

## **When Your Grown Children Go Astray II Samuel 18:33**

A young man who was raised going to church started hanging out with the wrong crowd during high school. That led to him to getting involved in drugs and petty crime that kept him in and out of jail. His dad bailed him out of financial difficulties countless times only to find him back in debt again and unable to pay his bills. They sought professional help for their son who later became an alcoholic and social recluse. Sadly, he showed little interest in accepting help but tolerated it with the hopes that he could get more support from his parents if he did. Eventually his dad became hardened against him and focused his attention on trying to help the grandchildren instead. His mother, on the other hand, worried constantly about her son and kept trying to help him even after dad had given up.

Then after 40 years of sleepless nights, thousands of dollars squandered, and prayers that seemed to go nowhere, they got the knock on the door they had always dreaded but knew someday would probably come. It was the police. Their son had been found dead of an apparent overdose.

I remember walking through that situation with those parents as if it were yesterday when in fact it was over 20 years ago. And I wish I could tell you that their's was the only situation like it that I've ever seen. But sadly, I can't. For over the years I've known of scores of parents who were having to deal with the heartache of grown children who had gone astray.

Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about. You raised your kids as best you knew how. But something went wrong. One of more of them has strayed far away from the kind of life you had hoped and dreamed for them to have. And the worry and guilt you carry because if it seems almost unbearable at times.

Nothing I will say to you this morning will erase all the pain you feel nor fix your grown child's problems. But there are some lessons to be learned that may help you come to terms with it better and enable you to respond to your child in a more positive way.

We take these lessons from another parent whose grown child went astray and eventually lost his life as a result. Though David is viewed as a man after God's own heart, he was also a father who made some mistakes with his son Absalom. Hopefully, by looking at his story, you'll be able to better understand your own story and what steps you need to take in the future.

At the same time, this is a message for those of you who are parents of younger children. Though there are no guarantees when it comes to how your children will turn out when they're grown, you can increase the odds of a better outcome by learning these same lessons.

So what do you do when your grown children go astray?

## **I. Be willing to face your own mistakes.**

Let me begin by saying that there are no perfect parents. Never have been. Never will be. Parents are people. And people are sinners. And therefore, every parent who has ever lived has operated out of his or her sinfulness and human limitations that has negatively impacted their children's lives.

Take David for instance. Obviously, David had many wonderful qualities. He was brave. He loved God. And he wanted to serve Him with all of his might. But he made some mistakes along the way in how he dealt with his son, Absalom. Here's a case in point.

In II Samuel we read the tragic story of the time when Absalom's half-brother Amnon, raped his sister. When David found out, he was angry. But unfortunately, there's no indication that he did anything about it which no doubt increased the wound in his daughter's heart as well as the growing anger in Absalom.

In fact, two years later, Absalom set a trap for Amnon and had him killed which set the stage for further estrangement from his father and other poor personal choices. Of course, one wonders what would have happened if David had stepped up to deal with the situation. But he didn't and this was just one of the many mistakes that David would need to face in his own life just like we need to face our own mistakes as parents.

Now in saying this I want you to know that I understand that parents can't be responsible for every decision that their grown children make. They're still accountable for their own actions even if our failures in parenting may have contributed to their character flaws.

Be that as it may, parents still need to face the mistakes they've made and be willing to tell the truth about them to themselves, to God and to their children. This won't guarantee that a prodigal child will turn his life around, but it at least creates the possibility for a change of heart or for the establishment of a better relationship.

I know in my case, I can look back and see mistakes that I made. I would like to think that I did a decent job as a father, but especially when the

boys were young, I wasn't nearly as attentive as I could have been. Thankfully, I was able to wake up and see that and become more involved during their teen years, but the reality of my own shortcoming is still there as are others that I may not even realize.

So if you're dealing with a grown child who's gone astray, it would be worth it to take a personal inventory and identify any mistakes you've made over the years. When you identify them, you need to face them honestly and confess them to God and to your children. And if there are changes you need to make in how you relate with your children now, then make them. But don't wallow in a sense of failure and shame.

Again, there are no perfect parents. And you're not personally responsible for everything your grown children do. But as parents, we need to face our mistakes and deal with them appropriately so we can move forward in life and create the possibility for our children to do the same.

That's the first important lesson we learn from David's experience. Here's the second.

## **II. Deal honestly with irresponsible behavior.**

As we saw, Absalom was understandably upset with Amnon for what he did to his sister. And he no doubt was upset by his father's lack of action to deal with it. No problem there. But when he allowed his bitterness to turn into hatred and murder, he crossed the line.

Amazingly, David was angry with Absalom about killing Amnon, but in typical fashion did nothing about it. Later we read where Absalom tried to drive a wedge between his father and his kingdom. But once again, David did nothing. These and other events like them point out a tragic pattern of David's refusal to deal with his son's irresponsible actions. Sadly, this only alienated him more from Absalom who in turn become even more out of control in the process.

This is a good reminder that the failure of a parent to deal honestly with the irresponsible behavior of their grown children helps no one. Of course, there's nothing you can do as a parent to control how your grown children are going to act. But making excuses for them or enabling their poor choices isn't the answer. Actually, such acts are usually an attempt to salve the parent's hurt because they can't stand watching the bad choices their children are making. It's understandable, but it doesn't help.

The better choice lies somewhere between enabling their grown children and abandoning them. It's not going to be easy. But it's a necessary step. And here's why. First, for your children's sake, if you keep propping up

their irresponsible behavior, then they're never going to learn to be responsible on their own. Certainly, great care needs to be taken as you change the approach toward your children in holding them accountable. But it's a change they need for you to make even if they don't realize it.

The other benefit of dealing honestly with your grown children's irresponsible actions, is the freedom it gives you. You aren't doing your children or yourself any favors by staying enmeshed in their lives. Yes, it's painful to watch your children go astray. But you don't have to go down with them. Face the truth about the choices they're making, do what needs to be done, and get on with your life.

Again, I know that's easier said than done. But it's worth the effort to try. And it's certainly better than staying in constant turmoil because you either won't face the truth about your children or won't stop trying to rescue them. Truly, this is another important lesson to be learned. Finally,

### **III. Keep the door open for reconciliation.**

If you keep reading the story in II Samuel, you discover that David's general had to persuade him to let Absalom return from exile back to Jerusalem. You get the impression that the general was hoping that some kind of reconciliation would happen. But when Absalom returned, David made no effort whatsoever to see him. In fact, two years elapsed before Absalom forced a meeting with his dad.

So basically, David had hardened his heart against his son and left no room for a possible reconciliation. This only served to drive a deeper wedge between father and son which resulted in Absalom's unrestrained rebellion and eventual death.

This sad story reminds parents of the importance of keeping a door open for potential reconciliation in the future. Doing so doesn't guarantee that prodigal children will return, but it at least creates the possibility that they could.

That's the lesson that Billy and Ruth Graham learned with their son, Franklin who for years lived in rebellion against God that broke both of his parents' hearts. It seemed that as a little boy Franklin had a strong will that would withstand any attempt on his parents' part to discipline.

For example there was one occasion, when Franklin's non-stop teasing of his sisters caused them to break down in tears. Exasperated, Ruth stopped the car and locked her son in the trunk. When they arrive at a drive-in restaurant, other customers were shocked when she opened the trunk and asked the boy inside what he wanted to eat. Rather than confessing his bad

behavior toward his sisters, Franklin popped out of the trunk laughing and called out, "I'll have a cheeseburger without the meat."

Sadly, the rebellion didn't end there. In a later book, *Rebel With a Cause*, Franklin confessed to years of alcohol abuse and other forms of rebellion through his late teens and twenties. It seemed that the more people expected of him, the more he rebelled against it.

Thankfully, he did come around and today is the head of the world wide benevolence ministry known as Samaritan's Purse. And that turn around in large part was due to his parent's keeping a door open.

Making that choice wasn't easy, however. In her prayer journal Ruth Graham recorded the following: "My head is trying to wise up my heart. The heart worries, fears the worst, imagines all sorts of things, wants to guide, counsel, control, choose. The head says, 'Lay off. Trust God. Love Franklin. Be sympathetic, understanding, patient, confident. Let him know you have confidence in him. Turn loose and pray.'"

Billy and Ruth found no quick fix formula for winning their wayward sons to the Lord. Yes, their other son, Ned, also had a significant period of rebellion as well. Instead they relied on earnest prayer, loving witness, and an abiding faith in an all-knowing, all-loving God. As Billy later wrote, "We trusted the Lord to bring the children through somehow in His own way in due time. On a day to day basis, however, we muddled through. But God was faithful."

Yes, God is faithful not to guarantee that every wayward child will come home but that you as the parent will be able to see it through and know that God will forever be at work in your children's lives even after you've gone to home to be with the Lord. And that's why you can keep a door open.

You see, you aren't alone in this. Though you may not feel free to share with anyone else the pain you carry inside over how your grown children are acting, you have a God who not only loves you and will walk with you, but who also loves your wayward children and will never give up pursuing them to win them back. I hope that brings some comfort to your soul.

This morning whether you're a parent of a grown child who has gone astray or you're going through some other big trial in your life, God will be faithful to walk the road with you. So as we sing our hymn of commitment this morning, I invite you to renew your trust in God to see you through and to continue dealing with your children.

If you would like for me to pray with you, you're welcome to come. If you would like to come and pray on your own, that's fine too. And if you just want to quietly pray where you'll be standing, feel free. This is your time with God to renew your faith in Him and to be strengthened.