

*As a Father Has Compassion for His Children*

Psalm 103:13

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I've preached a couple-dozen Father's Day sermons—trying to give Dad equal time with Mom—and most of those times someone has said to me, “Yeah, I have trouble praying to God as our Father, because my father was abusive”...or absent...or emotionally distant or whatever. Even though I had a good father, I get that.

This week someone said to me “I no longer use the word ‘God’—it has too many connotations. Too much baggage. I just talk about ‘the Divine.’” I sort of get that—but not quite.

So some people have trouble with the idea of fathers, and some people have trouble with the idea of God. And I want to talk to you about how God is like a father. This could be a challenge.

Let me set the stage this way. First, if your father was a source of pain in your life, God is not that father. The Bible does not compare God to that father. And to those who are not sure about God I say: tell me about the God you don't believe in. Chances are I don't believe in that God either. The one I believe in is the compassionate one we see in Jesus.

I want you to focus on one verse from the Bible on this Father's Day -- Psalm 103:13 (NRSV), “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.” I like the rendering of the Contemporary English Version: “Just as parents are kind to their children, the Lord is kind to all who worship him.”

This verse is not a command to fathers to be compassionate like God. The psalmist *assumes* that fathers have compassion on their own children. This kind of comparison is common in the Old Testament: “As a north wind brings rain...” (Proverbs 25:23), “As a door turns on its hinges...” (Proverbs 26:14). The poet sees something that everybody *knows* is the case, and uses it as the basis for teaching. In Psalm 103 the poet is saying, “Everybody knows a father has compassion for his children. Well, that's what God is like.”

When God is compared to a father in the Old Testament, what is stressed is his *compassion*. He knows us, he cares about us, he hurts for us, he yearns to be merciful. One scholar said that in the Old Testament the connotations of the word “father” are similar to the connotations of the word “mother” in our culture. Those of us who are being honored today ought to ask ourselves if anyone would say that the chief mark of *our* fatherhood is compassion.

When the Bible refers to God as Father, it does not mean that he is our boss—although in a sense he is. It does not mean that he is our judge—although ultimately he is. When the Bible says that God is our father it means that God is tender toward us, hurting when we hurt, eager to forgive and to heal.

If your child does something stupid because she can't see the consequences of her actions, you don't smack her around to punish ignorance. You try to teach her. If your child is sick, you don't say “bad boy!” You comfort and heal him. If a toddler has a tantrum, you don't just smack him—well, I hope not, it can be hard—instead you set boundaries for the child and work to help the child mature. That is how God treats us.

The key idea of Christianity is grace—that God has unilaterally chosen to forgive us and accept us as his children. It is a view of God that goes back through the history of Israel, at least back to the day that the disappointed and angry Moses went back up Mount Sinai and asked God

to show himself face to face. God refused to do that, but he passed by Moses as Moses hid in a crack in a rock. God revealed his name Yahweh and revealed his nature: “Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).

And yet we persist --as the Pharisees did—in believing in a God who is more than anything a judge, who keeps score, who gives us grades, and decides at the end of this very long school whether we pass or not. We find it hard to believe that the real God can be compassionate. Maybe we need God to be just and moral. Maybe we figure such a God would be wishful thinking. But most people I talk to about what happens when you die are laboring under the burden of thinking that this is a pass-fail course. God, for them, is the parental critic and not the parental embrace.

We need to be clear about the difference between karma and grace. Other religions believe in karma—that what goes around comes around, that you will pay in the end, or perhaps be rewarded. Christianity says no, you will be loved in the end, you will be forgiven, if you can just embrace that reality now. The rock star Bono, who was *Time*’s Person of the Year a few years back and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, expressed the difference between karma and grace as clearly as anyone in an interview:

“At the center of all religions is the idea of Karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in physics – in physical laws – every action is met by an equal or an opposite one. It’s clear to me that Karma is at the very heart of the Universe. I’m absolutely sure of it. And yet, along comes this idea called Grace to upend all that ‘As you sow, so will you reap’ stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I’ve done a lot of stupid stuff.” When [the interviewer] asks him to clarify what he means by “a lot of stupid stuff” Bono responds, “That’s between me and God. But I’d be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge. I’d be in deep s\*\*t. It doesn’t excuse my mistakes, but I’m holding out for Grace. I’m holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don’t have to depend on my own religiosity” [Bono: *In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (Riverhead, 2005, 203-4)].

On Father’s Day I can’t avoid the story of the prodigal son, although I have preached on it before. A better title for that parable would be *The Compassionate Father*. No doubt you know the story: the boy wanted his father’s money more than he wanted his father, so he took the money and ran. The boy wasted the money and his life. But when he came home because he had nowhere else to go, thinking that he might be accepted as an employee by his father, the father had compassion on the son. He embraced him as his child. He did not put him on probation. He did not give him one more chance to prove himself. He threw his arms around him and said, “You were missing, and now I’ve found you! You were dead to me, and now you are alive.”

God waits for you to return to him. Philip Yancey [*What’s So Amazing About Grace*] tells about a pastor friend who was battling with his 15 year-old daughter. She had started using birth control, and several nights she did not come home at all. No form of punishment seemed to work. She lied to them and deceived them and blamed them for being too strict. The friend said, “I remember standing before the plate-glass window in my living room, staring out into the darkness, waiting for her to come home. I felt such rage. I wanted to be like the father of the prodigal son, yet I was furious with my daughter for the way she would manipulate us and twist the knife to hurt us. And of course, she was hurting herself more than anyone. I understood then

the passages in the prophets expressing God's anger. The people knew how to wound him, and God cried out in pain. And yet, I must tell you, when my daughter came home that night, or rather the next morning, I wanted nothing in the world so much as to take her in my arms, to love her, to tell her I wanted the best for her. I was a helpless, lovesick father." God is like that, Jesus says: the lovesick father, waiting for you.

In a book called *The Whisper Test*, Mary Ann Bird writes that she grew up knowing she was different, and hated it. She had a cleft palate, and when she started school, the other kids made it clear how she looked to others: a girl with a misshapen lip, crooked nose, lopsided teeth, and garbled speech. She was convinced no one outside her family could love her. But she had a teacher in the second grade whom all the children adored, Mrs. Leonard, a short, round, happy lady who sparkled. Once a year they had a hearing test. Mary Ann was the last one to be given the test. She knew from past years that she was supposed to stand against the door and cover one ear. The teacher would sit at the desk and whisper something which she was supposed to repeat back to the teacher – things like "The sky is blue" or "Do you have new shoes?" As the teacher looked at Mary Ann with her deformity, she whispered to her, "I wish you were my little girl." Those seven words changed her life forever. God looks at us in our deformity and whispers, "I wish you were my son. I wish you were my daughter."

As a father has compassion for his children, God has compassion for us. If we accept his offer of forgiveness, we will be with him forever. Someday we will see him as he is. Only then will we fully understand the depth of his love and mercy. There was a Marine who went off to fight in World War II for a long time and left behind a wife expecting a child. A beautiful little girl was born. The mother did not want the little girl to forget her father, so every day she talked about the girl's father and showed her pictures of her father. She talked about how much the father loved her and cared for her. When the little girl was 4 years old, she was playing in the front yard. A man came to the gate. She looked in his eyes and saw his love and she knew who it was. She said, "Daddy, you're for real! Daddy, you're for real!" Our Father in heaven is not a dream; he is not a wish or a story told to comfort us. He is real, and someday we will see him face to face, and we will know that he is all compassion.