

# Like a Loving Father

sermon digest

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Luke 15:11-24

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Like many Christian churches, we pray together on Sunday mornings the prayer attributed to the teaching of Jesus, “The Lord’s Prayer,” commonly called the “Our Father,” in Latin, *Pater Noster*. Father is a word of reverence, respect, and intimacy that gathers up both the authority and compassion we associate with God. Addressing God as Father was found in Judaism long before the time of Jesus. Deuteronomy 32:6 inquires of God’s people: “Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?” In the patriarchal society, father was both the primary figure in the intimate community of family and the symbol of authority to whom children, servants, and wives must pay absolute respect and undivided loyalty. In the Eastern culture, the father often involved maternal dimensions of tenderness and affection as well as authority and control.

While *father* was a natural word for the role of God in life drawn from a common family experience, it was never more than a symbol to aid human understanding. Obviously some fathers would not have been good models for understanding God, and no thoughtful Jew reduced God to the level of male physiology expanding the human population through sexual prowess. Paternal references for God are found in the Old Testament, but they are neither central nor common.

But the image of fatherhood for God literally explodes in the Gospels in the teachings of Jesus. Joachim Jeremias counts 170 instances where Jesus uses the word *Father* for God in the Gospels (*The Prayers of Jesus*, p. 29ff). The most obvious reason points to the Christian confession of Jesus as Son of God, which both Matthew and Luke elaborate in the conception and birth narratives. But Jeremias points to a completely unique reference to God as Father in the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36); Jesus prayed, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible.” *Abba* was the Aramaic word for father associated with intimate family ties and the child’s word *Daddy*, “dear father.” Jeremias (*The Lord’s Prayer*, p. 19ff) contends: “No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner. Jesus did it always, in all his prayers which are handed down to us, with one single exception, the cry from the cross.”

Infants tend to find a word for the parent that often becomes unique to the family. Often the first words for infants are “dada” and “mama.” Papa is common with people of European descent. If, as a child, I had addressed my dad as “father,” he would have thought I was joking. In my childhood, he was Daddy, which was shortened to Dad as I grew to adulthood, but the formal word *father* never fit into our intimate informality as family. The tradition has been passed on to my children and to their children. I suspect that most of us have reflected in our choice of words our close relationship with our parents.

According to Jeremias, daddy is the exact meaning of *Abba*. Whereas the formal *pater* (father) is more common in the Gospels, Jeremias believes that the “very word” of Jesus was *Abba*, expressing a familiarity with God that we tend to avoid in our prayer language. Outside of the prayer of Jesus in Gethsemane, only Paul addresses God as *Abba* in the New Testament: “because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:6); “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God (Romans 8:15-16).” With Paul, addressing God as *Abba* was a door which Christ had opened for Gentile Christians, a door of intimacy that could only be expressed as a family tie.

***The Paternal image for God is pure grace.*** Jeremias may have overstated his case. It is connected only to three passages in the entire New Testament. But the picture of a loving father is clearly anchored in the Gospels. The parable in Luke, commonly known as “The Prodigal Son,” is perhaps the best-known story in the New Testament, nearly as familiar to secular people as it is for Christians. Fred Craddock observed the negative tendency in the human mind in our reading of Luke 15. He wondered why we focus on the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Why not the found sheep, the found coin, and the found son? In *The Parables of Jesus* (p 128), Jeremias takes issue with the title “Prodigal Son” and prefers the title “The Parable of the Father’s Love.” Others have noted that the story is about a man who had two sons (v. 11), not just a bad boy.

But the story is just that, a story. It is not an allegory where each character represents someone or something else. It has been called a story drawn from life rather than a farfetched, hypothetical fantasy. The reason why the story has stuck in the human imagination down through the centuries is that persons in every age and culture have been able to see themselves reflected in the story. Most of us see ourselves in the immature and self-centered son we call the prodigal. From the son’s viewpoint the quotation

attributed to Mark Twain becomes real: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years."

All you have to do is add the other facets of the story in the parable: the son's demand for his inheritance in advance, essentially saying to his father, "I wish you were dead"; squandered wealth; a famine leading to the humiliating job of a swineherd, wanting to eat the pig's food; hunger that sobers and creates a new self-understanding; and finally the realization that Dad may not be as dumb as he thought, that even servants at home are better off than he.

If we are prone to identify ourselves with the wayward son, we need to look at the connection to Jesus' ministry that led to the lost-and-found stories. Jesus was accused of cavorting with sinners and eating with them. "Lost" might be related to the ignorant sheep, a careless woman, or a willful son; but one is found through the care of a good shepherd, the persistence of a woman in need of the coin, or the forgiving grace of a loving father. Without question this is a crescendo of parables, with each story getting closer to the point and nearer to the paternal image of God that Jesus proclaimed.

Anyone of maturity and love for his/her children could have heard that story and found another mirror in the behavior of the father. Yes, I would set aside my authority to welcome a lost son home. Yes, I would break tradition for an old man and run toward him. Yes, I would violate the rule of justice that would attack his ego, set limits on his access to food and clothing, and make sure that he works for everything he receives for the rest of his life. Without concern for myself or balancing the scales of justice, I would embrace my son, put shoes on his feet and a coat on his back, and call for a community celebration. Like the loving father, I would probably say, "to hell with the cultural expectations and the gossip of neighbors! My love for my son is greater than my authority."

Jesus was saying, "God is like that! Much more like the loving father than like the purist Pharisees and Scribes!"

***The paternal image of God is worthy of imitation.*** The story is repeated almost daily in American life. The son may not be able to find the father; he may be anywhere but home. If found, the father too often meets the son with apathy rather than redemptive love. The time has come to rethink the common wisdom that a real man is measured by the weight he lifts or the height he stands so much as by the depth and persistence of grace in his character.

I hit the stump in my university years. I had a loving father. He was far from perfect, and I was often critical of his shortcomings. As I grew into adulthood my relationship with Dad took on more of a peer quality. I began to respect who my father had become in spite of his mother's death in his infancy and his absent, apathetic father. I came to the Mark Twain conclusion: my, how he had grown. But I had friends who did not share my experience. The last person on earth with whom they would want to associate the image of God was their particular fathers.

In 1995 David Blankenhorn wrote *Fatherless American: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* cites a trend toward becoming a fatherless society. I recall a conversation with Jerre and Lois Vandagriff about the time Blankenhorn's book was written. They were elementary school teachers. I asked about their experience of change in the Oak Ridge families. They underscored Blankenhorn's observation that the traditional, nuclear family is disappearing from American life. I distinctly recall hearing Lois note that more than half of her children were in a single-parent home. Usually the step-parent situation was a step up. The mother-father-child common to the 1950's had become the minority family.

Blankenhorn notes that children from families where the mother has a live-in male friend are far more likely to suffer from abuse and neglect. From 1979-1987 about 57,000 women were violently assaulted by husbands, while 200,000 were assaulted by boyfriends and ex-husbands. But the most tangible consequence of a the fatherless home is the loss of economic resources. Thirty-five percent of single mother homes were below the poverty line in 1994, probably much higher now. The children are more likely to drop out of school, boys are more likely to resort to violent criminal behavior, and girls are more likely to become pregnant.

I love the keen eye of Barbara Brown Taylor's biblical interpretation. When she was serving as Rector of an Episcopal Church in Clarkesville, Georgia, preaching every Sunday, her sermon on today's parable was called "The Parable of the Dysfunctional Family." Her point well-taken was that the audience would have heard Jesus' parable much like we read Blankenhorn's book on a fatherless society. The younger son breaks all of the rules for Jewish family life and fully deserves to be treated like the disrespectful,

self-centered adolescent he is. However, the family patriarch also is guilty of breaking the rules governing the discipline of a well-ordered home (society). He was too soft on misbehavior, undignified as an elder patriarch, and far too quick to forgive.

We can complain all we want about trends and behaviors; the truth is, all of us live in and come from homes that are dysfunctional in some way. We are not likely to justly claim a perfectly ordered family, but we desperately need to be forgiving people in a world starving for love. Most of us have learned by now that parents are not by virtue of their role paragons of perfection, who always know what is best for the family or for their children. Somehow grace always flows best from the one who has known grace on the receiving end. 1 John 4:19 declares, "We love because he first loved us."

Augustine perceived the paradox of sovereignty and grace in the nature of God and acknowledged that God demands more than we are capable of being or doing, but the God of grace always gives what God demands. In light of the loving father in the parable of Jesus, I can no longer pray "Our Father" as a mere formality of address. Jesus intended for all of us to know God as a reflection of the very best experiences we can imagine with a forgiving, loving parent.