Bringing Home the Prodigals

Guest: Rob Parsons

From the series: A Prodigal Comes Home
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Bob: If you have a child who has become a prodigal, what do you do? Rob Parsons says you don't shun the child. You also don't compromise. You reach out with kindness, compassion, and grace.

Rob: The incredible thing is not that Jesus ate with sinners, the incredible thing is that sinners ate with Jesus. He was the uncompromising one, yet they wanted to be close with him. And I wish I had clear cut answers to all this stuff. I wish it was black and white but, you know, sometimes we have to say what it used to say on those bangles the kids wore – "What would Jesus do?"

Bob: This is FamilyLife Today for Friday, October 31st. Our host is the president of FamilyLife, Dennis Rainey, and I'm Bob Lepine. If you son or a daughter who is a prodigal, how can you know what to do and do what Jesus would have you do? We'll talk about that today. Stay tuned.

And welcome to FamilyLife Today, thanks for joining us. I sometimes think if we were able to get everybody to be honest about their children and what's going on at home, we might recognize that there is more of a prodigal – I don't want to call it an epidemic, but there are more prodigals around than we know about or that we are honest about, don't you think?

Dennis: I actually thought about forming some groups called "Parents of Prodigals," to kind of meet in churches and just get together and support each other, because I think there are a lot of people suffering in silence. I think they've got a child who is not doing well, and they just need somebody who can weep with them, who can put their arms around them and say it's okay, and maybe begin to divide their sorrows and also relieve some guilt, because I think a lot of parents live in shame, fear of judgment within the Christian community and, frankly, need what God gave us, the body of Christ.

We have a gentleman with us who understands both the hearts of prodigals but also parents of prodigals, Rob Parsons. Rob, welcome back.

Rob: Thank, Dennis. Love to be with you and Bob.
Dennis: Rob is the founder of Care for the Family, which is a ministry in the United Kingdom, Great Britain, to families there in that great nation. He and his wife, Diane, have two children. He's written a book called "Bringing Home the Prodigals," and you had two adult children who, at the same time, really became prodigals, and I want to be delicate here, because they're adults now. But could you share with our listeners just a little bit of what described their lives, what was taking place that really resulted in them being a prodigal?

Rob: You know, I have a theory that if you have more than one child, you will have chalk and cheese. That is particularly golden if your first one is compliant, because for a while you think you’re a great parent. Actually, you just got lucky. If you're really foolish, you'll begin to give other people critical advice on where they went wrong with their kids. We did that. Our first child, Katy, was so compliant. The first thing Katy did when she came into the world was apologize to the midwife for being a little late. That was Katy.

Katy would save her pocket money for study guides, Katy would complain the church services weren't long enough, and so for a while we thought we were great parents. And then Lloyd came along. Lloyd came into the world smoking a cigar. Our little boy used to wake up every day of his young life with the same prayer on his lips – “Dear God, help me drive my mother crazy day,” and every day God answered his prayer.

And those two kids, and so you kind of expected Lloyd to be a bit rebellious and what I didn't expect was what was going to happen in Katy's life. Katy was 18, and she used to come to church with us – and Bible study, and then Kate went to university. And I knew in my heart what would happen to Katy. She would join the Christian Union, she would fall in love with another Christian and get married. It was lots to worry about with Lloyd, lots of concerns, but at least Katy was in the bag.

And then Katy fell in love with somebody who really had no love of Christ at all – deeply in love with him for a number of years. And I remember watching them walk away together one day, and I thought, "This is not how I thought it would be.” But I remember also sitting with my darling daughter in a car. I supposed she'd have been about 21 years old and saying, "You know, darling, I really, all my life, prayed that you would marry somebody that loved Jesus. But I do want you to know this – if you do marry Jack, we will love him. You know that, don't you?" She said, "Yes, Dad, I know that."

And then one day my wife, Diane, got a call from Katy. Katy was living in London then, and we were in Cardiff, Wales, hundreds of miles away. She said, "Mum, I feel the need to go back to church again." And then I remember her saying to me, "You know, Dad, sometimes I watch you and Mum pray hurriedly. It could be in an airport lounge somewhere, or you just gather us around and pray. I want that in my marriage." And Katy broke off her relationship with Jack. It
broke her heart to do it, but she did, and God brought into her life an incredible man. If we scoured the earth, we couldn't thank God for the son-in-law we have now. She's been married for four years.

I thank God for what He's done in Katy's life and in Lloyd's life now, but there have been plenty of tears. But if I hadn't cried, I don't think I could have written the book. If my kids had been kind of perfect, I think I would have always had a bit of me, which said, "Well, yes, but if you've done this as parents," or if you'd done that, or if you'd been more like me, you wouldn't be in this situation. I know now that literally anything can happen to anybody.

**Bob:** There is something in the heart of every parent, though, that has this idea if we do it right, if we obey the rules, if we raise our kids in the fear and the admonition of the Lord, God will honor that prayer, and they'll turn out right. So if something isn't turning out right, we do look back on ourselves and go, "Where did we mess up?" And it is possible that we messed up, isn't it, as parents?

**Rob:** Yes, it is. But, you know, the truth of it is, we have probably given it our best shot. If we could rewind the whole thing and do it again, we'd probably just make different mistakes. And I think sometimes we have to lay down the guilt.

Now, I'm involved in a family ministry. I write books on parenting. But sometimes I think people like me can give the impression that if you follow all the stuff, if you just do this, it will be all right. But there are no guarantees.

A friend of mine was asked to give a talk in church some years ago called "How to Bring Up Godly Children." You cannot bring up godly children. You can only, by God's grace, seek to live a godly life and hope that touches them.

**Dennis:** You know, as you were talking about no guarantees, my sister-in-law asked me a question the other day. She had read a book or heard about somebody, I think, who was maybe writing a book about 10 things you are absolutely certain of – 10 things you are absolutely certain of. And she asked me, she said, "What would be your 10?" And I don't think I finished the list, but nowhere on my list is there any principle of guarantee that our children will come out perfectly. In fact, my list doesn't start with anything about humans, it starts with God.

You start thinking about – you boil life down to those things, which you're clearly certain of. But my first one is that God is who He says He is. He is full of grace, lovingkindness, He is just, He is sovereign, He cares for us, but beyond that the list gets kind of interesting. Because what are you really certain of, and when it comes to parenting, it's not going to an exact science, because our children are all individuals, they all have to choose to follow Christ on their own. You can put it in their head, but you can't put it in their heart. It takes the Holy Spirit to put it in their heart.
Rob: It does, it does. We dare not take them for granted. As you spoke, I thought of my certainty. I read one translation of that lovely verse the other day—"With God there is not even the shadow, which turning causes," and we come to Him as our anchor. That's what Diane and I did—we came to Him as our anchor.

You know, the funny thing is about these things is that I'm almost 60 years old, for goodness' sake, you know, and you live a Christian life with prayer and Bible study, and you preach and you teach a little, and then life hits you, and you're asked to say "Do all these things that I have preached and written about mean anything? Do they amount to more than a pile of beans? What are they?" And I found, at the deepest level of my life, I was less sure of myself and increasingly sure of God.

Dennis: Yeah, yeah, that's what you can be certain of.

Bob: I remember when John Piper was on our program a number of years ago. He is a pastor here in the United States, and he was very open about the fact that one of his sons was, at that time, wandering from the faith.

Do you remember him saying, Dennis, that he wrote an e-mail to his son every day while his son was in the wilderness. He said, "I will often not hear from him for weeks at a time in response, but every day I write him, tell him that I love him, that we're praying for him."

And I thought that kind of parental persistence, that kind of a regular deposit—that invites a prodigal to know there is grace on the other side, doesn't it?

Rob: It does.

Bob: Yeah.

Rob: It does. Because, you see, it's so easy to say to them, you know, "I'm ashamed of you. You'll never be under my roof while you do this. Why don't you get your life together?" But they need some straight talk, and let's not minimize that, and some of our kids are rebellious, and they need that talk and sometimes they even need to go through pain. Now, that's hard, as parents, because we've spent all our lives keeping them from pain.

If the prodigal had never gone through the pigsty, he would have probably never come home. But, even so, they need to know we love them. I have told my kids every day of my life, "I love you."

I think of a mother who wrote to me who said, "You know, my son is living with his girlfriend, and my husband and I," she said, "found that very hard. But then
we began to pray for our love for this young woman, and I go shopping with her once a week, we shop together. And somebody from our church said, "I saw you out with Susan. Well, how can you do that, condoning their lifestyle?" She said, "Oh, I am not condoning it. They know what I believe." But as we shop together, I am really saying, "Susan, I love you. I love you."

And she said, "Recently, that girl lost her mother, and it was to me she came." And I wish I had clear-cut answers to all this stuff. I wish it was black and white, but, you know, sometimes we have to say what it used to say on those bangles the kids wear – "What would Jesus do?"

The incredible thing – and this is why He told the parable – the incredible thing is not that Jesus ate with sinners, the incredible thing is that sinners ate with Jesus. He was the uncompromising one, yet they wanted to be near Him, they wanted to be close with Him. And so they said to Him, "Why do you do it? Why do you eat with people like that?" And He tells them three incredible stories – the story of the sheep that was lost away from home, the story of the coin that was lost at home, and two boys – one lost away from home and one lost at home. It's an incredible story.

**Dennis:** Speaking of boys, I am still kind of stuck on that illustration of Lloyd making his arrival on planet earth smoking a cigar. Tell me what happened to Lloyd as he grew into adulthood and as he became a prodigal.

**Rob:** Lloyd, you know, was that kind of kid. He was always kind of on the edge, and it like a rollercoaster hanging on, spending time with him, and if I got anything right as a parent, from the time she was 12, I used to take Katy out once a week, and we'd have a coffee together in a little local hotel. It was almost like a date. And we would talk. Katy could talk for Britain.

And so when Lloyd was 13, I tried to do the same with him, and he would sit there with his arms folded, and say, "What do you want to talk about now?" He seemed to have only three syllables, and eventually I found a hotel with a pool table, and we used to play pool and talk together. But when he became an older teenager, I had to call on all those years, all those emotional times in the bank together to see us through.

But when he was 21, God touched Lloyd in a remarkable way, and I thank God for what happened. It is of His grace.

**Dennis:** What were the circumstances that brought him back home?

**Rob:** I think it was a sense of lack of fulfillment in his life. You know, when you try the other grass, sometimes it really isn't that green, and I think Lloyd saw that. And whatever else had gone wrong, we loved him, and he knew we loved that,
and we still laughed together, and he still had lots of even adult friends of ours who made him feel special.

You know, these other adults are crucial. I heard a wonderful story the other day. A friend of mine grew a church from 300 to 10,000. He said, "I grew it by being prodigal-friendly." And he said, "One day when we were very small, just a little happy family church," he said, "a young man, a Hell's Angel, was dared to come to church." He said, "I suppose he was about 27 years old, long, greasy hair, tattoos, body piercing, and on the knuckles of each hand, he had swear words tattooed." And he said they dared him to come to church, and he walked right down the front and sat in the very front row.

Unfortunately for him, that church allocates certain seats to certain people to welcome, and he got in Marge Staples' area. Marge is almost 90 years old. Marge knows she's going to be in front of Jesus any day now, so she's not so much worried about the style of worship or the color of the carpet. Marge just wants to love people, and she said, "Oh, young man, it's so lovely to see you," and she said, "Come here, let me hug you." She hugged him close. He didn't stop crying until the pastor finished preaching. He gave his life to Christ that night.

Six weeks later, a consultant plastic surgeon in that church gave him a skin graft to remove the initials on his hands. He had to, because he was offending people as he lifted his hands in worship. When they baptized him six weeks later, the wounds hadn't quite healed, and he had little plastic bags over his hands with rubber bands as he went under the water. Those parents of his may have prayed for him long and hard. They didn't know about Marge Staples. They didn't know of this old lady. In fact, if you could think who could come into the life of a Hell's Angel and change him, you wouldn't have picked Marge Staples, but God picked her, and that's the incredible hope.

**Dennis:** Take us to the time when Lloyd came home. Do you remember that moment when you realized the prodigal had come back?

**Rob:** Do you know, I really don't, in that sense. But let me explain why. I remember Katy's much more clearly because I remember the day that Katy broke off with Jack, and I remember the day Katy started coming back to church, and that was very clear. But I remember Lloyd coming back. He'd been helping in a football camp and saying, "You know, I've really given my life to Christ," and I remember that. But, you know, Lloyd is the kind of kid, even now, it's like a rollercoaster ride. So Lloyd loves Jesus. Lloyd's a firefighter. It's a hard world being a firefighter. So with Lloyd I still feel as I'm hanging on for dear life, you know. I pray for Lloyd more than any other soul on the face of this earth.
Dennis: And you’re just praying that his ladder is propped.

Rob: That his ladder is against that wall, but I’ll tell you, here is a boy with a heart for people. So I’m hanging on. But, you know, sometimes what I think? We see in our prodigals writ large what is writ small in all our lives. The truth of it is that half the prodigals are still in the pews. In their hearts, they are far away from God.

And do you know something else? Many of our so-called prodigals have a greater sense of sin than we do. They say, ”You know, if I'm doing this, I can’t stay in church. I can't be a hypocrite.” But we stay there with our pride and our arrogance. I think of a man who had two sons, and it is true that one stopped going to church. Somebody offended him, and he moved to a far city where he worked with homeless people. Their pain made him cry. I sense, in his heart, he still has a love for God.

The second son never, ever left church. In fact, he never missed a meeting. He became a member of the deaconate, but he drove the church leader crazy with criticism. He gave a single-parent Mum a tough time because her baby cried in the service. Which was the prodigal? Both – and both need to come home.

Dennis: You know, prodigals teach us so much about the love of God.

Rob: They do.

Dennis: And His love for us. I think, obviously, in the truest sense of the word, a prodigal is someone who is in a constant state of rebellion against God and against their parents.

Rob: Yes.

Dennis: But many times, during the day, I am impressed with my own heart how it can go astray and how I can be a prodigal in an instant. When, just before then, perhaps I had prayed a prayer, and I'd asked God to bless my day. But a prodigal can teach us a lot about our hearts and about our own need of the Savior, and our need to give grace and to look favorably upon people who may not talk like us, may not use the same language, may not have all the same religious rituals that we have but just need love, care, concern, belief, grace, certainly, and a compelling reason to come back to God.

Bob: And, you know, some of our listeners, rather than their heart wandering during the day, instead, they will be more like the older brother in the prodigal son story, and their heart will harden during the day.

Dennis: Or lukewarm.
Bob: And they will become critical, judgmental, harsh and questioning, and I think, oftentimes, when we read the prodigal son story, we quit too soon, because the encounter with the older brother who comes to his father after his brother has returned home and says, "Father, I've been here the whole time, and you never killed the fatted calf for me," and he's pouting about the whole thing. That's important for those of us who are in the church.

Dennis: That's right. But for all of us, we have to have a place that we somehow can go with the burdens of our heart, and a prodigal can be a burden on our heart, and that's why we've created a little spot on our website at FamilyLife.com for people to bring their prodigals to be prayed over or together another name of a prodigal they can pray for.

And I just invite listeners to do what Rob talked about on an earlier broadcast, which is bring that person to the foot of the cross. Bring their name and maybe a little bit about their circumstance so that someone can pray intelligently for them and let the body of Christ surround that young person, that young adult or perhaps that older adult with prayer and ask God to break through in their lives.

I wonder if there is any prodigal who comes back who hasn't been prayed for?

Bob: Well, of course, it's a gracious privilege that God gives us to be able to come and cry out to Him about our sons and our daughters who are wandering from the Lord, who are wandering from the faith that we've tried to raise them in. And it's also a privilege to intercede on behalf of others, whether you're going through this yourself or not, you can come to our website and take the name of a young man or a young woman. It kind of reminds me back in the '60s and the '70s when people would wear bracelets with the names of prisoners of war or those who were missing in action – this area that we've put together on our website gives us an opportunity to pray for one another and to ask God to move in the lives of these prodigals, and then to report back to us when God does draw that son or that daughter back home, back to the faith.

If you'd like more information about this part of the website, go to FamilyLife.com, and on the right side of the screen you'll see a box that says "Today's Broadcast." Click where it says "Learn More," and that will take you to an area of the site where there is not only information about how you can pray for a prodigal or leave the name of a son or a daughter or a grandson, granddaughter, to be prayed for.

You can also get information about Rob's book, "Bringing Home the Prodigals," which we have in our FamilyLife Resource Center along with the book by Ruth Bell Graham called "Prodigals and Those Who Love Them." It's a classic book where she shares some of her own experience in raising a child who was a prodigal. Again, both of these resources are available from us here at FamilyLife
by going to our website, FamilyLife.com or by calling 1-800-FLTODAY, 1-800-358-6329. That's 1-800-F-as-in-family, L-as-in-life, and then the word TODAY. When you contact us by phone, someone on our team will let you know how you can have the resources you need sent to you.

I want to say a word of thanks to those listeners who also help support the ministry of FamilyLife Today by making a donation or a contribution from time to time, and we do hope that when you contribute to FamilyLife Today, you are not taking away at all from the giving that you give to your local church. We believe that that needs to be your first and your ongoing responsibility in making donations. We hope you're faithful with that.

But if you are able to help support FamilyLife beyond what you do in giving to your local church, we would appreciate it. We are listener-supported, and so those donations are what keep us on the air in this city and in other cities all across the country. And this week when you make a donation of any amount, we would like to send you as a thank you gift and audiobook from Barbara Rainey called "Thanksgiving, a Time to Remember."

This is a narrated and dramatized version of this book. It tells the story of the settling of the Plymouth Colony and the first Thanksgiving, and it's great fun for families to listen to in preparation for the Thanksgiving holiday, which, of course, is coming up here in just a few weeks. So if you’d like to receive the audiobook, "Thanksgiving, a Time to Remember," you can request it when you make a donation of any amount online at FamilyLife.com. And if you are donating online, when you come to the keycode box on the donation form, type in the word "remember" so that we'll remember to send you a copy of the audiobook, or call 1-800-FLTODAY. You can make a donation over the phone and simply ask for the Thanksgiving audiobook. Again, we are happy to send it out to you, and we appreciate your financial partnership with us.

Well, I hope you have a great weekend. I hope you and your family are able to worship together this weekend, and I hope you can join us back on Monday when we’re going to hear from a husband who was caught in the snare of pornography and ultimately of other kinds of sexual sin, and we'll hear how God set him free. That comes up Monday, and I hope you can join us for that.

I want to thank our engineer today, Keith Lynch, and our entire broadcast production team. On behalf of our host, Dennis Rainey, I'm Bob Lepine. We'll see you back Monday for another edition of FamilyLife Today.

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