

KEEPING YOUR EYE *OFF* THE BALL

2 Corinthians 6:18

I have been accused by my children of having humor that ought to be on a cob because it is so corny. It's not my fault. It's genetic. My father was worse than me. He loved to say things like, "Did you hear about the guy who invented Lifesavers? They say he made a mint." Or, "A woman is on trial for beating her husband to death with his guitar collection. The judge asks, 'First offender?' She answers 'No, first a Gibson, then a Fender.'" Or "I had a dream I was a muffler last night. I woke up exhausted."

It's Father's Day, so I want you to think about fathers with me for a moment. Be it for good or for ill, we are all powerfully affected by our fathers. Edward Kruk, who has a Ph. D. in psychology, wrote an article on PsychologyToday.com in which he related that a recent report from UNICEF said that children in the United States, Canada and the U.K. rank extremely low in social and emotional well-being as compared with other advanced economies. Supposed experts have several theories for this, usually focused on poverty, race and social class. Dr. Kruk wrote, "A factor that has been largely ignored, however, particularly among child and family policy makers, is the prevalence and devastating effects of father absence in children's lives."

The U. S. Census Bureau reports that 24 million children, one out of three in this country, now live in father absent homes. What are the effects of that? They are well documented. Dr. Kruk cites a number of them in his article. Those who grow up without a father in the home are four times more likely to live in poverty than those with a dad. Father absence results in diminished self-worth and compromised physical and emotional security. Those who lack a good relationship with their father tend to struggle with control of emotions and with periodic bouts of self loathing. They have poor academic performance. They suffer from behavioral problems and social adjustment issues. They are far more prone to be involved in promiscuity, crime and drug or alcohol abuse. They have much higher incidence of mental health problems. In her book, *Father Hunger*, Margo Maine linked poor or no relationship with dad to eating disorders.

Our culture is loaded with people who have "daddy issues," due either to bad or no relationship with their fathers. You can see the prevalence of the father theme in movies. Rock star Bruce Springsteen was interviewed for an article in *New Yorker* magazine three years ago. In it he said his broken relationship with his father lives on in his songs. He said it 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 'Daaddy!'"

What should we do about this? The tendency is to run around trying to preach to men appealing that they be better fathers or try some other tactic to fix the problem of absent fathers. That may be a good thing, but in the end it is not the answer. The reason is that telling people they ought to be better or do something different than what they are doing rarely has much effect. In his book *Father Hunger*, Douglas Wilson wrote, "If we see a dearth of fathers...we must not try to organize pro-fatherhood rallies...it will not work. The need of the hour is to return to the worship of God the Father." In other words, men in our nation need their hearts changed. Something needs to change inside them so that they want to become better fathers. What needs to happen is to have people worshiping our heavenly Father, and if they worship him they will want to be the fathers they should be. So today we are going to think together about our heavenly Father, for in the end it is being in awe of him and loving him that changes all of us. The effect is not limited to dads. We all start moving toward being the kind of people we want to be when we start loving and worshiping our heavenly Father. ***Worshiping the Father is foundational to being fully human and living to the maximum.*** As it turns out God is the perfect Father.

THE HEAVENLY FATHER LOVES

There is an astounding message in 2 Corinthians 6:18. There the Lord says, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." NASA estimates that there are 100 billion stars in our galaxy, and there are conservatively at least 100 billion galaxies. Thus it is reasonable that there may be 100 billion times 100 billion. That is an inconceivable number. It is even larger than our national debt. The God who made and rules all of that decides you will be his child? That's astounding. Yet it is true. Fine, but there are some crummy dads out there. What kind of father is he?

We are rejoicing that Anna, our daughter-in-law, is pregnant, with the first member of the next generation of our clan due to make an appearance in December. We are seeing the effect of this new person in our family. Toby and Anna immediately began seeing the condo they live in from a different perspective. While they will make do with it, they suddenly are seeing some aspects of it that are less than ideal for having a child. They also realized that a different car might be needed. At one point Toby texted me, "Having a baby changes everything." I didn't say it to him, but I thought, "Toby, you have no idea. Just wait."

There is no way to explain or to adequately prepare a person for the paradigm shifting, world changing event that is the birth of a child. Once you enter the world of parenthood you will never be the same. One change that happens is that your understanding of and capacity for love expands dramatically. I have often said that the best theological education one can get is becoming a father. I am astounded that though my kids are fully functioning, highly successful and independent adults, though they are married, I am still a parent who loves them so much I cannot be at peace if something difficult is happening in their lives. Some of the smart weapons our military has produced are “fire and forget” weapons. Once fired they essentially direct themselves to their target. It would be easier if our kids were fire and forget, but it doesn’t work that way for me. In fact, now that they’re married I find that instead of having two that my thoughts are often focused on, now I’ve got four, soon to be five!

Our gracious God chose the image of a heavenly Father because it so closely depicts how he relates to us. He loves like a father loves. 1 John 4:8 says that God is love. He is the definition of it. If you want to know what love is like, look at God. His actions are always the very thing that love would do. Love is his motivation in everything he does. He loves us like a father loves his children, except infinitely more and better. In 1 John 3:1 the apostle said, “See what great love the Father has lavished on us.” It is not just love, it is a great love. In Jeremiah 31:3 God says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving kindness.”

God’s love is *unconditional*. We see that in that Jeremiah passage. The only way a love can be everlasting is if it is not dependent on us. Unfortunately, we are not always lovable, nor are we always consistent. Would you say that at every moment of your life you are always good, noble, kind, and worthy of love, both in your actions and in your thoughts? I’m not. If God’s love were dependent on me being worthy then it would not be everlasting, it would be conditional and would not last.

I was thinking about how remarkable it is that Laurie loves me. Her unconditional love started right from the very beginning of our marriage. I have shared some stories before from our honeymoon, but just recently it hit me how amazing her love is when I put some of those stories together. It started on our first full day as husband and wife when I realized on the flight to Hawaii for our honeymoon that I had left the map to the condo we were staying at back in our apartment, that I couldn’t remember the name of the condo, nor could I recall where it was. In other words, we were two hours out over the Pacific and I had no idea where we were supposed to go when we arrived in Hawaii, and had no way to find out. Don’t you

think it was a little unsettling for a brand new bride to find out how much of an airhead her husband was? Then there was the night a couple of days later when I, being the spiritual leader, told Laurie we should pray together. I fell asleep while she was praying and woke up to find myself alone in the living room of the condo. Then there was the first argument we had as a married couple in which I was brutally insensitive to her. That was all on our honeymoon. Put that all together and it is astounding that she didn't ask for an annulment. Even more astounding is that she has continued to love me despite failures far more egregious than those. That's unconditional love. If she had loved me conditionally, if I'd had to be worthy and deserving of love, we'd have had difficulty right from the first day of our marriage.

God loves us with a love that is even stronger. Do you understand this? God's love is not affected even a tiny bit by whether we are worthy of it. You are loved by God perfectly even in your worst, your ugliest moments. In your best moments God doesn't love you anymore because he cannot love you any more than he does on your bad days. That's because he always loves you perfectly, whether you are at your best or your worst. Romans 8:38-39 are most Christians' favorite verses. "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This is how God loves you. There is nothing in all that exists that can stop him from loving you or change how he loves you. That's because he doesn't love you because of something in you. He loves you because of what is in him, and he never changes. As a dad I understand that to some degree. I recall when my kids were in their high school years they were not the big stars. There were kids who were more talented than our kids, for Carissa it was in singing and acting, for Toby in sports. There were kids who got better grades. There were kids who were far more popular than our kids. None of that mattered to me. Carissa and Toby were my kids, and I would not have traded them for any other kid, regardless of how smart or talented or popular they were. That's still true today. There were moments when they did things that I was less than thrilled with, like the time Toby got into a fight with one of his friends at school. Great, did you hear the pastor's kid was in a fight? That didn't change even one iota how much I loved him.

That is how the Father loves us. Nothing can change it. He wouldn't trade us for anyone. He delights in us, even though we are far from perfect. He is, like any father, biased about his kids, proud of them to the point that you'd better not ask him about them because if you get him started he'll talk forever about them.

His love is *sacrificial*. Romans 5:8 says “God demonstrates his own love toward us in this: while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” The real measure of love is how far one is willing to go, what one is willing to pay, to obtain the best possible for the one loved. The price of God loving us is beyond measure. He was willing to go to the extreme of the cross of Jesus Christ to love us. Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”

His love is *compassionate*. Psalm 103:13 says, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.” Compassion is a powerful word. It literally means “to suffer with.” God loves us so much he suffers with us, he feels our pain. He is thrilled in our wins and agonizes in our losses and our hurts, just like a parent does with a child. I saw this in action when I visited with Dalja Parks and her family in the hospital. Dalja is enduring an exceedingly difficult trial, as we all know. Do you think her parents are looking on dispassionately? No. They are agonizing with her. Written all over their faces is obvious emotional pain. Do you understand that when you hurt, God feels it, just like a parent hurts with a child? We are never alone in our suffering and our hurts. God understands them, because Jesus has been through the worst suffering this world can pour out, so he knows how it feels. And he loves us so much that he hurts with us in it.

THE HEAVENLY FATHER GUIDES

Because we love our children Laurie and I put great effort into teaching them about how to live and about character and faith, training them and shaping their character. Laurie was brilliant at this. She was unbelievably creative in not only training them how to think but in leading them to know God and walk with him. That was a team effort, and it involved teaching, reminding, but also discipline.

We knew that if we did not teach our kids and back up that teaching with some discipline that they sometimes did not enjoy at all, we would simply be raising monsters. Not only would they likely turn out to be people who would inflict misery on others, they would destroy their own lives. In order to seek their good we had to train them.

Because the Father loves us he trains us. Start with the fact that God is wise. Romans 11:33 says, “Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.” In other words, his wisdom is beyond our ability to plumb. His wisdom is infinitely above

our pay grade. Romans 16:27 says, “To the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ.” His wisdom is in a class by itself. Really, he is the only wise one; the wisdom of everyone else isn’t wisdom at all in comparison. In fact, 1 Corinthians 1:25 says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.”

God is the wisest being in all that exists. Our Father is wiser and knows more than the wisest and most intelligent person you know. In fact, he is so much wiser that in comparison, that the smartest person is a dunce. We don’t always understand why God does what he does, why he lets life go the way it does, but we remember that God’s judgments, his wisdom, are unsearchable for us. In other words, he knows what is best for us and he is guiding us into what is for our own good. Psalm 25:9 says of the Lord, “He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.” In Psalm 32:8 David quotes the Lord saying, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.”

Sometimes his work in our lives isn’t fun. James 1:2-3 says, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance.” He goes on to say that is necessary to become mature. Romans 8:28-29 says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to become conformed to the image of his Son.” God teaches, guides and disciplines us so that we might be like Jesus, because that is the very definition of true wholeness and health.

I have shared before that there was a great moment for us as parents when Carissa was in college. We had what some would consider rather strict rules for our kids when it came to dating when they were in high school. Both of them chafed about their old-fashioned parents. But one time when Carissa was home from college we were having a dinner during which Toby was objecting to those strict guidelines. We had some lively discussion about the subject and then Carissa interjected, “Toby, I felt just like you do when I was in high school. But I can tell you that now I realize Mom and Dad were right. They’re doing what is best for you.” Wow, was that a good day. Oddly we still have that kind of an experience from time to time. Our kids have said to us repeatedly when describing things they have seen children doing in public, “You guys would never have let us get away with that.” And they say it by way of approval of our actions!

There has never been a moment when I have wished anything but good for our children. We were not perfect, but at every moment in our teaching, training and

discipline of them we were always aiming at them growing up to be healthy, happy, loving, godly people. Once again, though sometimes it is hard for us, we must always remember that the Father is teaching us, guiding us, disciplining us, not because he's harsh, arbitrary, demanding or unkind, but because he is seeking our good! He is pursuing our good every second of every minute of every hour, of every day of our lives. He is pursuing good for us in every single thing that happens in our lives.

THE HEAVENLY FATHER CARES FOR US

In 1 Peter 5:7 the apostle commands us, "Cast all your anxiety upon him (the Lord) because he cares for you." He cares for you. He is always acting to take care of you. Perhaps you remember the story from Genesis 22 where God told Abraham to sacrifice the long promised son, Isaac. He did so in order to teach Abraham a huge lesson. Though it went against everything in him, Abraham committed to obey this seemingly horrifying command. Just before he carried it out the Lord stopped him and provided a ram to sacrifice. Verse 14 says "Abraham called that place 'the Lord will provide.'" It was named Yahweh Yireh which tells us that the Lord's very name, his character is to provide.

Have you ever heard this before? "What God supplies is enough." That thought is at the heart of the gospel. What God supplied at the cross is all we need to become God's children. That message runs throughout all of God's dealing with him. Because he is a Father he provides what his children need. Philippians 4:19 says, "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." How much glory does Jesus have? It is infinite. The Father will provide for our needs at that level.

As a dad I needed to care for my kids. That meant I needed to provide for them. So we provided food, clothes, a home, an education. But we provided far more than that. They needed somebody to comfort them when they were sick, to hug them when they suffered the hurts that come with being around fallen human children, to support their efforts to learn and grow, to be interested in whatever their latest endeavors were, to encourage them and cheer them on in all they did. We provided that for them to the best of our abilities.

I remember when Toby got into paintball, going with him to play paintball and suffering the inevitable welts that came when I was shot. Those things hurt. I didn't care about playing paintball, but I was there being with my son. I remember so specifically being at a football game to be there for Carissa because she was a cheerleader. I remember this specific game because Toby was sick so Laurie

stayed home with him. I was there by myself at a game in November where it was polar vortex cold and pouring down rain. I was there because I wanted to support my daughter. It's what a loving dad does.

Several years ago Carissa had to move out of her apartment. It turned out that the timing of the move had to be right at the time when she was going to be in Japan visiting Michael, who was deployed there. I have expressed before that I hate moving with a passion. But Laurie and I moved Carissa while she was out of the country. I didn't even care. It's what you do when you love your child. And God cares for us infinitely more than we care for our kids. He provides what we need at all times, including the interest and involvement in our lives and the support that we all desire.

Not only does the Father provide for us, because he cares about us he also protects us. Psalm 121:7-8 says, "The Lord will keep you from all harm; he will watch over your life. The Lord will watch over your coming and going, both now and forevermore." Sometimes it doesn't feel like God is protecting us. You all, like Laurie and I, have at times suffered grievous hurts, the kind that cause you to wonder if God really loves you how he could let such a thing happen to you. Well, you all have probably encountered the little tract, *The Four Spiritual Laws*. News flash: there are more than four spiritual laws. The first law in that tract is God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. There is another law not mentioned in the tract. It is that Satan hates you and has a terrifying plan for your life.

In John 17:15 Jesus prayed for his followers, for us, to the Father, "My prayer is not that you take them out of the world, but that you protect them from the evil one." The Father answers that prayer. He is continually protecting us. He is protecting you right now. He is protecting you from Satan's plan for your life. What would your life be like if the Father weren't protecting you? For an example you can look at the life of Job. Do you remember what happened to him? All of his children died, he lost all of his wealth, then he became ill with a painful and debilitating disease. Perhaps you may feel like your life could have gone better, but how does it compare with that? What we need to know is that were it not for God's protection, that would be your life. Satan would like to do all of that to you and more. That has not happened to you because God is protecting you. More than that, he is protecting you from spiritual destruction, which would be the worst of all.

APPLICATION

TRUST THE FATHER

Having a powerful Father who loves you should provide an enormous sense of security. Psalm 18:31-33 says, “For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and keeps my way secure. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer and causes me to stand on the heights.”

Don’t you love that picture? God keeps my way secure. I don’t have anything to worry about. He is strong and wise and he loves me, so I can be at peace. David used the picture of deer that he had seen while he was out watching the sheep. He’d see them standing on narrow, rocky ledges in the hills, and if anything threatened them they would dash away across the heights where there was no visible trail, yet they would nimbly dart and run as though they were on level flat ground. That’s what God, our Rock, does for us. He is wise, he is strong, and he loves us, so we can be at peace. We can trust him in whatever he allows into our lives.

LOVE THE FATHER

You have a perfect Father. He has given you life twice now. He provides for you, protects you, cares for you, delights in you, is proud of you, and loves you just as you are. He goes with you everywhere you go. He never abandons you. He is fascinated by whatever you are interested in. Aren’t you glad he is with you? Doesn’t that make you love him?

I was very blessed when it came to a dad. My dad wasn’t perfect, but he was a great dad. He was a humble, kind, godly man who was always supportive of his sons. There must have been some moments when he said something discouraging to me, but I don’t recall them. He was always encouraging. He’s been gone 18 years now. His last few years he worked on the facilities at the church where I was serving. What a privilege it was to be able to leave my office and go find him on the grounds and just talk to him. I did that every day. One summer day several years after he died the windows were open because it was warm in my office, and I heard him talking to someone outside. I got up and went outside to talk to him, and it wasn’t until I stepped outside that I remembered, it wasn’t him. He was gone. I was hit with sadness because I don’t get to be with him anymore. You and I have the incredible blessing and privilege of having a loving heavenly Father. Love him. Let him know that you love him, talk to him everywhere you go.

WORSHIP HIM

God is worthy of our devotion and our praise. So we should respond by worshipping him. Certainly that means coming together to praise him as we do on Sunday mornings. That should be a high priority for us because he is worthy and deserves it, and because we need to be reminded of just how much he deserves it.

But worship is more than that. We should worship him in everything we do. Yes, that means praising him, but it means serving him as well. In other words, the motivation behind everything we do is to express love and praise to our heavenly Father. For you parents, it means that you seek to be the best mom or dad you could possibly be because you want to express love to God by loving your children. In the end, loving our Father, wanting to please him, is the motive for everything we do.

In his book, *He Speaks To Me Everywhere*, Philip Ryken said his son's first T-Ball season got off to a rocky start. When it was his turn to bat he repeatedly would swing and hit the tee, missing the ball completely. Eventually they were able to diagnose the problem. He wasn't looking at the ball. Instead he was looking at his dad. The solution was that when it was his son's turn to bat Ryken had to go stand someplace out of sight where his son couldn't see him, then he hit the ball just fine. The same thing happened in the field. Every time he caught a fly ball he would look for his dad to see if he was watching before he threw the ball. It occurred to me that while his desire to see his dad, to watch for his approval and direction was a problem in developing baseball skills, it made him strong, secure and successful in far more important ways in life. I think this is a great analogy for how we should live. We are to be so attached to our Father that our eyes are on him; we are looking for him to be pleased more than anything else. We should continually live not so much *consumed* with whatever is coming at us, but with our *eyes on the Father* who loves us more than we will ever comprehend.