

# GOD'S FATHER-HEART

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The kingdom of this world is a kingdom of rejection. The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of unconditional love. God's promises are conditional, and we must obey Him to see His blessings, but His love is unconditional.

From childhood, we are constantly reminded of the importance of things—their value, and how to care for them. Too seldom do we hear the simple words, “I love *you*.”

We use people to get things; God uses things to bless people. Please don't forget this: You are more important for who you are than for what you do.

Jesus was assailed by the religious leaders of His time because various kinds of sinners (a broad term for those who had insufficient or no interest in “religion”) were coming to Him and welcoming Him. They liked Jesus. And that's one of the great things we may discover about Jesus. He doesn't demonstrate “religion”; He shows people the heart and love of Father God, and their response to that is overwhelmingly positive: “I didn't know *this* is what it's about!”

Luke, who wrote the third Gospel narrative of Jesus' life and ministry, considered himself an historian, careful about facts and chronology. But he was also a story-teller, enchanted by the rich parables that Jesus taught.

In the fifteenth chapter, he shared three of Jesus' parables which were linked by a common theme.

The first was the story of a shepherd, who found when it was time to return to the sheepfold that one of his one hundred sheep was missing. This one-percent loss was not insignificant to him. He left the ninety-nine sheep in place, while he searched *until he found* the one that had wandered away.

The second was the story of a woman who had lost one of ten coins. Scholars surmise that these ten coins were her dowry and, thus, her ten-percent loss was no small hurt. It would be like losing your diamond engagement ring. She swept the entire house, searching for the coin *until she found* it.

Each of these stories concludes with a comparative reference to the joyous celebration that takes place in Heaven when a single sinner repents and turns to God. The third story doesn't comment, but instead describes the celebration party.

On the surface, the third story is about two brothers, and is commonly known by a reference to the younger as the “prodigal” son, a word that means wastefully extravagant. But a closer look at the three parables together reveals that the central character in this third story is neither of the young men, but their father, who, like the woman and the shepherd before him, longed for what was lost (his younger son) and celebrated its return.

The commentary in the first two stories shows us that Heaven’s (and therefore, God’s) value of and desire for a single sinner is extreme, illustrated by these two extraordinary searches. The third story personifies God’s interest in the father. This is an important transition, lest we think only angels are excited by our repentance or that Heaven’s joy is somehow impersonal.

God is a Father. He is the Father of all fathers. We discover what fatherhood is to be by observing what Jesus revealed about God’s relationship to sinners. After all, we all know by having been one, and some of us by having had some, that *all children are sinners*.

Whether well-guided or not, we parents have spent years trying to train it out of our children—sometimes merely to relieve our frustration or embarrassment, but other times, because we know it is best for them and the world around them. This is remarkable dedication!

Why don’t we give up our search for the perfect child? Why don’t we quit sooner and more often?

I think it’s because we have been made in the image of God, and part of that celestial DNA is the passion to find and restore what has been lost, *no matter what it costs*.

There's nothing syrupy about God's love; it's dynamic and powerful and persistent. It's deep and demanding and determined. He will not let sin go by unattended, for He knows it’s a destroyer. He loves and receives you just as you are, but He loves you too much to let you remain in that condition.

Let’s read the first part of the story this morning, and then I’ll offer four comments about it (with thanks to Pastor Jack Hayford).

Here is the parable of the Father’s heart:

Luke 15:11-24

<sup>11</sup> To illustrate [His] point further, Jesus told them this story: “A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son told his father, ‘I want my share of your estate now before you die.’ So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

<sup>13</sup> “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. <sup>14</sup> About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup> He persuaded a local farmer to hire him,

*and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs.<sup>16</sup> The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.*

*<sup>17</sup> “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger!<sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you,<sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.” ’*

*<sup>20</sup> “So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.*

*<sup>21</sup> His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’*

*<sup>22</sup> “But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.<sup>23</sup> And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast,<sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.*

In this parable, Jesus reveals four things about Father God that speak to their (and our) sense of unworthiness, failure, and distance from Him.

### **Father God Never Loses Hope**

Did you have parents who were warm, supportive, and encouraging—parents who had hope for you? Some didn't. Some had parents whose expectations could never be satisfactorily met, and others even had parents who wished their children had never been born—kids pick up that sense of rejection.

What's impressive about this story is that the younger son betrayed everything his father had hoped for, and wasted his wealth, and still the father still didn't lose hope for him! Meanwhile, the second son undervalued all that the father had given him and ignored his kindness, but the father still valued him!

As the younger son made his way home, broken and humbled by his own ways, he could not know or even expect that his father would be still watching for him, longing for his return. In fact, he could not know that “return” was even possible for the likes of him.

Before the son could fully return, the father ran to embrace him and kiss him and welcome him home!

This is the message of Father God's hope for us. Notwithstanding anything you or I have done or failed to do, God doesn't give up caring about us and desiring us to be with Him, nor does He ever lose His vision for what our life can become. His love for you is relentless.

## **Father God is Always Looking Our Way**

Regardless of what we may tell ourselves, many people *feel* as though God is looking for a chance to spear us with a bolt of lightning for some minor offense. If you or I feel that, it's because of our own sense of shame and guilt for what we've done or neglected to do. That guilt may be justified, but it isn't God's attitude toward us; it's our own sense of alienation because of our sin. It doesn't represent God's heart.

God is not passive about the fact that we've sinned. That's why Jesus was sent to die. Sin has to be dealt with. We need to repent of it, as this son was prepared to do.

Yet there was his father, as earnest as the day the boy left him, watching from the porch for his son to return. And though the son's bearing was broken by his lifestyle, to his father's eye his gait was recognizable, even from a great distance. Jesus tells us that God, like that boy's father, is always looking our way and reaching out to us. When we stray, He always longs for our return.

He didn't just stand and wait for the boy to come crawling to him. He demanded no apology. Instead, the father ran to his son with a hug and a kiss... and a robe and a ring and new shoes.

God is looking for you today, whether it's the first time or the ten thousandth time that you've approached Him, to show your face (which He loves) and to speak His name (which melts His heart). He's always there, waiting for you, delighting in you, and ready to celebrate with you.

## **God's Father-heart Responds to Repentance**

The son comes with repentance, and the father's heart responds. Don't miss this. This cannot be bypassed. Not because he's demanding that his son grovel for acceptance, but because he's glad the son has come to recognize that the problems he's had are his own and not his father's fault.

How often have you heard people say, "If there is a God, and He is loving, why did this happen to me?" God gets blamed (consciously or subconsciously) for everything for which we don't want to accept responsibility. But listen: When the prodigal son comes back, he said, "Father, I've sinned against heaven and in your sight."

Repentance is turning away from our own way to God's way. A repentant person recognizes that the Lord's ways are right, good, safe, and secure for us. As we align our intentions and our actions with the Lord's, it opens the door for Him to release all kinds of possibilities into our lives. He loves us with an everlasting love, unconditionally. But in order for Him to release the blessings that He has purposed for us, we have to be willing to say, "Father God, I turn from my own way to Yours."

My repentance says that my hands are empty—I'm not clinging to my own ways or my own righteousness—and I am able to receive what God has for me.

### **Father God Wants to Reinstall us.**

And when the son did that, look what happened. The father's response was over the top! He met his son with a hug, a kiss, a robe, a ring, new shoes, the fattened calf, and a party—complete reinstatement to the family's security, authority, and wealth! Similarly, God's gifts are abundant. *"He is able to do abundantly above all that we could ask or imagine"* (Ephesians 3:20).

The ring represents reinstatement to partnership with the father. It was his return to being "in business with Dad." And God is saying, through the lips of His own Son, Jesus, "If you'll come back to Me, I will reinstall the possibilities I had in mind for you," just as the father was going to re-enfranchise his son in the family business.

The robe over his shoulders reached all the way down to the son's ankles. It was a robe of dignity. It was the father covering whatever would be the shame or nakedness or uncleanness of the past. Our Father God desires to restore us to full stature, to robe us with the beauty of what we were made to be.

In that ancient culture, shoes, which protected feet from the unpaved roads and trails, represented wealth and privilege. When mourning and praying, shoes, if they wore them, were removed from the feet as a sign of humility. Putting them on again meant that the time of weeping and mourning was now past.

The prime beef and the party, I think you already understand.

1 John 2:28-3:1

<sup>28</sup> *And now, dear children, remain in fellowship with Christ so that when he returns, you will be full of courage and not shrink back from him in shame.*

<sup>29</sup> *Since we know that Christ is righteous, we also know that all who do what is right are God's children.*

<sup>3:1</sup> *See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are!*

We say, "I found the Lord," but the truth is, He found us. *He pursues us with a forgiving heart.*

You have forgotten most of your pains, but God has not. Your tears are still mingled with His at this very moment, as He stores them in a bottle.

You don't have to *get* His attention, He's already listening. Don't worry about taking His time... it's all yours.

He's your real Father, and always will be. Don't resent the failings of your human parents. They are just kids that grew up and had kids. Rather rejoice in the wonderful love of God your Heavenly and Eternal Father.

Corrie ten Boom had some simple advice to offer us all with respect to God's father-heart: "Don't wrestle... *nestle*."

*Zephaniah 3:17*

*He will take delight in you with gladness. With his love, he will calm all your fears. He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.*