We've been walking through the reality of prodigals in the Church and in our lives, and we've come a long way. We've seen that a prodigal is someone who walks away from the faith. We've looked at God's Word and seen that someone is made a prodigal by outside influences and becomes a prodigal by internal desires and decisions.

And as we've addressed how to respond to prodigals, we've talked about repentance, exhortation, and prayer. Repent of your sins against the prodigal, exhort them to hold fast to Jesus, and pray for their soul.

Today, we're going to look at how to love a prodigal, specifically at the actions that we need to take in response to their sinful rejection of Jesus, His Word, and His people. We need to know what it means to love someone who no longer lives as a Christian and refuses to repent.

And this question is something that prodigals have an opinion on. They have expectations for how they want to be treated; they have a working definition of what love looks like. I've mentioned the very helpful book "Letting Go" by Dave Harvey and Paul Gilbert before, and they provide a quick summary of what the prodigal wants: A prodigal wants choices without consequences, autonomy without accountability, and leaving without loss.\(^1\)

That is, what they think love looks like is letting them make their own decisions and follow their own desires without being rebuked, without the nature of the relationship changing, or without the loss of access or privileges in the family or in the Church. To the prodigal, love means uncritically accepting them, their choices, and their lifestyle. Love is uncritical acceptance.

And so if you respond any other way, they will accuse you of not loving them, which they then add to their pile of excuses for falling away in the first place. In the prodigal's mind, when they reject the faith, you have a choice to make: either you will discipline them and bring consequences to bear, or you will love them. So which will you choose, discipline or love?

But Proverbs 13:24 reveals that this is a false choice. A prodigal who demands that you choose between discipline or love does not understand either discipline or love, because love includes discipline. In fact, discipline is the way that love responds to folly and sin. Let me say that again: discipline is love applied to sin. Refusing to bring consequences is hatred, but love disciplines. (You can see this same teaching in Hebrews 12).

How is discipline an expression of love? Think of it this way: sin is destructive, like driving a truck over a cliff. Discipline is constantly building guardrails and reminding the driver of the rules of the road, in order to keep them safe and alive. Refusing to discipline is like watching someone hurtle down the path to destruction and not doing a thing to stand in their way. But loving discipline tries to stop them before something terrible happens. Sin kills, discipline saves.

\(^1\) *Letting Go*, Dave Harvey and Paul Gilbert, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 56-58.
So what does loving discipline look like? I want to point to three things: *establishing boundaries, enforcing consequences*, and finally, *letting go*. Let’s look first at boundaries.

**Establishing Boundaries** – when a relationship is going well, you don’t need to spend a lot of time setting up and policing boundaries. But when a prodigal introduces sinful and destructive behaviors into the relationship, boundaries start to play a much more important role. As Galatians 3:19 says, “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions.” Back in the garden of Eden, there was only one rule: don’t eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But once sin entered the world, the commandments started multiplying, and the consequences for breaking those commandments are made known.

Before, you didn’t think you needed to tell your son not to get drunk in the living room. You didn’t need to tell your daughter that she couldn’t sleep with her boyfriend in your house. But now that sin is threatening to enter your home, you need to establish clear boundaries, rules that keep sin away from your family. And that’s the fundamental boundary: you can’t control what you can’t control, but you are responsible for what happens under your own roof and by means of your resources. You need to make it clear that sin is not welcome in your home. *Sinners* may be welcomed; but they *cannot* bring their sin with them. So, for instance, this means that you don’t let unmarried couples sleep in the same room under your roof. You don’t let your adult son watch sinful entertainment in your home. Your daughter may not practice Eastern religious meditation in your living room. Sin is not welcome in your home.

**When prodigals start bring sin into the relationship, love responds by establishing boundaries for the purpose of keeping sin out, because love recognizes that sin is fundamentally destructive.**

**Enforcing Consequences** – the next step of discipline comes into play when those boundaries are broken. Now the consequences need to be enforced. And this is where many people get tripped up: bringing consequences means bringing pain, and love doesn’t bring pain, right? And so many people conclude that the loving thing to do is *not* to enforce consequences, but to “be gracious” and allow the prodigal to keep on sinning.

We don’t have time to explore the whole story, but 1 Samuel 2-3 shows us the sad example of Eli the priest, who failed to discipline his sons, and so the Lord to put them to death. In 1 Sam 2, Eli does *rebuke* them, establishing boundaries with his words, but in 1 Sam 3, the Lord says that Eli did not *restrain* them, and so Eli and his house were punished by God.

Here’s the point: **words are not enough**: God expects us to take concrete actions to restrain the sin of the prodigals in our families. Because Eli did not love God and his sons enough to take this step, the punishment of God was far more severe than Eli’s consequences ever would have been. *Love brings the controlled pain of consequences in order to protect prodigals from the far greater pain of God’s punishment.*
1 Corinthians 5 says very plainly that if anyone *bears the name of brother and walks in sin* that you are not even to *eat* with such a one. At the very least, this means that your actions can’t give the impression that you are in Christian fellowship with a prodigal when you are not.

Let me make this more practical: enforcing consequences means revoking privileges, denying access to things like computers, cars, phones, money, etc. Sometimes it means involving the elders of the church, or the police, or ending a friendship, or pursuing a divorce.

These steps can be very painful, and have huge relational, financial, and emotional ramifications. And sadly, in the face of how difficult and hard it is to go down that path, many well-meaning Christians are like Eli, sparing the rod, *hating* the prodigal instead of *loving* them. Hatred hides behind a lot of so-called grace; real love brings consequences like a rod.

**Letting Go** – Finally, when boundaries are established and the consequences are faithfully enforced, and your prodigal *still chooses to walk in sin*, then it is time to **let the prodigal go**. In Deuteronomy 21 and in 1 Corinthians 5, we see that stubborn and rebellious sinners who refuse to repent, who don’t respect godly boundaries, and who aren’t even corrected by consequences are to be removed from families and churches. Through their sin, they are communicating that they want out, and God’s strongest discipline involves giving them what they want.

They have rejected the easy way, and so God will correct them the hard way. 1 Cor. 5:4-5 says that if they will not listen to Christ, they are to be delivered over to Satan as the final act of loving discipline.

Now, that’s a shocking statement, and so I want to make sure we keep reading to discover the reason why God would want us to take such a step. Are we giving up? Are they out of reach of God’s mercy? No, not at all. Here’s the reason God gives: you are to “deliver them to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, *so that their spirit may be saved* in the day of the Lord.”

Let them go, *for the sake of bringing them back*. Harvey and Gilbert call this “redemptive release”\(^2\). Even though everything inside you wants to pull them closer and hold them tighter, when things have gotten to this point, God says to let them go. It’s a scary thing to do, because it means that you no longer claim any influence over them or their decisions. It seems like losing control, and it feels like giving up, but God tells you to do this in order that their soul might be saved.

The story of the Prodigal Son is the greatest example of how God uses *letting go*. The father gives his son his inheritance, and doesn’t try to stop him. But here’s the all-important point: *not stopping him* is not the same as *not loving him*. In fact, the father knows that the son getting what he wants is the best way for the son to learn that what he wants *isn’t worth wanting*. And that’s a lesson that the son refuses to learn any other way.

\(^2\) *Letting Go*, Dave Harvey and Paul Gilbert, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 100.
He doesn’t learn that lesson in his father’s home! He only learns it after he leaves, and here’s why letting go is love: if the prodigal never leaves, then he can never come home. A little while serving Satan sent the prodigal son running straight back to the father, which was the whole point of letting him go in the first place.

In fact, that’s been the goal every step of the way, because discipline is love. Love establishes boundaries to protect prodigals from themselves. Love enforces consequences to teach prodigals that sin is costly. And love is even willing to let go, because love understands the great gospel lesson that death is the way to life. Being disowned by your family and put out of the church is a kind of death, and so love puts prodigals to death because only the dead can experience resurrection.

This is love, because that’s the gospel: God’s love for mankind was such that He let us go, knowing full well that what we wanted to do was to murder His only Son. Once He stopped holding us back, we killed God as soon as we had the chance.

But at the moment it looked like humanity was too far gone to be saved, God was bringing life out of death. On the cross, the law was fulfilled in Christ, the consequences of sin were fully born by Christ, and Christ experienced a great forsakenness on the cross because He took our place. In all of this we see God disciplining the human race in the person of Jesus as our representative. As horrific as the cross was, God ordained the crucifixion of Jesus out of His love for us, so that we could be redeemed through Christ. This is how God shows His love to you in your sin. May God help you show that same love to the prodigals in your life, so that they might be redeemed.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

*Let us pray:*

“Almighty, merciful, and most gracious God and Father, we earnestly implore you to turn the hearts of all who have forsaken the faith once delivered to your Church, those who have wandered from it or are in doubt or temptation through the corruption of your truth; mercifully visit them and turn them again, so that with undivided hearts they may take pleasure in your Word and be made wise to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord, and Amen.”