

“The Father of Fathers”

1 John 3:1

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“Fathers’ Day.”

What thoughts and maybe emotions are stirred within you as you think of your father?

Is he or was he a good father?

For many that relationship or memory is a pleasant one.

That is my own experience.

My father is still alive at 89 and he has always been a model for me and an absolutely certain source of love.

Without doubt the most important thing he says to me every time I talk to him is, “I love you Jerry and I’m praying for you.”

But for some others that relationship or memory is not a pleasant one and in fact for some it is painful.

For us who are fathers, “Fathers’ Day” not only stirs thoughts of our own fathers but also of **ourselves** as fathers.

What kind of father am **I**?

My experience is that young fathers typically think of themselves as pretty good fathers and certainly better than their fathers were.

But I sense that as years pass, they become less certain of that.

So both in regard to **our own** fathers and in regard to **our being** fathers, “Fathers’ Day” stirs many thoughts and emotions.

I realize that some of you men simply refuse to think or feel about such things.

You have thought about it in the past and the pain of the memories of your own father or the guilt of your own fathering was unresolved.

And not being masochistic, you just “don’t go there” anymore.

This morning, I’m not going to ask you to trot down memory lane, regardless of whether it was pleasant or painful in the past.

I want you to go with me somewhere else.

I want you to think with me about the Father of fathers – our heavenly Father.

I want us to reflect on the kind of Father he is that we would both experience his Fathering of us and that we would be more able to be that kind of father to our children.

I don’t intend to address the kind of **earthly father** you have or had beyond saying that our relationship with them requires gratitude or forgiveness or both.

It is often said, “A person’s understanding of God is shaped by the kind of father they have or had.”

That is not wrong.

But, I purpose to show you today that your earthly father is not the only father you have and that your understanding of what it means to father can be shaped most of all by your Father in heaven if you will look to him.

Author Alan Sell wrote, “All worthy fatherhood takes its cue from him (God).” Alan P.F. Sell, *God our Father*, 17

Theologian J.I. Packer wrote, “God has not left us to guess what his fatherhood amounts to by drawing analogies from human fatherhood. He revealed the full meaning of this relationship once and for all through our Lord Jesus Christ, his own incarnate Son.” J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 204

We have insight into the Fatherhood of God not from our fathers but from THE Father himself.

God does not want us to shape our understanding of fathering by looking at human fathers; he wants us to shape it by looking at him.

Most men will father in the way they have been fathered.

I believe that.

But the question is whom do you see and experience as your father.

I'm not pretending that our earthly fathers don't have importance and influence – they most certainly do.

But the point is that they are reflections (good or bad) of the Father of fathers.

If we are going to be good fathers, we should use the right model of fathering – our Father in heaven.

I also have no desire this morning to reflect on the kind of father you have been in the past.

Self-recrimination and wallowing in feelings of guilt or, worse yet, self-congratulations and wallowing in feelings of pride don't help.

Good news from God is that he is more interested in us being good fathers than we are.

And God doesn't just desire that we be good fathers, he does something about it.

We are not on our own to come up with the right stuff to be the father of the year – God works in us to be what he wants us to be.

Most importantly, He fathers us in the way he desires us to father.

As you are being fathered, so you will father.

And so I repeat: I want us to reflect on the kind of Father God is that we would both experience his Fathering of us and be more able to be that kind of father to our children, regardless of their age.

This idea of the fatherhood of God is not just theological semantics.

Someone wrote, "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his whole

outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.” (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 201)

Too many of us have made of Christianity only a doctrine to be believed rather than also a relationship to be lived.

And so God has become for us the One who is there but not **the Father who is here**.

To be sure, having our sins forgiven, having the guilt removed and the sentence of hell lifted are of foundational importance.

Romans 8:1 “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

That is a great truth and it is fundamental “gospel.”

But it is not the end of the story.

We aren’t just freed from eternal punishment.

We aren’t just saved from something.

We are saved too something, something so good.

Christianity is not just a legal issue but also a relational issue.

Freed from guilt and condemnation is not the same as being part of the Father’s family.

J.I. Packer wrote, “To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.” (Packer, *Knowing God*, 207)

Listen to the Bible:

1 John 3:1 “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

This translation leaves the first word out, the word “see,” “look” or “behold.”

“Look or stand in awe” of the great love the Father has lavished on us.

This is where I want to start in the description of the Fatherhood of God – His fathering of you men, He loves you!

Jesus said, John 16:27 “The Father Himself **loves** you...”

This is not generic love; this is not the love so often thought of when people say “God loves the whole world.”

No, instead this for you is the kind of love the Father has for Jesus.

That’s the point – we are individually loved by the Father the way Jesus is loved by the Father.

Consider that! The Father, God, loves you the way he loves Jesus.

That’s how personal his love is for you.

But there is a dimension of his love for us that is even more incredible than his love for Jesus.

Romans 5:8,10 “But God demonstrates his own **love for us** in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us... when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son”

We have a hard time not thinking that we must earn God’s love and also that we never will earn it.

We look at our deficiencies and failures and assume God sees them and looks on us with disfavor.

And then we further assume that we might be saved from hell, when we die, but for now we are on our own.

You remember the story of the prodigal son that Jesus told.

When the younger son finally decided to go home, do you remember what he planned to say?

Luke 15:18-19 “Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. (Thus far his statement is true.) I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.’ (False.)

He assumed his father’s actions would be based on his own actions.

The jealous **older** brother made the same assumption about the father but not because of failure but because of merit.

The older brother said in Luke 15:29 “Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours.”

In the context he is saying, I deserve your love.

Sinclair Ferguson has nailed it: “The guilt-ridden (prodigal son) was calculating on the basis of his **sin**, rather than on his father’s character.” (Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*, 48)

And I would add that the pride-ridden older brother was calculating on the basis of **merit** rather than on his father’s character.

But our heavenly Father gives his love to us based on need not based on merit.

Paraphrasing Ralph Venning “There is no reason to be given for love but love.”

We should stand amazed as in 1 John 3:1 “(Look, behold) How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!

But I don’t want you to only think of the Father’s love for you as great because it is undeserved.

We might be tempted to see the Father’s love as only a kind of hard, calculated, committed choice.

Instead we must see it for what it also is – deep affection.

I’ve asked the question other times: “Does God like you?”

The answer is “Yes, he does!”

He delights in you. (Jeremiah 31:20 among other passages)

We were created to live in fellowship with the Father.

Hear that please!

We weren’t created to be God’s little robots to get God’s work done.

We weren’t created just to accomplish something.

We were created to live in relationship with the Father and the Son and one another.

1 John 1:3 “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

What man doesn't long for a place where he is loved not because he produces but merely because he exists?

That's how God loves you!

In the OT “Yahweh” (Jehovah) was the covenant name God gave his people by which they could know him.

It emphasized his holiness, his otherness, and their need for mercy.

Throughout the OT the emphasis was most often on keeping the proper distance and showing the proper respect for God in his holiness.

But in the NT, with Jesus, we are given fuller understanding of our relationship with God; we may call this holy God OUR FATHER!

And the affection is so great that we may call him “Abba” – Daddy.

One of the privileges of adult manhood is always being the man.
One of the liabilities of adult manhood is always being the man.

As an aside, there are men who abdicate that responsibility and force their wives into the role of the man.

But wise is the man who retains the responsibility and looks to his heavenly Father to meet the demands.

What man is so foolish as to think he no longer needs a daddy?

“Abba,” that's the name we may now use to describe the Father who loves us in that affectionate and intimate way.

Abba – Father.

One writer tells of a friend living in another country who adopted a preschool child from that country.

The friend spoke of the months that passed after the child was adopted when he longed for a relationship with her but she was doubtful and reserved.

But one day she appeared beside where he was sitting and she held out a shoe and said, "Daddy, I need another shoelace."

They were the sweetest words he had ever heard from her lips. (Sinclair Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*, 90)

Imagine **our** Father's delight when we finally understand how much he loves us!

And not only that - a **loved** man will love his children.

I didn't say a loved man **ought** to love his children, I said he will love them.

A man will father the way he has been fathered.

But love is not only decision and emotion; it is also action.

How does the Father of fathers, your heavenly Father love you?

I have time to recall only three ways:

First, He provides for you.

I want to read to you a portion of Scripture with which you are quite familiar.

But I want you to hear it with "new ears."

We are tempted to hear it as scolding for worrying so much or as correction to attend to the right priorities in life.

I want you to hear it instead as the **promise** it is from a loving Father:

Matthew 6:25-33 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or

store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

^{MT 6:28} "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Just this week, I was handed a poem written by a man in our church who has known some of the hardships of life including broken relationships, death of loved ones, failing health and more.

Yet, listen to his testimony of the provision and faithfulness of his Father in heaven:

"The Lord's Hands"

by Fontaine LaRue

"Your hands touched me as a child
and you blessed me.

Your hands touched me when I was sick
and you healed me.

Your hands created miracles
that I might understand.

Your hands held mine to lead me
on a path to see your face.

Your hands were nailed to the cross
knowing of my sins.

Your arms were stretched upon the cross
reaching out your love.

But the same hands were freed from the cross
and on Easter morning from the grave.

Your hands reached from heaven and touched my soul
and draw me to my home.

Is there a Christian man here who would not testify to the faithful provision of God?

Oh, it hasn't always looked the way we thought it should.

We may not **yet** see how the Father will make good come out of what appears so wrong, but we have seen enough to believe his promise – Romans 8:28 “in all things God works for the good of those who love him...”

A man fathers as he has been fathered.

As we have been provided for so we provide for our children.

Not only does our heavenly Father provide for us but **he is also patient and forgiving.**

Men, let me ask you some questions:

- If God were only just, would you still be here?
- How long ago would God have been done with you?
- How many times in the past year, past month, would he have said “That’s it, it’s over?”

Is the Father’s patience with you because he doesn’t know what to do or doesn’t have the ability to stop you? NO!

The Father’s patience is not weakness but it is true patience – his willingness to be ignored, harmed, and otherwise dishonored that we might yet come to repentance and greater faith.

And forgiveness?

- How many times have we come to Him asking forgiveness?
- How many times has he forgiven us even when we have not known enough to ask for it?
- How many times has he withheld his judgment even when we stubbornly refused to change?

I know a man who has disowned his son because of his son’s sin.
How can that be?

Our Father does not give up on his own:

Hosea 11:8

“How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.

2 Timothy 2:13 “If we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself.

The Father will never give up on you – he cannot disown **himself**,
and you are now His.

A man fathers as he has been fathered – patience and forgiveness.

I will mention just one more way that the Father demonstrates his
love for us.

He disciplines us.

There is a huge difference between discipline and punishment.

Isaiah 53:5 “The **punishment** that brought us peace was upon
(Christ)” at the Cross.

Please listen to yet another familiar passage of Scripture but again
hear it with new ears –

Hebrews 12:7-11 “Endure hardship as **discipline**; God is treating you
as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸ If you are not
disciplined...then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹
Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we
respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the
Father of our spirits and live!... God disciplines us for our good that
we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the
time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of
righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”

We too often view hardship as an expression of God's **disfavor** instead of an expression of his **affection**, His deep and abiding love.

Hardship is not God's way of punishing us; it is the Father's loving way of shaping us.

Proverbs 13:24 "He who spares the rod hates his son,
but he who loves him is careful to discipline him.

Every good father knows that truth.

Our heavenly Father doesn't punish us but he disciplines us in love.

Your heavenly Father loves you with deep affection and in that love he provides for you, is patient with you – forgiving you, and disciplines you.

A man fathers as he has been fathered.

1 John 3:1 Look "how great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!"

What's your last name?

"Ben" is Hebrew for "son of."

And so Hebrew names are often given as Jacob ben-Ammi;
Joseph ben-Jamin, or even in our day, David ben-Gurion.

Sinclair Ferguson wrote, "God is **my Father** (the Christian's self-image always begins with the knowledge of God and who He is!); I am one of **His** children (I know my real identity); His people are my brothers and sisters (I recognize the family to which I belong)." (Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Children of the Living God*, 18)

To be faithful to the greatest reality of my identity, my name should be listed as Jerry Nelson ben Abba.

Corny as it is, are you willing, even in your own mind, to give yourself the name of your Father in heaven?

I close with the opening words of the hymn we sang earlier:

Abba, Father! we approach You
in our Savior's precious name:
We, Your children, here assembling,
now the promised blessing claim.
From our sins His blood has washed us;
'tis through Him our souls draw nigh;
And Your Spirit, too, has taught us,
'Abba, Father,' thus to cry. James George Deck's hymn "Abba, Father, We approach Thee"

Happy Fathers' Day!

Other notes:

“If the love of a father will not make a child delight in him, what will?”

John Owen 1616-1683

How sad that the term “love child” is defined as one born out of an illegitimate relationship.

Just as illegitimate sex is often referred to as “making love.”

Oh, that every child was a true love child, the product of committed love and the object of faithful love.

We are the product of God’s love and the object of his love.

Don’t allow your rightful relationship with God to be made common by believing that all people are the children of God.

Yes, the same God is the source of all created beings but Israel was unique among all the nations of the world – she was God’s child.

The NT likewise declares with certainty and importance that all who put their trust in Christ are children of God – a new, unique and very important distinction.

So to us men who are trusting in Christ as saving-Lord of our lives, we are sons of our Father-God.

John 1:12-13 “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Adoption: Westminster Confession of Faith:

“All those that are justified, God (graciously granted), in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption: by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God; have his name put upon them; receive the Spirit of adoption; have access to the throne of grace with boldness; are enabled to cry, Abba, Father; are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by his as by a father; yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation.” (Chapter 12)

“Adoption is not a change in nature but a change in status.”

New birth changes our nature but adoption is what God declares.

And the declaration is possible because of the high cost of forgiveness and reconciliation – Christ’s death.

“Infinite grace! And can it be
That heaven’s Supreme should stoop so low?
To visit one so vile as me –
One who has been his bitt’rest foe?

Can holiness and wisdom join
With truth, with justice and with grace,
To make eternal blessings mine,
And sin with all its guilt erase?

O love! Beyond conception great
That formed the vast stupendous plan!
Where all divine perfections meet
To reconcile rebellious man!

There wisdom shines in fullest blaze,
And justice all her rights maintains,
Astonished angels stoop to gaze,
While mercy o’er the guilty reigns.

Yes, mercy reigns and justice too,
In Christ they both harmonious meet;
He paid to justice all her due,
And now he fills the mercy-seat.

We have become Christ’s brothers Hebrews 2:11 “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

“We are making the bold claim that he who framed the universe, who established the heavens, who set the rivers in their courses, he is our Father!” Alan P.F. Sell, *God our Father*, 15

Matthew Henry: “He is not only, as Father, willing to help us, but as a heavenly Father, able to help us...He is a Father, and therefore we

may come to him with boldness, but a Father in heaven, and therefore we must come with reverence.” (In Sell, *God our Father*, 18)

See two hymns that speak so well to the issue of the Fatherhood of God:

Horatius Bonar’s hymn “O Love of God, How strong and true...”
(Words on p 13-14 in Sell *God our Father*)

O LOVE OF GOD

O love of God!

How strong and true,

Eternal and yet ever new; Uncomprehended and unbought

Beyond all knowledge and all thought

O love of God, how deep and great!

Far deeper than man’s deep hate;

self-fed, self-kindled, like the light,

changeless, eternal, infinite.

O wide-embracing, wondrous love,

We read Thee in the earth below,

In seas that swell and streams that flow.

We read Thee best in Him who came

to bear for us the cross of shame,

sent by the Father from on high,

our life to live, our death to die.

We read Thy power to bless and save

e’en in the darkness of the grave;

Still more in resurrection light we read the fullness of Thy might.

O love of God, our shield and stay

through all the perils of our way;

eternal love, in Thee we rest, for ever safe, for ever blest!

James George Deck’s hymn “Abba, Father, We approach Thee”
(words on p 26 of Sell, *God our Father*)

ABBA FATHER

*Abba, Father! we approach Thee
 in our Savior's precious name:
 We, Thy children, here assembling,
 now the promised blessing claim.
 From our sins His blood hath washed us;
 'tis through Him our souls draw nigh;
 And Thy Spirit, too, has taught us,
 'Abba, Father,' thus to cry.*

*Once as prodigals we wandered,
 in our folly, far from Thee;
 but Thy grace o'er sin abounding,
 rescued us from misery.
 Thou Thy prodigals hast pardoned,
 loved us with a Father's love;
 welcomed us with joy o'erflowing,
 e'en to dwell with Thee above.*

*Clothed in garments of salvation,
 at Thy table is our place;
 We rejoice, and Thou rejoicest
 in the riches of Thy grace.
 It is meet, we hear Thee saying,
 we should merry be and glad,
 I have found my once lost children,
 now thy live, who once were dead.*

*Abba, Father! all adore Thee,
 all rejoice in heaven above;
 while in us they learn the wonders
 of Thy wisdom, grace, and love.
 Soon before Thy throne assembled,
 all Thy children shall proclaim,
 Glory, everlasting glory,
 be to God and to the Lamb!*

On the fathering of our children:

Charles Spurgeon: "A good character is the best
tombstone...So carve your name on hearts and not on marble."