

“The Prodigals in Our Lives”

By Allan Pole



Theme: Healthy relationships are inviting *and* provide space for free will.

Text: Luke 15:11-32

Here's a thought: Someone has observed, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

The normal human heart is a strong, muscular pump a little larger than a fist. It pumps blood continuously through the circulatory system. Each day the average heart "beats" (expands and contracts) 100,000 times and pumps about 2,000 gallons of blood. In a 70-year lifetime, an average human heart beats more than 2.5 billion times!

Relationships are much like a healthy heart – they expand and contract. Healthy relationships are inviting and provide space for free will.

While illustrating the Father's heart to "sinners" and "spiritual" people alike, Jesus tells this parable or story in Luke 15:11-32:

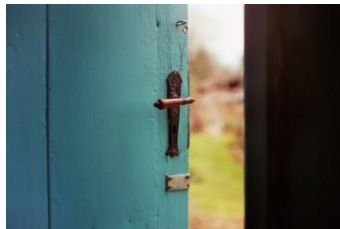
11 Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them. 13 Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. 14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. 17 When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' 20 So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. 21 The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring

the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate. 25 Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. 26 So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 27 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.' 28 The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!' 31 'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" NIV

We can learn a lot about handling the prodigals in our lives by the example of this model father of Jesus' parable in Luke 15.

When people want to go:

Let Them Go



If you were a son of a Jewish father 2,000 years ago in Palestine you would have had a lot of nerve to ask him for your inheritance. It would be like saying, "I wish you were already dead." Your father would have every right to be offended and probably would have viewed such a request as an act of rebellion. The ones listening to Jesus' parable would have been disgusted at the father even entertaining such a request.

The eldest son always received a double portion of the family inheritance, so in this case, the older brother would have received two-thirds and the younger brother would have received one-third.

Why would a father grant such a greedy, self-indulgent, short-sighted request? He was not obligated to say yes, but I am sure that he loved his sons and he wanted the very best for them. In light of this, he must have concluded that a powerful life lesson was awaiting both of his boys. He probably reached this conclusion after discussing the matter at length with his younger son and

discerning his heart. In this culture wasting resources was thoroughly despised. The father likely pleaded with his son not to squander his newfound wealth but eventually recognized the hardness of his heart and unwillingness to listen to counsel. Someone has observed, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

Yes, there is a time to confront people for sin and their bad choices but remember the wisdom of Proverbs 9:7-9:

7 Whoever corrects a mocker invites insult; whoever rebukes a wicked man incurs abuse. 8 Do not rebuke a mocker or he will hate you; rebuke a wise man and he will love you. 9 Instruct a wise man and he will be wiser still; teach a righteous man and he will add to his learning. NIV

We will soon discern a person's openness to counsel and correction by their response. If we keep hammering on the truth when the recipient does not want to listen, we can unintentionally build more walls than bridges. To use another analogy, such persistence can generate more heat than light.

Why did the robber take a bath? Because he wanted to make a clean getaway.

Jewish law permitted the father to determine which assets (especially land) would go to his heirs before he died, but they could take possession only upon his death. The father could have easily used control and even manipulation to keep the son under his roof. Respecting his son's free will, however, the father let him go. This young man, who was probably under 18 years of age and unmarried, set off to discover and enjoy all the pleasures this world has to offer.

This poem from an unknown author

(<https://www.theribbon.com/poetry/lettinggo.php>) helps me when I have to let go of different types and degrees of prodigals in my life ...

Letting Go

To "let go" does not mean to stop caring, it means I can't do it for someone else.

To "let go" is not to cut myself off, it is the realization I can't control another.

To "let go" is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences.

To "let go" is to admit powerlessness, which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To "let go" is not to try to change or blame another, it is to make the most of myself.

To "let go" is not to care for, but to care about.

To "let go" is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To "let go" is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.

To "let go" is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes but to allow others to affect their own destinies.

To "let go" is not to be protective, it is to permit another to face reality.

To "let go" is not to deny, but to accept.

To "let go" is not to nag, scold, or argue, but instead to search out my own shortcomings and to correct them.

To "let go" is not to adjust everything to my desires but to take each day as it comes, and to cherish myself in it.

To "let go" is not to criticize and regulate anybody but to try to become what I dream I can be.

To "let go" is not to regret the past, but to grow and to live for the future.

To "let go" is to fear less and to love more.

Seeing the longing for another place in his son's eyes, the father would have been tempted to chase after him but he did not. Instead, he hung on to him loosely. He resisted the temptation to chase after his son. He knew that his son had to learn some things the hard way. Jesus doesn't tell us, but the father might have received updates on his son. If he intervened before his son got to that point, he would have been short-circuiting the purposes of God in his boy's life.

Is there someone in your life that is running, sinning and/or making bad choices? Have you let them know how you feel about it? Are you having a hard time letting them go?

When people want to go:

Let Them Go

Welcome Them Back



Those listening to Jesus' parable would have fully expected the story to end

(like a similar second-century Jewish story) with the son getting what he deserved – scratching out an existence in a land filled with famine while he was reduced to the horrible level of eating alongside the most unclean of animals. The son should have been cut off from the community and any financial help he would have wanted.

However, the story takes a dramatic twist. Somehow, this son knew that the father would have him back - in fact, *he* knew his father's heart better than his *older brother* knew their father's heart. In protesting to his father about welcoming the younger son back, the older son calls him with disgust (in Luke 15:30), "this son of yours." For this reason, we could call *both* the *younger* and the *older* son prodigals. Even though the younger son knew his father's heart, even *he* did not realize the extent of his father's love.

While scheming a way to bargain with the father to take him back simply as an employee, the father went on with his life keeping an eye open for his son. No doubt he had prayed many times for his boy. His heart yearned to see him again and to embrace him back into the household.

While we would have lectured this self-centred, short-sighted young man on how much he had hurt us and how foolish he had been, the father instead welcomed him back with open arms and a grand celebration. Listeners would have winced as Jesus told them of how the father cast aside all dignity to run to embrace his son. The best robe in the house would have belonged to the father himself. The ring would probably be a family signet ring — a symbol of reinstatement to sonship in a well-to-do house. Slaves did not normally wear sandals, though they carried and tied a master's sandals. The father is saying, "No, I won't receive you back as a servant. I'll receive you only as a son."

The calf would be enough to feed the whole village, so this would be a big party! Aristocratic families often invited the whole town to a banquet when a son reached adulthood (about thirteen years old) or when a child got married.

The father knew the consequences of his younger son's choices would remain - the older son still maintained his inheritance. The father welcomed back his younger son, but there were boundaries and terms. Forgiveness can happen immediately but trust takes time to build or rebuild. Because the inheritance had been divided, the elder brother was already assured of his share, effective when the father died; he had nothing to lose by his younger brother's return. The final response of the elder brother is never stated, providing the Pharisees with the opportunity to repent if they are willing. While the older brother stood by in disgust at the father's reception, we too must beware of the tendency for the older brother to raise his ugly head in our hearts as well.

Even when there is forgiveness and restoration of the relationship there can be consequences of sin that remain – the Lord will decide on that. Our call is to pray for and welcome back the prodigals around us. Daniel represents a

nation of prodigals in his prayer in Daniel 9:1-10:

1 In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes (a Mede by descent), who was made ruler over the Babylonian kingdom - 2 in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, understood from the Scriptures, according to the word of the Lord given to Jeremiah the prophet, that the desolation of Jerusalem would last seventy years. 3 So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes. 4 I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, 5 we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws. 6 We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes and our fathers, and to all the people of the land. 7 Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are covered with shame - the men of Judah and people of Jerusalem and all Israel, both near and far, in all the countries where you have scattered us because of our unfaithfulness to you. 8 O Lord, we and our kings, our princes and our fathers are covered with shame because we have sinned against you. 9 The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him; 10 we have not obeyed the Lord our God or kept the laws he gave us through his servants the prophets." NIV

Our Heavenly Father loves us deeply yet respects our freedom to choose. We are called to do the same for others.

Is there a prodigal in your life that has hurt you? Have you forgiven them? In what ways can you affirm and encourage a prodigal for some good choices?

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