

## The importance of a Father's Love

**Luke 15:11-32** – Then Jesus said, “A man had two sons. The younger son said to his father, *‘Father, give me my share of the property.’* So the father divided his property between his two sons. After a few days, the younger son gathered his possessions and left for a country far away from home. There he wasted everything he had on a wild lifestyle. He had nothing left when a severe famine spread throughout that country. He had nothing to live on. So he got a job from someone in that country and was sent to feed pigs in the fields. No one in the country would give him any food, and he was so hungry that he would have eaten what the pigs were eating.

Finally, he came to his senses. He said, *‘How many of my father’s hired men have more food than they can eat, while I’m starving to death here? I’ll go at once to my father, and I’ll say to him, “Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and you. I don’t deserve to be called your son anymore. Make me one of your hired men.”* So he went at once to his father. While he was still at a distance, his father saw him and felt sorry for him. He ran to his son, put his arms around him, and kissed him. Then his son said to him, *‘Father, I’ve sinned against heaven and you. I don’t deserve to be called your son anymore.’* The father said to his servants, ***‘Hurry! Bring out the best robe, and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let’s celebrate with a feast. My son was dead and has come back to life. He was lost but has been found.’*** The father’s love never faltered!

The story of the Prodigal Son is the ‘greatest short story ever told’ (and re-told). But the real hero is the dad, so it should probably be called the ‘Parable of the Waiting Father’. Every person on the planet will experience 4 key relationships – **self, things, others, and God**. This amazing story is about all four.

A son comes to his father, and says, in effect, *“I wish you were dead and this was the day after your funeral. Then I would get the one-third of your property that’s coming to me anyway. I want you to sell a piece of the Promised Land that you’ve inherited from our forefathers. And I want it now! I will never find happiness relating to the people around here. Only money will make me happy.”* So his father sold the land that he wasn’t supposed to sell for this purpose. In fact, in that part of the world you could be stoned for doing that.

Was the father’s decision wise? What do you think? Maybe this father had decided that his son could learn a useful lesson if he allowed him to have his own way. And he was right! The boy learned the hard way (in the far away country). Jewish law prohibited contact with pigs, let alone being a keeper of pigs. But while in the pignen the young man ‘came to himself’ (it’s the term in Greek for emerging from a coma). He then put a good speech together, offering to become a ‘hired servant’.

Yet the father was out there looking for him daily. In an ancient Palestine community the houses are in the centre, the market place and other buildings around them, then a wall, then the open fields. Every day the father would go out into the fields to look for his boy, maybe to escort him past the jeering mob to the safety of his home. The day he saw him, he ran towards him. Note, old men in that culture did not run: it was beneath their dignity. The boy had his speech ready, but the father wasn’t listening. Before the boy could say anything the father threw his arms around him, and kissed him. The father wasn’t so much interested in “why” he came back, but rather “that” he came back. One of the key teachings of Jesus was that **acceptance precedes repentance**. Acceptance in this case came before confession. As the old saying has it: *‘Those who are seeking God have already been found by him.’* One of the most beautiful aspects of the gospel is that God loves you before you change, as you change, or whether you change or not. Do you believe that?

By the way, aren’t you glad the boy met the father before he met his older brother? His dad called for the ring, the robe (perhaps the one the boy once wore), the fatted calf and the shoes. Shoes are for sons as servants or slaves often did not wear shoes. But the real clue to the meaning of this story is at the start of the chapter – at the beginning of this parable. Jesus was hanging around with the riff-raff, the winos and the sinners, and the self-righteous religious people didn’t like it.

There are two groups of people in the world: those who are sinners and who know it, and those who are sinners and don’t know it, or don’t want to know it. So Jesus told a story about certain man who had two sons. Actually, they were both lost: the main difference was that the younger one externalised his alienation and figured that geographic distance would fix his identity crisis. The elder son was also alienated, but he internalized his rage and stayed at home. He would have been a quite miserable character to live with. Probably, whenever his father gave him a hug he’d stiffen up and be unresponsive. Notice, in the story we learn about the kid brother’s failings only from the elder brother. He describes him as ‘your son’, not ‘my brother’. These two brothers are just like us: *sometimes we blame others* (like the elder brother), but then *sometimes we have to take responsibility* for our actions, as the younger brother did. These are the two

basic attitudes to life: blaming and regretting. As mentioned before, blaming is the opposite of repenting. When you blame, you offload responsibility to others, or the situation, or the kids' friends, or their teachers, or the school, or TV, or the church...

Our society is on a downward spiral morally. Anything you can imagine is available on the Internet – the good, the bad and the ugly. Yes, there are major pressures on our kids to wander from the straight and narrow. But dads, you are nevertheless invited to accept full responsibility for the outcomes of your fathering. Now I know it's not acceptable to criticise the father in this story, but haven't you sometimes wondered why he hadn't thrown a party for the eldest son? Didn't that boy have birthdays? Maybe his preoccupation with building up the family business was to the detriment of the quality time he should've spent with both these boys.

Fathers, you must take full responsibility for the way you've raised your children. When you take responsibility for failing as a parent there are some things you need to remember:

- (1) You can't change the past - you ask forgiveness for the past, and then move on.
- (2) You don't have to carry destructive guilt about the past; yet you'd better know the difference between good guilt and bad guilt.
- (3) You have the power to do whatever you can to heal relationships 'in the present' – right now.

For lots of people Fathers Day is not a celebration. Many have had bad relationships with their fathers, and some may have not even known their dad – or ever lived with him. Others don't really know their dad, even though they live in the same home! For countless others however, this is a very special day, with affectionate memories of precious times. Recent studies show that only 3 men out of a hundred, when teenagers, spent more quality time with their fathers than with their mothers. Hence, we are a generation of under-fathered sons.

So why are dads so important? Primarily because every child needs a dad he/she can count on. But how can you be a great dad? Here are some tips:

- (1) **Always put their interests first.** It is still important to take care of yourself (otherwise you can't take care of them), but you should still have their interests in mind.
- (2) **Protect them.** As a dad, one of your main roles is protector.
- (3) **Spend quality with them.** The thing children want most from their dads is their time.
- (4) **Show them affection** – give them hugs. Dads shouldn't be afraid to show affection. Kids need physical contact, and not just from their moms. Snuggle with them, hug them, and love them.
- (5) **Have fun with them** – be playful. You should leap at the chance to do these things, because that's how you start a life-long close relationship with your child.
- (6) **Teach them self-esteem.** This is one of the most important points. There is nothing you can do that is better than giving them high self-esteem. How do you do this? A million ways, but mainly by showing them (not telling them) that you value them, by spending time with them, by talking and listening to them, by praising things they do, by teaching them (not telling them) how to be competent. Praise and encourage – don't reprimand and discourage.
- (7) **Be a good role model.** Your children are either going to become a dad or be married to one. So make sure you have set the standard for them to measure themselves and others against.

The most important reason we need dads is this... Every child needs to know he/she is **loved**. One of the realities about us as humans is that the person who knows he or she is loved has a great advantage. There's a sense of peace that comes with knowing you are loved, there's an inner confidence that affects everything you do. Knowing someone else loves you suggests that in their eyes, you have **value**, and if your dad believes that you are valuable, then you can begin to believe it yourself. Out of that sense of value comes a confidence, which in turn results in meaningful accomplishments. To put it simply, knowing you are loved is the surest pathway to **success**.

People who know they are loved don't have to go through life trying to please, or prove to themselves or others that they are important – they know they are important because they are loved. As fathers, we are **role models** for the young people around us, so we need to take this to heart, and do everything in our power to demonstrate to the younger generation our deep and abiding love – even if we feel that we ourselves have been deprived of this necessary nourishment in life. Certainly one of the highest forms of love is that of a **father** for his sons and daughters.

Why is this so important? For one thing love effectively dispels dysfunction. What is that? Simply put, dysfunction is present when something or someone is not functioning, as they should. They are functioning

wrongly. It's like courage – courage gone wrong is dis-courage. As mentioned earlier, when we know we are loved we can function with **confidence**; we don't have to go through life striving for acceptance. What's more, people who are loved find it easy to love.

They function well in all relationships. That's why the Apostle John wrote, "***We love because He first loved us.***" (1 John 4:19) Functional people don't yell and scream, they don't use intimidations and manipulations like dysfunctional people do. People who are loved don't feel threatened every time someone disagrees with them, they don't have to put other people down to make themselves look better, they don't have to bully others in order to be convinced that they themselves are not weak (as they inwardly fear).

So what do we say to people who have not experienced a fathers' love? Those who have become dysfunctional? Quite simply, "*God loves you. God your Heavenly Father loves you.*" Then try to get them to accept the word spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, "*I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you near to Me with loving-kindness.*" (Jeremiah 31:3) Believe this simple truth, and your life will never be the same.

Someone once said, "*A truly rich man is one whose children run into his arms when his hands are empty.*" But the truth is, God's hands are never empty!