

The Messenger



“... How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of good things!” Romans 10:15

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When a Prodigal Won't Come Home

by Allen Dvorak

We love happy endings! Perhaps that is why the parable of the prodigal son is so appealing to us. The younger son followed a destructive road, but “*he came to himself*” (Luke 15:7). His repentance and his humble confession to his father are intensely moving. What if the prodigal son (family member) doesn't come home? What if he stubbornly persists in his wayward course, refusing to repent? Experience reveals that often the story of unfaithfulness takes this path and, unfortunately, Christians sometimes commit two grave mistakes in their response to sin in the life of a family member.

Two Common Mistakes

The first error is to fail to properly value the soul of the sinner. It is all too common for Christians to refuse to follow Scriptural instructions for fear of damaging the intimacy of the family relationship. Such failure is tantamount to the admission that maintaining pleasant social relations is more important to us than obeying the divine prescription for discipline. Jesus said that those who act in this fashion are unworthy of Him because they fail to elevate God over everyone else (Matt. 10:34-37). Such behavior fails to demonstrate “neighbor-love,” choosing the cultivation/preservation of temporary social relationships over the eternal salvation of the erring family member.

The second mistake is assuming the Lord's plan for restoration will not work, so it is abandoned before it is even tried. It is reasoned that attempts at restoration will drive the sinner away and thus, we should take no “negative” actions, merely hope that the sinner will come to his senses sometime in the future. It is certainly true that repentance can only be encouraged, not coerced, but it is an evil heart of unbelief to refuse to follow the Lord's clear instructions.

What Should We Do?

God's word must be followed. Using Scripture, we should identify sinful behavior and patiently encourage repentance (II Tim. 4:2; I Thes. 5:14; Luke 17:3-4). The erring family member must be rebuked with gentleness and humility and with the intention of restoration (Gal. 6:1). The Pharisees and scribes were adept at identifying sinners, but they viewed themselves as superior and lacked the compassion and concern exhibited by the father of the prodigal son.

Jesus indicated it might be necessary to involve others. *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established'"* (Matt. 18:15-16).

Not even repeated rebuke and exhortation may be enough to bring the prodigal home. The local congregation may have to become involved. *"And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector"* (Matt. 18:17). It is difficult to shun any erring brother, but the task becomes especially difficult when he is a member of our physical family. The purpose of congregational withdrawal is twofold: to save the sinner and protect the congregation (I Cor. 5:4-5). The sinner is to be shunned with the objective of causing him to be ashamed: he is no longer walking in the light (II Thes. 3:14; I John 1:7). Corrective discipline is not intended to be pleasant, but it is a sure manifestation of love (Heb. 12:11; Rev. 3:19).

Sometimes the "prodigal" is not a part of the local congregation. Are faithful family members then excused from any form of discipline? Shall we maintain our family relationships as though there has been no change in the prodigal's relationship with God, giving the impression that we condone the sinner's behavior? Knowing how best to impress the prodigal with his dire spiritual situation can be difficult, but we must find a way to signal to him that he is out of step with God and thus out of step with the Christians in his physical family. Our physical family relationships bring responsibilities mandated by the Scriptures. Parents must care for children who are minors; spouses have duties toward one another. However, the overall purpose of corrective discipline should be remembered and respected even as these physical responsibilities are fulfilled.

It takes courage to discipline a wayward family member. He may never return home, spiritually speaking, but our task remains the same: To love him and work for the salvation of his soul.

News and Notes:

Remember to check the prayer list for those with ongoing spiritual weaknesses and physical illnesses.

"...Pray for one another...The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." James 5:16