

## “THE BEST OF FATHERS”

It fits on Father's Day; we've come to the picture of God the Father in *The Parable of the Prodigal Son*. We're taking our time with this great chapter and its climactic story this summer, and we will most likely come back to some of the themes we've touched on already in the future. But today, our focus will be on the father in this story.

The Fatherhood of God is not, as many people think, just an analogy. It is not that God looked down upon humankind, saw that we had fathers, and said, "That's what I can use as an analogy to teach them what I am like. "I will tell them that I am like a perfect Father." "No," that gets it backward. God is the source of the very essence of Fatherhood. Embedded in one of the apostle Paul's great prayers, recorded in **Ephesians 3:14-15**, is the truth that all Fatherhood, the very idea of Fatherhood, derives from Him. God has been a Father from all eternity! Everything that Fatherhood at its best symbolizes, aspires to be and should be, but from which all Fatherhood falls short, He is, in perfection and always has been. Our father in heaven is the best of fathers.

The idea, the truth that God could have a relationship with us in which he is not only our creator but the perfect parent to us; attentive, wise, loving, thoughtful, available, always wanting the best for us and wisely providing for and guiding us in our growth, all of that can be incredibly meaningful for us whether we never knew our biological fathers or had very flawed and imperfect fathers. That's why Jesus continually teaches and talks to us about the care and compassion of our heavenly father.<sup>1</sup>

*We may come back to the theme of God as our Perfect Father before we're done this summer, but today we're looking at two truths about the Fatherhood of God that stand out in **Luke 15**. First...*

### **I. OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN OFFERS US AMAZING GRACE AND COMPASSION.**

The whole story is about this, but it's all captured in **verses 20-21**, *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* He truly was not worthy. He had treated his father horribly

and sins against him repeatedly. But when he returns, the father shows him extraordinary grace and compassion.

*It teaches us that...*

**A. The Father goes on loving us even when we have rejected His love in dramatic ways.**

***1. Our selfishness can fuel a kind of entitled thoughtlessness.***

Kenneth Bailey spent forty years living and working in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cyprus and is an acclaimed lecturer in Middle Eastern studies. He studied the parables of Jesus in light of the culture of the Middle East. When he writes about the prodigal son, He writes:

For over fifteen years, I have been asking people from all walks of life, from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan, about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same...the conversation runs as follows:

Has anyone ever made such a request in your village?

Never!

Could anyone ever make such a request?

Impossible!

If anyone did, what would happen?

His father would beat him, of course!

Why? The request means - he wants his father to die. The prodigal son's request was a heartless rejection of his father's love. He was saying I want what you can give me, but I don't want you.<sup>2</sup>

***2. We're all tempted to take the greatest love of all for granted.***

Jesus paints this picture for us not so that we can shake our heads in disgust at this ungrateful son but so that we can see something of ourselves in him. Sometimes the truth is we want what the father can give to us and do for us, but we don't care about God the Father Himself. We treat his love and our relationship with Him as if it were not very important, certainly not most important.

*The father goes on loving us even when we have rejected His love in dramatic ways. And...*

**B. The Father goes on loving us even when we have committed many sins and lost control of our lives.**

**Verse 13** says he "*squandered his property in reckless living.*" The word "reckless" literally means "out-of-control ."

*Do you know why he was out of control? Here's the irony.*

**1. Whenever you try to control your life by running away from God, you give control of your life to other things.** So you end up enslaved to all kinds of bad habits, drives, addictions, and obsessions. When that happens we, like the prodigal need to come to our senses.

**2. Repentance is not just feeling sorry for this violation or that violation-- it is seeing that you have rejected the father wholesale and run away from your relationship with Him.** Repentance is coming back to the father and saying: *"I've made a mess of my life, and I want to come back to you."*

*What do you find when you turn to God the Father that way?*

**C. The Father meets us with a compassionate and loving reception whenever we return to Him.**

**Verse 20:** *And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.*

**1. The love and compassion pictured here is beautiful.** The words here are significant and deliberate. The word *ran* is the technical word used for the footraces in the stadium. Paul uses this word when he talks about running the race. Baily draws the conclusion: "Thus we can translate the phrase: 'His father saw him had compassion and 'raced.'" He goes on in his observations on middle-eastern customs, "In the Middle East, a man of his age and position *always walks*. No villager over twenty-five runs, But the father races. To do so, he must gather up his robes. He throws concern for dignity aside... all of this is painfully shameful for him, but compassion moves him. The words *embraced* him are literally he fell on his neck. There is an intensity to this. The word *pipto* is *to fall*. This word is *epi**pipto* to fall on something, to throw yourself onto something, to pounce. The father fell on his neck. The word *kiss* is also an intensified word. It means to kiss fervently or to kiss repeatedly.<sup>3</sup>

**2. God doesn't just put up with us he races to welcome us when we come to him.** The whole chapter began with the religious leaders complaining because Jesus was welcoming sinners and eating with them. His reply is this story in which he offers no apology. He doesn't minimize the radical grace in the way he welcomes sinners or describes the Father. He doesn't say something like, *"Yes, these sinners are totally unappealing people. They don't take seriously their*

*sin or God's holiness or his wrath. Those truths are vital and I will have to impress that all on them. But, for now, shouldn't we just have pity on them and try to put up with them? Don't we have a duty to show some a little patience and charity? Can't you understand me trying to be put up with them?"* No, he's not the least bit apologetic. The picture he paints makes it clear he doesn't just put up with them. He, embodying the heart of God races to welcome them. *"Take that you Pharisees!"*

**3. The grace God offers us in Christ is so absolutely sublime that we can do nothing to earn or deserve it, we can only receive it and rest in it.** In his book *The Cross and the Prodigal*, Kenneth Baily says that most modern western interpretations of this story miss something. If you remember, when the son decides to go home, he seems to develop this whole plan he is going to pitch to his father as to how he can go to work and pay him back. He never gets those words out. Most western interpretations think the father cuts him off, but based on his time in the Middle East, Baily says that when he sees the father's emotion, pathos, and compassion, he is overwhelmed by the realization that the deepest wound he caused was not practical or financial but relational and emotional. It was not lost money but a wounded heart. Therefore there was nothing he could do to make up for what he had done. He can only allow himself to be embraced by grace.

**4. We are so not like this father.** When we are injured, we tend to stand on the porch and wait to see if the other person truly deserves our forgiveness. We tend to say things like, *"They started it,"* *"If they want to come to me, ok, I'll hear them out, but they're more to blame than I am."* What do we do with this picture of God the Father and of Jesus? When someone you truly love and care about hurts you. That hurts horribly and deeply. You never want to make yourself vulnerable again. You surely don't want to be vulnerable with that person unless you have a lot of reassurance that person has truly changed. Let's be careful here because there are abusive situations in which you must be careful. But hear what Jesus is saying about the compassion of God the Father.

**5. The love of God is real love and God is always loving.** Some people kiss and it doesn't mean anything. But there is nothing false or fake in God the Father. God is love. His love doesn't ebb and flow in response to circumstances or even our responses. The father didn't suddenly start loving the son when he saw him coming up the road. He had always loved him, but when the son came to him, the father was

able to express and the son to receive the love that had always been there.

The kiss is not only a picture of the father's love but of the father's joy! Sometimes we forgive people barely, begrudgingly, cautiously. God forgives freely and joyfully. This is a joyful father. *Our father in heaven offers us amazing grace and compassion.*

*The second thing this passage shows us is that...*

## **II. OUR FATHER GIVES US INCREDIBLE GIFTS OF GRACE AND HONOR.**

Look at **verses 21-24**: *And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'*<sup>22</sup> *But the Father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. <sup>23</sup> And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this, my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.'* And they began to celebrate. The best robe, the ring, and the sandals were all symbols of honor and position.

### **A. Almighty God opens his arms to heartless and hurtful sinners and says I will not only accept you, but I will also honor you.**

The Bible says when we turn to Christ as our Lord and trust in Him as our Savior we become the children of God. We are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. We don't stand before God in the torn and filthy clothes of our sins and our so-called good works. We are clothed with Christ and His righteousness. Do you understand that when God forgives you in Christ, he does not simply tolerate you, but He honors you to the highest position of love and affection in His heart and household?

In **John 17:23**, Jesus prays for us and says, *"I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me."* As God's repenting children, we are honored with the same love that God has for his "beloved Son," Jesus Christ.

J.I. Packer writes powerfully about our adoption into God's family. In His book *Knowing God*, He writes;

Sometimes like the prodigal in the parable, we may only find ourselves able to say, 'I have sinned ... I am not worthy to be called

Thy son; make me as one of Thy hired servants' (Luke 15:18 f.). But God receives us as sons, and loves us with the same steadfast affection with which He eternally loves His beloved only-begotten. There are no distinctions of affection in the divine family. We are all loved just as fully as Jesus is loved. It is like a fairy story the reigning monarch adopts waifs and strays to make princes and princesses of them but, praise God, it is not a fairy story: it is hard and solid fact, founded on the bedrock of free and sovereign grace. This, and nothing less than this, is what adoption means. No wonder that John says, 'Behold, what manner of love!' <sup>4</sup>

## **B. God gives his gifts of honor so that we can live as confident children of God.**

**1. Too often we live like orphans.** Rose Marie Miller was the wife of the well-known pastor and author Jack Miller. She tells about a time when everything seemed fall apart. They had been through one crisis after another. The physical and emotional pressures and demands began to wear away at her until she was overwhelmed. She was filled with anger, resentment, and guilt. One day she couldn't hold it in any longer. With tears running down her cheeks, she turned to her husband and said; "Why can't I cope?" She said Jack turned to her and said, "*Rose Marie, you act like an orphan. You act as if the Holy Spirit never came and could never help you through any impossible situation.*"

Listen to her response. She says;

I knew he was right. All I could say was, "O Lord, I am sorry, please teach me how to be a daughter ."In Uganda, I had seen lots of orphans. One had tried to steal my purse as we knelt to pray in the marketplace. They would kill almost as quickly as steal. Because they had no father to look after them, they made sure they took care of themselves: lying, cheating, stealing and deceiving to get along. I had been acting like them as if I had no father, as if I didn't have His authority, His power, His Spirit, His heart, and His ear.<sup>5</sup>

**2. Do you live more like an orphan or like one who has a Father in Heaven?** Jesus wants us to know we have a gracious heavenly father He doesn't promise to shelters us from all the struggles of life in a broken world. But he does promises his care and guidance will in the end bring good out of all things. His eyes are on you, his ears are attentive to your prayers. You are not an orphan or alone. In Christ you have him.

*Now, as we prepare for the Lord's Supper, there is something else we very much need to understand.*

**C. The gifts of grace we are offered by God come to us because of the sacrifice of Jesus.**

As Jesus tells this story, it should dawn on us that He is the one who makes it possible for us to receive the embrace of God.

**1. Earlier in the gospel of Luke, in Luke 9, Jesus foretold his sacrificial death and his resurrection from the dead.** For us to be embraced by God, someone has to bear the shame, and absorb the cost. That was all present in the heart of Jesus. As he tells this story, he clearly sees the shadow of the cross fall across his life and his listeners.

**2. Our sins create a debt we can never repay and a wound we can not heal.** *We can not make it right by any promises or improvements. But we can not do for ourselves Jesus did for us.* He bore the shame we deserve for us on the cross. He made the full payment to restore what we have lost and squandered. He left the father's side and came after us to reveal the father's unremitting love to rebellious and resentful children.

At the end of his earthly life he didn't get the fatted calf. He got vinegar on a sponge. He was stripped, and they cast lots for His robe. Jesus says the only way for you to be clothed in compassion and kindness is for me to be stripped. The only way for you to get the robe and the ring is for Jesus to give them up in sacrificial love. Because of God's great love, he did this for you so you can come home and be welcomed.

## **Conclusion**

Is there anyone here who needs to be reminded of the compassionate heart and welcome of God the Father and of Jesus our Savior who indwells us by his Holy Spirit?

Is there anyone here who finds the promise of new beginnings for even the most desperate and shameful appealing? Because of the compassion of God, the most lost, desperate, pathetic, and shameful of sinful people can have a new start, a new beginning, another chance.

There is always and forever a turning point in which you go back to the

father in humility and confession and find yourself embraced by love and compassion. He is the best father ever. Believing that matters. That's why Jesus told this story.

**Amen**

### **A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ**

Almighty God, Thank you for calling wayward people like me to see and receive your perfect righteousness in Christ. I confess I know, and you know that I have been sinful and stubborn and unrighteous. I have broken your laws, defied your will, and denied you your rightful place in my life. Thank you for a perfect Savior who lived the life I have not lived for me and suffered the judgment I deserve in my place. I believe Jesus died to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation.

### **A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal**

Almighty and gracious God, my creator, and redeemer, you are also the perfect and compassionate Father. Enable me by your Holy Spirit to live as your trusting and joyful child. So work by the power of your grace to reproduce in me a reflection of your strength and beauty. Help me to grow to be more trusting in you, grateful for you, strengthened by you, and as a result, more and more like you in every way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> J.I Packer talks in more depth about this in *Knowing God*, p. 204

<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *The Cross & The Prodigal*, p. 41

<sup>3</sup> Bailey, 67-70. I'm indebted to Bailey throughout this section.

<sup>4</sup> Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 216

<sup>5</sup> I took this quote from some notes I had on file and, unfortunately, have not had a chance to search out the reference for a proper footnote.