

# Family Perspectives

by W.F. Anderson

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*The increasing problems with children, particularly in their teens, are complex and multifaceted, and Christian parents need genuine fellowship and support to navigate these challenges.*

**Duration:** 31:59

**Scripture:** Proverbs 22:6, Matthew 10:34, Acts 16:31

**Topics:** "Parenting Teens", "Prodigal Son"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the story of the Prodigal Son from Luke 15. He emphasizes that the son in the story was likely a teenager, as in Jewish society at that time, boys would be married at around 16 or 17 years old. The speaker suggests that some children need to experience the 'far country' or the depths of life in order to truly understand and appreciate their home. He also mentions the challenges faced by parents in today's society, such as the drug culture and the increasing gap between physical and social maturity in teenagers. The speaker encourages parents to never give up on their children, to keep praying for them, and to keep the door open for them to return home.

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## Transcript

And I thank you all for inviting me here to the conference and for your warm reception to the Ministry of the Word. This is very encouraging. At the convener's reception the other night.

They said that I had been invited to the first conference 18 years ago and I don't remember getting that invitation. I think Shockley just got around to it last year. That's how I got here.

And one of our dear sisters, who shall remain nameless though, she comes from Columbia, gave me a present. It says, I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I am not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant. I don't know whether she feels that that ought to go over all my messages or what.

Now, I'm in a dilemma. Not only am I not awake, I don't know what to do this morning. First of all, good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Why don't you stay out of it? Several areas of difficulty that I want to talk about. Things like sin and forgiveness and the whole area of guilt. I think a lot of us as Christians bear a lot of unnecessary guilt.

I think we get a lot of false guilt that has nothing to do with our relationship to God. We bear that burden for years. We need ways of getting rid of it.

On the other hand, I feel increasingly the pressure of talking to Christian parents, particularly parents of teenagers. And I don't have any answers. I don't have anything helpful to say, I think.

But at least if you don't have any teenagers, but you'll probably be in contact with people who do. And I'd like to just share a few ideas. It's only a perspective.

These are not answers. But there are certain perspectives that I'd like to talk about, just viewpoints, that may help us with our own kids, maybe not. And at least may help us understand other people.

And maybe I'll go that direction this morning. And tomorrow morning we'll take up guilt. When we returned to Florence, we had lived in Florence, South Carolina.

We returned there after 13 years in May. And one of the big differences I noted in going back into a pastoral ministry was the great increase in family problems. If anything struck me, it was that.

It's not that I had been totally isolated from them in May, but I was working primarily with students and doing very little pastoral ministry outside that. My pastoral ministry was with students, not only teaching in the classroom but working with them individually as they came to the office. And I was really struck with the vast increase in family problems when we returned to Florence.

Not only in the area of divorce and remarriage and infidelity and all the rest of it that seemed to be so prevalent today, but in the tremendous increase in problems with children, particularly as they get up into their teens. I think personally that it's one of the ways Satan has of getting at Christian people. I personally know of four, and I'm talking about personal acquaintance, four preachers who have been on the verge of resigning from the ministry because of problems with their children.

And I have heard of many more, but I personally know four very gifted and capable servants of the Lord who have been on the point of turning in their preaching badge because of problems with their children. And I'm convinced it's one of the ways Satan has of getting at God's people, is to work through their children. And I feel very much like something I heard Paul Little say two years ago, because he died just a year ago, right about this time.

Yeah. I remember Paul saying, it's time we stood up and told the devil to get his dirty hands off our kids. And I think Satan works through our children to bring us a great deal of discouragement and really to tear up our confidence in God and in his word.

A few things I do want to say are these. First, there is no guarantee in the scripture that our children are going to turn out all right. Now, some of this is going to be pretty negative for a while.

But there is no guarantee in the scripture that our children are going to turn out all right. I've already talked about the book of Proverbs, and we keep going back to that verse in Proverbs chapter 22, Turn up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it. Now, that verse is open to all sorts of translations and interpretations.

And I don't want to spend a great deal of time talking about the possible translations of the Hebrew in that particular verse. But I will say this. It is a proverb and not a promise.

It is a general observation. When godliness prevailed in the nation of Israel, and there was a good king on the throne, and righteousness was the characteristic of the whole nation, this was generally true. You turn up a child in the way that he should go, and when he is old he won't depart from it.

If that's really what the passage means. But as I suggested to you the other day, when a godless king was on the throne, and unrighteousness prevailed in the nation, all bets are off. And those things do not hold true.

You've got all other kinds of factors involved when you've got a godless king on the throne, and unrighteousness prevailing through the nation. We are dealing with proverbs, not with promises. And I'm not trying to destroy anybody's faith, but I'm trying to help us be realistic, because some of us are going to have to be very, very realistic in our own experience someday.

And we turn to Acts 16.31, and Paul says, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved in thy house. And we say, see, that guarantees that if parents trust Christ, their children are going to trust Christ. No, it doesn't guarantee that.

Paul is not saying that if you parents trust Christ, your children are going to trust Christ. He doesn't say that. If they trust Christ, they'll be saved.

The promise is not just to the individuals. God is interested in reaching more than just those individuals, but it's no guarantee that the children will be saved. Else I have no way to fit in what our Lord says, that he came to send not peace, but a sword.

And he would divide families, and he would put parents against children, and children against parents. And he warns his disciples that the day is coming when children will deliver up their parents to death for the sake of Jesus Christ. So, Acts 16.31 cannot be a guarantee that every parent who trusts Christ is going to see that his children trust Christ.

There are certain contributing factors to the increasing problems we are having with our children, particularly as they reach their teens at IC. This may be no help, but it may at least throw a little light on the subject. Obviously, our society is a rapidly changing society.

When I grew up, I grew up in a very stable society. We were not part of a mobile society. I had the same friends from the first grade right through the twelfth grade.

Same group of fellows all the way through. Very stable society. The street on which I lived in Pittsburgh was a rather lengthy block.

I could have gone from the beginning of that block. Really, it was two long blocks on our street. I could have gone from the beginning of that block to the end of that block, both sides of the street, and told you everybody who lived there.

Everybody knew everybody else. It was a very stable society. Beyond that, whether they were Christians or not, and the majority of them were Roman Catholics in the area where I grew up, whether they were Christian or not, their standards were pretty much the standards of my parents.

My parents, in their attempt to reinforce or to enforce moral standards on their children, had the reinforcement of that society. Those parents supported, whether they were Christians or not, in general,

they supported the kind of standards my parents had. So, my parents had a great deal of support from the people around them in their attempt to impose moral standards on their children.

The schools were the same way when I grew up. There was a great deal of moral teaching in the school. Of course, we read the scriptures every morning, but apart from that, there was a great deal of moral enforcement in the school.

The school I grew up in as a kid, in grammar school, in every classroom, on the front wall of the classroom, there was hanging a large flat stick with a handle on one end of it. And everybody knew what that was for. And a lot of parents, if you got one of those things at school, you got another one when you got home.

And the schools, in general, supported the standards of the community. And that's no longer true. Neither our society nor our school system give any kind of support to the moral desires of Christian parents.

They used to, but they don't anymore. So, what happens is that our children, with the peer group pressure on them, and the teenagers particularly, it's vital to them not to be different, to have teenage support. By the way, let me throw in something on the side here.

As Joe Bailey said in an article years ago, I don't see very many Christian salesmen carrying red Bibles. We want our kids, when they're in school, to put a red Bible on top of their school books because everybody knows they're a Christian. But I don't see many Christian salesmen carrying red Bibles around where everybody can see it.

And we want our children to dress differently from their contemporaries. Well, we don't dress differently from our contemporaries. When I put a suit on, I look just like one of the mafias of Chicago.

You can't tell the difference between me and an executive of a corporation that's ripping off the public. I look just like my middle-class contemporaries. And yet we want our kids to look different from their contemporaries.

We don't intend to look different from our contemporaries. And we talk about a worldly standard of dress. Well, will you please tell me what a biblical standard of dress is? There are only two things the New Testament says about the way we should dress.

One is it should not be very expensive, and the second is it should be modest. If it's very expensive and immodest, the whole purpose is to draw attention to ourselves, and that's the New Testament forbid. But beyond that, there isn't any standard of dress in the New Testament.

And when we put the pressure on our kids to be different from their contemporaries, we are putting a standard on them that we do not impose on ourselves, unless you're going to join the Amish. And then you will dress differently from the rest of the society around you, but we don't do that. And our kids, in their teen years, one of the things they hate is to be different from their contemporaries.

And so there's a great deal of peer group pressure. There's some other things going on that all of us are aware of. There's a whole drug culture that has come to us.

When I grew up in school, in high school, we had those guys and gals we needed to drink on the weekends, but it wasn't a real problem for the rest of us. Drugs have always been in the ghettos. But when

drug pushers discovered new ways of getting more money and began to move out into the suburbs, then we had a problem.

And there's another factor with our kids, and that's the increasing gap between the time they reach their... Well, what I should say, there's an increasing gap between physical maturity and social maturity. What I mean is this. Because of physical developments in our own country, medicine, food, etc., children are reaching sexual maturity earlier and earlier.

And talking with one of our doctors in Florence, they're seeing an increasing number of 13-year-old girls coming in for abortion. And yet our sin, our society, is imposing more and more, maybe not so much right now in the last year or so, but more and more on our young people before we will admit that they are ready to take their place in society. They've got to go through high school, and if they've reached sexual maturity at 13, that means four more years before they get out of high school and they could get married anyhow.

And now we want them to have a college education, and that's another four years. And now increasingly grad school, before they really are in a position to marry and raise a family. And now we've got that tremendous gap between their physical maturity and their social maturity.

And our society has no way of transferring an individual from immaturity to maturity, from childhood to adulthood. We don't have any rights of puberty for which they go. And the Jewish rights, by the way, the one exception to the standards in society, the standards in all the other societies of the puberty rights, had to do with sexual matters, primarily, and whether or not a man was a man, for instance.

The Jewish rights were primarily spiritual. You've got today the Bar Mitzvah. He becomes the son of the commandment.

And the passage from childhood to adulthood in Judaism is centered around religion, not around puberty. But nevertheless, in our society, there's that gap. And adolescence is an unnatural phenomenon.

There shouldn't be such a thing. It ought to be that a kid can go right from his childhood into adulthood in a clearly recognized step. And adolescence is something artificial that our Western society has forced on us, and we have not found a way to deal with it.

And our teenagers are in a terrible bind. And those are some of the factors that I see that contribute to all our problems. Now, I want to get on with a few more things.

There are two things I really want to talk about. Severe problems with our teenagers are not always the fault of the parents. I want to get the parents off the hook, if I possibly can, primarily because I'm a parent.

But it used to be we all said, if parents really were the kind of parents, they ought to be their kids that turn out right. And that's simply not so when you stop to think about it. Let's turn back to Isaiah 1. Isaiah 1, verse 2 says, Hear, O heavens, and give ear o'er us, for the Lord has spoken.

Now, what does the next line say? You ever think you're going to find a more perfect parent than God? And he says, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. Did God make mistakes in his bringing up of Israel out of Egypt and through the wilderness and training them and providing for them and instructing them? Did God make mistakes? And if God's children can rebel against him, I shouldn't be surprised if us mere human parents have children who rebel against us. And when we

look at ourselves as God's children, we know that God has got some pretty raunchy children.

And we've given him endless heartache. And all you have to do is look back over your own life and see the number of times you've rebelled and you've demanded your own way, and some of it pretty serious, to realize the fault is not always that of the parents. So, when there are teenagers in difficulty, let's not automatically say what's wrong with the parents.

The thing is just too complex for such a simplistic answer. The problem is not always with the parents. I think we have to remember that as our children grow up and begin to get into their teens, they become responsible individuals who make their own decisions.

And you cannot make decisions for your teenage children, particularly as they begin to get into their late teens. Your time, whatever you can do for those kids has already been done. There is no way you can make their decisions for them.

They are becoming responsible before God for their own decisions. And there is no guarantee, again, that they are going to make the right decisions. I should insert here, in the final analysis, the only important thing is that they be in heaven.

Is that right? Of course, I would like to see my kids live the right kind of life. But the only really important thing is that they end up in heaven. That's the goal.

And they may destroy themselves in life, much to God's heartache and ours. But if somewhere along the line they've got hold of Jesus Christ, that's the only important thing. That does not mean we're not brokenhearted at their conduct in life.

But it may help us to see that what we're really after is that ultimate thing. If it's at the end of 70 years of a wasted life, the really important thing is that they end up in the presence of Jesus Christ. That's the important thing.

Well, with all these problems, and some of them are pretty severe, is there any kind of help we can get? I'm not talking about help for the teenagers. I don't know what to do with that in many, many cases. But I'm talking about us parents.

Is there any real help? I will suggest a couple of things. One, there is a tremendous need for genuine Christian fellowship among Christian adults where we really bear one another's burden. Now, when Christian parents are having problems with their teens in your assembly, what happens? Do you begin to pick up that judgmental spirit? Don't they try to keep it quiet? Hush, hush.

They don't want it known around. And the very time when they need all the emotional and spiritual support they can get, we in our self-righteousness cut them off from it. God have mercy on us.

I remember one of our teenagers ran away from home. Shock you? One of our teenagers ran away from home. We were tremendously distressed, obviously.

It wasn't a sudden occurrence. It was building up for a long time. I called one of the elders in our local assembly.

I didn't know right away. That evening, seven couples came to our house from that assembly. Seven couples.

I don't know all that they had to lay aside to do it, but there they were. And they sat with us for hours as we were making various phone calls and trying to trace this kid down. We sat around and held hands and prayed.

Not a bit of condemnation. All kinds of support. What we need is Christian fellowship where we don't have to hide our problems and where we can support each other and pray not against each other but for each other.

Now we need to develop that kind of relationship. If you can't do it in the assembly as a whole, please do it with some individuals either inside that assembly or outside that assembly. And if our local assembly has not learned how to fellowship with each other, then let me get hold of some Christians outside that assembly and develop that kind of relationship.

I've got to have it to survive. Personally. I've got to have it.

If there's one thing Christian parents need, it's that kind of fellowship. We need the kind of fellowship, too, in which young people can talk, young Christian parents can talk to older Christian parents and get the benefits of their experience and their knowledge of the Word of God. There's a clear instruction in the New Testament that the older Christian women are to teach the younger Christian women how to love their husbands and to love their children.

There's very little of that going on in most churches that I know of. Very little of that's going on, if any. And if there's ever a day in our society when we need it, it's right now.

And I'm suggesting as a help that first of all, we develop, we work at that kind of fellowship in our local church. And just to pull in another problem, what happens when divorce comes to a family in your assembly? Let me suggest you go back and pick up a copy of Moody Monthly about maybe two or three months ago. Don Cole has an article in there called What Do You Say to a Divorced Friend? And I think every elder, in fact every Christian ought to read that article.

What Do You Say to a Divorced Friend? I abhor in myself this tendency to draw my pharisaical skirts around me to keep my reputation pure, to make sure that nobody thinks I condone divorce or that I condone problems in a Christian family. And I stay away from those people. All I do is cluck my tongue and say how terrible it is that Christians can't live for the Lord.

And that's exactly what those people don't need. So we need that kind of Christian fellowship. Second, to parents, I want to say this.

Get rid of the guilt. Now that's easier said than done. Get rid of the guilt feeling.

In the first place, the past is past, and all of us as Christian parents make mistakes. None of us deliberately sets out to destroy our children. I don't get up in the morning and say now let's see, how can I trouble my kids today? What can I do to make sure that my kids are going to turn away from the Lord? Nobody does that, but we all make mistakes.

And all you can do is confess those and put them behind you, and do not allow Satan to keep troubling you with that guilt. Now don't for one moment say that is God working on your conscience. It isn't.

Once you have confessed that, if it ever comes up again, that is not God. That's the devil. He is the accuser of the brethren.

God is not. And if those things keep coming up, that's the work of Satan. That is not the work of God.

And you may need to sit down with a mature Christian friend and try to work that whole area out. Along with that idea of getting rid of guilt, stop having perfect standards for yourself. I hope that as I get older, I stop worrying about being a failure.

We all fail anyhow, and I wish I just stopped worrying about it. And I discover, as other Christian parents have, that in trying to prevent the kind of mistakes my parents made, I invented a few. I created my own.

All of us did. There is no such thing as a perfect parent. We are all human.

And whatever ways I could help you to get rid of those guilt feelings, I would like to do that. The last thing I want to say, and this is all perspective, I have no specific help, because I'm struggling with the thing myself. I have no specific help, you know.

I will say this. Any book, or any lecture, or seminars, that give you the pat-ins. You do this, this, and this, and everything will turn out alright.

They are wrong. And I will say that right now, and I'll say it publicly, I'll put it in print. They are wrong.

There is no mechanistic way that you can get at our human dilemma. There are no pat-ins. There are no formulas of success.

There isn't such a thing in the Bible. We human beings are too complex to be shoved into a mechanistic mold, and if you just pull this lever, and this lever, and this lever, in the proper succession, you're going to turn out a little jewel of a child. To me, that's a cruel hoax.

Perpetrated in the name of Christ. So I don't have answers. Obviously, Christian parents are going to be praying night and day, and trying to get all the help they can get.

The final thing I'd like to do is just leave a note of hope. We don't have time to read it, but I'd suggest you read Luke 15 again, the parable of the prodigal son. And remember, by the way, that boy was a teenager.

In the Jewish society of the first century, a boy would be married at about 16 or 17. And that boy had to be coming to that age when he took off. Because he would not be ready to take off at all if he weren't that age.

So he would be about, maybe 16, 17 years old. The prodigal son. It's a cruel thing to say.

It's hard to say. But there are some of our children that simply have to go to the far country. They will not learn any other way.

Some of them simply have to go to the far country. And they get to the depths of things. They discover what the far country is really like.

Then they're ready to turn around and come home. But some of them have to go to the far country. Now it doesn't say how long that trip took, and it doesn't say how long he stayed there.

But some children simply have to go to the far country. Now what do we do as parents? Well obviously we pray. And what you do, for God's sake, is keep that door open.

Don't you ever write that kid off. Don't you ever communicate to him you're through with him. You're never through with him.

If you know anything of the grace of God. And he may cause you untold agony. That's the price you pay for being able to love.

If you couldn't love, you'd never hurt. God didn't make us angels, he made us humans. He made us like himself.

And God's capability of loving means that God is capable of being hurt. And if you're able to love, you're going to get hurt. And you keep that door open.

And you let that kid know there's always a welcome when he's ready to come home. And when he does come home, don't you ever mention the far country. When that boy came home, he was the only one outside of the elder brother.

He was the only one who mentioned the far country. The father never said a word about it. Don't you ever mention the far country.

That's past. It's gone. You let him come home.

And you welcome him with great rejoicing. Right? I hope our local assembly treats penitent Christians the same way. I don't know how you would feel if David had committed adultery and murder and everybody knew about it.

Nathan went to him and he confessed his sins. And the next Sunday he showed up at the Lord's Supper and he took part. I don't think we'd let him do it.

Yet he ought to. Happy is the man whose transgression is forgiven and whose sin is covered. Who's better able to sing that than David the Sunday after he's been forgiven? You make sure that door is open and there's a warm welcome when he comes back from the far country.

Let's pray. Our Father, how well you have received us and how often, how often we have wandered strayed deliberately and when we have come back we have never found you frozen and cold. We have always found you warm and open and welcoming us.

Help us to have the same attitude. Deliver us from the self-righteousness that looks down at the problems of other people and help us, we pray, in understanding and love to draw alongside and give support and help. Make us people who know what it is to love.

We pray in Christ's name. Amen.

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