spiritual mentor came into my dad's life who began to unpack the traditions his parents had introduced through church and Christmas, but never really explained. My dad married, I was born, and my parents began to do things differently. Dad's goal was to light my candle of faith from the beginning. He started a new kind of Christmas and a new kind of legacy in our family.

I then talked about what my dad and mom had done with me. They had tried to plant some really good seeds of faith in my life. But in my free will, I chose to reject the faith as I got older. I walked away from the Lord and became an alcoholic and an atheist who hurt my parents (and myself) in many ways. But my father never gave up on me and pursued me. Though he was a preacher, I was not won back through Dad's preaching. I was won back through his and my mother's selfless love and grace. With their help, I tried to do things wisely in the life of my son.

Bill's Notes for Deeper Reflection

Which of the THREE SONS are you most like?

As you think over the biblical account of the prodigal son from Luke 15:11–32, ask yourself, which son are you most like in the story—the younger son, the older son, or Jesus? You may want to go through this quiz twice: once for yourself and once for the prodigal in your

life as you pray for this person. Why? Because it helps breed compassion and empathy to admit that we have all gone astray. It also acts as a warning, for any one of us is susceptible to falling away from the truth. Check all that apply.

The Younger Son (The Outward Prodigal)

1. He Lost the Battle for His Thoughts

- He looked out from home
- He became discontent
- He became self-centered
- He became filled with lust and greed

2. He Lost the Battle of His Behavior

- He acted on sinful thoughts
- He disrespected his father
- He left his family
- He put his family's values behind him

3. He Lost the Battle of His Habits

- He willfully headed toward evil
- He willfully repeated harmful actions
- He developed harmful habits

4. He Faced the Consequences of His Choices

- He lost relationships with family
- He lost his home
- He lost his money
- He made—then lost—false friends
- He grew jealous of pigs

5. He Was Convicted of His Own Sin

- He realized he had sinned against heaven
- He realized he had sinned against his father
- He experienced a deep sense of loss
- He grew jealous of his father's servants

6. He Was Repentant

- He had a change of mind

- He was sorry enough for his sin to want to change

7. He Chose to Act on His Repentance

- He said, "I will arise and go to my father"
- He headed in the direction of home

8. He Chose to Return

- He allowed himself to be embraced by the father
- He allowed himself to be celebrated by the father

The Older Son (The Inward Prodigal)

9. He Lost the Battle for His Thoughts

- He began to be proud of being better than his brother
- He became critical and judgmental

10. He Lost the Battle for His Behavior

- His lack of love for his brother exhibited itself in disgust
- Because of his lack of love, he withdrew from people
- He made a list of his brother's sins and held on to his list

- Because of his lack of love, he was angry, simmering until he exploded

11. He Lost the Battle for His Habits

- He focused on all his brother had done, or not done, that hurt his family
- He refused to forgive

12. He Faced the Consequences of His Actions

- He missed out on the party
- He accused his father of favoritism

- ___ He separated himself from his family and friends
- ___ He became bitter
- ___ His felt like a slave instead of a son

13. He Was Convicted of His Own Sin

His father held up his sin to him, showing him . . .

- ___ He did not love his family members
- ___ He was angry when he should have been rejoicing
- ___ He was carrying a grudge when he could have enjoyed all the father offered

14. He Should Have Repented of His Own Sin

- ___ His focus was on his brother's sin, not his own

15. He Should Have Focused on Healing and Restoration (Matt. 7:1-5; 18:1-35)

- ___ He remained focused on his brother's sin, not his own need

16. He Should Have Been Restored to His Family (Matt. 18:11, 17)

- ___ He stayed unforgiving
- ___ He lost the joy of celebration

The Good Father (God/Jesus) (1 Cor. 13:4-8)

- | | |
|--|--|
| ___ He was patient, kind, not jealous or boastful | ___ He never gave up, never lost hope, and never quit loving |
| ___ He wasn't proud, rude, or irritable | ___ He watched for his son's return |
| ___ He did not demand his own way | ___ He was full of grace and love and forgiveness |
| ___ He did not keep a record of wrongs | ___ He forgave and restored his son |
| ___ He didn't rejoice in injustice but rejoiced when truth won out | ___ He sought to restore his other prodigal son |
| | ___ He celebrated restoration in his family |



At this point my son shared how he had believed when he was young but later rejected the faith and became a drug addict. He overdosed and almost died, he ran away from home, spent time in jail and rehab programs, and landed in a homeless shelter. But with the help of family and church, God strengthened my wife and me. And together, we were able to win him back.

My son then shared what Lori and I and my father and mother had done in his life, and how it softened his heart and how he returned. He shared that there were consequences of his rebellion for sure—he did not graduate from high school and had a son out of wedlock with a woman he hardly knew. He shared how God had worked it all out so that now he was a youth minister working with kids who had drug problems. Now he was married and had a son with his believing wife.

As each of us in turn talked about what had happened and how God had helped to save our kids, we lit a candle. In the end, my son's four-year-old son, Kaden (the son born out of wedlock), came up and had his candle lit. Kaden then went to the crowd and lit one person's candle. That person lit another person's candle, and so on and so on, until every person in the auditorium had a lit candle. The house lights were off, and it was an amazing sight to see row after row of candles glowing in the dark. So many in our church had known of our struggle to save our son. They had prayed for us and sought to help in so many ways as a church family—we had all prayerfully helped to bring my son home. Now as a church we wanted to help provide a new future for Kaden, just the same way as we prayerfully commit to helping everyone walk closely with the Lord.

Throughout this book, we're going to prayerfully help you with the prodigal in your life, the prodigal whom you focus

most upon. I wish I could say there's one magic formula, but life is not like that. Life can be messy and complicated. I get that. And I know that statistics are not merely numbers. Statistics represent real people. The people who have walked away from God are our children, our friends, our family members, our neighbors, our classmates, people we once worked with at camp, maybe even our mentors or parents or spouses, people we care about the most. Our prayer is that these prodigals would come to their senses and return home to the Father. Why should we care? Why should we make it our mission to do all in our power to woo prodigals back to the Father? Because these people are loved by our Father and we love Him. In some respects we were all prodigals and He came for us. And when we love the Father, we remember that we were first loved by Him, and those people out there are loved as well. They are God's creation, and He wants them to become a part of His spiritual family through faith in Christ. They are dead and lost, and God wants them alive and found.

The good news is that the Father is already looking for them, actively waiting for their return. He's fully prepared to sprint down the road toward them, greet them in a loving embrace, and say, "Welcome home!"