

Happy Father's Day, God

Luke 15:11-32

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“Your job won’t take care of you when you are sick. Your friends and parents will. Stay in touch!”

Happy Father's Day, God!

Father's Day, contrary to popular misconception, was not established as a holiday in order to help greeting card manufacturers sell more cards. In fact, when a “father's day” was first proposed, there were no Father's Day cards!

Mrs. John B. Dodd, of Washington, first proposed the idea of a “father's day” in 1909. Mrs. Dodd wanted a special day to honor her father, William Smart. William Smart, a Civil War veteran, was widowed when his wife (Mrs. Dodd's mother) died in childbirth with their sixth child. Mr. Smart was left to raise the newborn and his other five children on a rural farm in eastern Washington State. It was after Mrs. Dodd became an adult that she realized the strength and selflessness her father had shown in raising his children as a single parent.

The first Father's Day was observed on June 19, 1910, in Spokane, Washington. At about the same time in various towns and cities across America, other people were beginning to celebrate a “father's day.” In 1924 President Calvin Coolidge supported the idea of a national Father's Day. Finally, in 1966, President Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday of June as Father's Day.

Father's Day has become a day to not only honor your own father, but to honor all men who serve as father figures: stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers and adult male friends are all to be honored on Father's Day.

For many centuries our understanding of God was through the words of Jesus who called God his ‘Abba’ or ‘Father’. Many Biblical scholars looked at today's passage of Scripture and framed their understanding of God by the teachings of Jesus about this Father and his two sons.

However, in the last 20 years a challenge has been laid at the Christian Church concerning using the name Father for God. Women especially have expressed concern at the patriarchal nature of our understanding of God.

We Can Still Honor God as Our Father!

I believe it is possible to honor God as our Father. But there are problems of only knowing God in that one way.

One of the major problems with identifying God as our Father is the poor, even destructive human fathers who spread devastation all over their families.

- It is true that 25 percent of young women will be sexually abused before they reach the age of 18. Unfortunately, much of that abuse will be at the hands of their fathers, stepfathers or grandfathers.
- It is true that during much of the last 300 years we have tended to celebrate a macho, warlike image of God as our Father. This image has condoned war, led us into a judgmental theology and created many dysfunctional church families.

When we use a cultural model for understanding God as our Father, then we are in trouble. However, if we use Jesus' teaching as the core of understanding God as our “Abba, Father”, then we can use the word Father for God in a good and healthy way.

One metaphor or symbol for understanding God is the Good Father. This metaphor was a good one for Jesus and it is a good one for us. Of course, the metaphor of Father is not the only way we can understand God. The Bible uses many metaphors for God. We say that God is Creator, Redeemer, Mother, Savior, Advocate, Judge, Counselor, and Friend. But we know that God is essentially indescribable. God cannot be defined, limited or circumscribed by any human word, idea or concept! We must worship God in Spirit and in truth knowing that God is beyond our comprehension.

A helpful old story is that of the four blind individuals who had never seen or heard of an elephant before and yet sought to describe it. The blind man who feels the elephant's leg describes the animal as being like a tall tree. The blind woman who feels the elephant's long snout says that the animal is far more like a large snake. The blind man who feels the elephant's ear says both of them are wrong -- this animal looks like a large plant leaf. Finally, another blind woman is lifted up and placed upon the elephant's back says that all of them are wrong; the elephant is more like a large platform high off the ground. All four are right and all four are wrong! The elephant is all they say that it is and much more!

Our God and much more than our language can describe. However, Jesus does tell us a story about a Good Father and two not so good sons. Jesus points us to an understanding of God as the Good Father in this story. In this sermon, I want us to concentrate on the Father. I know the story is named after the prodigal son. However, the real focus for this morning is the Father. Let us concentrate on a few of the major teachings of our Risen Savior about our Good Father.

Father God Teaches Responsibility through Consequences

The Good Father is not into power and control. When the young son chooses to ask for his inheritance and leave home, the Father complies. Even though he must sell land that has been in his family for many generations at a bargain basement price, the Father complies. Even though the entire village will know of the rebelliousness of the son, the Father complies. The Good Father will give his son the choice of his actions and the responsibility for living with the consequences of his choice.

Notice also that the Father does not go running after the rebellious son. The Father does not rescue him from his pigsty prison. Our Father God is not a helicopter parent! The Father allows the son to suffer the consequences of his choice.

Fathers and Mothers, we need to learn from our Father God. God will allow you to choose your own path even if it is into destruction. God created this world in such a way that God will not step in and override your choice. You are responsible for your actions. The consequences are yours!

As parents we need to teach our children to make choices, accept responsibility and live with the consequences. The earlier we start this teaching, the easier the consequences are. Too many parents attempt to protect their children from the pain of failure by making all of their decisions. These helicopter parents seek to build a cocoon of protection around their children. Cocoons are safe homes for worms becoming caterpillars. However, human cocoons create spoiled, irresponsible, dysfunctional, forever-needy adults. Children raised in cocoons are not beautiful. Just like this rebellious son is not beautiful. Our good Father God is teaching us to teach and to accept reasonability and consequences. We need to follow God's example in our homes. Failure to do so will bring about much pain now and throughout eternity.

Our Father God not only deals with each of us individually, God also deals with our governments and communities in the same manner. God allows us to continue to experience the consequences of our madness on this planet as horrific as that sounds. God will not interfere with our choices as nations, businesses, or communities. We are responsible for the kind of society we build upon this earth. If we choose to have a partner in the building process that glorifies death and destruction, then the harvest we reap will be death and destruction.

Fathers and Mothers, your responsibility is to become like the good Father, teaching responsibility and consequences. If you teach your children when they are young, the consequences are much less, and their opportunity to grow into fully mature human beings is much greater!

Father God Teaches Mercy through Forgiveness

Our Father God gives us the freedom to make our own choices, even if that means we give the Evil One power over us. The Good News is that responsibility and consequences are not the final word from God. God does forgive. The prodigal son did return home. He came back still filled with pride and seeking to negotiate a better way of life for himself. The Father accepted him totally and completely. The Father's forgiveness was real and unconditional. The Father even took upon himself the embarrassment of the village. Forgiveness was costly, but worth it!

Jesus continually teaches us the importance of forgiveness. In His model prayer, forgiveness is highlighted. In His teaching the disciples, forgiveness is urged as often as 70 times 7. One of Jesus' last earthly actions was to forgive the people who had betrayed Him and placed Him on the cross. Forgiveness is incredibly important to Jesus because forgiveness is basic to God the Father.

Have you done something in your life that needs forgiving? You cannot have done anything worse than the two sons in this story did to their father. One rebelled and broke every one of God's covenants. The other stayed home and self-righteously broke God's covenants as well. God stands ready to forgive you. You do not have to be all cleaned up. You do not have to have the right motive. All you need to do is come down the road towards your Good Father and God will do the rest.

Fathers and Mothers seeing beyond the pain and trouble that your children bring into your life is vitally important. You must see with God's eyes the potential and the possibilities that are alive within your children. No child is perfect! No child does everything right! But, every parent who follows God our Fathers example will learn to forgive, and forgive, and forgive. After all, God forgives you!

Father God Teaches About Abundant Life through Unconditional Love

The picture of God that Jesus provides us with in this story is a family example of the Greek word, *agape*. God's unconditional, no-strings-attached, self-giving love is essential to God's very being. God's love is more important than God's power.

God's power is subordinate to God's love. The world is subordinate to God's love. The world is a place that is beloved of God. Like creation, it is good, although terrible things happen in it for it is not perfect, it is not without pain, and the price of our freedom is to learn to cope with a world of ambiguity and danger, pain, joy, and opportunity. Through all of that, God relates to us out of God's love for us. The action of God, the act that counts, is love (Peter J. Gomes, Sermons: ***Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living***, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998, page178).

If you want to know the heart of God, then you will begin to learn to allow God's Spirit to move through you with unconditional love. You cannot love like God loves without God being present in your life. God is willing to love you and love through you. You must be willing to accept God's love and be a channel for God's love.

Being a Father who follows Jesus means being a father who is daily growing in the Good Father's kind of love. Jesus' picture of the Good Father is one who loves both sons even when they are totally unlovable! The Good Father engages with both sons out of love even when they reject him and his wisdom. The Good Father lovingly challenges both sons when they are totally self absorbed.

The Good Father is the picture of God our Father. And, because we can celebrate God as our Father who is love, we can say to God our Father -- Happy Father's Day, God.

Happy Father's Day, God!

In saying Happy Father's Day to God we commit ourselves to growing more like God in the way we live and the way we parent. You see, as we model our lives upon the good Father in Jesus' teachings, we grow to be more like God. And, as our children and our friends see God within us, they grow to be more like God. Human beings are basically imitators. What kind of model are you giving your children? God is giving you a wonderful model. Are you following it? Edgar A. Guest wrote a poem asking that very question. Take it to heart today!

Where Do Daddy's Footsteps Lead?

There are little eyes upon you, and they're watching night and day;
There are little ears that quickly take in every word you say;
There are little hands all eager to do everything you do;
And a little boy who's dreaming of the day he'll be like you.
You're the little fellow's idol; you're the wisest of the wise;
In his little mind, about you no suspicions ever rise;
He believes in you devoutly, holds that all you say and do
He will say and do in your way when he's grown up just like you.
There's a wide-eyed little fellow, who believes you're always right;
And his ears are always open, and he watches day and night;
You are setting an example every day in all you do,
For the little boy who's waiting to grow up to be like you.

Because you want to be the best father you can be. Because you believe that Jesus alone can teach you how to be more like your Good Father God make a commitment to accept God as your Father and to imitate the way God loves each and every person alive on our planet.

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