June 18, 2023

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WHO’S YOUR DADDY?

Romans 8:15

When Toby and Anna had their first child, Ella, they began discussing how they felt the condo they were living in was less than ideal with a child in the family. Toby told me they also started thinking about how their cars wouldn’t work as well for a family with a young child. He said to me, “Dad, having a child impacts everything.” I told him, “Just wait, Toby. You have no idea.” He had just entered into the most challenging adventure of his life, that of being a father. He had gotten his first look at the fact nothing would ever be same for him because he was now a dad. Not only would his circumstance change in every way, he himself would change. In thinking about Father’s Day, it occurred to me that I have done a number of Mother’s Day sermons, but not very many specifically addressing Father’s Day. I thought I should balance the scales a little.

One of my favorite movies is an old one, *Remember The Titans*. Yes, a sports movie, but a very good one. It was based on a true story that took place when high schools in Virginia were being integrated. African American coach Herman Boone was selected to be the head coach at T. C. Williams high school over a successful white coach. In the movie from the onset there was racial tension in the school and on the football team. There is a scene when the team is about to board buses to go to camp before the season begins. One of the white stars of the team, their best player, Gary Bertier, tells coach Boone some demands on how he should run the team. The coach says to him, “When you get on that bus, you won’t have your Momma with you. You’ll only have your brothers, your teammates, and your Daddy. Who’s your Daddy, Gary?” In other words, who is going to run this show? Gary finally has to say, “You.” Coach says, “Uh huh. Get on the bus, Gary.” Who’s your daddy? Who gives you life, takes care of you, and runs this show? Who’s your daddy is common expression we hear thrown around in our culture with various meanings these days. But it actually is a significant question. In fact, it has huge impacts on our lives. We will see that as we consider just one verse from the Bible, Romans 8:15.

PREMISE: GOD WANTS US TO SEE HIM AS OUR FATHER

Romans 8:15 says, “The Spirit you received did not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’”

This is in a passage that is about a life and death issue. Paul says in verse 13 if we live by the Spirit we will experience life, but if we live by the flesh we die. That seems like an easy choice. We all want true life, full life. Everyone is seeking it, but Paul says if we just do what comes naturally, what he calls living by the flesh, we will get the opposite. Choosing whether we live by the Spirit or the flesh is a life and death matter.

But what does it mean to live by the Spirit? Paul has considerable discussion of how we do that, but verse 15 provides an important element of it. By putting our faith in Jesus we receive his Spirit. He says the Spirit we receive does not make us slaves to fear again. We could only be slaves to fear *again* if we had already been slaves before. Paul asserted that the natural state of humans is to live in fear. That’s a subject of discussion for another day, but I assert that it is true of all of us. Fear plays a much larger role in our lives than most of us realize. The fashion industry exists because of fear, peer pressure exists because of fear, much of religion is also about fear. In this case, Paul was especially referring to the fact that religions have a big element of fear. We are afraid of what God is going to do to us, afraid that we are displeasing him and might be subject to retribution from him. That’s how religions try to control behavior. Paul says in Christ there is a whole new way to relate to God and to live. It is not the way of fear.

Wait, doesn’t the Bible tell us that we should “fear the Lord”? Yes, it does, but it means something different than cower before him in fear that we have failed to meet his requirements and are in peril of punishment. The kind of fear the Bible commends is actually reverence. Be in awe of him, have deep desire to honor him, not because you’re afraid of him but because you are so astounded by him.

The Holy Spirit does something that plays an important role in us experiencing life as it should be. He enables us to call out “Abba, Father.” Abba was an Aramaic word that was a familial term for Father. In English it would be “Da-Da” or “Daddy” or even just “Dad.” I actually remember feeling a twinge of sadness when my kids started calling me “Dad” rather than “Daddy.” The point here is that a powerful work of the Holy Spirit is to give us what Paul called the spirit of adoption to sonship. He enables us to rejoice and be free in the love of our Heavenly Father who wants us to see him as our loving and attentive Dad. It is no accident that Paul referred to as God’s adopted children.

Our son and daughter in law, Toby and Anna, are seeking to adopt a little one year old boy. It is a long process. He is with them now as a foster child, but they are hoping and praying they can make that permanent. Why do you suppose that Paul chose adoption as the model for our relationship to God? There’s an interesting difference between an adopted child and a natural born child. I was a natural born child. What that meant was that my parents were stuck with what they got. They told me that their chosen name for me was Linda Gale. They wanted a girl so they’d have boy, my brother Jerry, and a girl. Instead, they got me. They couldn’t tell the folks at the hospital, “Um, I think there’s been a mistake. We ordered a girl, but we got this, clearly not a girl. We’d like to trade him in for the girl we originally ordered.” I’m very glad they gave up on the name Linda Gale. I suppose I could have just gone by the middle name and tell people I was like Gale Sayers, one of the greatest football players ever. I could have been L. Gale Myatt. But hiding that “Linda” name would have been a problem. I could have been the living embodiment of the old Jonny Cash song *A Boy Named Sue*, or in my case Linda.

Did you ever bid for a hotel on Priceline? It was a bit risky. You were offered the opportunity to bid a price you were willing to pay for a hotel, but all you knew was the general area and category of hotel. If your bid was accepted, you had bought that room. The cost was immediately charged to your credit card. You only found out what hotel it was after you’d been charged for it. Having children is kind of like that. You put your bid in, but you’re not in control of what you actually get. Once the pregnancy starts you’re stuck. You get what you get. It doesn’t just have to do with gender. The whole genetic package is involved. Height, build, hair color, eye color, intellectual ability, athletic ability, even personality traits.

An adoption is different, for in an adoption the parents can choose the child they want. They can decide what gender they want. There will always be surprises as the child grows, but it is that decision to adopt and love this particular child that is important. God adopts his children. He chooses them. He wants these particular children for his own. As a natural born child I, in a sense, deserved to be loved as my parents’ child. They were obligated to love this little being to whom they had given life. But an adopted child’s parents are under no such obligation. The child deserved nothing from them. They chose to love this child out of the goodness and love of their hearts. That’s how it is with us and God. We deserve nothing from him. He is not obligated to us, but in his goodness and love he has chosen to make us his children.

So there are some powerful implications of the imagery that we see in this verse. But the heart of its message is that God wants us to see him as our Father, our Daddy, and to relate to him as such. Part of his Spirit’s work in us is to enable us to see him as Dad. This is far from the only place in the Bible where we get this message. Remember when, in the Sermon On The Mount, Jesus taught people to pray. How did he say we should address God in prayer? “Our *Father* in heaven, blessed be your name.” Jesus didn’t tell us to address him as Lord God, as God Most High, as Almighty God, as Creator of heaven and earth, as the Righteous Judge of all, as the King of Kings. All these are accurate, and important that we remember. But when we are relating directly to him Jesus said the most important way to see him is “Our Father in heaven,” our spiritual Dad.

God is spoken of as the Father more than 40 times in the Bible. In Matthew 23:9 Jesus said, “Do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven.” In that case, he wasn’t referring to calling our actually fathers, “father,” he had a different point. But in that verse it is quite clear, God wants us to see him as our Dad, our Abba.

I was blessed with a great Dad. I don’t think many of you here today knew him. But John Calvin Myatt was a prime example of what has been called The Greatest Generation. He grew up in and survived the Great Depression. As soon as he graduated from high school at the age of 18 he went into the army because the US had entered World War 2. He saw combat against the Nazis in Europe, then when the war ended there he was immediately slated to be part of the invasion of the home islands of Japan. He was spared having to face that bloodbath by the end of the war brought on by two atomic bombs. However, he went to Japan as part of the occupation army. When he was finally discharged from the army he came home, went to college, married his sweetheart, had two sons, had a successful career as a high school teacher, but also as a layman impacted literally thousands of lives through a ministry to college students in Bakersfield. But it was who he was that was more important. He was a humble, loving man, devoted to his wife and his sons. Jerry has more memories of our childhood than I do, but I only recall him saying anything harsh to me on one occasion. I’m sure there must have been some, “Don’t make me stop this car” moments, but I only clearly remember that one. He had to yell at me on that occasion to save my life, because I was in the process of doing something really stupid that put me in danger. He was always supportive of me and encouraging to me. What I saw in him and learned from him was what it means to be a man devoted to living for Jesus Christ and serving him. I wish I were the quality of man he was. So seeing God as a father is a positive and encouraging thing for me. But it is not so for everyone.

Many people do not have the kinds of memories of their fathers that I have of mine. “Daddy issues” are prolific, something you can see reflected often in the entertainment media today. It is a recurring theme in many movies. In an interview in *New Yorker* magazine a few years ago Rock star Bruce Springsteen said his broken relationship with his father is “*the subject* of my life. It’s the thing that eats at me and always will…Musician T-Bone Burnett said that rock and roll is all about Daddy. It’s one embarrassing scream of ‘Daddy!’”

Ph. D. in psychology, Edward Kruk, wrote an article about a report from UNICEF a few years back that children in the United States and the UK rank extremely low in social and emotional well being compared to many countries. The report attributed this to theories about poverty, race and social class. Krumsick said they missed the real issue. He said it is, “the prevalence and devastating effects of father absence in children’s lives.”

Because of this, seeing God as Father is not necessarily immediately helpful for some people. What can correct this problem is seeing God as the Father than he actually is. How does God the Father relate to us?

HE GIVES US IDENTITY

There was a time when the key element of a person’s identity, was the name of their father. You see that in the biblical genealogies like in Luke 3:31. In giving the genealogy of Jesus he lists, “David, the son of Jesse, the son of Obed, the son of Boaz, the son of Salmon, the son of Nahshon,” and so on. Well, yes, but we don’t do that any more. No one knows my son as Toby, the son of Rick, the son of Calvin, the son of Cecil.” Yeah that was just an archaic anachronism from the patriarchal societies of those ancient times. Yes, that’s true, but there is a grain of truth sometimes reflected by modern last names. I’m going to read some last names and ask you to look for something they have in common. Anderson, Benson, Carlson, Carson, Davidson, Dawson, Donaldson, Ericsson, Ferguson, Gibson, Hanson, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Larson, Lawson, Morrison, Nelson, Olson, Patterson, Peterson, Richardson, Robertson, Robinson, Simpson, Swanson, Swenson, Thompson, Watson, Wilson. What do you note? Son of Anders, Ben, Carl, David, Donald, Eric, Harris, Jack, John and so it goes. My son’s real name should be Toby Richardson.

That is just a pointer to remind us that a big part of our identity derives from our roots, especially from who our father is. I have lived my entire life as a Myatt. That last name is, always has been and always will be part of my identity. When I was a kid early on my parents called me Ricky. But in my first grade class at Horace Mann Elementary School in Bakersfield there was another boy named Ricky. Somehow the teacher declared that in order to differentiate between the two of us, I would henceforth be known as Rick and the other boy would continue to be called Ricky. I’ve been Rick ever since. But when I got involved with more formal organizations such as the DMV, I had to go by the name on my birth certificate. So to them, I am Richard. The people who call me that don’t know me. But in the eyes of the bureaucratic world, I am Richard. So I have been Ricky, Rick and Richard at various times in life, but I have always been Myatt. That name ties me back to my roots, especially to my father. That is part of the reason why Dr. Kruk said that father absence has such a devastating effect on people. They have a hard time knowing who they really are. At issue here is the question of where identity comes from.

Our culture and our own thoughts come up with ideas about how we can find and understand our identity. This is an important matter because every human absolutely will engage in that search. We all need to understand who we are. Our identity plays a huge role in determining what kind of people we will be, how we will act and what we will do in life.

In the book, *Cultural Counterfeits*, Jenn Oshman points out that our society broadcasts loudly the message that we are the center of all things and we can be awesome. We just need to create our identities. We do that with choices about wardrobe, hanging out with the right people, doing the right things, achieving the right things, and if we can create the right identity we can be limitlessly happy. We hear that achieving the right goals, having the right accomplishments, having a successful career, making a lot of money, winning approval, gaining notoriety or fame, are the things that can establish our identity, resulting in that limitlessly happy life. A central part of that quest, we are hearing continually now, is our sexual identity.

We need to ask if that is anywhere close to true. What we find is that the promises of that message fail to deliver, leaving us longing for something more, something real, something unshakable. Jenn Oshman said there is a whisper we all hear in the quiet, in the middle of the night, when we feel the disappointment of those failed promises, that we were made for more, something substantial, real and true.

Famous actress Emma Thompson, talked in an interview about feeling like she had always known who she is. But at that point, when she turned 60 years old, she said that though she has filled the roles of wife, mother, actress, she finds herself asking, “Am I any of those things? And if I’m not, who am I?” She’s discovering there has to be another deeper identity. Sophie Turner, who has starred in *Game Of Thrones*, has confessed, “I don’t actually know who I am.”

The problem with any of the things the world claims can give us an identity is they are all temporary, ephemeral. They don’t actually get to the core of who we are, and they can disappear in an instant. I think of my friend who was a successful major league baseball player for 14 years. That was his identity. And then at the age of 34 his career was over. Who was he then? Many professional athletes can’t navigate their way through that transition very well. What if my identity is not as an athlete, but a person of intellect? Or what if it is a person of charisma, or beauty, or talent? What if those things fade or are taken away? Those kinds of identities can’t actually form our character, direct how we love other people or how we think about and relate to God. They put our sense of worth on an illusion.

We need a core identity that cannot be shaken, something that provides a strong base from which to live our lives no matter what may come, something that resonates with who we actually are down in the deepest part of our hearts. Romans 8:15 says the core of that identity is that I am a child of Almighty God. I was created by him and for him, I am made in his image, I was rescued by him and adopted as his child. That is who I truly am in my deepest soul. Nothing can threaten that identity. I can’t lose it, I won’t age out of it, no one can take it away from me, no failure or success can change it, no circumstance can call it into question, and the opinions and judgments of other people have no bearing on it. It is eternal. It is my identity today, tomorrow and forever.

This means I can be absolutely secure as a person. No matter what may happen, no matter what anyone might think or say, I know who I am. I bear God’s name, and this becomes the North Star that enables me to navigate my way through life. It is the foundation for my life. That identity is founded in being able to call God Abba, Father, Dad.

HE LOVES US

Many of the so called “daddy issues” that people have boil down to whether they feel their father actually loved them. Everyone knows that a true, good dad loves his children. I have said a number of times that I got a great theological education from becoming a father. I was totally surprised by what happened to me when I became a dad. I’ve said before that prior to the birth of Carissa, our first child, I was never a big fan of babies. But when Carissa was born all of that changed in an instant. It was like a whole new department in my heart opened, a department that I didn’t even know existed. I found a capacity to love another human being that I had never experienced before. I began to understand in a whole new way what the Bible meant when it said that God loves us.

I experienced a thrilling, joyful, powerful, kind of love when Laurie and I committed our lives to each other. My heart was so full of love and joy because of her that I couldn’t imagine that anything could match it. But there was a component of that love that had a slightly self driven aspect. I received a beautiful and joyful flow of love from Laurie. With this new being in our lives, our baby, we had a similar powerful love, but, frankly, the baby didn’t give much of anything back. She couldn’t talk, she couldn’t communicate in any way other than crying. Yet I felt this powerful love for her. I began to see how God loves us, even when about all we can seem to manage is to wail if we don’t get what we want and to poop our diapers.

John wrote that God is love. He is the epitome of what it means to love, the very embodiment of it. That means he is the ultimate in what it means for a Father to love. This is how we need to think of our Father. He loves us to a degree we cannot comprehend. In Romans 8:38=39 Paul said nothing can separate us from his love. Nothing can or will ever stop him from loving us. This I understand from being a dad. That little baby that introduced me to a new level of love is now 40 years old. She has children of her own. But she is still my beloved little girl. Her brother is still my beloved little boy. We had a couple of moments, especially with that little boy, that were exasperating, but even at the hardest, lowest moments, there was never a shred of doubt about whether I loved both of those kids without condition, and about whether I would do anything for them. That never has and never will change.

In 1 Peter 5:7, one of Jesus’ closest friends told us, “cast your anxieties on God, because he cares for you.” That’s what it means to love doesn’t it? If you love someone, you actively care for them. I have this memory of one night when Carissa was a junior in high school. That year she was a cheerleader at her school. It was her only year as a cheerleader. One year was enough to convince her that was not for her. But this one night was near the end of the football season. I don’t even remember who they were playing, but Carissa had to be there as a cheerleader. Toby was sick, so Laurie stayed home with Toby and I went to the game alone. It was a brutally cold night. A storm passed through that night, and it was windy and raining. I went to that game and endured the miserable, wet, cold, windy weather. I wasn’t there because Carissa needed me to be there. She’d have been fine if I didn’t go. I wasn’t there because I was a fan of cheerleading. I wasn’t there because I was a fan of her school’s football team. I really didn’t care about the outcome of the game at all. I was there for one reason. I wanted my daughter to know that her parents loved her and were with her in everything she did. I wanted her to know that I cared for her. I had an analogous experience with Toby, attending the final game of his high school football career on a bitterly cold, rainy windy night.

I could share myriads of examples of how loving my kids meant caring for them actively. We are taking care of our grandsons, Wesley and Hunter this weekend so that their parents could have a weekend away together. It has been fun, but demanding. Last night Hunter had a tough night and was awake from 2 to 4 AM. That meant Laurie and I had a tough night on the night before church. Why would we do something like that? Because we love our kids and our grandkids, so we do whatever is necessary to care for them.

We need to understand our Father loves us. He cares for us. Romans 5:8 tells us he has graphically, vividly demonstrated this at the cross, when Jesus Christ died for us even while we were still rebelling against him. God loves us as a perfect Father.

HE GUIDES US

There were a number of things that I gained from my dad. Many guys love the outdoors, camping, hunting and fishing. What I gained from my dad was a total lack of interest in any of that. He claimed it was because of his time in the army. He said he got all the camping and sleeping outdoors in the army that he would need for the rest of his life. Oddly, my dad had a love for the game of golf, but somehow he wasn’t able to pass on that to me. He had a successful, long career as a teacher, but I never had an ounce of interest in following in his footsteps. He was also a big time DIYer, and none of that seeped into my heart.

But there were some other things that I did inherit from him. He loved sports, and I got a sports addiction that exceeded his. But there were some far more important things. He showed me that loving God and serving him was the most important thing in life. He showed me that devotion to family, loving your wife and children, was more important than anything else this world offers. He showed me that being a real man meant having integrity, being honest, it meant humbling yourself and serving others. These are things I don’t even have to think about. They are just a part of me, and they are there because I saw them in my Dad.

Psalm 23:3 says of the Lord, “he refreshes my soul, he guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake.” I like the older translations that said, “He guides me in the paths of righteousness.” The point is that God shows us how to live. He teaches us, leads us, and guides us. It’s not so much about guiding us to the right circumstances, as guiding us to have the right character, to be the kind of people we should be, for it is in being the right kind of people that we truly find life.

My dad never pushed me into any particular career or life choice. I recall one point in my sophomore year in college when I contemplated transferring to UCLA and was accepted there. But somehow when it came down to decision time, I didn’t know what to do. I sought my parents wisdom. I asked them what I should do. They said, “We can’t tell you what is best for you to do. We just want you to know that whatever you decide we support you and are for you.” I wanted them to make the call for me, and they wouldn’t. I remember years after I had become a pastor my dad told me they kind of wished I had selected another career, that they kind of wanted me to be a doctor. I think my dad would have been very happy about Toby. His son never became a doctor, but his grandson did. The point here is where my dad guided me was never about schools, jobs, other circumstantial choices. It was about the kind of person I was. That’s how God guides us.

There’s much more I could say about what our heavenly Father does for us. He protects us, he provides for us, he encourages us, he comforts us, he disciplines us, he strengthens us and so much more. But the main thing I want us to see today is that this is the model God has chosen for his relationship with us. He wants us to see him as our Father who loves us.

IMPLICATIONS

What should we do because God is our Father?

LIVE SECURE IN OUR IDENTITY

We need to remind ourselves every day of who we really are. We all play a lot of roles in life, but those roles come and go. I have been a husband, but for the first 29 years of my life I wasn’t. I am a father, but my role as a dad has seriously changed. I am a pastor, but I wasn’t for my youngest years, and it is likely that some day I won’t be. If I try to found my identity in any of those things, I set myself up for an identity crisis, for it might change. The one thing that is rock solid, that will never change, that has life directing implications for the kind of person I am and the way I live, is I am a child of God, beloved by him forever. Nothing will ever change that.

The late Brennan Manning wrote, “My deepest awareness of myself is that I am deeply loved by Jesus Christ.” In his book, *Abba’s Child*, Manning wrote, “Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. Every other identity is an illusion.” The only way we can be truly secure and at peace is by living in reality. If we try to build an identity based on an illusion it will forever be threatened and we will never be at peace. As children beloved by our Heavenly Father we can be completely at peace.

LOVE THE FATHER

As a dad, I hope what I get from my children is love. That’s just what the heavenly Father wants from us. That’s why Jesus said the greatest commandment, the most important instruction in all of life, is to love the Lord your God, love your heavenly Father, with all your heart, soul, and strength. God wants us to love him as a child loves a Father.

In his book, *He Speaks To Me Everywhere*, Philip Ryken said his son’s T-Ball career got off to a rocky start. When his turn to bat came, he would repeatedly swing and hit the tee, missing the ball completely. When he was in the field and he fielded a ball, he wouldn’t seem to know where to throw it. They finally figured out what was going on. At bat, he wasn’t looking at the ball when he swung. He was looking at his dad. When he fielded the ball, he immediately looked at his dad. Ryken realized he had to stand someplace out of sight and tell his son not to look for him, and then he began to do better. But Ryken said actually his son was a great analogy for how we should live. We should love the Father so much our eyes are always on him, wanting him to be pleased more than anything else.

SEEK TO HONOR HIS NAME

Psalm 29:2 calls on us to “Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name.” 1 Corinthians 10:31 says that whatever we do, we should do it all to the glory of the Lord.” If we love God we will make it our goal in everything we are and do to honor the name of the Father who loves us, the Father whose name we bear. I go through life as Rick Godson, trying to honor my Fathers name by praising him and by the kind of person I am, one who mirrors the character of my Dad to the world.

I can readily say that one of the greatest, blessings, joys and callings in my life has been being a dad. God feels the same about himself. He rejoices in being a Father, in having you and me as his children.