

## A Father's Love

*Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name."* Matthew 6:9

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father, through His Son, Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I grew up in Warren, Michigan back in the '60s and early '70s. The neighborhood was filled with families that looked a lot like the TV show, "The Brady Bunch," and there kids everywhere. As a boy I spent lots of time with the other boys, playing baseball, exploring the pond and the open fields, doing Evil Knievel- type jumps on our bikes. It was a young boy's dream. I don't remember watching much TV when I was a kid because even when you sat down to rest or to eat, someone was knocking at the door asking if you could come out and play.

There were enough kids on our street that we had groups – not gangs – but groups. I went to the Lutheran elementary school and my friends all went to the Catholic school. And there was one group you didn't want to mess with. They were older, smoked cigarettes, drank beer, and they had reputations of getting in trouble with the law.

One summer night, I and my group of friends were sitting on the front lawn of my house, by the sidewalk, talking about baseball and trying to act tough – like boys do. When out of nowhere two of the big, bad kids showed up. The biggest kid John had the worst reputation and John accused my friend Ken of stealing something of his. I think he accused Ken of stealing the beer that John hid out in the field. Ken denied it, but John wasn't taking no for an answer. He kneeled across Ken's chest. I was laying in the grass beside Ken, when he started to say he couldn't breathe. "Get off me, I can't breathe," my friend squeaked out as I saw him start to turn white. John, the big bad kid stayed kneeling across Ken's chest, a knee right by Ken's air way. My friend started to turn blue. Now I was really panicking. I started to scream for John to get off him, but he didn't move. My adrenaline started rushing. I was truly afraid for

my friend Ken. I don't remember when I jumped to my feet and tried to push the big kid off of my friend. The next thing I remember was the other big kid, who had been just standing by, he spun me around to face him. Placed his lit cigarette in his mouth, and then, he began landing punches on my face and head. He was obviously experienced at fighting. I obviously was not. I just pulled my arms up to protect my face, but he got on top of me and just kept punching my face – over and over and over again. I saw stars. My nose was bleeding. I got beaten but – bad.

The next thing I remember I was laying on the couch in my parents' family room. I had an ice pack on my face. My parents and my friends parents were standing over me looking down at me. That was unusual because the parents had never met before. Grown-ups stayed out of neighborhood kids' stuff. But this time my dad walked down the street to the home where the boy who beat me up lived. Dad wasn't a muscular guy. He couldn't threaten anyone by his size. Dad was an accountant, but smart and wise. I don't know what he said to those parents. But what I do know is that those big kids never came around me or my group of friends ever again. My friends and I were never again threatened by them.

In his own way, my dad showed strength and protected me from being hurt again. That day I learned something very important. I learned that how good it is to have a father's protecting, caring love.

Today is Father's Day, and people are celebrating fathers like my dad today. Now, Father's Day doesn't get quite the attention that Mother's Day does, but both days are very important for our families and for our society. Dads, you are more important than ever today, no matter what today's TV shows say. You are needed as engaged dads for your kids and as loving husbands to your wives. For that reason, I'm a big fan of Father's Day.

I'm also a big fan of observing Fathers' Day for another reason -- an even more important reason. As a pastor, Father's Day not only causes me to remember the fatherly love of my dad, it more

importantly calls me and all of us to receive and reflect the love of God, our heavenly Father.

God, of course, isn't a man or a woman. God tells us about Himself in the Bible, and there we learn that God is a very real personal being. He loves you, made you, knows you better than you know yourself. There are some churches where they change out the word "Father" when talking about God and instead use words like "Mother," "Creator," or "Divine Spirit." But God chose to use the word "Father" to describe His relationship to us and His love for us. So, we here use the words He has given us.

It is Jesus who taught us to pray: ***"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name."*** The whole Christian church on earth has for centuries confessed in the Creeds **"I believe in God the Father, Almighty, maker of heaven and earth."**

It's important as fathers, mothers, married people, single people, children, friends, all of us -- to realize that the health and healing needed in *ALL* of our relationships must first come from a right relationship with God the Father. It's important for us to know what He expects of us. It's even more important for us to know that our Heavenly Father is *for* us. Because of His Son, Jesus Christ, each of us can know "It's good to have our heavenly Father's love in our lives!"

Our relationship with our earthly father changes over time. There's a natural progression of the importance of dads in our lives. There are times when we celebrate them, times when we challenge them, times when we ask for their forgiveness, and times when we finally realize the importance of their love for us.

There was a newspaper column by Ann Landers about dads. She said her relationship with her own dad changed in this way:

**"My Father..... When I Was**

**Age 4: My daddy can do anything.**

**Age 5: My daddy knows a whole lot.**

**Age 8: My dad doesn't exactly know everything.**

**Age 14: Don't pay attention to my father. He is so old-fashioned.**

**Age 25: Dad knows a little bit about it, but then he should because he has been around so long.**

**Age 30: Maybe we should ask Dad what he thinks.**

**Age 40: I wonder how Dad would have handled that? He was so wise and he had such a world of experience.**

**Age 50: I'd give anything if Dad were here now so I could talk it over with him. Too bad I didn't appreciate how smart he was. I could have learned a lot from him when he was just a phone call away."**

There is natural change of attitude concerning the importance of our dads as we grow up. But, dad didn't really change, did he? We are the ones who change the way we relate to him.

Something similar is true when it comes to our Heavenly Father. Jesus teaches us that our greatest need is to be back in harmony with God our Father, our Creator. Life is at peace when we're reconnected to Him. Jesus reminds us that it is good to have our heavenly Father's love.

Your earthly father's love is the kind of love that can discipline and protect. It's the kind of love that can set standards and build self-respect. Your Heavenly Father's love goes way beyond that. God's love also ensures that there will be justice in this world – truth will win in the end. Living righteously – that is, living the way God says is right – will be proved to be the best and only way to live.

Your heavenly Father's love also sees the whole big picture of things. His is the kind of love that you appreciate when you feel His protecting, and guiding power as His son or daughter. And because His love is protecting and guiding, He doesn't tolerate those who do wrong by destroying and creating deadly chaos in His world.

Like that Ann Landers column, and like me as a boy, our view of our heavenly Father isn't always accurate. We don't always see and relate to God as He truly is. Let's admit it, we are sinful people

who often fear our heavenly Father rather than want to call on Him in prayers of faith. Our sinful fear of God, our rejection of His love is not because of who He is, it is because of who we are as sinners. We need His love. But our unwillingness to trust in His love causes us to caricature God the Father as too harsh, too demanding, even too remote.

For many people, when they think of God the Father, they infuse their view of God with the imperfections, the weaknesses, and the harm that our earthly dads committed. Maybe you had a dad who reflected love so poorly that your hurtful relationship with him colored your view of our heavenly Father's love. It can be very hard to call God our Father when your earthly dad was very uncaring, unkind, abusive, or belittled you.

Jesus reminds us that our Heavenly Father is way better, way greater, and way more loving than any earthly dad. Jesus sets our wrong caricatures of God our Father straight. And Jesus calls all of us to repentance today, to have a change of mind, to turn to the Only One Who can love us with an everlasting love. That person with that perfect love is your Father in heaven.

When Jesus speaks about His and our Heavenly Father in today's Bible verse, Jesus is inviting us to faith in Him, to trust in God the Father's love for us. His love is a righteous one, a just one. It is love that hates sin because sin destroys your life now and eternal life to come. God's love is a love that yearns to reconcile a sinful, rebellious world back to Himself. Your Heavenly Father wants you to receive His love, to let Him love you, and then you to love Him back. In fact, one of the most famous passages in the Bible, John 3:16, says that "**God (the Father) so loved the world (you) that He sent His only begotten Son (Jesus), that whosoever believes in Him (He's inviting you to trust Him), should not perish (forever in hell), but have eternal life (with Him forever in heaven).**"

Jesus isn't merely teaching us today that it is good to have our heavenly Father's love. Jesus isn't teaching us to improve the quality of life by making time to be a more spiritual person. Jesus isn't teaching us to go on our own seek and find our heavenly

Father's love. Jesus isn't teaching us to try hard to do good things that build our own relationship back to God your Father. No, instead, Jesus is teaching us, that because of His work on our behalf -- His life, and death, and resurrection -- we do have a Father's love and we can have that Father's love by faith.

When I was a boy I would go down to my dad's workbench on summer days when he was at work, and I'd help myself to his tools. I often lost them, left them out in the rain to rust, or broke them. And when I did, in my guilt I hid them. My guilt drove me to stay clear of Dad because I was afraid I'd get in trouble.

It's similar with your Heavenly Father. You've done wrong and it has broken your relationship with your God. Guilt makes us expect the worst from our God and makes us try to hide from Him. But because Jesus lived perfectly, sinlessly the life that God our Father expects from all of us -- but in our sinful brokenness we haven't lived it, and we don't want to live it. Jesus, however, lived as God requests, and Jesus gives -- yes, gives -- His record of perfection to you. He offers it as a free gift. Jesus lived without fault or sin or selfishness -- you didn't -- but Jesus offers His innocence as a free gift to become your own, so that God in His love sees you sinless, and restored back to Him.

And all the wrongs that you actually did, they are more than you know, and Jesus paid the penalty you deserve for them all. He paid for your sins by carrying them on Himself and giving His life on the cross as the price owed. Jesus' Easter morning resurrection guarantees that His life and death for you -- is enough. Your debt is paid. You are brought back to your Heavenly Father.

God's love is one-of-a-kind! His love sets your wrongs, your turning away, your guilt right. He doesn't wink at your sin, but pays for it -- all of it. And now, through Jesus you can and do have your Father's love. His love given to you is certain because Jesus did everything needed to make it certain. It's good to have a Father's love in your life.

On Fathers' Day people often reflect on "what a good dad is" celebrating the uniqueness of that love, by saying things like this,

"My dad was a dad of action. If there was a problem, he solved it. If there was a need, he found a way to fill it, and if we got scared, he made sure that we were protected."

The Bible's message is a message of God's love in action. Out of His love God the Father created the world. Out of love He sent His Son to redeem and restore the world back to Him. Out of His loving kindness He daily provides for our needs. Out of love, He disciplines and matures anyone who trusts in Him. And above all, out of His love, He is always on the job for us. God the Father's love, much like my dad's love that Saturday back in the old neighborhood, is an active love, one that jumped into action for the sake of others.

On this Father's Day then, all of us are called to receive and reflect our heavenly Father's love and its meaning for our lives. One of the ways that we can show our love for Him is to live our lives dependent on His grace and mercy in Jesus. One of the great ways to be a protector of those we love is to connect them, to lead them to the love of their Heavenly Father who is their mighty fortress at all times and in all places.

Let me share with you today one story that might give you one more glimpse of the depth of the Father's love just for you.

A church one Sunday had a guest speaker. An elderly man stepped up to the front of the church and he began to speak. He said, "A father, his son, and a friend of his son were sailing off the Pacific Coast when a fast-approaching storm blocked any attempt to get back to shore. The waves were so high that even the father, who was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright, and the three were swept into the ocean."

The old man hesitated. He made eye contact with two teenagers who were, for the first time in the service, paying attention. He continued. "Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life. The father had to decide which boy he would he throw the other end of the line to. The father knew that his son was a Christian and he also knew that his son's friend was not. The agony of that decision was worse than the

torrent of the storm. As the father yelled out, 'I love you, Son!' He threw the line to his son's friend. By the time he pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beyond the raging swells into the black of night. His body was never recovered."

By this time, the two teenagers were sitting a little straighter in the pew waiting for the next words to come out of the old man's mouth. He continued, "The father knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus, and he couldn't bear the thought of his son's friend stepping into eternity without Jesus. Therefore, he sacrificed his son. The love of God the Father is so great that He did the same for us." With that, the old man sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room.

Within minutes after the service, the two teenagers were at the old man's side. One of the boys started talking politely, "Well, that was a nice story, but I don't think it was very realistic for a father to give up his son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian."

"Well, you've got a good point there," the old man replied as he looked down at his Bible and then he looked back up at the boys with a smile on his face. "It sure isn't very realistic, is it? But, boys, I'm standing here today to tell you that that story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God the Father to give up His Son for me. You see boys, in the water that day; I was the son's friend."

We may not be able to fully grasp the love of a Father, whose heart broke when He sent His eternally loved Son, Jesus, to endure on a cross the punishment we deserve so that we might live forever. This is why today – on this Fathers' Day – and everyday, it's good to have the heavenly Father's love. His is the love you need as the basis for all your relationships. His is a love that protects, and provides, and guides you. His is a love that is given, it's free, and it's certain. You can say from your heart, "It's good to have a Father's love."

God bless you this Father's Day and always. Amen.