

## Managing Prodigals by Syler Thomas

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Watching Kristy come to faith was one of the great joys of my early years in ministry. Watching her then walk away was equally as painful. Kristy had been invited to our youth group by a friend, then made a commitment to Christ, attended our mission trip, joined our student ministry team, and was herself beginning to minister to others. She then started dating a student who had also recently come to faith. Together, they began pulling away from the youth group, slowly at first. During a dating talk, they both left the church rather abruptly and we rarely saw them again. The departure of those two left many of their friends and leaders quite brokenhearted. A frequent topic of conversation was: How do we respond? Do we call them out on their lack of faith and sin, and hand them over to Satan, so to speak, as Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 5? Or do we just ignore all that and continue loving them?

Fast forward six years. We began to see Kristy around here and there. She was no longer dating the same boy, and seemed interested in my family's life again. We got a heartfelt Christmas card and then very recently, a phone call asking if she could come over. She shared with us about her newfound faith, then accepted an invitation to join our small group, and even traveled to Mexico with our church to serve on a family mission trip.

The question is: what happened so that this "prodigal daughter" felt comfortable returning home? There is a delicate line that must be walked any time a student you love either shows signs of walking away from her faith or flat out bolts. Paul clearly dealt with this in his letter to the Galatians where he advises that "if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." What does that mean? It means that any sort of scare tactic used to jolt the wandering student back to their senses is inappropriate. Restoring someone gently must include respecting their struggle and being willing to walk alongside them through it. The situation Paul addresses in Corinth is clearly one where the church not only wasn't upset about sin in their church, they were proud of it! And even in this situation, Paul's advice to hand the man over to Satan is for the purpose of ultimately saving his spirit (v. 5).

Many years ago, a friend of mine sat down with one of his friends who had wandered from the faith. He "laid it on the line" and basically told the friend that if he didn't turn from his sin, the fires of hell awaited him. Nothing could have been more hurtful in that situation. My friend felt like he had "done his duty" but it was actually a selfish act, so that he could stand before God and be able to say, "I did all I could. It wasn't my fault!" The more difficult and more loving thing to do is to display the grace of God through one's own unconditional acceptance and friendship.

Generally speaking, if a student has shown signs of a genuine commitment to Christ, a subsequent rebuttal of that faith is a symptom that they are struggling with doubt, with sin, or that they are in a conflict with another member of the group. Do everything you can to respectfully ask if perhaps one of those three scenarios is in play and see if you can help. But understand that when a student has made a decision in his heart to walk away,

your own frustration and desire for them to avoid the ramifications of a life apart from Christ can't lead you to bullying them into repentance.

If the student makes clear that he or she has no intention of returning, remember that Luke 15 was written especially for them. God's heart breaks for them, and we as God's representatives must reflect that persistent, yet patient love. The father in Luke 15 was watching for his son's return and ran to him, but he didn't go find the son and force him to return against his will. Our role is simply to shower the student with grace, refuse to burn any bridges, and make clear through our actions that if our presence in their lives is ever again desired, we will be there. We must shift our attitudes from accountability to understanding, and model the love of a God who waits patiently for his sons and daughters to come to their senses and return home.