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OUR FATHER

What an intimate, personal, family-like approach to God. What a reassuring, comfortable way in which to address the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Can it be that He, who is from everlasting to everlasting, the infinite One, really regards me as His child? Does He care enough to consider me His own son?

This is a startling concept.

It is unique. It stands as a brand-new revelation of God, given to us with repeated emphasis and clarity by Christ.

Prior to the time of Jesus, God was regarded as someone remote and august in His demeanor. He sat in the high and holy place, a stern Judge behind the hard, harsh bar of the Law. Only with fear and foreboding did any man dare to address himself to such a powerful potentate.

All through the Old Testament account of God's dealing with His people. He is referred to as YAHWEH, the name which dared not be spoken for fear of offense. Fewer than seven times is He even referred to as a father, except indirectly and rather remotely.

Yet in the first four gospels, Jesus, the Christ, casting aside all restraint, speaks of God as Father more than seventy times. It is a radical, new, and very exciting disclosure that God is our Father. Suddenly it puts man's relationship to Him into an entirely new light. He moves from behind the bar of justice to come knocking on the door of our human hearts. He enters our lives to become a "Father to the fatherless."

The whole concept is replete with wonder and incredible love. It hardly seems possible that He who has been from everlasting to everlasting, the eternal, infinite God, should delight to have us call Him, "Our Father."

But not all of us can do this either easily or in sincerity. It is a frightening fact that, for many people, the word father does not denote a dear one. It does not conjure up the thought of a happy home. Rather, to them it may well be a repulsive and abhorrent title.

Many people have known only harsh, hard fathers. Their human father may have been a selfish, self-centered person who cared little for their well-being. He may have been a derelict, a drunkard, a dope addict, or some other distorted person who wrought havoc with their personalities in early childhood.

Or the human father may have been a weak-willed person who could command no respect from his children. He may have neglected his duties to his home and family, so that he earned only contempt and scorn from his offspring. Even at his very best, he may have at times fluctuated in his moods and temper, one day lenient in dealing with his children, the next tough and terrifying. So how could one so inconsistent, so unpredictable, be trusted?

Little do many fathers know the importance of their role in

shaping the characters of their children at an early age. Long before boys and girls are even off to school, the cast of their characters and the pattern of their personalities have been shaped under the parents' hands in the home. More often than we would admit, this is a period of pain to the child. Deep doubts and miserable misgivings arise in the malleable minds of youngsters. They wonder if they are really wanted. They long to know if they are really loved. They search for someone who can really be trusted, someone who really understands them.

Because of all this, the name father, instead of being rich with warm and happy memories, is frequently associated with fear and repulsion, anger and hostility, sometimes even hate and scorn.

And the tragedy is that in ascribing the title to God as our Father, we sometimes unconsciously transfer to Him all those debasing attributes associated in our minds with our human fathers.

Of course this is not done deliberately. Still, it is done. The consequences for both us and God can be devastating. We do Him an enormous injustice by superimposing upon His character the facsimile of a human father. At very best it can be no more than a caricature, a distortion of His true being.

If our human fathers have been fair, honest, decent individuals, then our mental picture of God is bound to be more favorable. If they have been generous, loving, gentle men, endowed with more than the usual degree of human understanding and compassion, this will enhance our concept of what God may be like. And it is inevitable that, in our minds, we will take a more magnanimous view of God.

But the fact remains that, to a large degree, our thoughts and ideas of God as our Father are conditioned by our childhood impressions and recollections of our rather frail and fallible

human fathers. Far, far too often we ascribe to God in heaven all the weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, failings, and inconsistencies of our very unpredictable human fathers.

None of this was in the mind of Christ when He spoke so sincerely and so simply of God as His Father. His view of God was not conditioned by His childhood relationship to Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, but by His own personal identity with God the Father throughout the eons of eternity.

He alone knew fully the true essence of God's character. He alone comprehended the beauty and integrity and wonder of God's personality. And He spared no pains to portray to us the caliber of this One.

If we are to appreciate fully the kind of person God is, if we are to grasp His essential love and goodness, if we are to understand even a little of the wonder of His winsomeness, if we are to know the strength of His integrity and reliability, then we must see Him as Christ saw Him.

Obviously God the Father completely dominated Christ's thinking. He influenced all of the Son's conduct. He occupied the prior place in all His affections. He was ever in His mind and on His lips.

One of the half-truths which plagues Christians is the old saying, "What you are speaks so loud, I cannot hear what you say." It is true, one's actions should correspond with one's words. But we can really only comprehend what a person's inner thoughts and life are like by what he says. "For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matt. 12:34).

So if we are to fully grasp Christ's innermost thoughts and concepts of God as Father, we must, of necessity, pay careful attention to what He said about Him, as well as observe how

Christ conducted Himself before His Father.

Jesus stated emphatically, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). And we are most grateful for this personal, open revelation of God to us mortal men. In addition to His impeccable life, lived out before us on the stage of human affairs, we have as well His precepts and parables given to us for illumination. They are an endeavor to have us fully appreciate what God our Father is like.

There is no doubt that when Christ addressed God as His Father, it was in the full and splendid relationship of perfect Sonship. There was complete understanding. There was absolute agreement. There was total unity and harmony. There was deep delight.

But for us there is not always this open and unclouded approach to our Father.

We are haunted by our own misgivings. We are sometimes uneasy because of our own misconduct. We come rather gingerly because of our guilt. We wonder if we really will be understood because we are not sure we even understand ourselves. And often we question secretly if we will even be accepted.

Because of all this, it is essential to a reassuring and satisfying relationship with God that we study what His character is like. Unless we do begin to grasp what kind of person God is, we shall never fully develop a simple, strong confidence in Him. Yet, this is what He wants from us more than anything else, our trust and affection as His children.

The most outstanding attribute of our Father God is His love. There is a quality of selflessness and altruism to His character which is almost foreign to our finite human concept of love. So much of our love is self-centered. Often we are loving

only when such conduct serves our own ends or satisfies our own selfish impulses.

With God, however, there is a love of magnificent and unchanging proportions. His care and concern and affection for us are not dependent upon His moods or our good behavior or our response to His overtures. Rather, it flows out to us in a clear, pure, powerful stream that has as its source and strength His own great heart of love. It is constant and unconditional.

Evidence of this lies in the fact that He Himself was willing to pay the penalty for our misdeeds. For God was in Christ reconciling the wayward world to Himself, not charging men's transgressions to their account (2 Cor. 5:19). And this He did for us through the death of His own dear Son while we were still alienated from Him. Such a magnanimous gesture is almost beyond the bounds of our finite human comprehension. Nonetheless, it is an attested fact, which in itself undergirds our confidence in Him. It enables us to come to Him quietly, confidently, and without fear as, "Our Father." We can do this, not because of any merit on our part but rather because of His own generous attitude of concern and affection for us. We come freely because He has invited us to come, with an open-handed, great-hearted welcome. But we can come and receive that welcome only through true repentance toward God and faith in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as our Saviour. Only in this way can the Father-son relationship be established.

All too often God is viewed as a stern, austere Judge standing over us in an attitude of disdain and deprecation. We seem to see Him holding in His hands a giant set of scales. In it our bad deeds are weighed against our good conduct. And often we are filled with dismay at how our sins outweigh our good.

But this is a caricature of God our Father. It is a most distorted view of the One who loves us deeply and is able to enter fully and completely into our human dilemma. This is so because having made us, He understands our limitations and is sympathetic to our earthly struggles. He remembers that we are born and shaped in iniquity, that our brief sojourn upon the planet is a fleeting interval in which we struggle to cope with the assaults of sin and Satan upon our souls.

No, God our Father is not some distant deity who stands apart and aloof from the trials of men. He is not one to sit sternly in condemnation of His children. Rather, because He did identify Himself completely with us through the birth, life, and death of His Son our Saviour, He is touched with the feelings of our infirmities (Heb. 2:16–18). He looks upon us in compassion and deep concern. He is moved by the least inclination on our part to resist evil and do good. And at every opportunity, He extends His helping hand to us by His gracious Spirit, eager to lift us up above the downward pull of evil.

Moreover, when we approach God, our Father, we are drawing close to Him who completely understands us. This is a concept which should give us enormous comfort and consolation.

It is an unfortunate fact that the great majority of human difficulties arise because we do not understand each other. At our very best, we humans are unpredictable. We can never fully understand why we do or say the things we do. No wonder we have so much conflict and chaos in interpersonal relations.

Besides our inability to understand others, no man or woman fully understands even himself or herself. We cannot possibly unravel all the peculiar characteristics we may have acquired through complex hereditary processes from our parents. What

makes one child in a family docile and agreeable while a brother or sister may be a self-willed young rebel?

Nor, likewise, can any person possibly determine the impact made upon his character by his parents or siblings during his formative years. At this critical time of life, all sorts of forces, unknown to him, have shaped the pattern of his future conduct. The influences of home, school, friends, teachers, parents, and casual acquaintances throughout one's life condition his behavior, reactions, and outlook. Who can possibly understand all this? Certainly we cannot. At best we do not understand ourselves, let alone others. This is why so often we are so hard on ourselves and so harsh in our judgment and censure of others.

But this is not the case with the infinite, all-knowing God our Father. For He does know our makeup. He does understand why we are as we are. He does, in His all-embracing tenderness, appreciate our particular problems. And because He does, He has a much more magnanimous attitude toward us than most of us have to ourselves or to each other (Ps. 103:13–14).

It is for this reason that we can come to Him as our Father with the assurance that we will be given an understanding hearing. Unlike dealing with human beings, we will not be given short shrift. We will not be held in contempt. We will not be cut off or cut down with a critical attitude or cruel condemnation. Christ Himself reassured us of this when He emphasized that He had not come into the world to condemn men but to deliver them from their dilemma.

When we fully appreciate that the thoughts and inner attitudes of God toward us are good and gentle and understanding, what a difference it can make in our approach to Him. We

come now, knowing full well that we shall be met with compassion and kindness, understanding and affection.

This reassures our hearts. It sets our minds at ease. It frees our spirits and releases us into a deep dimension of delight in our dealings with our heavenly Father. How good to know, here is someone who really understands; who knows all about us and who, even though He knows the worst, still loves us.

This explains why we can come to Him in any situation and find a warm welcome. It explains why we can count on a sympathetic hearing. Nothing else is so sure to dispel our fears and allay our anxiety as to know that in dealing with our Father, we are indeed dealing with a consistent character.

In human relations, all of us know that many of our problems arise because of the unpredictable nature of people. If a parent wakes up in the morning with a sick headache or upset stomach, it is more than likely the rest of the family will feel the brunt of the malady. We tend to vent our suffering and stresses on those around us. When a man is in a good mood and cheerful frame of mind, he will probably treat his children with great forbearance and leniency. But if, on the other hand, things are going wrong and he is in a bad mood, it is probable he will be harsh and hard with his family.

But there is none of this about God our Father. He is not fickle. He is not changeable. He is not subject to unpredictable fluctuations of temperament. He is always the same (Heb. 13:8). Because of this, our relationship with Him can be a most beautiful thing. There is nothing else to compare with it in the whole realm of human relationships.

Only those who do truly know Him as Father are aware of how wonderful it is to be acquainted with such a being. For the

rest, there lurks in the background of their minds the suspicion that somehow all of this is just too good to be true. They feel unsure of Him and unsure of others.

In order to convey this reliable aspect of God His Father's character to us, Jesus told the moving story of a father and his two sons (Luke 15:11–32). It is perhaps the most poignant parable in the gospels. The father's attitude toward both boys never altered, never changed. The young rascal subjected his father to appalling anxiety and awful anguish of heart. His dear old dad died a thousand deaths for that lad while he was away living it up. His father was no fool. He knew what the boy was doing in the distant land. Even the older brother knew that much. Not only was the father's fortune being squandered, but also his good name was being dragged in the dust. And on top of this, the old man's heart was being crushed relentlessly with sorrow.

Yet, despite all that the profligate son did to dismay his father, the parent's attitude toward him never deviated. In spite of all the shame, suffering, scandal, and loss, the father's love never diminished. Instead there went out from him forgiveness, compassion, love, and concern. At no time did he reject or repudiate his child. Despite all the boy had done, he was forgiven. He was never disowned or disinherited. And the day that broken, battered boy stumbled up the road toward home, he was met with the father's open arms and open heart that had never been shut against him.

The picture is replete with pathos and power. The essence of the character of God our Father comes through to us here with no textual difficulty. The language is too clear, too simple, too potent for us to explain it away. This boy, despite all his misdeeds, had always been forgiven. All he had to do was come

to his father and accept the forgiveness which was always there. The day he did this, he knew and felt fully accepted by his father. His misconduct was forgiven. The price and penalty for all his perverseness had been paid for in the suffering of his father.

This is what sets the forgiveness of God our Father on a plane far above that of us human beings. Not only has He forgiven us our misdemeanors, not only does He forget them, but He Himself bears the penalty of suffering which attends our misconduct.

The best of human beings, even when they find it within themselves to forgive another, seldom if ever can forget the wrong done to them. And, what is more, they expect that the one who committed the offense shall somehow, in due course, be made to pay the penalty for his misbehavior.

Even if we look at the relationship between the older of the two sons and his father, we find Christ conveying the same principle to our hearts. The elder brother, in his attitude of self-righteousness and self-pity, had built a wall between himself and his father. All of his father's attempts to reach across that barrier had apparently been of no avail. Here assured the boy that everything he owned was his. In fact, according to tradition, he was entitled to twice as much as his younger brother because he was the firstborn son. His father's love and affection and interest in him were ever the same. But the poor fellow's pride and self-esteem prevented him from enjoying all the benefits at his disposal. This was simply because he did not believe what his father said. He was trying so hard to earn and merit by diligent service what was already rightfully his as the elder son.

His plight is almost the more pathetic of the two. It shows us a man who really never got to know his father. The picture

painted for us is that of a person who sees God his Father as someone harsh and hard and very demanding. He has never sensed His love, compassion, generosity, and fantastic forgiveness. And because he keeps his father at arm's length, there has never been that wondrous sensation of feeling those open arms flung about him. He has never felt accepted. He has never felt wanted.

But just because the older boy took this attitude toward his father, it did not change the father's love and concern. For, after all, this lad, too, was still his son, his heir. He still yearned for him. He still reached out to him in tenderness. He still reassured him that everything he had was at his disposal if he would just come and accept it.

In the light of this account, we can see God our Father in a new and wondrous way, if we so choose. We can come to Him without reservations, no matter what our background may be. We can count on being accepted with warmth and wondrous delight.

Wrapped up in this little expression, "Our Father," lies a whole dimension of intimate companionship between father and child, between God and me. It reduces all the complications of life to a very simple, though very special, relationship.

I sense that I am a child of God. I know assuredly that God is my Father and I am the object of His constant love and attention. There steals over my soul the realization that His concern and care for me are never ending, that His patience and compassion and mercy and understanding are always extended to me. In every situation of life, no matter how unusual or adverse, there comes the quiet assurance to my heart that I am His and He is mine.

What a consolation! What an encouragement! What a stabilizing influence in my affairs!

It is little wonder that among the most favored phrases to fall from our Lord's lips, those of "Our Father," "My Father," "Father in heaven" held prior place. This concept and this relationship was the most precious He held in His heart. It provided the central meaning and direction to all of His life and ministry.

Throughout His earthly sojourn it is moving to note how often Christ referred to His Father. He saw Himself as here on earth completing His Father's will, carrying on His Father's work, complying with His Father's wishes, conversing quietly with His Father, while all the time making His way gently toward His Father's home.

This was the ever enduring hope and joy held before Him. It was the central relationship about which all the rest of His life and work revolved. And when the day dawns that we, too, see and know God truly as our Father, our walk and life with Him will have become one of great serenity and enormous import.

It is on this basis and against this sort of background that we can address God as our Father with confidence. We can come with the quiet assurance that He will be receptive of our petitions and appreciative of our gratitude.

There is no more beautiful nor meaningful manner in which to present our prayers, be they pleas for help or expressions of praise. Simply because He is our Father, we can expect that we shall be heard and our heart's communion will be reciprocated.

If Christ chose to preface His prayers in this intimate manner, then we may be quite sure we can do no better. It is fitting and appropriate that we come to God in an attitude

that combines both respect and gentle endearment. No doubt this delights His heart. It is one of the honors we can bestow upon Him in return for the great honor He confers upon us by calling us His children (1 John 3:1–3).

There are times when we tend to take for granted the enormous privileges extended to us by being brought into the family of God. This is no small honor. There devolves upon us the responsibility to bear this family name with dignity and high esteem. This theme is developed in the prayer. Emphasis is placed upon the paramount prestige of God, as our Father, and the desire for us to comply with His desires and wishes in our conduct.

Our Father—just two short words. Yet they have a whole world of meaning wrapped up in them. They set the tone of this entire prayer. They embrace all the beauty to be found in a unified family. They convey to our hearts and minds the strength and serenity of the Almighty. They speak to our souls and spirits of the love that comes from an understanding Father's heart.

No other religion in all the world carries such a happy, contented concept of communion between God and man. No other philosophy or teaching so intimately touches the heart of our human needs. Where else can one turn to find words more tender, more meaningful, more mighty in their simplicity than Our Father?

Do we really know Him this way? We can!