

## **Forgiving Adult Children Who Disappoint You**

by Stephen Bly

What do you do when adult children reject moral, social, and spiritual wisdom and choose a life that is totally unacceptable?

There's just such a story in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> In this account, a man's younger son asks his father for his share of the estate, then sets off for another country. He squanders his entire inheritance in wild living and eventually ends up in a literal pigpen. Though the details may have changed, this is still a common story today. Let's look at a few things we can learn from the parable of the prodigal son.

### ***Remember, a good environment does not ensure perfect children***<sup>2</sup>

Though the prodigal son left home and made a series of bad choices, there's no indication that his home life was anything substandard or severe.

Since the time of Freud, childhood environment—and specifically parental actions or inactions—have taken the rap for almost everything. Many of us have done a less-than-sterling job in raising our kids. But remember:

- \* There are no perfect people.<sup>3</sup>
- \* All people are responsible for their own actions.<sup>4</sup>
- \* All people (even your children) are capable of totally unreasonable actions.<sup>5</sup>

Geoffrey and Marcia were exemplary citizens with a reputation for honesty, stability, and credibility. That's why it came as a shock when their son, Allen, was arrested for embezzling a large sum of money from the car dealership where he was the accountant. People speculated about where Geoff and Marcia had gone wrong in their parenting. Even Geoff and Marcia struggled to find fault in themselves.

But Allen's problem was all his own. During college he began a secret habit of gambling—poker in the dorms, bets on sporting events, and occasional trip to the casinos. After college, as his income grew, so did his addiction, until he began losing more than he made. He began skimming at work, until finally he was caught. It should have been no more surprising than if it had happened to the son of an alcoholic parent. Behavior does not necessarily reflect home environment.

Eventually we have to allow our adult children to make their own choices.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the story of the prodigal, we never read about the sorrow in the father's heart when he gives his youngest son the inheritance and allows him to run off to the city. But it's not hard to imagine.

Bruce and Amber's son, Ted, had just finished dental school when he announced over the phone, "I'm moving in with a friend while I do my internship."

The friend turned out to be a woman 16 years older than Ted. She had been married three times, had two teenagers, and was a heavy drinker. Ted didn't ask his parents' advice and wasn't interested in their concerns. He simply informed them that he was capable of making his own decisions. He's right, no matter how lousy his decisions might be.

### ***Adult children need to know intuitively that the door to Mom and Dad's home is never completely shut.***<sup>7</sup>

What made the prodigal return home and plead for mercy? He knew his dad treated all people kindly.

Ronnie hadn't seen his parents in 12 years, though he called them once or twice a year. One day he called and asked them if he could move home. "Mom, there's no nice way to say this. I have AIDS and I'm dying."

Less than a year later, Ronnie died in his mother's arms in his parents' house—a home where he found an open door.

### ***Adult children need to see an open display of compassion.***<sup>8</sup>

Upon his son's return, the prodigal's father threw his arms around the young man, hugged him, and kissed him even before there was any confession of sorrow. It was a very public display of love.

At 21, Heidi flew home from college during her senior year, unmarried and pregnant. Her parents met her at the airport, and the first thing her father did was hug her for about five minutes. Tears flowed and the people in the terminal stared. "I was so scared that I'd come home and you wouldn't want to hug me anymore!" Heidi said. Dad hugged her that day, and he was the first to hug her five months later when the baby arrived.

Truly repentant children, no matter what acts they committed, need our forgiveness. But what about those cases where there is no regret or remorse? This is a tough question. However, you should not let your grown kids get away with inappropriate behavior or wrongdoing. Keep these key principles in mind when you need to discuss your adult children's failures with them:

- \* We all have times when we need to be confronted for failing to live up to acceptable standards.
- \* Correct your children with patience and instruction.<sup>9</sup>
- \* Let them know that you are by no means perfect, but that you do want to help them overcome their failing in any way you can.<sup>10</sup>
- \* Don't make enemies of your adult children. The goal of confrontation is a loving, healthy lifestyle and relationship.<sup>11</sup>
- \* Make sure your comments exhibit true wisdom.<sup>12</sup>

- \* Take time to consider the exact words (and tone of voice) you use when speaking to them.<sup>13</sup>
- \* Once you have made your position clear, don't keep bringing up the subject.

When we are disappointed in our children's behavior, we must live with the burden of incomplete relationships until they are ready to repent of their failure. This means not talking about your child's failures to others and not sitting around allowing the situation to eat away at you.

No matter what, parents cannot do four things when deeply disappointed by adult children:

1. Parents cannot give up.
2. Parents cannot cut off all contact
3. Parents cannot negate the wrong choices
4. Parents cannot reverse the damages

Forgiveness is not the end goal when adult children fail; it's the first step in reestablishing or maintaining a relationship.

1 See Luke 15:11-32

2 See Luke 15:12-13

3 See Romans 3:23.

4 See Ezekiel 18:4.

5 See Jeremiah 17:9

6 See Luke 15:13

7 See Luke 15:13

8 See Luke 15:20-24

9 See 2 Timothy 4:2

10 See Galatians 6:1-2

11 See 2 Thessalonians 3:15

12 See James 3:17

13 See Ephesians 4:29, Colossians 4:6