

# Practical Help for Parents of Prodigals

By Shirley Elliott Johns

One of a Christian parent's greatest joy in parenting is when his son or daughter places faith in Jesus Christ and chooses to live to please and glorify God. Likewise, his greatest heartache is when his child makes a conscious decision to reject what he was taught about God and chooses to live to please himself. As unsaved children grow into adulthood parents are faced with challenging situations since adult children are no longer under the authority of parents. Thankfully, God's word is the source of help and hope. Here are some biblical principles that can guide parents during this difficult time:

1. Be Christ to your unbelieving adult child. Welcome them, love them, share meals together, have peaceful conversations where your hearts connect. Think of ways you can show the love of Christ to them whether they live near you, with you, or out of town. Connect through text messages, emails, phone calls and cards. For some parents it may be a one-sided relationship when their adult child does not want a relationship with them. In times like this we must remember that our motive for all we do is the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:31). God will lovingly reveal our hearts to us when there is no response or when our child cancels or does not show up. We become Christ when we show love to our prodigal, expecting nothing in return (Romans 5:8).
2. Guard against speculations like, "what if", "I wonder", and "if only". As parents, it's easy to beat ourselves up, by doing a meticulous review of the previous ten to twenty years, and begin to think, "If we had only done this, and not that", "If we had only said 'this' instead of what we did say", maybe our child would be different. These kinds of thoughts can consume the hearts of Christian parents, paralyzing them with fear and making it easy for them to experience despair and hopelessness. God's word teaches us to "take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). Dwelling on the 'what if's' will get parents nowhere and can easily tempt us with fear of man which can result in making decisions based on something other than biblical truth. This was me in the beginning when I realized my young adult daughter was not a believer after all.
3. When adult children are living in the home and parents become aware they are acting deceitfully and making choices to follow Satan and self, parents should lovingly address their behavior. If they refuse to abide by house rules, parents should tell them to leave within a short timeframe. Perhaps only a couple of weeks. This helps the prodigal grasp the seriousness of his thinking and behavior. It is heartbreaking for parents to do this, but an important decision, especially when there are younger children living in the home who may be influenced by older siblings. The parent can consider making a behavior contract. Signing it does not mean they are in agreement, but does mean they understand what is expected and what the results of abiding or not abiding will be.
4. For parents who have young children in the home and an adult child who is not living at home but is living a lifestyle of drug or alcohol abuse, homosexuality or transitioning their gender, it is important for parents to communicate truthfully to the younger child concerning the ideas and lifestyles of their older siblings. Even with young elementary children, when it comes to a transitioning adult child, a parent can simply explain, "God made people male and female, but many people today do not like the way God made them and so they try to live like the opposite sex." It is also unwise to allow younger children to be alone with an older sibling since you do not want them to be influenced by the lifestyle of their older sibling and see their behavior presented in a 'positive light'. These challenging days can present many teachable moments to younger children. Nonetheless, parents can and should seek to maintain a relationship with their prodigal son or daughter while refusing to compromise godly principles (Romans 12:18).

5. Allow the natural consequences of foolish decisions to run their course. Don't interfere with what God may want to accomplish in the life of your young adult. The temptation for parents is to protect and rescue, but the outcome and benefits to the prodigal can be life-changing when parents allow their children to experience the effects of the 'sowing and reaping' principle found in Galatians 6:7-8. No one helped the younger son in Luke 15 or offered to have him dine at their table. God used the natural consequence of hunger and hitting rock bottom to drive the young prodigal back to his father with humility, a heart of repentance, and a willingness to work as one of his father's hired servants. For parents whose adult children are going through church discipline, although heartbreaking to watch, we know that God ordains this process. As Jay Adams describes, "... it is God's provision for good order in His church that creates conditions for the instruction and growth of the members. Discipline has a positive function."
6. God alone has the power to save – we as parents are called to train our children in the instruction of the Lord, but salvation is a gift from God, by faith and through grace. There is nothing we can do to earn it for ourselves or for our children (Ephesians 2:8-9). We are not the Savior. It's easy for parents to believe the lie that they alone can speak truth to the heart of their adult prodigal. That is not true. God can use anyone and anything to open blind eyes and soften hard hearts to the gospel. It is the work of the Holy Spirit.
7. It is wonderful when parents and adult children can enjoy peaceful conversations and enjoy being in the lives of each other. However, there may be times when it is loving and wise for parents to distance themselves and even cease communication with their prodigal. It depends on the situation and the heart motive must be examined. A relationship with your adult child is a wonderful desire but cannot be forced. When adult children are demanding, harsh, abrasive or attacking when they are with you, then it may be necessary for a while to let them go and not pursue communication until behavior changes. We never want to have the attitude of 'washing our hands' of our children. That would be unloving. But it is also unloving and unwise to give freedom to a prodigal adult child to selfishly explode in anger towards you, the parent.
8. Parents must be discerning about advice or counsel given by well-meaning friends. This can be unbiblical at times and be rooted in emotion rather than truth. Some counsel may indicate that love and confronting sin are in opposition to each other when biblically they are not. It is unloving to watch anyone heading for a cliff and not attempt to help that person avoid the pain of the fall. Obviously, this is done with discernment and care depending on the situation and context. Both friends and family have confidently assured me that my daughter *will* turn and be saved one day. But I respond with, "I don't know that to be true and I cannot put my hope there. My hope rests in the Lord."
9. Keep praying and never lose hope! My daughter's salvation is at the top of my prayer list. In the beginning when I became aware she was not a Christian, I'd hoped it would be a sprint until the day she acknowledged Jesus as Lord in her life. But over these 14 years, it has become a marathon and I continue to find hope in God and great comfort in Isaiah 59:1 which says, "*Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear*". Holding tight to the secure belief that God is sovereign over my daughter's life has allowed me to take a step back and quiet my racing heart and noisy soul. It has allowed me to sleep at night when I might be prone to worry and believe the worst. Other hope giving passages that remind parents to rest in the Lord are Psalm 27:14 and Lamentations 3:25-26.