

God, the Father

Pastor Tim Melton

“The small boy had been consistently late for dinner. One particular day his parents had warned him to be on time or there would be consequences, but he arrived later than ever. He found his parents already seated at the table, about to start eating. Quickly he sat at his place, then noticed what was set before him –a slice of bread and a glass of water. There was silence as he sat staring at his plate, crushed. Suddenly he saw his father's hand reach over, pick up the son's plate and set it before himself. Then his dad put his own full plate in front of his son proceeding to eat nothing more than the bread and water. Now some of you may argue that the boy needed to experience the consequences of his disobedience, but here was the result. When the boy became a man, he said, "All my life I've known what God was like by what my father did that night."¹

This story shows how much the example of our earthly father helps or hinders our understanding of our heavenly father. Before we look further at “God as Father” we must understand the culture of Jesus' day.

In Jesus' day most people believed that God was very distant and unknowable. Among the Greeks there were two dominant beliefs concerning the gods. One was held by those known as the Stoics. They believed that the gods did not have the ability to feel any emotion. This came from the idea that if the gods could feel emotion then they could be hurt, and surely the gods cannot be hurt, so they must be emotionless, apathetic and indifferent.

The second dominant belief concerning the gods was held by a group known as the Epicureans. They believed that the gods were most characterized by perfect peace and tranquility. The Epicureans realized that the world was chaotic and often out of control. The gods would surely lose their tranquility and peace if they got involved in human affairs, so surely the gods must be distant, detached and uninvolved.

¹ *Homemade, May, 1989.*

Even the Jews of Jesus' day had grown to believe that God was very distant. He was definitely to be feared, but intimacy with God was a foreign concept. In the Jewish tradition the people felt that the name of God, "Yahweh," was so sacred and holy that a person had no right to even speak it out loud. Their perspective of a distant, almighty God, seemed to focus more on the God who had created the world, judged the world with the flood, parted the Red Sea and brought plagues. He was powerful and just, but also unapproachable.

It reminds me of walking in to a grand cathedral. The towering ceilings. The massive columns or structures. The ornate stain glass windows. Visually it speaks to the awesomeness of our God, but it doesn't fully speak to us about our Father God who draws us near.

It is into this cultural context that Jesus recited the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew 6 Jesus was asked by His disciples to teach them how to pray. In response, Jesus began with these words:

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name." Matthew 6:9

Jesus could have started His prayer many different ways, but He chose to use the term "Father".

Father . . . All-Sufficient Provider of our needs. Author of our existence; Authority over our lives; Protector; the One who finds joy in us and loves us unconditionally. Our Father . . . in heaven; Who sits on the throne. Who reigns and resides in the eternal, everlasting, all-knowing, all-seeing, sovereign, timeless place. Our Father in heaven. . . Hallowed be your name. Hallowed means holy, consecrated, sacred, unblemished, sanctified, pure and completely trustworthy. Hallowed is His name, which in scripture means hallowed is His character.

This is our Father God, who in Zephaniah 3:17 rejoices over us and even sings over us. He is our Father who has drawn us near, but He is not just any father. This heavenly Father is eternal, sovereign, Creator, Lord over all things. Because of His holiness and our sinfulness we have no right to enter His presence, but yet through Jesus Christ He calls us to *"come into His presence with confidence and receive grace and mercy in our time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16). As the Psalmist has written, *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"* (Psalm 8:4).

How is it that a God like this would invite us to draw near? But this is the truth of our heavenly Father that Jesus is presenting to us. In Mark 14:36 we even hear Jesus refer to God as *"Abba, Father"*. This would be the equivalent of calling God *"daddy or papá."* This type of intimacy with God would have been unheard of in Jesus' day, but Jesus knows the reality of God and calls us to pray to our Father who can be known intimately.

William Barclay illustrates this balance between sovereignty and intimacy in this story:

"There is an old Roman story which tells how a Roman Emperor was being honored after a victory at war. He had the privilege, which Rome gave to her great victors, of marching his troops through the streets of Rome, with all his captured trophies and his prisoners in his train. So the Emperor was on the march with his troops. The streets were lined with cheering people. The tall legionaries lined the streets' edges to keep the people in their places. At one point on the triumphal route there was a little platform

where the Empress and her family were sitting to watch the Emperor go by in all the pride of his triumph. On the platform with his mother there was the Emperor's youngest son, a little boy. As the Emperor came near the little boy jumped off the platform, burrowed through the crowd, tried to dodge between the legs of a legionary, and to run out on to the road to meet his father's chariot. The legionary stooped down and stopped him. He swung him up in his arms: 'You can't do that, boy,' he said. 'Don't you know who that is in the chariot? That's the Emperor. You can't run out to his chariot.' And the little lad laughed down. 'He may be your Emperor,' he said, 'but he's my father.'" That is exactly the way the Christian feels towards God. The might, and the majesty, and the power are of one whom Jesus taught us to call Our Father."

Luke 15:11-32 shows us the love of the Father. To better understand the story it would help if we understand the situation that Jesus was in when He told the story. The Bible tells us that Jesus was speaking to a group of people that were known publicly as bad or sinful people. These were the type of people who would have agreed that their lives were not good. At the same time standing nearby was a group of Pharisees. The Pharisees were the religious leaders who were very powerful.

Luke 15:1-2 says, *"Now the tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"*

So here we have Jesus Christ, the Son of God, sitting with and teaching people who were considered the worst of sinners, and standing not far away were the arrogant "super spiritual" religious leaders, listening and judging every word that Jesus said. This is the situation that Jesus was in when he told the following story.

Jesus told of a man with two sons. The younger son comes to his father and asks for his part of the inheritance. Now the inheritance was never given to the sons until the father died. So in the culture of that day it was the same as telling your father, "I wish you were dead." But instead of slapping the son or having him publicly whipped to save the Father and the family's honor, which would have been the normal response, the father grants the son's request. In the thinking of Jesus' listeners the father's actions would have been unthinkable.

In the Middle East culture, shame and honor are key. One avoids shame at all costs. This story was so extreme that the listeners are probably thinking that this story would never happen in real life. Jesus was describing unthinkable, shameful actions, so that the people would begin to grasp the unimaginable love of the Father.

The son then takes the money and goes to a distant country, where he wastes all the money on wild living. Eventually the money ran out and the son was left with nothing. A famine comes to that foreign land and the son is desperate to find food. He hires himself out to a citizen of that country and is sent out to the field to feed pigs, but no one gave him anything to eat.

The son, in a matter of months, spent all the money that had taken generations for his family to accumulate. How foolish this young man was. Such a disgrace, and it only got worse. For a Jewish person pigs were considered unclean animals. This would have been horrifying for the listeners that the son would have fallen to this point of desperation that he would even consider this type of work.

Finally the son “came to his senses” and made a plan. He would return to his father and beg to be made a servant, not a son. But even with this plan he was not being realistic. He had already taken and wasted more money than he could ever repay.

Dr. Kenneth Bailey, an Arabic and New Testament scholar who taught at seminaries in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus for 40 years, gives this interesting perspective. “Jesus' original audience would not have seen this as the turning point. For the first thousand years, the universal Arabic translation was not that ‘he had come to his senses’ but rather that the prodigal ‘returned to himself (*nepash*)’ or more specifically ‘he would depend on himself’. Up until this point the son had been living off of his father’s money. Now he was vowing to become a servant and to be self-sufficient. Had the son been repentant, Jesus would have used *Shub*, a Hebrew word meaning ‘return to God’. The son is going to pay-it-back himself. He will not become a slave, but rather a skilled craftsman so that he can restore himself. It is with this mindset that he returns to his village.”

Thinking he could go back as a servant and make things right would be the same as thinking you could pay back a billion euro debt with a minimum wage job. That kind of thinking doesn’t even make sense. A hired worker was the poorest of the poor. They were the ones who would gather in the city square each morning, hoping that someone would come buy and hire them for the day to do some odd job. Scripture even commands that hired workers be paid at the end of a day’s work, because that is the only way they would have money to buy food for their family. It is good that the son has realized that he has sinned against God and his father, but the belief that he could somehow make it right by his own efforts shows that he does not understand the size of his wrongdoing and the hopelessness of his efforts to make things right.

Nonetheless the son started his journey home. Because of the shame that he had brought on his family and the failure that he experienced financially, he was expecting to be ridiculed and ostracized by his community once he returned. That was part of the cultural punishment that was often received by people with grave misbehavior, but the father had other plans. Jesus described it with these words:

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him”.

If anyone should have been running, it should have been the boy. He should have been the one begging for the mercy of the father, but instead the father ran. In Middle Eastern culture that was shameful. Middle aged men were never to be seen running and showing their legs. But in this instance we see the father gladly taking shame upon himself so that his son will be shielded from it. Because of the father’s actions, the boy never experienced the punishment from the community. Instead . . .

“The father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.”

The son never even got a chance to present his idea of becoming a servant. The father immediately gave him son status by giving him the best robe, shoes, sandals, and the family ring that gave him full

authority as a son. The father even prepared a huge celebration for his son who had returned. That is how the Father feels about the sinful person who comes home.

The first part of the story was primarily given for the sinful people that Jesus was sitting with and teaching. It was a huge offer of mercy and grace and love to each one of them. But Jesus wasn't finished. This story was also being overheard by arrogant religious leaders who were standing at a distance. For them he continued the story.

Jesus told of the older brother who had never left home. He told how the older brother heard the celebration as he came home from working in the fields. He asked the reason for the celebration. When he found out it was for his rebellious brother who had now returned home, he was furious.

The older brother refused to join the celebration. His father came out to talk with him, but the older son just yelled at his father, reminding him about how good a son he was and how he had never received a party. There was no love in his heart for his brother or his father, only for himself.

This was Jesus' message for the religious leaders. Although the older son stayed nearer to the father geographically, his heart was farther from the father than the son who had left and now returned. This was true for Jesus' listeners that day. Jesus was surrounded by sinful people who were now coming close to God, and God was celebrating. But the religious leaders who appeared to be near God were really the ones who were farthest from Him and were the ones most displeasing to God. Their lack of love for others exposed their selfishness and godlessness.

This story applies to us all. All of us have at one point in our lives been distant from God. Some have publicly turned their back on God, while others have privately turned their back on God while still claiming to be near Him. Either way, God, like the father in the story, goes out to both types of people with open arms, if only we will return to Him.

This same unconditional love is offered to all those who will humble themselves before God and receive it. God demonstrated his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whosoever believes in Him will not perish but will inherit eternal life (John 3:16).

God the Father is loving, but don't forget that all good fathers also discipline their children. We find this clearly stated in Hebrews 12:5-7,11: *"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."* It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

God will use testing, trials and various predicaments to bring us back to Himself in repentance. The result of His discipline is a stronger faith and a renewed relationship with God (James 1:2-4), not to mention destroying the hold that particular sin had over us.

In Matthew 6:25-33 we also see the Father as our Provider:

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

We have now talked of the “Abba, Father God” who has drawn near, the loving Father who grants grace and mercy, the Father who disciplines, and the Father who provides for our every need.

Knowing these characteristics of God is important, because our understanding of God the Father affects how we live, how we obey and even how we pray.

Matthew 7:11 is a good picture of our heavenly Father who listens: *“If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!”* Do you believe that?

Think back to when you were children. Can you remember what your Father was like when you were that age? Can you remember a time when you really wanted something? Maybe a toy, or some candy, or going to spend time at a friend’s house. There were three kinds of requests that you probably had for your father. One was the kind that you knew there was no use asking, because you knew he would say “no”. You knew what kind of man he was, and what he didn’t want for your life. Another was the request to which he would say “yes,” because we knew what kind of man he was and what he did want for our lives. The third kind of requests were those where you had to come up with a strategy to get what you wanted. Maybe you would do something nice for him, or wait until he was putting you to bed, or maybe you even had to get your mother involved. But all of this was possible because you knew what kind of man your father was.

The same idea is true in prayer. Having a correct understanding of what God the Father is really like is one of the most important elements to prayer. When we ask something in His name, or in line with His character, He will answer. But how well do we know our heavenly Father?

In John 14:9 Jesus’ followers longed to know the Father and Jesus responded with these words, *“If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”* We see God the Father in Jesus’ life as He forgives the prostitute with dignity and grace. He weeps with the family and friends of Lazarus. He calls the children to Himself, He forgives His enemies, yet promises to bless those who love Him.

Jesus was completing the picture for us. God's power and holiness that had been so clear in the years past was now being coupled with the intimacy of God the Father that was seen in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. It was a picture of a God who pursues His people with a passionate and committed love. Don't miss the balance. He is definitely the Creator God who rules over all things, but He is also the Father God who desires that we draw near to Him in reverence in the midst of our desperate needs. For those who desire to know the Father, they can first begin by opening the pages of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and getting to know Jesus. "If you have seen Him you have seen the Father."

So much of the Christian life depends on our understanding of our heavenly Father. Our obedience is a result of our love for our heavenly Father. Our prayers depend on praying in agreement with the heart of the Father.

In closing I would like to share this story of the heart of a father . . . An older man tells a story of when he was a boy. He remembers that the circus was coming to town. Everyone in town was excited. There were posters all over the city and all the children in the school were talking about it. The day finally came and he and his father arrived at the circus early to get a good seat. The man tells that he and his father stood in line for a long time, waiting to buy tickets so that they could go in. He still remembers the family who was in front of them in line. The family had a lot of children. They were so well behaved. No fighting, no complaining, just standing there with all of their little eyes focused on the clowns, the elephants, and all the exciting things that they saw. From their clothes one could tell that they didn't have much money, but you could tell that their parents were doing a good job raising them. The father had probably saved a long time to be able to afford to bring his family to the circus.

Finally it was this family's turn to buy their tickets. Then this man and his father would finally be able to buy their tickets. The father of the big family proudly stepped up to the ticket booth and said, "I need 2 adult tickets and 6 children tickets." Immediately you could tell something was wrong. The father asked, "Excuse me, how much is it?" Once he heard the answer his face fell, he turned and looked at his wife and they both understood. They didn't have enough money. Even though they had worked hard, somehow they hadn't saved enough. How would they tell the children?

The man telling the story thinks back to that moment. "My father had been watching the whole situation. My father slowly reached into his pocket, pulled out 20 Euros and dropped it on the ground. He waited a moment and then politely said to the other father, "Excuse me sir, I think you dropped this." Their eyes met, they both understood what was happening, man to man, father to father.

The family bought their tickets and as they entered the circus their father looked back and said it all with a brief nod of the head and a silent thank you. It was now the father and son's turn to buy their tickets, but instead they turned and walked away. For that money that was given away was supposed to have paid for their tickets that day. The man ends the story by saying, "We didn't go to the circus that day, but on that day I truly began to understand the heart of my father, and in the years that followed I grew to love him even more." May that be true of us. May we begin to understand the heart of the Father, and may His presence in our lives change everything.