

## **“Was the Father of the Prodigal Son a Good Dad?”**

**Luke 15: 11-24**

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**Fathers' Day**

Was the Father of the Prodigal a good dad? If Jesus had not told this story, this question might be up for discussion. However, knowing Jesus was the author probably changes that. From all indications, he was pleased with the words and decisions of the father of the Prodigal. He portrayed him as a wise, loving and patient man; a healer and peacemaker.

Let's put the spotlight on him since this is Father's Day. What made him a good dad? What can we learn from him that would make us better parents?

I am indebted to Dr. O. S. Hawkins for his insight. He claims the Prodigal's father was good because he had open hands, open arms and an open heart. Let me explain.

**The prodigal's father was a good dad because he had open hands.** He knew when to release his grip and let go. When his son came and asked for his inheritance so that he could leave home, he gave him what he asked for and let him go.

I wonder how hard this was for him especially knowing his son might not make wise decisions. Was this the first time his son had approached him? Had they discussed this previously? Did he try to talk his son out of leaving?

Jesus doesn't tell us, does he? He merely said that the father divided his property among his two sons, implying that each was free to do as he wished.

Knowing when to let children go is a sign of wisdom. Doing it is usually painful. I remember vividly when I learned this.

I was happy and excited the day I left for college. I was looking forward to living in a college town, meeting new friends and expanding my wings. My brother, who is two years older, was already a student. I loaded my few possessions in his car and went back into the house for a final check.

My mother was sitting at the kitchen table looking out the window. As I approached her, I saw tears in her eyes. I realize now that she didn't want me to see them. She did not want to dampen my enthusiasm. She had put on such a good front the whole time I was packing and preparing to leave.

For the first time that day, I realized this was very hard for her. I was so wrapped up in my life and schedule that I failed to consider her feelings, and my dad's for that matter. They knew it was time to let me go but it was still painful. I was the last to leave and wrapped up almost three decades of parenting for them.

Years later, I found myself on the other end of the equation. It was my turn to let my children go and I wasn't handling it very well. I recalled that day I left for college, so I called my mother.

“Mom,” I said, “How did you do it? How did you let us boys leave home without completely falling apart? Jason has gone to the Marine Corps and Amy is preparing to go to college and I'm not handling it well. How did you do it?”

I'll never forget her reply. “At times, I hurt so badly I thought I would die,” she said, “but I was too grateful for you boys and too proud of you and your families to want it any other way.”

Little did I know this would be my last conversation with her. She died suddenly a few days later. Once again, I had to open my hands and let go of someone very dear and precious to me.

I delivered the eulogy at her funeral and one thing I said was this. “Her greatest virtue was her ability to let her children go. Like a mother bird, she reared us four boys to fly and then let us soar. She encouraged us to chart our own courses and pursue our own dreams. She never

interfered or tried to reattach the umbilical cord. I never recall any unrealistic or selfish expectations. Our mistakes were never accentuated but our accomplishments were never forgotten. She defined and embodied the words encouragement, independence, strength and discipline.”

Letting go is an important part of parenting. We do our children no favor by making them hopelessly dependent upon us. This may feed our ego but it destroys theirs.

This is why good parenting skills prepare children to be independent. I believe it is easier to let go when you recognize this and have taken parenting seriously, making it a priority. One reason parents are reluctant to let go is because they have neglected to prepare their children to make wise decisions on their own. Time has slipped up on them and they feel the need to hold on to their children to say and do the things they have neglected.

I know being parents of young children is stressful and demanding. When you are running ragged, it is hard to imagine your home empty and your children gone. That day will come, however, and usually it occurs when the children are ready to leave home, not when you are ready for them to go. This was certainly the case with the Prodigal and his father. The separation was not determined by the father but the son. The father merely honored his son’s wishes, opened his hands and let him go.

One day you will be called upon to do this if you have children. Prepare for it while they are young by making parenting your highest priority and calling. Decide what you want to pass on to them and take advantage of every opportunity to do so. It will be easier to let go when, over the years, you have been good teachers, companions and role models.

**When the time is right, open hands make good dads and so do open arms.** When the prodigal decided to come home after squandering his inheritance, Jesus said, “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” Luke 15:20.

Is there anything more affirming and welcoming than a hug? I don’t know what it would be. If a picture is worth a thousand words, a hug is worth a million. It communicates what words never could. To me, a hug says that you don’t have to be perfect for someone to embrace you. Since no one is perfect, we all need hugs.

“What was it like the first time you saw your family?” Katie Couric asked Runaway Bride, Jennifer Wilbanks. “It was a very, very tender moment for me. I just hugged them all and cried and cried and cried. That’s all I could do was hug them.”

Can you imagine how the prodigal felt when his father hugged him? How nervous and apprehensive he must have been about returning home. He prepared a speech about his remorse and expectations and even rehearsed it. He never got to give that speech in its entirety, did he? Actually, he was unable to say anything until his dad hugged and kissed him. What a relief that must have been.

That hug tells me two things that I think are important. It tells me how hard it must have been for this father to let his son go. I still remember the first time I saw Jason after boot camp at Parris Island. I thought I was going to squeeze all the air out of his lungs.

It also tells me that this father wanted to make sure that his son knew that nothing was more important than his well being. The problems that must be confronted because this boy had made bad decisions would be dealt with in the proper time and place. That time was not then nor was the front gate the place. Instead, it was time to let a scared and humiliated son know that home was still home and always would be. Nothing mattered until that was understood.

A Spanish story says that a father and his son became estranged. The son ran away and the father had no idea where to look for him. After months passed with no communication, the father put an ad in a Madrid paper that read, “Son, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your Father.” At the appointed time, over eight hundred boys showed up hoping the request was from their father.

The father of the Prodigal knew what Philip Gulley and James Mulholland wrote in their book, If God is Love. “Goodness is not about controlling others but loving them.” What his son needed on that dusty road was not a lecture but a hug, a full body bear hug, so he gave it to him.

**The only way the Prodigal’s father could do this was because he had an open heart.** In Marilynne Robinson’s novel, Gilead, the characters in John Ames’ family come to the realization that at times it is easier to love the world than their own kin. The same could probably be said of the Prodigal’s family. The father of this flawed family did not do what was easy, but necessary for healing and hope.

He loved his son at his best and his worst. He loved him when it was easy to do so and when it was hard. He loved him when he made bad decisions as well as good ones. He loved him and wanted everyone to know. Shame, guilt, fear and condemnation don’t throw parties. Love does and perhaps one reason it does is because it overrules those other strong emotions.

We all know it is easy to love lovely people. This includes our children. It is easy to love them when they have achieved their potential and made us proud. For sure, they need our love and affirmation then, too.

However, the time they need us most is during their identity crisis, when they have failed to achieve a goal or when they are reeling from foolish mistakes. When no one else loves them and they don’t even love themselves, they need to know their parents love them and will be there for them. By the grace of God, and only by His grace, good parents will.

John Hinckley, Jr. tried to assassinate President Reagan in March, 1981. In the book, Breaking Points, Hinckley’s parents described their first visit with their son after the shooting.

“What do you say the first time you see your son after he has done the unthinkable? ‘Why did you shoot the President, son?’ Of course you don’t. Instead, as we had done a number of times on the phone since Monday, we told John that we loved him. No amount of anger or revulsion could change that and that we intended to see this thing through together.” Sounds like something the prodigal’s father would say.

Open hands, open arms and open hearts- these are the things that make good fathers and mothers. Where is your struggle today? Which is hardest for you to open? What do your children need you to open? Talk to Jesus about it. Somehow I think he understands and can help.