

# How to Grow a Prodigal Son

## By Dennis Guernsey

Announcer:

Alright. Ron asked me if I would introduce Dennis this morning. He said he didn't really like him and no, he didn't say that I've had the privilege of having Dennis at Forest Home many, many, many times times. I guess there are a lot of things I could say. I can tell you about the fact that he is an author. He has good books. He has one book that's been a great help to me and I encourage you to read it somewhere along the line. Read all of his books, obviously, but one. If I am So Free, Why do I Feel Boxed In? That is a great book and I recommend it for your reading. He is a seminary professor. I guess the thing that means the most to me about Dennis is that I really consider him to be a real person. He's been a friend, he's been a confidant. I just sat this morning and shared with him my midlife crisis and he has not solved it yet. But he will before the day is over. And he has been a dear friend to me as a person. He has been a great communicator at Forest Home.

A lot of people come to Forest Home. The one thing that I appreciate about Dennis Guernsey is I have often given him assignments. When he has come, I've called him and said that I want him to do a specific thing for a specific group and he's one of the people who can consistently prepare and do that. And I have great appreciation for that kind of skill and ability is a man who has experienced difficult things in his life. I first met Dennis when they lost a son in a neighbor's swimming pool. That was my first meeting with Dennis Guernsey. I had heard his name when he worked on the staff at Van Nuys First Baptist. But that was the time, right during that period of time through another mutual friend, he and I guess maybe shook hands for the first time. He's got

a neat family. His wife Lucy is a lady who loves Christ and as a support to his Ministry and those of us in the Ministry know how critical that is. So I recommend to you for your mind in this hour the man who's coming to share with us Dr. Dennis Guernsey. Dennis.

Dennis Guernsey:

One of the marvelous privileges that we have in this world is the privilege of friendship and friendships that endure over time and through the years. The great privilege that is yours of being in this place is that those folk with whom you rub shoulders and you eat with and that you pray with you, cry with you, laugh with you, get in trouble with these will be some of your most dear friends over time. I'd like to begin with prayer. Father, we do honor you this morning. We are coming from such diverse places and our hearts are beating at different paces and rates.

There are some who have just exited from freeways that were clogged. There's some, Father, who have just awakened, whose bodies are tired. They're those of us who carry about in us the marks of emotional struggles and hurt. So we gather together this morning as a diverse people. And, Father, because of that diversity, we must rely upon you because you know and you are the architect of each of our personalities and our souls. Father, you have direct access to the innermost being inside of us. Lord, I recognize this morning as I stand before you and before these, my friends, that we must rely completely upon you to be a work in our life and that we can do nothing in ourselves.

We recognize, Father, that it is not by might, that is not by power or elocution, but it is by your spirit that things are accomplished for you. Bless this time now we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Last night in Southern California, an old man with scraggly hair a man who is in a convalescent hospital, a man whose mind has been touched by infirmity that man pillowed his head and went to sleep desperately alone. He was alone not only because he was basically a stranger to those who shared the hospital convalescent room with him. He's alone because he is isolated, isolated, especially from those who are his family. He's an interesting man. He probably has written more books and touched more lives with theology. He probably has affected and stimulated more students in terms of the gospel and the implications of what it means to be Christian than anyone else in this room here this evening, this morning. And yet, as his eyes closed and he begged for sleep, he went to sleep alone, his heart full of tears. Across the country somewhere are his family. They have said they want nothing to do with him. They have said they are absolutely, totally, completely disinterested in whether he lives or whether he dies.

In fact, if he were to die tonight and the funeral to be at the end of this week, they would not come. His children, though they be in their middle years, and the grandchildren that have been spawned, those children carry within them roots of bitterness and disgust. And yet the paradox. How can a man be so used of God? How can a man write such marvelous theology? How can a man preach such effective sermons and yet be so distanced from those who are in his family? Be sad. That man there is another man. He is not as tragic as that man. He and his wife live. They've had a distinguished pastoral Ministry. There are folk who have been used probably in terms of Church relationships and Church ministries. And were I just speak the name of any of this person, your heart would soar. And you would say, what a Prince of God he is. Marvelous family, Virginia. And yet this night, when he and his wife go to sleep. They pause, both kneel beside their bed, and they pray for their daughter, their daughter who is alienated and far off

from God. Their daughter at one time said to them, I want nothing to do with you, and I want nothing to do with your God.

On Monday evenings in Wheaton, Illinois, the Mecca of evangelical Christendom, you thought it was La Mirada in Wheaton Illinois, every Monday evening, a group of fathers and mothers gathered together for prayer to support one another. And they have met for years. If you and I went around the circle and counted the folk who were there and spoke their names, they would constitute some of the most the Princes of evangelical Christendom, names of authors and leaders and educators. And as they gather for prayer and the emotion fills the room, they pray, each of them husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, for sons and daughters who have strayed, who are gone, from whom they are alienated. The problem of the prodigal son is a phenomenon that affects not only the drunken bums, the persons who engage in domestic violence, knocking their kids around. So finally their kids abandon ship and run away out of desperation, but the problems of the prodigal in the culture of which you and I are apart, this thing called Christian faith, the problems of the prodigal kind of affect all of us. The question is, why do they happen? The fact of the matter is, as I look out here, I'm convinced I'm going to coin a word "prodigality" having the characteristics of the prodigal.

And I'm convinced that as I look out here, if I could wander around in your lives and trail after you and listen to your conversations, I'm convinced that I'd find people here who are struggling with the problems of "prodigality," the alienation, the distance you drove away from your families when you exited at Christmas time. It was a great time. But when you exited from that place, I don't care how many miles there are, some of you who went away and there was stress

and there was distance, there were harsh words, and the issue kind of tumbles in your mind. Do I return at Easter or not? Do I say forget it? I'm going my own way. I'm doing my own thing.

"Prodigality" infects not only the general Christian community, it is here with us, those of us who sit and listen and open our Bibles and pray. What I'd like to do just with you for thoughts.

I've been a family therapist. I was kind of embarrassed. I sat down last night thinking about this, and I said, Dennis Guernsey, you've been doing family therapy for 18 years. Good grief. No wonder there's gray in my beard. What I'd like to do this morning, I'd like to look at the story of the prodigal son through the eyes of a family therapist.

I'd like to kind of take apart and analyze what I think were going on in terms of family dynamics there and then if, in fact, part of that is applicable to you and part of it is applicable to me, then what I'd like to do is kind of conclude this morning by asking you to go and think it through in terms of where do you stand on this issue of "prodigality." Having the characteristics of the prodigal son.

One thing we know from the story is that you can read in and empathize a great deal of pain, because the problem of the prodigal, although it feels literature, it always has a very personal dimension in that it captures at the time a great deal of heart ache and a great deal of pain. When the prodigal leaves the questions that I'd like to raise this morning and when I'm with you again on Friday, what are the characteristics of a prodigal's family? Let me briefly give you a little bit of background, not just in terms of the scripture, but background in terms of family therapy.

When we talk about the prodigal son, the tendency is to think of it as being a normal, healthy, common kind of event that takes place in adolescents lives.

And that is truth in part, whether it's normal, healthy and needed. I'll talk about when I'm with you on Friday. I don't think so. And I'd like to share with the alternatives for working through the things that seem to be worked through with the prodigal. But the fact of the matter is that the problems of the prodigal's family are problems that affect both sexes. The males and females both have to deal with the same issues. It affects all ages. It is not simply something that is isolated only to adolescence in there as they seek to kind of break free and cut loose from family ties. It is something that there are professors at this College. They're professors where I teach. They're grown adult people who are struggling with the same dynamics of the prodigal. But they've covered them up. They've dealt with them in other ways. There are two words that I want you to understand, and they'll become kind of key as I try to talk about the problems of the prodigal. The two words are the words disengagement, disengagement and enmeshment. What we'll do this morning is look at the prodigal and his older brother and look at some of the characteristics of what I think are going on in terms of that family.

Then Friday morning, what I'd like to look with you, I'd like to look at the father and what takes place in the father's life. Now what do I think is going on? First of all, if this were a typical family, and one of my trainees or interns came to me and they said, Dennis, I've got a family. I've got to sit down and talk with you. And I said, well, tell me about the family. He said, well, the presenting problem is that there's this kid, this young man, he's completely just left home and he's gone and there's no contact whatsoever. Everything seems to be perking along fairly well at

home and the family is okay, but there's some kind of undergirding and underlying kind of issues taking place in the older son's life. And now it seems that he's come back and everything has just broken. It's all unraveled all over the floor and nobody knows how to put and they've come in for counseling. Tell me about the prodigal. My first point for you in terms of the kind of pain that would be characteristic of a prodigal family. And think with me for a second about that nature of pain.

Very often a family may be in trouble and have suffering from dysfunction. And very often that dysfunction creates a very severe emotional pain that just rips at the sinew of the family. And many times that pain kind of drains into one corner of one person's life and that person becomes the symptom. The tendency we call they call that person is the symptom, the identified patient. The identified patient becomes the person who acts out but really expresses the pain and the struggles that really belong to the family as a whole. And the assumption is that the pain of the whole is often experienced in the part. Many times the identified patient becomes the one. We all just shake our heads about and we all talk about, well, you know, growing up, if I were in Kraning's, family Kraning... And we talk sit around, what's wrong with Bob and the family and all everybody said, well, he's just being his typical neurotic self. Really ought to talk about Ron Hafer. You've never been a prodigal? No, not you. That this family dynamics focus sometimes upon one person, and that person seems to be the problem. But in fact, the dysfunction belongs to the system as a whole.

The first point having to do with disengagement, that often pain within families is expressed through the disengagement of one or more persons from the family. In this case, there was a man

who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, father, give me the share of property that falls to me. He divided his living between them. Not many days later, the young man gathered all he had, took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose, et cetera, you know the story. Disengagement is defined as the unplugging, the severing of relationships, usually accompanied by extreme conflict and deep emotional trauma. It is when you deal with the pain in the family, by unplugging, by cutting off, by severing the relationships between you and another person. This is told in a narrative form, but you can imagine the conflict that went on between the fathers and the sons. You mean you just don't walk into a patriarchal family and say, dad, it's 100 in the afternoon I've decided I'm leaving. I want half of your living.

The father didn't say, oh, sure, take it. You got a plane. A lot of things would have gone on that were precursors to this event. A lot of struggles, a lot of arguments, a lot of hassles, a lot of people spinning on their heels, walking out of rooms. But finally he unplugs and he takes off. He disengages. The disengaged person can be highly religious, can be highly irreligious. The disengaged person can be the runaway who's prowling the streets of Hollywood and prostitution. The disengaged person can be the alienated young person at a Christian College who has no civil word to say to his or her family whatsoever. Let me share with you some characteristics of the disengaged person that are illustrated by the story of the prodigal son. First of all, it is characteristic of prodigals and disengaged persons to be occupied with me first, me only kinds of attitudes. You know what he says? He said, Father, give me the share that belongs to me. One of the things that happens in families that are struggling that suddenly people begin to stake out their own territories about what is mine, what belongs to me.

There is an implicit inherent selfishness that becomes a part of the family system of folk who are struggling with this kind of dysfunction, the kinds of selfishness that people begin to say, well, you always take the best. Why shouldn't I? You get to stay up later. Why shouldn't I? This just didn't happen that he said, me first, give me what belongs to me. The sense of territoriality when you begin to say, It's my side of the room you ever had that sense? Territoriality begins quite early in families. I remember driving in our automobile and hearing kind of out the back seat, mom, she's on my side. I looked back expecting to see some kid just draped all over the seat. And here was somebody had a little bit of their genes. Territoriality is that kind of thing that begins to form within families that kind of puts creases in rooms and carves puts marks on milk bottles, in numbers, cookies and cookie jars. Territoriality the roots of this issue become when suddenly the pain in the family not only just hasn't simple forms of back seats and automobiles and milk and milk bottles, but suddenly it becomes, if I don't get mine, I'm going to get left out.

Implicit is the assumption that if I don't look after me, you won't look after me. Occupied with a me first and a me only attitude secondly. And I think this is important for you and I to understand that in the disengaged person's life, physical distance is usually substituted unsuccessfully for emotional independence. The thought is, this, okay, if I can just get away from here, get out of here, I'll be free, runs off. If I can just get out of the house. If I could just get in the car and drive away. Physical distance becomes the tactic by which one tries to establish emotional independence, but it doesn't work. The fact of the matter is what happens in many times those who are in families of their own now and they've grown up, they've gotten married, they've had children. It is possible to be a disengaged person and cope not with the emotional problems and

pain. By using physical distance as a technique. The issue is it's easy, then, to create emotional distance. Even if physical proximity is intact, emotional distance is maintained. It's possible to live in a family with a disengaged person and you can never really get close to them.

They always seem to be at arm's length. It is possible to room with a disengaged person and to know their name and to go through the numbers and never, after even being with them for years, having shared their lives with them. A classic example of a person that I see as being the disengaged person but yet held out to be successful in the body of Christ is a moderately successful missionary that I'm thinking of. He has never worked through, evidently, his own relationships with his own parents, and so he creates within him. He has within him the mechanism of disengagement. If you got a problem with somebody unplug distance yourself from if you can't do it physically, then cut him off emotionally. You can be in the same room with this guy and he's not there. He's gone. He can look at you, he can have a conversation with you, you can talk to him, and you can see the kind of glazed over scents of his eyes, and you know that you just prayed with a person who really wasn't praying with you. His wife complains of neglect. He's always ready to pick up his briefcase, pick up a suitcase, throw his garment bag over his shoulder, and be off around the world somewhere to do somebody else's business and carry out and do it good for them.

Everybody has first claim. His wife sits at home desperately lonely, struggling. On the field, he's continually in trouble because he is hyper-independent. He's in trouble because he's saying, Look, I'll do my thing. You do your thing. Who cares? As far as he's concerned, missionaries are like satellites orbiting with no relationship to each other, and there's no inner relationship. And

the field is forever ever getting on him. Because why can't you cooperate? He says, Why should I? God's using me. What are you doing? And he can always it's the immense, incredible ability to flip the situation and focus it upon the numbers or the programs or their own success or his abilities, but the hyper independence. He has adolescent children who are rebelling to his heavy handed, authoritarian parental style. Some have said, Kiss off, dad, I've had it with you. You've never been my father. He attributes it. If you talk to him, to humanism the secular influences. That what happened to him when his kids came back to be educated in the States, and he could just kept them on the field, in the cocoon, in the hot house. If I were to sit down and ask him, who knows you? Who really knows you?

Who really cares? A few questions like that... Up you pop. You get nervous, you walk around, you pace, and he'd be gone. You see what happens. The kind of pain that he carries inside himself begins to be coped with by distancing, either emotional, by keeping emotional distance, or by creating physical distance. In his case, he can hop a jet and fly thousands of miles for other people. We can't hop a jet. We can just hop in our car and go for a ride. The disengaged person, another characteristic, carries the conflict inside him. You notice that wherever he goes, it's fascinating to me that I'm sure that this young man has the conversations with his dad. Can't you hear the conflicts between the two of them, the fights before he got ready to leave? It kind of think like he said, well, who cares? All I want is my money and I'm leaving. When he leaves, he goes only to find out in verse 18, only to find out that hundreds of miles away, guess where his father is inside his head. To have gone through all of that, to have done all of those kinds of things, only to get hundreds of miles away and find out that I'm still having a conversation with my father in my head, father, I'll say to him, I as sinned against heaven and before you.

The incredible thing about the distancing of the disengaged person is that it is never effective because the problems and the pain you take right with you tucked inside your heart, your gut and your head and those people that you are fussing with that you couldn't stand, that you unplugged from guess what they do? They carry right around with you because they're inside. Now you can even grow older and have family of your own, but you can still carry that disengage kind of relationship inside your gut because of the issues you've never really worked through. The paradox is the young man is hundreds of miles away, completely out of touch in an alien culture, and his father is inside his head. In this family, there's another son that son copes with the family dynamics, not through disengagement. This son copes with the problems of the family through enmeshment. And often pain within families is expressed through the enmeshment of one or more persons in the family. Let me define enmeshment. Enmeshment is defined as the fusing of one person or persons to another, so much so that the boundaries separating the persons are blurred, sometimes never established.

The classic example of the fused enmeshed person would be the child that is being carried, the fetus that is being carried in his mother's room he is a person without personality and yet totally dependent upon the life flow of the mother. Physically, there comes a day when he unplugged. We call it birth. The interesting thing, however, is that many times that person never really is birthed emotionally. And so the fused kind of enmeshed person is still bonded and tied strongly. This case, it's the older brother tied to his father. Notice the characteristics of the enmeshed person. First of all, he's often marked by seething resentment, especially toward the identified patient, the one who's acting out. Notice verse 28, it says, but when he heard the music, they said

to him, Your brother's, come, your father's kill the fatted calf because he has received him safe and sound. But the older son was angry and he refused to go in. Oh, for crying out loud, what's he doing back? He's been a problem to me ever since he was born. Resentment. He's also secondly, insecure and fearful of being displaced. Why is he so afraid? Why do you get so afraid and so jealous and envious of your brothers and sisters?

Why do you care if they get some time with your parents and you didn't? What do you care if somehow you're at home at Christmas time and you couldn't help but you tried not to, but you attached a dollar value to the gifts. But you said, oh no, it's happened all the time. They always give her the neat things. Look what I got, oil from my car, a check that'll pay off my tuition. She got a trip to Europe. The envy. Look at her hair, look at her hair. She just get up in the morning, she looks like a million Bucks. She takes a shower and fluffs her hair and she walks out and she's Hi. It's perky. I get out looking.. The resentment, the kind of tension that exists between the siblings. There's an interesting phenomenon of the enmeshed person and they use a communication technique that I'd like you to understand.

The enmeshed person habitually uses triangling as a communication process. Triangling is pitting one person against the other, talking about other people against their backs. Triangles and family systems are always negative and dysfunction because the nature of a triangle is there must always be for two pluses there is usually a minus.

In this case, you'll notice in verse 30, he begins by saying this. He said he was angry. Verse 28. Refused to go in. His father came out and treated him, but he answered his father. He says,

Good. I like what he starts saying. These many years I've served you. I've never disobeyed your command. You never gave me a kid that I make marry with my friends. I like that man. He's leveling with the guy. He's sending out good eye messages. But then he says, but when this son of yours, let's talk about this guy who just came back. There's the triangle. Okay, let me tell you what's wrong about him. Triangling takes place very interestingly in dysfunctional family systems. It's a very common thing. It's probably the most common kind of miscommunication within family systems. It's when we talk about somebody to somebody else. Not in the sense of information, but in the sense of the negatives. I remember a client of mine who triangled. Her mother and father were having problems between the two of them. They would have fights. The mother would come and call up the daughter, bring her up.

Let me talk to you about your father. Do you know what he's done to me now? And she would listen to him. Interesting thing. The daughter thinking that she would kind of let some of that emotion drain off. Never made things better between the mother and the father. Triangles never bring the people closer together. The elder brothers and sisters in this world are habitual master trianglers. They can talk about that prodigal. Hey dad. You know what I heard the other day? One of my friends heard about Bud. You know what I think he is? You know what I think he's doing? Dad, I never told you this, but before he left, he did this and he said this about you. And priest and dad began to say, that kid, he's a creep. Elder brothers, elder sisters, triangle. Let me tell you what's wrong. Thinking that if I can make them the bad guy, I'll become the good guy. Love me is what they say. Paul says, Let no corrupt communication come out of your mouth. But only such as good for edification. Triangles never build up. They always tear down. He is also occupied with a poor me.

And nobody ever cares about me or appreciates what I do kind of attitude. I love this. Can't you just hear this hang in his voice? He's rage that's there. And he's kind of talking to himself. And he said, I never disobeyed your command. You never gave me a kid that I might make marry with my friends. But when this son of yours come, who is devoured as living with Harlot's, I like that projection. How does he know what his kid? He hasn't even seen him for how many years? And he's had him shackled up in some massage parlor. I think it's because in his own mind there's a good chance it's a projection. He says, God, I wish I had the guts to do the things that he's done. But I stayed home.

You killed him. The fatty calf. Poor me. Nobody appreciates me. I'm just going to sit here and suck in my bitterness and feel pious and go to Church and be faithful. Ride in the backseat and let mom and dad talk about my prodigal brother and sister. And I'll sit back and I'll say to myself, Why don't they ever pay attention to me?

Don't they know what I do for them? I always cut the grass without being reminded, but he never take out the trash. Both disengagement and enmeshment are provoked by similar dynamics. They are the opposite expressions of the same problem. They share common roots. They represent what we call in our field the unity of opposites two seemingly opposing kind of ways of dealing with something having those same roots attached. We sit here in a Christian College auditorium talking about prodigal sons. The tendency is to think, oh, that's not me no way and I doubt if that's true. It is possible to be a prodigal and to be a Biola. It is possible to be severely disrupted in your relationships with the people in your own family. It is possible to have created without

ever thinking it through the mechanism of emotional distancing coping with the demands of relationships by unplugging when they become uncomfortable where no one really knows you it feels like nobody really cares. But my hunch is there are a lot more of us who are elder brothers and sisters. When we got in our cars to come back to school Mother reached in patted us on the head be careful now.

Yes, mother. Did you pack a lunch? Yes, mother. Did you go potty? I always do what mother wants. How come they love my brothers my sisters who rarely ever do what mother wants and on the way down to school we prayed Lord I am glad that I am not like one of these. Let's pray.