



“About Prodigals”

Earlier this month, I attended the funeral of a Christian gentleman who served his church as both deacon and choir director. Eulogies from family and friends attested to the strength and consistency of this man's Christian testimony. He was at home and in private exactly what he professed at church. Without exaggeration, his life was well lived, for the good of others and the glory of God.

Although it was nearly forty years ago, the memory of a conversation I had with this man's wife following a Sunday service at church remains vivid. I was both surprised and embarrassed when she began by telling me that I frustrated her. My immediate reaction was to wonder what I had done wrong. I was a high school teenager and had been a Christian just a short time. After coming to Christ as the result of reading a simple gospel tract, I started attending a small independent Baptist church where I was grounded in my new faith. This kind lady went on to tell me that what was frustrating to her was not really me but her son who was just a few years older. He had a loving family, was raised in church, and attended a fine Christian school. Yet he came to church only at his parent's insistence, gravitated to the wrong crowd, and was often in trouble. With tears in her eyes, she expressed her confusion as to why her son did not have the interest in spiritual things that I did. She asked me to please pray for her son. Tragically, years later her son died as a result of a drug overdose.

The sad end of this son's life might lead some to conclude hastily that the declarations made at that funeral were flawed. People, after all, tend to hide vices and overstate virtues at a funeral, right? In truth, the real flaw here would be the assumption that moral and spiritual ruin in the life of a son or daughter is always the fault of the parents.

But doesn't Proverbs 22:6 promise, "Raise up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it?" Actually, no, this is not a promise. It is proverbial literature, which means it states a general truth. Most often, children raised right turn out right. But not always. And the converse is also true: Sometimes good kids come from bad homes.

The assumption that parental example and training is all-determining is not taught in Scripture. If it were in fact so, how do we explain the good kings of Judah such as Hezekiah and Josiah whose fathers were profoundly wicked? By the grace of God a child can rise above his upbringing. As well, godly Samuel had sons who "took bribes and perverted judgment" (I Sam. 8:3) in spite of the fact that their father's character was consistent and above reproach (I Sam. 12:2f). Children can reject godly upbringing and turn to their own way. Cain and Abel both came from the same set of parents, as did Jacob and Esau.

This is certainly not to diminish the importance of parental responsibility. Instead it is to warn against pride on the part of parents whose children faithfully follow Christ. Give God the glory, and be cautious about judging others too harshly. Also, for parents who endeavored to raise their children "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4) yet still grieve over their prodigal son or daughter, it is vital to realize that children must choose for themselves. Blaming yourself for failure when there is none is of no value. Remorse and grief do not need the added burden of false guilt. Also, remember, sometimes prodigals do come home.

As a footnote, this fine Christian gentleman whose funeral I recently attended left behind two adult children who are faithfully serving the Lord, one as a foreign missionary. They both credit their faith to the inspiration of their father's example and upbringing.