

## If I had it to do again, I would preach less and pray more

# I Am the Parent of a Prodigal

Name Withheld

**M**y wife and I have wept a thousand tears and asked a thousand “why’s?” I am the minister of a growing Christian church. We are the parents of a prodigal.

It hits you like a ton of bricks when you first learn your child has rejected virtually every biblical principle and value that you have spent years carefully modeling and teaching. When you discover that your son is doing physical, emotional, and spiritual damage to himself, you experience a pain most others cannot understand.

Many members of our church have been so kind, so understanding, and so encouraging. Perhaps it’s because they have a prodigal child, or maybe some of them were prodigals. Whatever the case, they’ll never know how much their support and prayers have meant to us!

### Problems Begin

Our nightmare began when our 18-year-old son dropped out of a Christian college after only a few weeks. We were unaware as this bright, talented, athletic young man jumped headfirst into an abyss of drugs, vandalism, and sexual promiscuity. He quickly became an easy target for those living in a dark underworld who prey on naive, unsuspecting, and yet seemingly willing victims. In just a few short months, he faced possible criminal charges, but due to the mercy of some of those in the judicial system, he was released into our custody.

We wrongly assumed the nightmare was nearly over, but when his head began to clear of the drugs that had



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been in his system, he was left with guilt and shame, anger and bitterness. He felt scarred, used, and depressed. He struggled to break free of the destructive cycle that had trapped him. Instead of the prodigal leaving the pigpen and coming home, it seemed like

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the pigpen had been brought home to us. We faced the agonizing decision of if, when, and how to have our adult son removed from our home.

Some readers of this article have never had to face a decision like this. You will never see your child in a

bright orange prison jumpsuit standing before a judge. You will never receive phone calls in the middle of the night from the police. You will never be cursed at or threatened by your child. You will never have your child steal from you or lie to you or sneak out of your home at night. You will never need to raise a grandchild born out of wedlock. You will never be forced to visit your child in a rehab center. You’ll never look for your child among the homeless people who live under bridges and overpasses, wondering if he is dead or alive.

If your children have consistently made wise choices, consider yourself blessed, because the number of young people the enemy has snatched has become a national epidemic.

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## Don't Jump to Conclusions

You might be speculating about what causes these young people to go astray.

"The parents must not have spent enough time with their child."

"There must have been inconsistencies in their lives."

"They must not have taught them the Bible."

"They should have had them in a Christian school." For years I might have said such things. I lived with a very legalistic, prideful attitude about parenting. I believed that if I did "A-B-C," then my child would do or be "X-Y-Z." If I got the formula right, then my children would turn out as I expected. But recently I've decided that how children grow up is more about human will and choices than parenting skills. If I had it to do over, I would preach to my children less and be on my knees praying for them more.

No parents are perfect parents; we all make mistakes. But what if we didn't? God is the perfect parent, and yet every one of His children at one time or another chooses to rebel against Him! Have we ever believed the father was to blame for the son's rebellion in the biblical story of the prodigal son? On the contrary, it is abundantly clear that it was all about the son's free will, exercised in his poor choices.

Haven't you known people who grew up in terrible homes who turned out good, and others who grew up in wonderful homes who turned out not so good? Our second child is a very committed Christian. Both children were

raised in the same home.

It's interesting to note that the first seven chapters of Proverbs are directed to sons choosing wisdom and obedience, but only six verses in the entire book are directed to parents disciplining their children!

Only God knows the end of the story for our prodigal. Every once in awhile we get a glimmer of hope that our son will fully return to God. Many times I've wished I could just read the final chapter; then perhaps I'd sleep better at night. But we are learning to walk by faith, one day at a time. God is sovereign, and we have learned much about His grace, His patience, and His love that we probably would not have learned otherwise.

If, at times, I seem distracted, I've asked the church to forgive me. If my voice breaks, they try to understand. And if someone is tempted to judge me, all I can say is, "Please don't. My load is heavy enough right now, so would you pray for us, please?"

## The Story Isn't Over

*After I wrote this article, my wife and I received a letter from our son that reinforced our reasons to hope. Part of what he wrote:*

"I moved out of the house when I was 18 thinking about how good life would be once I got my freedom,

but just like the prodigal son in the Bible, I shared the trough with the pigs. I too saw all the world has to offer. I too realized that the life is sinful, cold, and unhappy without God or your family in it.

"I want you to know that I am so happy to have two parents that love and care about me like you do. You have given me chance after chance, and have been so very patient with me. Thank you so much for caring about me and trying to understand all that I have gone through. I have seen the most evil that people are capable of, and I have seen that living a life of sin contrary to God's will leads only to self-destruction and anguish. I have been living that kind of life long enough.

"I am willing now to take steps to rebuild a relationship with God, and I look forward to many good years ahead of us as our relationship as a family gets better. I don't want to hurt or disappoint either one of you anymore. I only want now to try and be the best person I can be. Several years ago you lost a sensitive and good-hearted little boy to the sins of this world. I want to be that kid once again. I want my hardened heart to be free of the pains from my past so that I can be happy again.

"I will try my best to do my part to make things better for our family. Your prodigal son may have physically returned to you a couple of years ago, but returning to you emotionally and spiritually will take some time. Please don't ever lose hope in me. Just remember that I will always love you."

## You're Not Alone!

Ministry families with children addicted to drugs or alcohol need not face this trial by themselves. You're Not Alone is a ministry started in 1999 by John and Susan Vawter after they learned their daughter was addicted to heroin. John was senior pastor of Bethany Community Church in Tempe, Arizona, at the time.

To read their story and to learn more about the resources they offer, log on to [www.notalone.org](http://www.notalone.org).

In addition, here are other books rec-

ommended by the author of this article:

- *Parenting the Wild Child*, by Miles McPherson (Bethany House, 2000)
- *Praying Prodigals Home*, by Quin Sherrer and Ruthanne Garlock (Gospel Light, 2000)
- *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*, by Ruth Bell Graham (Baker Book House, 1999)
- *Relief for Hurting Parents: How to Fight for the Lives of Teenagers*, by Buddy Scott (Allon Publishing, 1998)