

James Dobson: How to Deal With a Prodigal Child

It is my belief that more people become disillusioned with God over the waywardness of a son or daughter than any other issue. There is nothing more important to most Christian parents than the salvation of their children. Every other goal and achievement in life is anemic and insignificant compared to this transmission of faith to the next generation.

Unfortunately, if a parent's prayers for a child are not answered quickly, there is a tendency to blame God and to struggle with intense feelings of bitterness. Often, this anger at the Lord results from a misunderstanding of what He will and won't do in the lives of those for whom we intercede.

Admittedly, we have waded into deep theological water here.

How can I explain the prayers of my great-grandfather (on my mother's side), who died the year before I was born? This wonderful man of God, G.W. McCluskey, took it upon himself to spend the hour between 11 a.m. and noon every day in prayer specifically for the spiritual welfare of his family. He was talking to the Lord not only about those loved ones who were then alive; he was also praying for generations not yet born. This good man was talking to the Lord about me even before I was conceived!

Toward the end of his life, my great-grandfather made a startling announcement. He said God had promised him that every member of his family for four generations-both those living and those not yet born-would be believers. Well, I represent the fourth generation down from his own, and it has worked out more interestingly than even my godly forebear might have assumed.

The McCluskeys had two girls, one of whom was my grandmother

and the other, my great-aunt. Both grew up and married ministers in their parents' denomination. Between these women, five girls and one boy were born. One of them was my mother. All five of the girls married ministers in the denomination of their grandfather, and the boy became one.

That brought it down to my generation. My cousin H.B. London and I were the first to go through college, and we were roommates. In the beginning of our sophomore year, H.B. announced that God was calling him to preach. I can assure you, I began to get very nervous about the family tradition!

I never felt God was asking me to be a minister, so I went to graduate school and became a psychologist. And yet, as the founder of Focus on the Family, I have spent my professional life speaking, teaching and writing about the importance of my faith in Jesus Christ.

At times as I sit on a platform waiting to address a church filled with Christians, I wonder if my great-grandfather is smiling at me from somewhere. His prayers have reached across four generations of time to influence what I am doing with my life day by day.

What does that say about free moral agency and the right to choose? I don't have a clue. I know only that God honors the prayers of His righteous followers, and you should stay on your face before Him until each child in your family and extended family has been granted every opportunity to repent.

We must remember, however, that God will not ride roughshod over the will of any individual. He deals respectfully with each person and seeks to attract him or her to Himself, but He will not force anyone to choose Him.

It is wrong, therefore, to blame God if the wooing process takes years-or if it doesn't produce the result you are praying for. An unrepentant heart is the outcome of rebellion, not negligence on God's part.

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