

FATHER'S DAY 2018:
Honor your father and the Father
Psalm 103:8-18
Braca Radio Sunday School Class
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First Baptist Church
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Lawrence Webb

I read a man's tribute to his father a few days ago. This was in a Christian devotional magazine called *Standfirm*, published especially for men. The writer and his wife were visiting Providence, Rhode Island, home of the very first Baptist Church in America, founded by pioneer Baptist Roger Williams 'way back in the 1630s ("Honor your father and the Father").

Those on the tour wore name tags, and the writer noticed this man staring at him. Then, based on the name tag, this stranger asked the writer whether he knew anyone by that name from Cleveland, Ohio. The writer told the questioner that his father had been a minister in Cleveland, Ohio, many years before. The writer said in the article, "He looked at me as if he were talking to a ghost and said, 'You look like him.'"

The writer's minister father had started thirteen new churches in that area, and was the other man's pastor in one of those churches back in Cleveland. So this coincidence of being on the tour together provided a kind of glad reunion.

Words from this stranger impressed the writer and his wife as he spoke in a hushed voice, about the spiritual impact the writer's father had on him. The writer thought of his father's influence many years in the past and of his continuing influence as the stranger testified.

I never called my father "father." Rather, I always called him "Daddy." Whatever you called your male parent, I invite you to think with me as I think aloud about my Daddy and you think of your daddy or father or Papa or Dad. Also, I encourage all fathers to think with me about what kind of father I have been to my sons.

Today, on this Father's Day 2018, I am borrowing the title of that devotional piece: "Honor your father and the Father."

You can't see my punctuation marks as you listen to the radio, but the first "father," with a little "f" stands for the man responsible for giving me physical birth. But when I say, "Honor your father and the Father," the second "F" has all capitals, pointing to God as Father who gives us spiritual birth.

TRANSITION

Our verses from Psalm 103 present one of the most beautiful pictures of God as Father in the Bible, that challenges us who have sons and daughters to see how far we fall short of His loving care:

*8 The Lord is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.* Reflect on those descriptors:

God shows mercy and grace. Both those words point to love and forgiveness, both indicating the recipient has done nothing to earn or deserve that generosity, and *can* do nothing to earn or deserve that generosity,

This mercy and grace means God is not quick to fly off the handle: He is slow to show anger because He is patient. He will not hold on to His anger and tend to it the way a camper squats down by the fire and keeps stoking and adding more fuel to keep its hot heat going.

At the height of the AIDS epidemic, as medical and science people worked to determine several aspects, many thought the disease was contagious. Some thought you could get AIDS if you got the patients body fluids on you: saliva, blood, semen, urine or feces. Despite this fear, some parents exposed themselves to that potential as they wiped away and cleaned these fluids from their adult children just as they did when those sons and daughters were newborns.

On the other hand, some parents refused to have any dealings with their children who came out as homosexuals and certainly if they learned their offspring had contracted AIDS. More than one young man heard from angry parents that they should never come home again. I heard the direct testimony of members of a pastor's family, how the minister told his son that he never wanted to see him again and the young man would be cut out of the father's will.

Unlike such human fathers who make hurtful accusations against their children, Psalm 103 goes on to say God will not always accuse, nor will God hold on to His anger and nurse it forever.

Then verse 10 says God does not deal with us according to our sins, nor does He repay us according to our iniquities.

We have two metaphors of distance to help us think of how far away God takes our sins when we seek His forgiveness. First, the psalmist looks up into the sky. You may remember last week, we looked at Psalm 19 as the poet there gazed into the night sky and felt overwhelmed at the thought of the Almighty One who made all this.

Here in Psalm 103, the poet thinks in terms of unfathomable distance into the sky as a metaphor for God's love:

For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;

How far away is that? Well, today's astronomers tell us the nearest star, known as Alpha Centauri B orbit is so far away, it would take about a hundred years to reach there.

Of course, the psalm writer had heard nothing about Edwin Hubble and the space telescope named in his honor. But as the poet looks up, he knows the heavens are infinitely higher than he can ever hope to go, and he feels sure the God who made all this is up there somewhere or out there somewhere, looking after it all and keeping it going. Just so, God's love reaches infinitely higher.

Now, after thinking vertically as high as he can think about God's far-reaching love, the poet thinks horizontally about how far away God removes our sin from us if we trust in Him:

as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

We noted, the poet writes this 25-hundred years or more before our time. So he has no awareness of the world as we have come to know it. The scientists tell us the world is 24-thousand, 901 miles around it. Those statistics would have seemed beyond belief for this ancient writer. But he knew he lived among his fellow creatures in a considerable land mass. It stretched far beyond his awareness, and that's what he wants to communicate when he says, *as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.*

A little over a hundred years ago, Charles Miles wrote a short song about God's great love that I think catches the essence of today's passage:

Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heaven above;
Deep, deep as the deepest sea is my Savior's love.
I, though so unworthy, still am a child of His care;
For His Word teaches me that His love reaches me everywhere (Miles).

Just how far is it from the East to the West by our measurement? Well, let's do some calculating. If you started off from the East and headed to the West, you would eventually come back where you started from. And you would never have reached the West. The West is still out there ahead of you. Or, if you turn that trip around and head from the West, hoping to find the East, you would face the same problem. The East is still out there ahead of you.

OK. So the psalmist says, God's love is so far-reaching that He has put your sin so far away, you could never find it. That shows the vastness of His love and forgiveness. You'd keep on keeping on with your search forever.

Now, to top all this off about height and breadth, of the impossibility of understanding about God's forgiveness and God's love, whether you probe the heavens or travel all over the earth, the poet comes all the way down to earth and to our very homes for a look at our very human man:

*As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.*

The writer mulls over his own weakness, his own comparative shortness of life, in comparison with the greatness and eternity of our Creator. He says God loves us the way a human father loves his children in our frailty:

For he knows how we were made;

he remembers that we are dust.

In the sweep of eternity, we're "Here today; gone tomorrow."

As for mortals, their days are like grass;

they flourish like a flower of the field;

for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,

and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him,

and his righteousness to children's children,

to those who keep his covenant

and remember to do his commandments.

PERSONAL THOUGHTS

If you're a semi-regular listener to this Baraca Radio Sunday School Class, you've heard me talk about my Daddy many times — so many times that you probably can tell it with me — how he worked hard, the hardest working man I ever watched close-up — how our whole family spent the fall in the cotton patch, pulling bolls. Pulling bolls. That's the West Texas version of what you probably call 'pickin'' cotton. Out there, in the 1940s, the gins had an upfront stage that separated the lint from the hull or boll. We pulled the bolls off the stalk, along with the leaves and stems, then broke off the stems and leaves and then put the bolls in our sacks.

I've talked about Daddy's being a hard-working, hard-driving, often impatient man. But I don't think I've said much about him as a loving father. He didn't get us many luxuries, and he didn't give us regular "allowances." His hard-earned money didn't reach that far.

We could tell he dearly loved our Mother. As I grew up, I watched him at times buy something nice for her — a pretty blouse or a box of handkerchiefs with little flowers on the corners from Sears, Roebuck — things he probably couldn't afford. I figured these were a kind of compensation for not being able to get her better clothes and not having a car to take her places.

- He loved his children too, even though I wasn't too sure when he fussed at us or used his belt or a switch to warm my backside through my overalls or blue jeans.

- Daddy kept strong and agile through his hard work. He liked to squat down, place a broom flat on the floor, and hop over the broom.

- He smoked most of his life. Sometimes a pipe. A cigar a great once in a while. Mostly cigarettes. Sometimes a pack of Camels or Lucky Strike, if he could afford it, but often using the roll-your-own process. He would take a piece of that thin

cigarette paper, hold it just-so in his left hand so it would hold the tobacco he poured with his right hand out of the Prince Albert can or the little cloth sack of Bull Durham. Then he would roll the paper around the tobacco and lick the paper to make it stay put. He would twist one end of the loaded paper, put the other end in his mouth, and then light up.

- I can picture this most vividly when we would live with Mother's mother on her little farm south of Sweetwater. At her little three-room house where eight of us lived, somebody had found a huge rock, several inches thick and probably four or five feet long and two or three feet wide. It stood at the front door.

This served as our front porch. Daddy would sit on the floor in the open doorway to the side room where he and mother slept, and he would rest his feet on that big rock while he enjoyed his "smoke."

- From early on, at least by second grade or so, Daddy took me with him to hitchhike into town. Then by the time I was 11 or so, he and Mother let me start hitching rides by myself. By the time our sons were born, we had cars, of course, and we always have lived in the different towns as we moved from job to another. But I would have pitched a wall-eyed fit to equal my Daddy's if either of them had wanted to hitchhike!

- I never heard him use the term, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." But he believed in that rule. I remember the last time he whipped me. I was 11 or 12 at the time. I don't know why he physically punished me that time. He was doing something out in the yard of the house where we were living — one of many places. I was outside, obviously doing something that displeased him. I knew I was in trouble when he headed for a tree and opened his pocketknife. He cut a good-sized branch and whittled it just right, took hold of my shoulder, and gave me several switchings across my rear. I have no doubt that I did things equally deserving as I grew into my teens. But that was the last time he punished me physically.

Perhaps I followed his example on that. When our boys were little, I took my belt to them from time to time. I would say not all often. They probably would have a different opinion. I stopped whipping them while they both were in grade school. I remember how they were mixing it up between themselves one morning, and I felt I had to interfere with that. So I took them aside, with them both likely expecting a paddling of some kind. Instead, I said, in essence, "I'm not going to whip you any more. All that proves is that I'm bigger than you are. So I'm going to find some other way to make you regret things you shouldn't have been doing."

- Most of his life, Daddy was not into church-going. But he didn't keep my brothers and sisters and me from going. Mother would not go without him. She knew he would raise the devil if she went. He was proud of each of us as we made professions of faith and were baptized. I remember vividly how he and Mother stood on the dam of the little community lake and watched me and other young people being baptized.

- When I made my public announcement that I felt “called to preach,” I started trying to make plans to go to college. Daddy apologized for not having any money to help with college costs, but he said he was proud of me, and he went to hear me the first times I preached in our church.

- He lived 79 years, and at some point in the last fifteen or twenty years of his life, he came back to the Lord and the church, as he had done much earlier in life. His renewal came largely through the efforts of my older brother-in-law, who was their pastor at the time.

- I’ve tried to connect my Daddy’s love to what is said of God as Father in Psalm 103. Despite his boycotting church much of the time while we were growing up, he was a father who had loving compassion for his children, even though he could not provide the finer, nicer things we saw our schoolmates enjoying. He was not always, “show to anger,” but in the words of the psalm, he did not keep his anger alive forever.

- I remember the very last words I heard Daddy say. Mother had told me that I needed to come home if I wanted to see him alive. I flew back to Texas as soon as I could. When I got to their apartment, Daddy not awake, but Mother said he drifted in and out. She told him, “Lawrence is here.” He said something in a kind of mumble that I couldn’t make out. I said, “Daddy, I didn’t understand what you said.” He said, clearly, “How are Russell and Jonathan?” I told him they were doing fine. Then, he was gone again. So my Daddy’s last words to me concerned my sons, his grandsons.

MY FATHERHOOD

I’ll have to leave it to our sons to tell you how close I have come to the fatherhood model in our psalm. We tried to live as Christians as they grew up and kept them in church as long as they lived at home. They both live far away from us — in New York City and Chicago. We don’t see them as often as we wish we could. But as they settled into responsible adulthood, we have had a strong, loving relationship.

As they grew up, we provided much more of the material things than Pansy or my parents could give us. They studied music and both have continued with their performance preferences as adults. They went to strings camp. They both were in the Governor’s School when that was a summer program.

We took them to theater performances, beach trips, and were able to send each of them on trips to Europe with school groups. Both of them went to college and finished debt-free.

I trust that, along with these activities we have made some lifelong spiritual impact with them. Our younger son and his wife and children have become deeply involved in their church very near their home.

Our younger son put up a thing on Facebook recently that I thought was wonderful. With an Olan Mills church picture of him with Pansy and me, he

mentioned things we had given him. He praised Pansy's quiet dignity. And he listed three things he had inherited from me: corny jokes, stubbornness — which, after all, is a synonym for determination — and then, finally, striving to be creative. I accept all three of those descriptions.

Now, from past to the present, I look forward to talking with both our sons on the phone later today on this Father's Day 2018.

SANDBURG

As we think of giving our children opportunities to expand their thinking in various ways, a poem by Carl Sandburg comes to mind. At times, he wrote loving pieces about his wife Lilian, whom he called Paula, for some unexplained reason. When their three daughters were little, he wrote poems about them. Recently, I came across one he called, "Prayer for the Child Margaret Who Is Six." He begins:

This is an intercession to you, O God,
Who is the God men mean when they cry
"God help us all!"

To you, O God, I enter this plea:
Let this child not be too literal.

Sandburg's plea about not taking things too literally is his poetic way to say he wants her to learn to look below the surface — to go more deeply into things than they may appear, to go beyond the obvious truth. Two other lines jumped out at me, and I think I understand what they mean:

Let the truth of Jack and the Beanstalk enter her mind
Equally true with the location of the postoffice (Sandburg 22-23).

He doesn't want daughter Margaret to think Jack actually went 'way up a giant beanstalk and encountered the giant and had adventures along the way. He explains what he means in the next lines:

He wants her to be able to climb above the clouds she encounters in her life so they will "train her soul for the great impossibilities" as she faces great loves and hates that he says will "nourish better than milk."

From Sandburg's desire for his child to look beyond the surface, beyond the obvious, I hear a call, a cry for possibilities beyond ready human reckoning. I can join that prayer for my grandson and granddaughter, that they will be grasped by the greatness of the God whose love reaches above the limits of the sky, the God whose forgiveness goes around the world and never stops.

BENEDICTION

So, if you are a father, or if you can recall the influence your father had on you, I pray that this will point your way to the God whose love and forgiveness is so much greater than earthly fatherhood. If you desire that kind of God-given spirit, then claim these promises:

God's love that will never let you go.

God's grace that is greater than all your sin.

God's peace that passes all understanding.

These are yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

SOURCES

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