

Lift the Heavy Burden of Shame

How to Care for Parents of Prodigals

Dave Harvey

Pastor, Tallahassee, Florida

Prodigal kids: the gaping wound for many Christian parents.

A child, whether adolescent or adult, is living out their worst nightmare by charting a course away from God. They may be a people-pleasing prodigal, whose good appearance masks a godless heart, or a protesting prodigal, who blithely flips the bird to expectations and feels victimized by every consequence. Yet there is one common denominator that unites most of their parents: *as Christians, they bear a unique burden of shame.*

Stop and ponder that last line. Let the irony tug at your curiosity. Christian parents of prodigals often bear a peculiar shame over their child's unbelief. It sounds counter-intuitive, doesn't it? We believe Christ *bore* our shame (Hebrews 12:2). The gospel *unshackles* us from sinful disgrace (Romans 5:5) and "everyone who believes in Christ will not be put to shame" (Romans 10:11). So why do Christian parents bear such a heavy burden of shame?

The problem isn't God. It's his people.

What Can the Church Do?

We know the church is uniquely qualified to help suffering parents. Just look at our assets — the gospel, community, prayer. But when a parent bleeds for their wayward son or daughter, the church can be quick to judge and slow to bind wounds. We can dish out shame rather than demolish it. As a result, parents gravitate elsewhere for help, intuitively sensing their church is not a place of grace.

To be fair, it's not easy for Christians to know what to do. We're confused about how to care, what to say, whom to involve, and when (or if) to explore parental culpability. We're often well intentioned but poorly informed. We want to lift burdens and inspire hope, but we lack the skill. So how do we speak to shame? What can churches do to become a place where families can heal and prodigals can return? Here are four thoughts.

1. Face Our Fear

Katy was raised in a Christian home, attended a Christian school, went to youth group, and made a gospel album as a teenager. When she sang, people wept. But Katy had other desires. She left home for Hollywood and recorded a racy hit in 2008: “I Kissed a Girl.”

You guessed it. I’m talking about superstar Katy Perry.

Mary Hudson, Katy’s mom, recently said, “I get a lot of negative vibes. People ask, ‘*How could you have a daughter like that?*’” That question deserves our attention for two reasons. First, it’s a question that is deeply felt and often posed to prodigal parents. Secondly, the question betrays a haunting fear embedded within the church: “*Could I have a daughter like that?*”

Rebellious kids trigger serious anxieties for Christians. We respond by playing the comparison game — examining prodigals and their parents to find differences between *us* and *them*, *our* kids and *their* kids. To assuage our own worry, we want to find something to explain, something to blame. Once comforted, we feel elevated and speak like one of Job’s friends. “You magnify yourselves against me and make my disgrace an argument against me.” (Job 19:5)

But comparison creates a callous culture where suspicion trumps compassion, speculation replaces intercession, and judgment supplants long-suffering. All Christians are called to suffer. For some, the pain comes through a prodigal. We must normalize this if the church is truly going to be a place of grace.

2. Offer Safe Space

Do you love a wayward soul? If so, I pray you enjoy a safe space: one with open ears, wide hearts, and unhurried conversation — where friends bear grief, withhold judgment, protect confidentiality, and meet shame with gospel hope.

Don’t misunderstand. Safe space doesn’t mean unaccountable, godless venting, or assuming every wayward sufferer is a victim. The story of a Pharisaical father with a runaway teen is timeless. But most

parents of wanderers come to church assuming, at least on some level, they're at fault. And that floating blame is a huge distraction to finding real hope.

When you hear the words *wayward* or *rebellious* tumble from parents' lips, hear *grief*. Grieve with them (Romans 12:15). Don't be a fixer! Entrust any discovery of culpability to God and time. It's not the immediate priority. The more we comprehend grace, the more our care moves from identifying their sin to sympathizing with their suffering. As we shift our posture from discerning hearts to delivering love, safe space expands and hearts open wide.

3. Label the Legalism

One of the less detected strains of legalism in the church today is the false hope of “deterministic parenting.” This unspoken but deeply felt dogma assumes the parents' faithfulness determines the spiritual health of their kids: “If I obey the Bible, discipline consistently, and push the catechism, then my kids will look good on earth and be present in heaven.” No parent would say it, but it's really “justification by parenting.” Such legalism smuggles in a confidence that God rewards faithful parents with obedient, converted kids and does so proportionally to what we deserve. We can wrongfully assume, “I've put in serious work, so I deserve a lot!”

We also flip it. If the gospel of determinism is true, a wayward child reveals parental failure. If a kid is spinning out of control, parents are just reaping what they've sowed.

I'm not suggesting our parenting doesn't matter. Godly parenting influences children positively and bad parenting influences them negatively. But the key word is *influence*. Too many Christians unconsciously confuse influence with determinative power. This assumption takes God, the world's brokenness, and the human will out of the equation. We're not masters of our own destiny or our children's.

God is the perfect Father, and he still has prodigal children (Romans 3:23; Luke 15:11–32). What makes us think that could never be a part of our story?

4. Celebrate the Shame-Bearer

When parents of prodigals appear at a church event, shame tags along. This invisible companion whispers within about how substandard they are as parents compared to the other gold-circle group that gathered. Happy families can prompt pangs of guilt convincing them that no one could relate to their circus at home. The companion baits them to focus *inward* on their flaws or *outward* upon their circumstances. Shame grows through this diversion. It feeds on how we feel when we look in the wrong direction. One of my daughters used to run with her head down, never looking where she went. After a few bumps and bruises, she learned a valuable lesson: the best way to move forward is to look up.

To suffocate shame, we must help hurting parents look up to Jesus, “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2). The words “endured the cross” transport us back to the most dishonorable hours in human history. Jesus had friends but none stuck by him. One betrayed. Another denied him. His followers? One week they sang “Hosanna!” and the next cried “Crucify!” He was entirely innocent yet was scorned as the worst of sinners.

Jesus knew deep shame, but the surprising twist comes in his response. *He despised it.*

Christ despised shame because he saw beyond it. Shame is painful, but it was powerless to define Christ. Shame could not change Christ’s identity nor control his future. Shame had no voice of influence over Jesus, no ability to paste him with indignity or dishonor. Because Christ saw joy beyond it.

If you love a prodigal, you must learn shame-hating. Christ nailed our shame to the cross. In its place, he imputed to us his record of perfect righteousness. When God looks at us, he doesn’t see our parenting failures. He doesn’t scroll through an unfiltered feed of ugly accusations and regrets. God sees his Son instead of us. We must look to Christ as well. For the one who loves a wayward soul, a shift in gaze is the only link to present sanity and future hope.

Who Can the Church Be?

The church has an opportunity. Parents of prodigals come to us with tender wounds. What would happen if they received a warm invitation to a group led by a couple who has walked their path? What if they heard sermons with applications for wayward souls? What if the church identified with their shame so they left saying, “I’m not an outlier. They get me. Jesus can help.”

What if, for them, the church became a place of grace?

Dave Harvey (@RevDaveHarvey) is the Executive Director of Sojourn Network, Teaching Pastor at Summit Church, founder of AmICalled.com, and author of *Letting Go: Rugged Love for Wayward Souls*.