

Podcast 235 An Excellent Father

I'm going to start today by reading a passage of scripture that is very familiar to many of us. And then we're going to look at somebody that is normally in the background.

(Jesus is speaking) "There was a man who had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. Not many days later the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need.

So, he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into his field to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread? But I perish here with hunger? I will arise and go to my father and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.' And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him, and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring, quickly, the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet, and bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate, for this, my son, was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

Now, his older son was in the field and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servant and asked what these things meant and he said to him, 'Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him. But he answered his father, 'Look, this many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'

And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me. And all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.'” (Luke 15:11-32)

Let's pray.

Father, thank you for this parable, this story of the two boys and their dad. And thank you for what we can glean from it on so many different levels. I pray today that you help us to see you. Help us to see your character as a dad, as a father, as we look at some of the aspects of this story. Help us as we talk about it and discuss it and talk to each of our hearts. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Now, most of the time we hear sermons about the prodigal son, we focus on the fact that the younger son came to himself, repented, and returned home.

My new insights into this account began when I was praying and asking God if He really loved me the same today as He did yesterday. I've told this story before. God gave me a picture of Jesus standing in the clouds and I saw Him and I knew He was laughing, even though I couldn't see His face. His arms were spread wide and He said, "Of course I do. I don't have any baggage."

My first thought was I need to test the spirits to see if this is a biblical image. I began praying through the image, and I remembered that God is light, and I checked the box. Then I recalled that God is love. This is consistent with the image. Scriptures who were popping into my head just as I would go through each of the things. "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5) "God is love." (1 John 4:16) I learned that day that God is not loving, He is love.

As I went each aspect of the image, I asked God why His arms were spread wide? You might imagine that I'd get a picture of calvary or Jesus on the cross, but instead the first thought that came to my head was this father in Luke 15. When the father saw his son coming over a hill he was moved with compassion and he ran and embraced him with his arms spread wide.

That day was one of the first times that I began reading this parable and looking at the father instead of looking at the sons. I imagine this father interrupted his son's speech of repentance and grabbed him, even though he was probably smelling of pig, and unwashed clothes, and the whole package, but that didn't make any difference because his father was seeing his son who he thought was lost. He thought he was dead. He didn't know where he was. And now he was home.

What an amazing picture of a father. His face lighting up, probably tears streaming down his face as he ran to his son. The first application that I am thinking of is that every time I see my sons I hope that my face lights up. Because Jesus lights up when He sees us.

For many years my mom and dad lived in Pittsburgh. We live in Lancaster which is about a four hour drive away. I think that much of the joy of going to Pittsburgh for me was knowing that when I got to Pittsburgh mom and dad would be walking out the front door and their faces would be lit up with big smiles.

They're my folks, and I'm their kid. We each have baggage and we've got issues. But I just loved that initial greeting when they bounce out of the house with big grins and their arms are spread wide because their son was home. In fact, whenever my brother and I would go home they would put up the American flag on the front of the house. They would have it hanging off the awning for this was a special occasion. Their kids were coming home.

Every time I walk into the office and see my boys I want them to see a smiling face, a welcoming face, a face that says, "I love you. I'm happy to see you." This is the first way that I can apply this account of the father and his prodigal son. We need to light up when we see our kids.

Welcoming

The second thing that I thought was interesting was how welcoming and generous the father was to the prodigal son who had squandered half of his estate. He could have said maybe we'll just do pizza, because you've already blown half of my estate. But he killed the fattened calf. He was welcoming. And he was generous.

Perhaps he knew that this is what the prodigal needed to see. I don't pretend to understand all the different dynamics going on here. But money must have meant something to that boy, because he asked for it when he was young and he spent it all. Now he came back and his father was still generous.

I used to just read the rest of the parable and say, man, this older brother's got to get over himself, what a whiny fellow. But let's not look at the whiny older brother, but instead give our attention to the father. This patient father went out to meet his older son, who didn't even come into the party. He was angry. But his father pursued him. It's what we talked about in the last podcast. His father took the initiative and came out and entreated him.

And then his son had a chance to get his frustration off his chest. His father listened while his son vented. I have faithfully served you and I never got a fattened calf to celebrate with my friends. And then his father patiently responded. He didn't take issue with all that he said. He heard him. And then he said, "Son, you are always with me. All that is mine is yours." It's okay. Perhaps the older brother was fearful that he was going to lose everything that he had now that his brother was home. They're going to cut it up in half again or something. I don't know.

All I know is the father knew how to meet the needs of that boy and he didn't lose his cool and he didn't take it personally and he didn't react. He responded very carefully and gently. He reached out to him, took the initiative, and brought him back into the fold. What an amazing picture of a dad who is able to meet the needs of two different boys with two different issues and be solid and loving and compassionate and steady and faithful. Phew! As I read that parable now, I don't even look at the boys, I'm just focused on the dad. Because this is a picture of our Heavenly Father.

Each Child Unique

My takeaways from this parable are to light up when we see our kids and love them individually. They each have different needs, different make-ups, and different personalities.

One of the books Sandi and I read was **The Five Love Languages**. We learned each of our children's love language. One of my boys is touch and so I continue to seek to make contact of some sort when I see him like rubbing his shoulders. Another of our sons is quality time, so we try to make sure that we have time to visit and spend time with him. When we went on long trips as a family, he'd sit up in the front seat. My wife would go in the back and rest, and he would sit up in the front, where we would talk for hours. He would blossom with that much time one on one.

Another boy's love language is gifts. He enjoys Swedish Fish. Every once in awhile I'd be walking through Target or the grocery store and I'll see Swedish Fish and pick up a bag just to let him know that I'm thinking about him. Of my kids. I want to treat them all equally and in other ways I want to adapt to their love languages or their unique personality.

One of my sons is an extrovert, another son is more of an introvert. When I send the introvert emails I'm very specific. I talk to him about what my timeframes are, and my expectations, because he doesn't like surprises. The extrovert I can usually drop stuff on him pretty quickly, because he adapts quickly, and thinks

quickly on his feet. So, throughout life I'm learning to adapt to each of my sons according to who they are.

No Favorites.

I think this goes without saying, except we have examples in the Bible of several examples where parent's played favorites and it did not turn out well. Isaac and Rebekah had twins: Esau and Jacob. Esau became Isaac's favorite and Jacob became Rebekah's favorite. And that turned out badly for them. Very badly. As young adults, Esau vowed to kill Jacob after Jacob has taken Esau's birthright.

You'd think that Jacob would learn from that. He should remember growing up in a home where his parents had favorites. However Jacob is blessed with a large family and Joseph becomes his favorite. Perhaps this was because he was the child of his wife, Rachel, or maybe he was the child who was born when he was an old man. All we know is that Joseph was his favorite and the same thing happened. There was contention between the children and his older brothers tried to kill him. They ended up selling him into slavery.

I don't think we need to expand on this idea too much, but we will have children who are more like us. Their personality is more like our personality or perhaps their interests line up with our interests. As dads we need to resist the temptation to have a favorite son or daughter.

God's Unfailing Love

Another point is how we view God and His care and affection towards us. For most of my Christian life, I knew that God loved me, because he loves everybody. I grasped this truth theologically a long time ago. When I first heard the gospel at the Young Life ranch in Colorado. I was so happy to learn that God loved me and had a plan for my life. I also heard that he wanted to know me and have a relationship with me. That was very good news. But over the years I lost some of this truth. God became more distant and although I knew He loved me, I was not convinced that he liked me. I do now. And because of my own experience, I think it's important that we not only love our sons, but that we like them.

We all know that we have relatives or people that we go to church with, that we love and pray but perhaps are not easy to get along with. While there are other people that we just really like and enjoy being with them. And I hope that our children know that we not only love them, but we like them. When God the Father spoke to His son, He said, "This is my dearly loved son who brings Me great joy." I believe God the Father not only loved Jesus, I am convinced He genuinely liked Him. And we want to make sure that our kids know that they're loved and liked. If you don't naturally have affection for each of your sons and daughters, pray, and ask God for help in this area.

God has said He's going to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the children's hearts to their fathers. Because of this, I think it's legitimate to pray and say, "God, help me to love my kids. Help me to like them. Help me to see them like you see them. Help me to appreciate them and know how to adapt to their personalities. Help me to learn how to see their good qualities and not the things that aggravate me." We all encourage these relational challenges, so let's pray.

Pray about everything, Paul says. In everything by prayer and thanksgiving we are to make our requests known to God. Thank God that He has given us these kids, now help us to love them and like them. Help us to light up when we see them. Help us to not have favorites. Help me to love them individually like the father in the first parable we read about today.

Be All There

When you do spend time with your kids, be fully present. I guess I've already mentioned how one of my sons had to say my name "Mr. Demme" because he would talk so much that after awhile I started tuning him out. I have learned that if we can focus, even if just a few minutes each day, and have one on one time with our kids it can pay wonderful dividends. If we can look them in the eye, and really hear them, tune into them, we can win their heart. I heard somebody say, it's not so much what you say to your kids, it's how you treat them that helps them develop their sense of self worth and value.

I want each of my kids to feel valued. To that end I need to focus on hearing them and asking good questions, and even if it's just for a few minutes. A learning specialist that we used to consult for helping John, who helped us encouraged us in this regard. He explained that children in a classroom rarely get one minute of individual attention in a classroom of 25–30 students per day.

He encouraged us to give a child five or ten minutes a day by sitting and reading a book together, or having a conversation. If you have tried this, you know that you can cover a lot of material in five or ten minutes. He said this connection between parents and children will change that child's life. Most of us think we do this, but when you really pin it down we often do not follow through. Consider how many minutes you spend, not sitting at the table with the whole family, or being in the car with a few kids, or playing miniature golf. One on one time is precious.

Just this morning, I was getting ready for the day and it dawned on me that with all that's going on right now with the fears and the virus and all the rest, God is fully present with each person. And every one of us who is drawing near to God and asking for help and pouring out our requests has His complete undivided attention. Even though there are millions of people praying, He's not dilute. God is infinite. God is omnipotent. He's also omnipresent and fully present with each one of us. He's right there for me, and He's right there for you. We want to have that same attitude and be right there for our kids, even if only for a few minutes at a time, just to make them know that they're valued and that we see them.

Let's pray.

Father, help us to light up every time we see our children. Help us to love and like our children well, Help us to be fully present. Deliver us from the natural inclination to have favorites or to hang out with the kids that are most like us or have the same interests. Help us to be like You, who loves us all equally. In Jesus' name, Amen.