

Our Father, Who Art In Heaven

What do we mean when we pray "Our Father?" Or to be more correct we ought to ask what does God mean when He teaches us to call Him Father? In this parable Jesus teaches us what it means that God is "Our Father."

Luke 15:11-13 ¹¹ Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. ¹² "And the younger of them said to *his* father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them *his* livelihood. ¹³ "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living.

It means that His love for us is unconditional and that He lavishes that love upon us even when we take advantage of that love and misuse and abuse it.

There are some who think that the right way to be a father is to be very strict, lest the children grow up to be spoiled. Even when the children are grown, they believe they must continue to lecture and criticize and etc. This father does not act that way. Certainly, we can assume that Father taught the children when they were young, but here there is no longer any discipline but only an extravagant amount of grace and mercy. The father even divides his inheritance among his sons at this younger sons request. Even the elder son seems to take advantage of the Father's lavish grace. The elder son accepts his portion of the inheritance. His children know their father's love. They have no fear of taking advantage of his love. The purpose of this parable is not to teach us how to be parents but what it means that God is our Father.

What the younger son does in asking for the inheritance is sinful. What he does with the inheritance is sinful. Nevertheless, he is bold in asking his father for this thing. He knows well the father's love. At no point does the father try to stop him. So great is the father's love.

The purpose of this parable is not to teach us how to be parents but what it means that God is our Father. When God, who is rich in mercy, showers His grace upon us we so often seek only our own advantage. Yet God does not strike us with lightning but continues to shower us with His grace.

God has granted that we should be called sons of God and that we should address Him as Father. This is a gift from Him beyond any price and yet when we pray "our Father" we often pray only seeking our own advantage, what can I get out of it.

Luke 15:14-21 ¹⁴ "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ "Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. ¹⁶ "And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him *anything*. ¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's

hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸ 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, ¹⁹ "and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" ²⁰ "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. ²¹ "And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

To call God our Father means that He always loves us no matter how far we have fallen.

It is often assumed that the low point in the son's life is when he is willing to eat the slop of the pigs. But actually, the son degrades himself even lower, takes yet another step down. He says to himself that he will ask to be one of his father's servants.

The son's proposal, I will go back and be my father's servant, is a blasphemous statement. Certainly the first part "I will return" is what the father desires above all else, but the second part that he will be a servant shows that there is not yet repentance in his heart. He has partially woken up, he has been confronted by the consequences of his sin and realized to some extent his own depravity but not fully. In the remnants of his arrogance and pride the son believes that he can work for his father, that he can partially redeem himself by being a servant, that he can pay back his father and earn again at least some respect and esteem by his own efforts.

At this point in the parable there are many who would nod their heads, thinking this is a good plan on the part of the lost son. Certainly the Pharisees would have appreciated his attitude. One commentator pointed out that if Jesus stopped here, it would have been a good moral parable, in keeping with pharisaic views and indeed human views in general. Yes, they would say you have messed up and now you must earn back. And the fact that we rarely realize the sinfulness of this statement shows our own sinful nature.

But such an attitude shows just how little we value the grace and mercy of our God. How little we value the gift that He has given us when He taught us to pray "our Father." To think that we can even partially earn or pay him back, accomplishes nothing other than to cheapen his gift.

If you were to sleep with your wife and afterwards say to her, "here is \$10 dollars for your trouble," such a thing would make a mockery of your wife's love and of your whole marriage. It would degrade her and you. This is what it is like when we try to earn God's love.

The son is not yet repentant. Yet it is not surprising that he is not yet repentant. He has not yet been confronted by His father's unconditional love and it is only that love that can create true repentance.

And so the son returns still in his arrogance, still in his sin. The father runs and embraces him and showers him with unconditional love. It is only now that the son truly repents, for here he confesses his sinfulness but confronted by the father's grace there is none of that nonsense about working for him as a servant.

Our natural sinful condition attempts to return to the Father offering our own efforts and work. God's love embraces us and teaches us that His love is a gift we can never deserve.

Luke 15:22-24 ²² "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put *it* on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on *his* feet.' ²³ 'And bring the fatted calf here and kill *it*, and let us eat and be merry;' ²⁴ 'for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.

To call God our Father means that He has restored us to the fullness of sonship and fixed the relationship which we destroyed.

One of the primary duties of a father is to provide for his family. The meal, especially the evening meal is the father's opportunity to call the family together to partake in that which he and the mother too has provided for them. The importance of sitting together as a family to eat, especially in the evenings, turning off the tv and the cell phone and being together cannot be overly emphasized. It is fellowship.

The feast of the parable elevates and restores the prodigal son back into not only the right relationship with his father but also into the community of his father. The father's unconditional love and the fullness of his forgiveness and the restoration of the son is realized in the feast he gives to his son. It is not just forgiveness, but restoration, restoration even within the community over which his father is Lord

It is not money and food that the son needed although the lack of those things helped him to realize how far he had fallen, it was the relationship with his father and his community that was broken and is now restored

So it is with us. Hunger, drought, poverty, war, disease and sufferings, we often think these things are the problem. These things are not the real problem but only the symptom of the problem. These things bring to our awareness that there is something wrong. They make us realize we need something better. They recall to our mind the promises of what it is like to dwell in our Father's house. They are there to call us back. But the real problem is the broken relationship with our Father and our broken community with one another.

But God who is rich in mercy restores us to the community as sons of God and invites us to feast, to the dinner table with Himself. So that we may sit down with Him and dine with Him and be a part of His family. That is exactly what we are about to receive this day, to dine with our Father and with His Son and with one another. That we may be one and may be one family, brought together by His love and by the blood of His only begotten Son.

It is this which our God wishes to teach us when He teaches us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." That His love continues even when we abuse and take advantage of that love. His love is unconditional no matter how far we have fallen. His love not only forgives but restores us to sonship.

The address of the Lord's prayer, Our Father who art in heaven, is neither a request nor an offering. It is a simple statement. On the surface all that we have done is to state to whom we are offering the prayer. Yet it is the most important part of the prayer, since it is God's greatest desire and joy that we return to Him, as this son did, and receive from Him without attempting to earn or deserve it that unconditional love by which He calls us sons of God and becomes again our true Father. If any of us were capable of truly praying these six words from the heart that would be more than sufficient prayer for the day and

we would have no need to pray for anything else. Nevertheless, if we could understand and appreciate these words fully, there is no power on earth that would stop us from continuing for hours in prayer to our true Father who is in heaven.

Our Father who art in heaven

With these words God tenderly encourages us to believe that He is our true Father and we are His true children, so that we may ask Him boldly and with complete confidence as dear children ask their dear father.

Amen