

# THE FATHER HEART OF GOD



*Transforming Truth from  
'Abba's' Heart to Yours*

*a series by David Legge*

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# *The Father Heart Of God - Chapter 1*

## **"Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace"**

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**G**ood evening - that's a bit of a lacklustre response! Good evening! That's better! It's good to be here with you again - but it really is a delight to return. It doesn't often happen, I have to say. I say to folk that I go to an awful lot of places once, but it's nice to be invited back! I obviously didn't offend you too much last time, I must have done my job right! But it is really nice to renew fellowship with you all, and I'm looking forward and I'm excited in my heart about what God is going to do this week as we meet with Him. Thank you for the invitation and for the welcome, and I'm looking forward to what the Lord is going to do in our midst this week as we look at 'The Father Heart of God'.

I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Luke chapter 15. I'll be in Luke chapter 15 a lot of the week, not every night, but several of the nights we will be looking at the parable of what has come to be known as 'The Prodigal Son'. Now, I have to say that I'm not fond of that title, because as we will see a little bit later on, the parable isn't about the son, it's about the father. As we look into the Father's Heart this week, we're going to, I believe, get a great revelation of what is in God's heart toward us. I have to say to you - and I suppose every preacher wants to say this because he wants to excite people and enthuse them - but I believe this week, if you hang in there, I believe it will change your life. I'm not over-egging it, I believe that this week, if you get the truth of what Scripture teaches and what the Holy Spirit is revealing in these days afresh to people, it will transform your Christian life. So will you come with me? Will you journey with me tonight and throughout the week as we look into 'The Father Heart of God'?

We will read from verse 11 of Luke chapter 15, and I'm reading from the New King James Version: *"Then Jesus said: 'A certain man had two sons. 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. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal", or wasteful, "living. But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. 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! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants". 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. 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'. 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. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive*

*again; he was lost and is found'. And they began to be merry. Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf'. But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him'. And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found'".*

Perhaps we could pray together as we come to God's word. Now, please, I want you to enter in with me now in prayer, would you do that? Sometimes we just let the fellow at the front, who we think is paid to do it, pray - it's not like that. We're coming to God now, we are meant to be meeting with God, and this is my desire for this week: that we would have an encounter with the Living God in this place. You have needs, and I have needs, but the greatest of them all is: we need to meet the Lord afresh. So will you come with me, and will you pray a prayer to that end, and say: 'Lord, speak to me'? Would you do that? 'Lord, speak to me; Lord, meet me at the point of my need; reveal Yourself to me; reveal Your Father heart to me' - I believe He's going to do that, but it's important that we attune our hearts to Him, and we are open, we are welcoming to what He's going to do. So let's pray together.

Holy Father, we thank You that we can come to You as Abba Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Lord, we just ask now that You would, by Your grace, open the eyes of our hearts that we may see You the way You really are - by the power of the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' name, that You would reveal Your Father heart to us as Your children. Lord, whatever misunderstandings or misconceptions, whatever has happened to us in life, whatever we have been mis-taught, Lord we pray that today and this week that You will just dispel it all by giving us a revelation of Yourself the way You truly are. So, Lord, we know You are here with us, but Lord, we welcome You in a greater capacity. Broaden our hearts to receive more of You, we pray, and we invite You to come by the power of the Holy Spirit: come Lord Jesus, come Holy Spirit, we welcome You here to have Your way. May Your glory fall in this place, and may Your presence fill this room. May we know that we are here, saturated by God. Lord, there are wounds that some people don't even know are there deep down in our hearts that we have pressed down for many a year, Lord, would You please - not for the purpose of distress, but for the purpose of healing and deliverance - would You bring them to the surface that You might deal with them. We thank You that our Lord Jesus was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities, and by His stripes we are healed. Come now we pray, and help me Lord, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Well, our title is 'The Father Heart of God' - and if you want a subtitle, it would be 'Transforming Truths From Abba's Heart - Abba Father's Heart - To Yours' - and we will find out later in the week what the word 'Abba', the designation 'Abba Father', actually means. But tonight we're going to look - and this is really my heading for this evening - at how Father's Heart 'Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace', Father's Heart beats with the rhythm of grace. Luke 15, as I said earlier, is not about the prodigal son - actually it mentions in verse 11 that a certain man had two sons - and so often we focus on

what we know as the prodigal, and we forget about this older brother. We're going to spend a whole night on him probably on Thursday night - but there are two sons here, but it's not about the sons.

The parable is about the father, and I would rather title it: 'The Parable Of Abba's Heart'. The reason is, the context that we find leading into this chapter - if you look at verses 1 to 3, let's read it, of chapter 15 of Luke: 'Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him', to Jesus, 'to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, 'This Man receives sinners and eats with them'. So He spoke this parable to them' - and then He begins by telling the parable of the hundred sheep, and one was lost; then He tells the parable about the lady who had ten silver coins on a wedding garment on her head, a headdress, and she lost one and she searched until she found what was lost; and then we have the parable of the lost son. So there are these three 'lost' parables that Jesus tells - why? He tells them in response to these accusations coming from the religious Pharisees, the highbrow Jews who were hyper about the laws of God and that the Jewish people would not transgress them. They were, not to put too fine a point on it, scandalised by the behaviour of Jesus.

Now it's hard for us to appreciate how aghast they were, and often we don't really understand the scandal of this grace - 'scandalon' is a Greek term that is used for it - at how Jesus was fraternising with what they considered in every term, whether it was religious, social, or civil, as the scum of the earth - the untouchables of society. You look at these verses: Jesus receives sinners, verse 2, and He actually eats with them! That was unthinkable! But what was Jesus showing? Why does He tell these three parables about three lost things? Very simply - and we could spend ages on it, but it's very easy to give the answer - He was showing that God's heart is for the lost. That's tremendous! To realise that our God is not - as is portrayed often by legalistic religion and fundamentalism - our God is not distant, He is not untouchable by ordinary people, but in fact as Jesus reveals the heart of Father God, He is towards the sinner! He is for the lost! His heart beats with the rhythm of grace.

But let's not run ahead of ourselves, we're going to be spending all week about that - but we need to appreciate and sympathise a wee bit with the Pharisees, because you know they weren't just grumps. They weren't grumpy old men, they weren't folk that just had personality problems, and couldn't get on with people, and were particularly negative and pessimistic - no, you see they had Scripture for this - that's right! They had Scripture for their objection to the behaviour of Jesus. Let me show you, turn with me to Deuteronomy 21 - I assume you have your Bible with you, if you don't it would be good if you'd bring it, because you'll need to flick up a number of verses we're going to be moving around tonight and other nights. Deuteronomy 21, and I have to say I read books on the Fatherhood of God, and books on the prodigal son, and it never mentions this portion of Scripture - but this is actually the foundation for the Pharisee's objection to what Jesus was doing. I want you, before we read it, I want you to ask yourself the question: do I see any parallels here to any of these three parables that Jesus told? It's obvious - this is called 'the law of the rebellious son' - verse 18 of Deuteronomy 21: 'If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey the voice of his father or the voice of his mother, and who, when they have chastened him, will not heed them, then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his city, to the gate of his city. And they shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious; he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton and a drunkard'. Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death with

stones; so you shall put away the evil from among you, and all Israel shall hear and fear'.

Now, we might ask the question: what Mum and Dad would do the likes of this? But that's not the issue here, this is the law of God - we don't know how often, if at all, this happened - but the fact of the matter is, this is what God's law says this sin of rebellion deserves. So these Jewish Pharisees knew this inside out, and they thought Jesus was so ignorant in the fact that He was mixing with rebellious sons and daughters. He was touching lepers, He was receiving expressions of devotion and affection from prostitutes kissing His feet! Are you feeling the outrage now? I mean, let's try and put ourselves in these guy's shoes - they had honest motivation, they were trying to bring their lives into plumbline with what they thought God had said. And really, had they got it wrong here? We would say 'No, they had got it dead right'. When they look at the behaviour of Jesus, they say: 'There is a contradiction here! This cannot be - God's word says this, and Jesus is doing that, and He's claiming to be the Messiah, the Anointed of God, He's claiming to represent God and reveal God - but that cannot be! God wouldn't do that!'. Did you ever hear that? Just as a digression - did you ever hear people say that? They are usually very biblically literate: 'God would never do that!'. They hear about something happening in a church: 'God would never do that!'. Be careful to assume that you should know everything that God would and would not do.

But we have to sympathise with these Pharisees, at their sense of scandal and apparent contradiction in Jesus' behaviour. This would be our conclusion too, the conclusion of the Pharisees, if we don't understand the heart and the mind of God - and can I say this please: it is not always synonymous, interpretation of Scripture and the heart and mind of God. Now that's a very deep statement, and I haven't got time to go into it all, but hopefully by the end of the week you will understand that you can know the Bible intricately, but not know the heart of God intimately. Without knowing Him intimately, what happens is: you misapply the word of God. You've got to understand the heart and mind of God. Many people today, Christians in church this very evening, are confused in their relationship with God and His word, and they are confused for the same reason that the Pharisees were confused by the scandalous behaviour of Jesus. This is why: they have not understood the role that law plays in the Bible. Do I need to repeat that? People are confused in their relationship with God and His word because they have not understood what the law of God is for - and that's why many Christians are living under the law of God. I meet them regularly.

But the fundamental issue in understanding the message of God in the Bible is what the purpose of law is, what part does law play. It's very important, I mean the first five books of the Bible are about law, the Ten Commandments are a summary of the law of God. It is God's law, it is communicated from His mouth, His mind, and His heart - but what is the purpose of it? The answer again is simple: the law is for nothing other than to show us our sin. Now, let me not complicate things this week - and I can complicate things, not because I'm clever, clever people make things plain - let me try and make things plain. Read the book of Romans, read the book of Galatians, and you will discover God's purpose in the giving of His laws. It's not a standard to live by, it's not a code of merit that we have to keep, by which we earn God's favour. In fact, here's what both Romans and Galatians will teach you - a crash course on Romans and Galatians is this: the law of God makes us lawbreakers. It tells us what sin is, and because it becomes the law, we are now lawbreakers through breaking the law. Paul

tells us it actually enflames sin within us, it stirs it up. It's like telling a child: 'Don't steal that cookie!' - and what happens? You tell it not to do a thing, and something within them is stirred up to want to do it. That's what the law of God does for us as sinners.

Paul also teaches us, particularly Paul, that the law brings a curse with it. Did you know that? Read the book of Galatians, we will look at it a little bit tonight. Also it tells us that the law brings condemnation of death, and we saw that from Deuteronomy 21. So that means, Christian, if you're living under law - OK? You have a legalistic faith - you live, in other words, trying to obey a set of rules, doing certain good things and not doing certain bad things, you potentially are becoming a bigger sinner. Sin is not getting controlled, but it's getting more in control of you because the law stirs things up within your sinful nature. It is more than likely that you feel cursed, you feel condemned, and there is death upon you. You see, God's law was not given as a ten rung ladder to get us to heaven - it never was! It was given, rather, as a mirror so that we would look at what God's standards are, and we would see that we fall far short of them.

Now don't misunderstand me, God's word says that God's law is good, it's perfect in essence - but its purpose is not to make us perfect, its purpose is purely to show us that we are sinners and we desperately need grace. I hope you've got that, and if you haven't got that, you need to get it! You really do! Look at Deuteronomy 21 again, I hope you're still there - look at the penalty of death that is prescribed here at the end of the law of the rebellious son, verse 22: 'If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God'.

The Pharisees had a genuine dilemma, they are confused, there is apparent contradiction in the behaviour of Jesus and what the law of God says - how can this conundrum be solved? How can they get a solution to their legal dilemma? Turn with me to Galatians chapter 3, Galatians 3 - remember how that law of the rebellious son ended, he is stoned to death and his corpse is taken and hanged upon a tree - look at verse 13 of Galatians 3: 'Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written" - where? Deuteronomy 21 - "'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')". Are you getting it? Are you joining the dots? God's law is good, it is perfect, it is God's standard, it is what He requires - and yet it's what we cannot give, because we are weak in the flesh, that's why we need grace, we need a Saviour, and in Jesus we get grace. He is hanged on a tree, He becomes a curse for the law that we have broken, He dies the penalty of condemnation to death, so that we might go free.

You see, Jesus knew what He was going to do. In fairness to the Pharisees, they didn't know, they didn't understand this. But, you see, you don't know everything - no matter how much you know the Bible, you don't know everything, what we need to get is attuned to the heart of God which beats with the rhythm of grace. It is through the goggles of grace, if you like, that we must interpret the word of God. So I am always very fearful of legalistic interpretations of the Bible; of interpretations of the Bible that hammer people, rather than liberate people; of interpretations of the Bible that harm them, and restrict them, and bind them, rather than heal them, deliver them, and set

them free. Don't misunderstand me: the Bible has some hard things to say, some very harsh things - but when we understand that the heartbeat of God is grace, not law, we can really understand His plan and His purpose and the message of the Bible. Many Christians' expression of faith is very legalistic, because they have no conception of the heart of God, they are people of the book - but unlike David, they are not men and women after God's own heart - that's what we need to be! They have never understood that the heartbeat of God is grace.

This is the way the Pharisees were, it was a performance-based relationship with God. They knew what the Bible said about sin, but they didn't understand the heartbeat of grace toward sinners - and so they are aghast when Jesus claims to reveal the Father, and He is touching lost people. Now, let me ask you a question - and this is a diagnostic question, and it will help you the rest of this week: have you got God all wrong? Have you got God all wrong? Or, to put it another way, what is your conception of God? Or, to put another slant on that question, does your idea of God come from Moses or does it come from Jesus Christ? Or to put it another way: is it legalistic, or is it grace-filled? This can be the reason for so much of our confusion - and you do hear people say today: 'I'm so confused, I hear so many people say so many things. You get these hard preachers, and they're really demanding this of me, and 'you need to pull your socks up, and pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, and you're not doing this right, and you need to do this', blah-blah-blah, and I go away feeling condemned. Then there are these other ones who tell you, 'Oh, God is always happy with you, and you can never do anything to annoy God or make Him angry'. Then there are so many gods in the world, there is a plethora of deities, and we are more open now to hearing what other people believe in our world - and many can be confused. Different ideas, different gods and concepts, and even within Christianity different expressions of faith - well, let's keep it simple.

Here's how to keep it simple, turn with me to John 14 verse 7, Jesus is speaking to the disciples, the early disciples and He says in John 14:7: 'If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him. Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us'. I think there was a little bit of frustration there in Philip, he's getting exasperated - parables, teachings, and all this stuff - and he says: 'Just show us God, and that will do, we'll be happy. Just show us the Father!'. Listen to what Jesus says, verse 9: 'Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father?'. 'He who has seen Me has seen the Father', or 'To see Me is to see the Father'. So this is how we understand God: Jesus came to reveal the heart of God - this is what's going on in the New Testament, in the Gospels in particular! The Jews had got a legalistic understanding of who God was. Yes, He had given them the law, but the law does not define God, it defines us! But now Jesus is coming, and He is in complete contradiction to everything that they believed in their religious psyche, and they don't recognise God when He shows up in human flesh. They know the book, but they don't recognise God Himself incarnate.

So, if you want to know what God's like, look at Jesus. It doesn't matter what any denomination, any preacher, any sect, or cult, or religious philosophy or belief says - all you need to do is look at Jesus, 'Whoever has seen Me, has seen the Father'. So it's vital that you get God right, because it will affect everything. It will affect you. Here's one of the reasons why it will affect you, and how it will affect you - listen to this: you



become like the God you worship. Do you know that? You become like the God you worship. Let me show you this from Scripture, keep a marker there in Luke 15, the prodigal, and turn with me to Psalm 115 - and Psalm 135 is like this as well, but we'll just look at this one, Psalm 115 - verse 3: 'But our God is in heaven; He does whatever He pleases. Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but they do not speak; eyes they have, but they do not see; they have ears, but they do not hear; Noses they have, but they do not smell; they have hands, but they do not handle; feet they have, but they do not walk; nor do they mutter through their throat. Those who make them are like them; so is everyone who trusts in them'. Do you see that? What is a false conception of God? Well, it's a false god, an idol - and idolatry affects you - what you believe affects the way that you behave. What it's actually saying here is that if you worship false conception of God, if it's an idol of wood, stone, or precious metals, and it has eyes but it cannot see, you're going to have a problem seeing into spiritual things; it has ears but it cannot hear, you're going to have problems hearing from God. You're going to have problems acting correctly, because this thing that you're worshipping has hands that don't move and feet that don't walk. There are a lot of 'Christians' today who have a conceptualisation of God that is wrong: He is a figure in history, but He's not doing too much these days - and do you know what happens? We don't do too much to break through for God today either.

You become like the God you worship, and so that's why you need to get God right. Turn with me to Galatians, keeping a marker in Luke 15, Galatians - you see why you're going to need your Bible! Galatians 3, and this is reiterating what I've said. Verse 24: 'Therefore the law was our tutor', our schoolmaster, our instructor, 'to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith'. That's what the law is for, to set us in the right direction, it's not an end in itself - but these Galatians were returning to the law, they were going back, and Paul was having to say: 'No, you're making a mistake, you're becoming slaves again when you're meant to be sons'. Look at chapter 4 and verse 10: 'You observe days and months and seasons and years', look at verse 9, 'After you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage?'. Another translation puts it: 'You turn to the miserable forces', the margin of the NIV says, 'principalities', and principles. You've left, you've been converted and transformed by grace from legalism, from dead religion, but why is it that you're now turning back to observe days and months and seasons and years, religious rituals?

See how this affected these Galatians, look down at verse 15 of chapter 4: 'What then was the blessing you enjoyed?' - I think it's the NIV, or maybe an old edition of the NIV, translates that 'What has happened to all your joy?'. What has happened to your joy? At the end of verse 15 it says: 'For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me' - now, some infer that maybe Paul had bad eyesight, and they were such compassionate people and full of the joy of the Lord that they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to the Apostle Paul at one time - but they had lost their joy, because with law comes a curse and the condemnation of death. What they were experiencing is: they were starting to worship a false conception of a legalistic God, and it affected their joy in Jesus Christ. They used to be generous and joyous, but they became like the God they worshipped.

Look at verses 4 through to 7 of Galatians 4: 'But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem', to

buy back, 'those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'. Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ'. You were slaves, but now you're meant to have the Spirit of God's Son, the Spirit of adoption, by which Jesus cries out within you: 'Abba, Father!'. In other words, we are meant to have a father-child relationship with God, not a slave-master relationship.

So, how do you relate to God? Do you have a father-child relationship, or a master-slave? Now, let's look back at the prodigal as we bring things to a close. Luke chapter 15 again, and this is really just setting us up in introduction for the rest of the week. Look at the prodigal and verse 19 - he had hit rock bottom, he had wasted the inheritance he took from his father, joined himself to certain people, and they had let him down. Now he's in the pigpen wanting to fill his belly with the pig swill, but not even able to do that. In verse 18 he decides he's going to get up and go back home, and he says: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you', verse 19, 'and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants'. Now I envisage this in the contemporary sense today, it would be as if he were standing in front of the mirror - and there was no mirror in the pigpen, that's for sure, it's just as well, if he had seen himself! But imagine him practising this spiel that he's going to say to his father who he has let down: 'Father, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Just make me like one of your hired servants'. The son had sinned so devastatingly, and abused the love of his father, that he thought he could only expect to be like a hired servant at home. He had burned his bridges, he had wrecked them, so he couldn't walk in and expect to be a son again.

But, you see, we need to see Father as he really is, and that's what this prodigal son needed to see. We will find out later on during the week that the father didn't even let him get out the words 'Make me as one of your hired servants', till he calls the servants to get a robe and put it on him, and a ring, and to kill the fatted calf. You see, God was going to establish him again as a son - that's the way the Father is. But look quickly at the other son in verse 29, he wasn't relating to God as a son to a father. He hears the commotion and the celebration in the house, because the prodigal had come home, and he asks a servant: 'What's going on?'. He hears that the prodigal had returned and his father had killed the fatted calf, and this is the response - the elder brother is angry, and in verse 29 he says to his father: 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends'. 'I've been serving you all these years, father, and you never did this for me, you never threw a party for me. I've never done anything wrong!'. Now, listen, who talks to their Dad like that? 'I have served you all these many years', is that the way you're meant to talk to your father? He was relating to his father as an employee to an employer, or as a servant to a master, but certainly not as a son to a father. I want to tell you: a lot of Christians are related to God like that. They are related to God on legalistic basis, and because of that they are religious - but they're not intimate with God, they have not gotten through to God, they have never known what it is for the love of God to be shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. They have never truly had a baptism of that liquid love from heaven that flows from the heart of God like a river.

Some people have many biblical concepts of God, but they're not personally intimate with Him because they don't enjoy Him as Father. Now I like the Presbyterians - do

you not know? Amen? I like them! Not all of them, I don't like everybody at all, you know - that's just being honest! I have a lot of Presbyterians in my family, and one great blessing is the catechism that we have from your heritage. Do you know what is the chief end of man? Come on, in unison - the chief end of man is: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever! Good, well done. To glorify God, but to enjoy Him - do you enjoy God? I mean, let's face it, if that hadn't been written hundreds of years ago, it probably wouldn't have got written now in some circles. Because, you know, 'enjoy God', you're talking about Him like He's Disneyland or something - we are meant to enjoy God! The problem is, if we have a false conception of Him we will not enjoy Him, we might be utterly terrified of Him. Now there is godly fear, and we will talk about that, but that is not something that is meant to separate us from God - because God is perfect love, and perfect love casts out fear, for fear speaks of punishment. There is a reverence for God, but it is not a shaking in the boots fear that keeps us away from the heart of Abba Father, and Jesus came to reveal the heart.

So there might be two things that afflict you - there are probably a whole lot of things, but relating to this - two things that we're going to tease out this week. The first is: you might have wrong teaching about God. You might have been party to - and I think in Ulster in particular we have been, and I'm guilty of doing it - we have been under harsh, legalistic, cold and demanding teaching concerning the heart of God. That needs to be addressed, and the imbalance redressed. Not only might we have been under wrong teaching about God, we may have had a wrong example of what a father is. We will look at this in detail in subsequent nights, but a father in the home is meant to cover us, he's meant to protect us, and he's meant to love us - give us boundaries, discipline, yes, and all that - but he's meant to show such a heart of tender love, protection, and security that we are pointed towards Abba Father.

Parents are meant to be signposts to God. God didn't decide to call Himself 'Father', because He thought we might understand what that means because we've got fathers, He called us 'fathers' because he is the Father - He had the name first. Our fathers are meant to point us toward God, but you and I both know that many of our fathers pointed us away from God. Maybe they taught us wrongly about God, and all we got was harshness and hardness from them in a religious sense, they blattered us to death with the Bible. Or maybe it is that they weren't there, they were absent, they left - and we will touch on this later in the week - we are in the fatherless generation. Maybe your father was there but he wasn't there, he was distant, maybe he was working, or maybe he was just passive - and there's a whole generation, even the war generation that came back from World War II, and they had to shut down their emotions in order to survive. So many men came back from war and didn't know how to show emotion - or even in the Troubles.

Maybe your father on earth pointed you away from God, maybe he was even abusive, and so the word 'father' sends shivers up your spine - not warm fuzzy feelings in your heart - that can be a barrier to you getting through to Father God. You need healing for father wounds, parent wounds, if you find it hard to have intimacy with God, if you find it hard to trust God. You will need to forgive the offending parent - and I'm not saying that in a glib way, to just expect that to be a decision in a moment. We bless our parents, as God's word encourages us, and honour them - but we've got to confess our own sins toward them, but also not be in denial that there isn't any perfect parent. I'm not one, and you're not one, and you didn't have any. Some of us need to stop living in denial of what our parents actually did or didn't do.

Let me have an experiment with you as I bring everything to a close. If you were to die tonight (I hope you don't), and go to heaven (I hope you do) - and when you went through the pearly gates, there were three doors in front of you. One door said 'Father', over on the left; the middle door said 'The Son'; and over at the right there was a door 'The Holy Spirit' - OK? You were free, an angel told you, to go into whatever door you want - what door would you go through? Think about it. Right, we'll take a vote here! Who would go through the door of the Holy Spirit? Stick your hand up - where are the wacky folk? That's what people think, isn't it? Oh, you never know what will happen if you go through that door, the charismatic folk, you know! Where are the emotional people? That's what they say people are like - some of you don't look too happy! Put your hand up if you're going to go through the Holy Spirit door - you're allowed to put your hands up. They have permission to put their hands up, haven't they? You're not going to have to pay anything now! Put your hand up if you're going through the door of the Holy Spirit - nobody? Oh, a couple in the back there! Elders, you would need to talk to them afterwards! A couple of folk there, I think they're visiting!

What about the Son, who would go through the door with the Son? Who would go through the door of the Father? There's quite a few - I think you're all licks, you're doing that because it's 'The Father Heart of God', aren't you? Well, a lot of people are afraid of the Holy Spirit, but generally speaking, I think most people would go through the door of the Son, because of 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, tell me the stories of Jesus', what we know of Him. That is right, in one sense, because He is personable, He is human, He has come to us, He talks with words we understand, He uses parables - we touch Him in the Gospels, He is in a body - but why did He come? To reveal the Father. Some of us would not walk through that door of the Father, because we don't really know Father God, we don't know what's in His heart. Some of us are afraid of Him, some of us think of this despotic headmaster type figure, ready to strike us down when we take a wrong step: 'We're breaking His law!'. Sometimes that has come from wrong teaching, and sometimes it has come from our own father experience.

Thomas Jefferson, the President of the United States, was crossing a swollen river with his troops and one fellow fell off his horse. He stood on the riverbank and waited. One soldier went by on horseback, another, and another, and another. He waited until a few went by, and then he asked the President for a lift, and President Jefferson let him on the back of the horse and took him across to the other side of the river. When he got to the other side, his mates said to him: 'Why on earth, out of all the boys that were coming across the river, did you ask the President for a lift?!'. Do you know what he said? 'I didn't know he was the President, all I know is: on some people's faces is written the word 'No', and on other people's faces is written the word 'Yes', and 'Yes' was on his face'.

John chapter 1 tells us: 'The law came by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ'. Some of you need to hear this tonight: Jesus has a big 'Yes' written on His face, because there is a 'Yes' in the heart of Father God towards the lost, towards the broken, towards the estranged, towards the disenfranchised, towards sinners. God says 'Yes', and He is for you, not against you. Are you excited? It doesn't look like it! Are you excited? Are you excited about looking into God's heart this week? Can I ask you to pray a prayer every day - would you do it for me? It's not: 'For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful' - that's about the height of how

some of our praying goes every day. You pray this one - go to the beginning of the book of Ephesians, and it's in there - ask the Lord to open the inner eyes of your understanding, that you might see the four dimensional love of God. Would you go home and pray that every day, a very simple prayer, and come every night - I know that's a tall order, but if you can't come every night get the recordings, because you'll miss something. I'm going to take a different thing every night, you'll miss something, and you need it all. So come, bring people with you, folk who you know need love - and we all need love, and we all need God's love.

Let's pray. We have received transforming truths from Abba's heart to yours, and tonight's is that it beats with the rhythm of grace - so does your heart beat with grace or law? Maybe you need to talk to the Lord about wrong teaching that you've received, or a wrong example that you were given - well, why not do that? Maybe you are ready, some of you may be ready to forgive that father, or maybe a mother, a parent who has driven you away from intimacy and love and affection, and ultimately away from God and His love? We will be looking at that in much detail during the week. Why not start by just saying: 'Lord, whatever, whatever is blocking me from intimacy with Your heart, why I can't see You, and I'm not experiencing Your love in my heart - Lord, would You show me, and would You show me how to deal with it'.

Father, we thank You for what You have done tonight, and what You're going to do this week. We thank You, Father, for revealing Your heart in Jesus. We love Him, Lord, we just love Him, and that makes us love You - because we know what You're like now, we know what You're like. You're for us, not against us. May we all receive that love, may we see You a little bit clearer tonight - and by the end of the week, may we have such a revelation that we will be overwhelmed by the love of Father God. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## *The Father Heart Of God - Chapter 2*

# **"The Answer For Our Aching Hearts"**

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Good evening everyone, it's great to be here again tonight - and thank you for joining us, we do appreciate the pressure it is during the week at any given time, but especially this week, and I am a parent myself so I understand all that is going on at the moment in families. I do believe that if you can get along, and even the nights you won't be here if you can get the recordings, you will be blessed - and it is consecutive ministry, therefore, if you do miss a night, you're going to miss something. Now, I'm not scolding you for not being here, but if you can try and get the ministry it will be helpful to fill in the gaps. I'm going to be dealing with something different every night in relation to 'The Father Heart of God', and I think every single truth, and every aspect to this very intrinsic truth in Christianity, is vital for you to catch. As you have already been exhorted, encourage people to come along, please - as you will see tonight, this is a truth for our times, more than many other truths that we are so familiar with.

So it's good to be here, if you will turn with me in your Bibles - now, we will be in Luke chapter 15, where we were last night, and we will be there several evenings at the prodigal son - but I want you also to turn to Malachi chapter 4, that's the last book in the Old Testament, Malachi chapter 4. Now, last night we began studying 'The Father Heart of God', transforming truths from Abba's heart to yours - and we looked at how the Father's heart 'Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace' - and tonight we're going to look at 'The Answer For Our Aching Hearts'. This truth, the Father heart of God, is the answer for our aching hearts, and indeed our aching generation. Now, just as a heads up for what is coming, tomorrow night - we've been hinting at father problems that we can have as human beings - tomorrow night I'm going to spend all night on that, and we're going to look at 'Father Flaws'. Wednesday night, the women aren't getting off the hook, we're looking at 'Mother Wounds'; and on Thursday night we're looking at 'The Disease of the Elder Brother'. On Friday night we're going to look at what it means to 'Abide In Abba's Love' - it's all right having a great revelation of it at a series like this, or maybe in some kind of crisis experience in your personal life, but we've got to live in this from day to day. It's got to be something that keeps us going as Christians on a daily basis. So don't pick and choose, now, the ones that sound good; and the ones that are a bit scary, 'I'll not go to that' - come to as many as you possibly can. There might be folk who you know, and feel led to invite, because you know they've had father issues, or problems with their mother, or whatever - the difficulty comes when the whole family comes to this church, eh?! Just all come together, and the Lord will speak to those who need to hear.

Let's pray before we read the Scripture. I don't know how many of you were able to pray Ephesians 1, which I was talking about. We sang it really, 'Open the eyes of our hearts', let's ask the Lord to do that now - and you might even want (you don't have to do it, of course), you could put your hand on your heart just as we pray, and say:

'Lord, just as my eyes are open to physical things and those things that are seen, open the eyes of my heart to the things that are unseen'. You might want to put your hand on your heart, and just say it now as we come to the Lord: Father, we come to you in Jesus' mighty name, and we ask that You will give to us the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, that the eyes of our understanding would be enlightened, that we may know what is the hope of Your calling upon our lives, and what are the riches of the glory of the inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of Your power that is toward us who believe - according to that power which You worked in Christ when you raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at Your right hand in heavenly places, above all principalities, powers, might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in that which is to come. Father, open the eyes of our hearts, we want to see You. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. So let's read first of all from Malachi and then from Luke. So Malachi chapter 4, and we're just reading verses 5 and 6: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD"*. Now let me just say, and I'm not going to go into this in any detail, but we know that John the Baptist came in the spirit and anointing of Elijah - but he was not actually Elijah. We know that he was the forerunner, in that prophetic mantle, for the Messiah coming - and that ministry has been fulfilled. But the indications of Old Testament Scripture are that before Jesus returns again - there will be many similarities to His first coming, of course many differences, but one of the similarities is that there is going to be a prophetic Elijah that will come. Whether it's the literal Elijah, who of course never died, maybe the Lord will send him back again, I don't know - but certainly there is going to come a character or a ministry of some kind, with the same anointing of Elijah, as the forerunner to Jesus coming again and the dreadful Day of the Lord. But here's a characteristic of this Elijah's ministry that maybe you've never thought about, verse 6: *"He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers"* - this is an end time ministry, a prophetic ministry that is going to be particularly pertinent in the last days, which I think we are in; a prophetic ministry that turns the hearts of fathers to children, and the hearts of children to fathers - and this is the parting shot in the Old Testament: *"Lest I come"*, the Lord says, *"and strike the earth with a curse"*.

Now turn to Luke chapter 15, we're not going to read any of it just at the moment. We're looking at how this truth of the Father heart of God is the answer for our aching hearts. Thousands, yes probably millions, would not agree with what I'm about to say, but during the 1960s there was what we now know as a sexual revolution. You know what that was. We could talk about it from a political or social capacity, but the fact of the matter is, as Bible believing Christians - and I have to say that this is what I believe, this is my commentary on it - that during that period of time, and for that matter since the sexual revolution, there has been a moral and spiritual meltdown in our society. Around about the same time there was the rise of feminism, some of it very militant feminism - now, I'm not a chauvinist, but nevertheless I'm certainly not a feminist. Fatherhood, during that period of time, and indeed masculinity, became increasingly unfashionable. I don't think that that has changed much. In fact that - even if feminism isn't as popular today, and even if some of the mistakes of the sexual revolution are acknowledged even in secular circles - fatherhood, manhood, masculinity, is not popular at all. Our age, I believe, is suffering, more than any, the fallout of the sexual revolution. I think we could accurately be described as 'the

fatherless generation'.

Fatherlessness is, without doubt, the social crisis of our nation, and indeed probably of our world. You don't have to be a Christian to agree with this following statement: the family is in crisis, it is in trouble. Only last week I was reading in the press that Britain has the highest divorce rate in the European Union. A survey was taken and it has only been released, the results of it, last week - and we are up there with the highest divorce rates. The United States statistics on divorce seem to indicate that there is little difference between those who are professing Christians and those who aren't in the matter of the divorce rate. A survey from last week's findings in the UK tell us that the rate of births outside marriage has risen sharply, more than one child in four from around 1990 - that's about 39% of births.

Now, if you study revival history, you will find out that during every move of God, every awakening, every renewal in the church, there was a particular social crisis. You can go right back to John Wesley and George Whitefield, and you'll see during those times Gin Palaces and all sorts of immorality and illegitimacy, and all sorts of things going on there. Before every revival there seems to be a particularly marked social and moral crisis that characterises that era of history. Just after that, God pours out His Spirit, but He also remedies, in grace, that particular moral issue. I believe that in our present-day crisis of the fatherless generation, and as we approach and are in the end times, approaching the return of Jesus, that this truth of the Father Heart of God is one that He's going to use in order to revive the church, and indeed restore humanity in His grace. As we saw it tonight from Malachi chapter 4, God has promised in the end times that He will turn the father's hearts back to the children, and the hearts of their children to the fathers. The antithesis of that, really, is that when father's hearts are turned toward anything other than their children, there is a curse on the family, and even - it says here - upon the land. I believe that doesn't just apply to the land of Israel, I believe that applies to any land, and our land in this 21st-century. Because we, generally speaking, have turned our back as a people on marriage, on the family, on biblical fatherhood, we are seeing a curse right across our society. This truth of the Father Heart of God is the answer for our aching hearts, and indeed our aching age and society.

The prodigal son here in Luke chapter 15 is a wonderful picture of the brokenness of our nation, and indeed individuals within it, many hearts that are estranged from Father God. So I want us to look at it tonight, and I want you to see from verse 11, as we look at this parable: 'Then Jesus said: 'A certain man had two sons'. Now I said last evening that often this parable is called the parable of the prodigal son, I would rather call it 'The Parable of Abba's Heart' - but even if you go with the prodigal son title, you will see that it's about two sons. We're going to spend all of Thursday night looking at the elder brother, but we can't ignore the fact that this father had two sons - and they were very different, they were like chalk and cheese. The oldest one seems to be the more sensible, and the youngest the more wild. I don't mean to say that that has to be the case in every home, but often it is - certainly in our house!

One of these sons chose the world, that's obvious - we have come to know him as 'the prodigal' - but the other chose religion. Neither of them, neither of them saw into father's heart. If anything, it was the prodigal when he returned who understood what was in his father's heart, when the elder brother remained blinded. We're going to look tonight at the wayward son. In verse 12, he requests: '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'. This is very interesting, this was a request that should not have been made. This was the inheritance that the sons would receive, both of them, at the death of their father - but he's coming and he is requesting it before he is deceased, which is tantamount to saying: 'Dad, I wish you were dead, I wish you were six foot under so that I could get my hands on your money'. How would father have felt at that? How would you have felt? Yet, you notice that this father isn't in anyway aggressive, he is not some kind of despotic dictator in the home, and he didn't pummel him into submission. It's interesting.

Remember that this father is a picture of God, your Father, Abba Father. Whatever your view is of predestination and the sovereignty of God - and I'll let you have it, and I have mine and my questions about it all, I've more questions probably than answers it has to be said - but whatever your view is on that: God is big on freewill. There is no such a thing as absolute freewill, nobody can just do whatever they want, but God has created a measure of openness in the decisions that we make as human beings. He has made us in His image, and one of the aspects is the ability to make choice, volition. So God gives us principles, He gives us laws, and we have to live within those - but there is a great measure of choice that we have in it. Sometimes we ask the question: 'Well, why did God not stop so and so going down that road, and why did He not stop this happening in my circumstances, why did He not intervene? Why did this father not do more to prevent his son going to the far country and wrecking himself?' - because we live in a universe of free choice, and we are responsible for the decisions we make. Parents, I know you have to have boundaries and you have to have rules in the home, it cannot be anarchy or chaos - but sometimes when your children do want to walk away, sometimes you've got to let them go if you want to get them back. It doesn't always work standing in their way. I think - although I'm going to be talking mainly to the children of parents tonight, what your relation has been to your parents - if you are a parent tonight with wayward or rebellious children, you can take on yourself a lot of false guilt and shame. You ask yourself: 'What have I done wrong? What did I not do for them?'

Quickly, and this is not what I'm dwelling on but I feel I need to do this, turn with me to Isaiah chapter 1. Keep your finger in Luke there, turn to Isaiah chapter 1. If there is anyone here with false guilt and shame over how you have parented your children, and how they have turned out, you need to hear this. Now I'm not saying that we aren't responsible for wrong decisions, and we do make mistakes, every single one of us, and we're going to see that throughout the week - the damage that parents and authority figures can do - but nevertheless there can be false guilt and shame. Look at Isaiah 1 and verse 2 please, this is God Almighty speaking, He says: 'Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken' - look at this - "I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me". This is God the Father speaking! He's got kids, and they have gone wayward. Of course, it was Israel and Judah in the Old Testament, but that's what the prodigal son is about in Luke chapter 15 - it's about the Jewish race. These are His children, and if God can have children that rebel against Him - and that's the story of the Bible - how can we be exempt? It doesn't necessarily mean that we've done things wrong. God hasn't done anything wrong toward His children, and yet they can still rebel.

Look at verse 13, back to Luke chapter 15, it says that he received this inheritance, and verse 13: 'Not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed

to a far country'. Now I'm speaking, I believe, to people here tonight, and they may not necessarily be young, but you're on a journey - all of us are on a journey - but you're on a journey into the far country. Every journey starts with small steps. Now I'm not a big traveller, it has to be said, I could tell you a few stories that would make your hair stand on end! I don't really like travelling, only when it's necessary - but a number of years ago I needed to go to Australia for a series of ministry. You know what it's like, it's the other side of the world - just in case you didn't know that! It's way down at the bottom, down under! I live in Portadown, and my journey to the other ends of the earth, 22 hours on one of those big A380s, it started by my alarm going beside my bed, and me putting one foot in front of the other, and getting out and going to the bathroom, freshening myself up, putting my clothes on, getting in the car, going to the airport. That was my journey, it started with little steps, and I ended up within 22 hours at the ends of the earth. The longest journeys into the farthest recesses of morality and spirituality always start with small steps, and I wonder how far you are on that journey? Our society is on a journey, and it's big-time into the spiritual wilderness right now.

Agatha Christie wrote a book entitled 'The Labours of Hercules', and in it there is a nightclub that is visited by Hercules Poirot the detective, and it's called 'Hell' - that's the name of the nightclub, it should be the name of every nightclub really. The steps of the nightclub, it's subterranean, under the ground, the steps have slogans on them. Step one: I meant well. Step two: I will wipe the slate clean and start afresh. Step three: I can give it up at any time I like. As Hercules Poirot is walking down these steps, he is heard to murmur under his breath: 'These are the good intentions that pave the way to hell'. Maybe that's how your journey into the far country started: 'I'm not doing anybody any harm. I can quit this whenever it suits me, and start all over again. I can give this up any time I like'. But you know tonight that you are on a journey, and you have had good intentions - and, let's face it, very few of us make conscious decisions to harm ourselves or to harm others. Now we might get to the point where we don't care any more how we are hurt, and how many other people we hurt in the process, but generally speaking all of us are looking for love, we're looking for life and happiness - but very few of us ever achieve that. That's what this wayward son thought he was going to get: 'Get my pots of dough from my Dad, and go and have a wild time - and that's what it's all about!'

But this wayward son ended up wasteful. He was searching for meaning and for love in all the wrong places. It says 'he wasted his substance', that's what it says in verse 13, he wasted his possessions with prodigal or riotous living. Looking for love and meaning in all the wrong places, what's going to happen is, you're going to waste yourself. Maybe you're far tonight in the far country, and you could be far from your family, you could be far from your Mum or your Dad, you could be far from a spouse, a husband or wife, you're certainly far from God - you're estranged from God. Maybe you're dabbling in things that previously would have been unthinkable for you, you never ever thought you would have got to the low levels to which you have delved and you find yourself tonight, and you could be described as 'wasted'. That's the way young people talk about getting high, or getting drunk, being 'wasted' - and that's really what happens. When we try to find meaning in all the wrong places, we get wasted. Our bodies get wasted, we are affected physically by lifestyles of sin and ungodliness. Our souls get wasted, and if you understand the soul as the mind, the emotions, and the will, the actions - they get wasted. Your spirit gets wasted, that's the part is meant to relate to God - it gets further estranged from God, and starts to worship other things. You were

not created to be wasted, God created you in His image to be invested, for your life to count. We can talk about Hell and the Judgement Day and all the rest - and that's coming, the Bible teaches that - but there is not only a judgement for sin that's on the way, but there is a judgement in sin now, the wages of sin is death, it produces death in us.

So this lad wasted away with, verse 13 says, riotous, prodigal living. What's that? It's what you get up to when authority figures aren't around. Verse 14 says 'he spent all', and there arose a severe famine in the land and he began to be in want. 'He spent all', it's so graphic, you hardly need to explain this parable - do you feel spent? The reason why you feel spent is that you've paid the price, but you've not received the goods. Did you know, by the way, that the devil always shortchanges? Jesus said that in John 10, he is a thief, he comes to steal, kill, and destroy; Jesus came to give us life in abundance, real life, life to the full. Do you remember that Ronseal advert that used to be on the television years ago? 'It does exactly what it says on the tin' - well, sin doesn't do what it says on the tin. The enemy will lie to you, he will make claims - and, yes, there is pleasure in sin, the Bible clearly says that. That's why temptation is such a problem, that's why this young fellow got lured into the far country, because it was attractive, it was tantalising. I'm not going to tell you a lie, sin is pleasurable - but the Bible says it's only for a season, and then the serpent's venom comes after he bites his teeth into you. There is a payment, there is a debt that you've got to pay for sin, and it's death, it's bondage and waste. He spent all and the devil shortchanged him, he robbed him.

During the 60s the Rolling Stones sang: 'I can't get no satisfaction', some of you can remember that, eh? Well, if you saw them today, you would realise they still haven't got any satisfaction! During the 80s U2, they sang: 'I still haven't found what I'm looking for'. These songs, you know, they are expressing - out of the mouth the heart speaks - and when these pop stars and rock stars are honest with their emotions in their artistic gifts, they reflect the deep aching void that is in their hearts. No matter where they have turned, no matter how much money they have, no matter what sensual pleasures they indulge to excess, they still can't get that sense of meaning, that sense of being and purpose.

So we find this young fellow in the environment of famine. What is a famine? Well, it's whenever there is no food, no water - and if you haven't got food and water, what have you not got? Life. There is a famine in our society today whereby we are satisfying every pleasure available, we are satiating our natural appetites, but our souls are starving. Many are engaging in illusions of intimacy - take Internet pornography - illusions of intimacy, but we ourselves are disconnected from other human beings. Just like the prodigal, many of us as individuals and, I believe, as a society, we're going to have to hit rock bottom - and just in case you think we're there, we aren't there yet, we're a long way off. God sometimes has to let us hit the floor, before we realise that these are broken cisterns that we are hewing out that can hold no water, and we have forsaken the Fountain of Living Waters that is our God.

This wayward, wasted son, started engaging in wishful thinking. Look at verse 15, he joined himself to a citizen of that country, and that citizen sent him into his fields to feed swine - you know swine, pigs, are unclean animals to the Jews. This was unthinkable. But you see that it says that he 'joined himself' - you see this is what happens, this is what happens, OK: we are made in the image of God, and the only

way we can be satisfied as human beings is in relation to the true and living God as our Abba Father. You've got to understand that. But if you don't want to look there, but you're still looking for this satisfaction, finding what you're looking for all your life in humanity to boot, you will join yourself to cheap imitations thinking that that will satisfy you. Of course, life holds a variety of alternatives for those who lack a secure connectedness with God's love. We look to pleasures to compensate for the lack of meaning in our lives, this is what this young man was doing.

I want to urge you tonight: you need to look in the right place for the right thing. What are you joining yourself to tonight, to try and find satisfaction and meaning? It doesn't have to be anything particularly sinful - often it is, but it could be your education, it could be career, it could be trying to find meaning in your family, it could be in religion - but there is no intimacy with God that actually satisfies the heart. In verse 16 it says 'he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, but no one gave him anything'. I mean it was unclean, unthinkable for him to satisfy himself with the pig food, but he couldn't even fill his belly with that! It didn't work, he accepted a cheap imitation. Often that's what we do, we take second-best because we don't want to say: 'I was wrong', we don't want to have to turn on our heels and go back to Father God. So we receive a sticking plaster, a quick fix, rather than the real thing.

Eventually his wishful thinking turned to a wise decision, verse 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!'. He came to himself, we would say from the East of Belfast - a very refined place where I come from - he wised up, he caught himself on, he came to his senses. He realised there is no place like home, 'Father's house is filled with bread - and here I am sitting with the pigs, and I can't even eat their food. There is no place like home, there is no one loves me like father' - I want to ask you tonight: have you realised that yet? He said: 'How many of his hired servants have bread enough and to spare?', and you're maybe a son of God, a daughter of God, a child of God - and look at what you could be, but look at where you are right now. Look at how you are living at this moment: are you living as a son or a daughter, or are you living as a slave? Do you realise who your Father is? Do you realise that your Father is there for you? We're going to spend all week just unravelling this, and there is so much that I'm just bursting to say - but I'm having to go slow because I don't want to give you too much too quickly. Do you know who your Father is, do you realise that He is there? In this parable we see this wayward, wasted boy who had momentary wishful thinking - he makes this wise decision, and when he does it, when he comes to his senses, what does he find? Does he find what is often preached, this God up there ready to knock your block off because you're a sinner, going to just zap you, dangle you over hell until you feel sorry for your sins? We believe in a holy God, we believe in a just God, we believe that there is a hell, we believe that there is a Judgement Day coming, but the New Testament message is that Christ did not come into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. The message today is grace, it is the compassion of the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus.

When he wised up and stopped looking to second-best and substitutes of intimacy with his father, when he decided to get up and go home, what did he find? He found a welcoming father. I want to tell you here, on the authority of God's word, whatever you have done tonight: if you come home you will find a welcoming Father - I guarantee it. When he repented - what's that? He said: 'I will arise and go' - there was a change of direction here. Now maybe you don't have the power to give up your sin,

and we're not suggesting you should - only God can give that power - but you've got to have a willingness in your mind and in your heart to say: 'My sin is actually wasting me, it's destroying me, and it's keeping me from God'. You've got to be willing to have that changed, and to turn from that and turn to God for help. That's what he did, he repented - an about turn - and said: 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him'. What's that? That's confession: 'I'm going to agree with God, I'm going to agree with my father, I got it wrong. I'm guilty as charged'. But he went a little bit too far, and we will see that in a moment or two.

He found a welcoming father. I think, I've a hunch that he knew something of what was in his father's heart, and that's why he contemplated returning to him. I think that figures: he must have known there was a chance that his father would take him in. He was hardly going to make all this journey of humiliation home if he thought he was going to be thrown out. It's interesting, isn't it? I have to not run away with myself, but I'm looking forward to Thursday night, to this elder brother - could it be that this prodigal son, in all of his sin and shame, knew more that was in the heart of Father God than the boy who was all religious did? Interesting thought, isn't it?

Here is the welcoming father. What do you expect when you come to God? What have you been taught to see in Father? As we go back a little bit to last night, and also forward a bit to tomorrow night, what did you see in your own father? I mean, if you had done something like this and you had wasted a fortune of your Dad's - I mean, imagine, what would your own father have been like? What would you be like as a father or a parent? What would you expect if you had sullied the family name, if you had sinned and caused yourself to be cut off from the congregation of God's people in this day and age? What would you expect from your father? Well, here is the Father who meets you tonight in grace, look at verse 20: the father saw him a great way off. Now I want you to ask the question of the Scriptures: how did the father see him a great way off? How is this possible? Let me tease it out for you: how did he know when the young fellow was coming home? Did he? No. Did he know what time of day it was? Did he know what season of the year it was? So what does this infer? He was watching for him. Was he watching for him on Fridays? On the Sabbath? It appears he was watching for him every single day from the moment that he walked out of the house. Now, that's profound. In all likelihood he was on a rooftop. I want you to picture this old man, broken because of his son's sin, and yet filled with a heart of love and grace. He's looking out there, squinting toward the horizon, and what is he looking for? The small silhouette of that familiar form of his boy coming home.

I want to tell you: that is the heart of God toward you. This parable, as we saw last night, is revealing - look at verses 1 to 3 - the tax collectors and the sinners are eating with Jesus, and the religious Pharisees are saying, 'How can this be? This is a scandal! This is against the law!'. But, you see, Jesus came to reveal the heart of God, that it is for sinners, it's for the lost, it's for the broken. Here's a picture of a God, not getting His kicks by throwing people into hell, but a picture of a God whose eyes are focused, waiting for sinners to repent.

Every day he's looking from that house top. How many miles had the young fellow travelled? How many have you travelled? I don't know what direction you're going tonight, whether you're going out or you're coming back, but I want to tell you this: He sees you. Wherever you are, He sees exactly where you are. You know, this is something we're all looking for, even if we don't realise it - we're all looking for

intimacy. That's why we've been made, we're looking for intimacy, and God made us in order to get intimacy from one another - but ultimately we need to get our chief, primary intimacy from God. 'Intimacy', that word can be broken up into several words, 'in', 'to', 'me', 'see' - isn't that good? We want to be known, we want to be known, we want to know who we are, and we want to be known, and we want to know another.

It says that the father, if you look at verse 20, he ran - he ran! Now we miss this, but in this day and age - well, elderly men tend not to run! - but men in general, out of dignity, in this civilisation, in this society, they didn't run. It was seen to be undignified, unbecoming, especially for an elderly man, to run. So this father, what happens? It says that he saw him a great way off. He didn't wait until he was at the front door and wait until he grovelled a little bit, and came up and got on his knees and said sorry, and then he threw his arms around him. Once he saw the direction in which he was coming, he didn't even wait for him to come home. I want you to see this in your mind's eye: he gathered up his skirts - men wore the skirts in those days - he gathered up the skirts, because he would have had to run down from the house top, down the stairs at the side of the little house. He gathers up his skirts so that he doesn't trip, and he runs down these stairs - and the old man runs out! Everybody is watching him, thinking: 'What is happening here? Has the man lost his reason'. He is running into the desert - this is God! It's not the way a lot of us would portray God - oh, our stuffiness that we have in our religious spirit - but this is God. He is losing His dignity. Do you know that God lost His dignity? Do you know that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself? Jesus, as He hangs naked on that cross between heaven and earth, He is bearing our guilt and our shame. He is God's Son, God was in Him doing this so that we might be redeemed. He condescended, He came down - what love!

That's the glory of God, the cross - and yet it is utter foolishness. This is foolishness for an old man, a father, to be running after a wicked, wayward son. But you see, the Bible says the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. When we sin, what do we often think as Christians? What do you think when you sin? What way do you think God is with you? Well, we often think He must be angry with us, and then what we do? Like Adam and Eve we hide in the Garden, we think God is angry and so we run from God - and this is often what we do: we then ran to false comforts; or, if we are of the religious ilk, we try to appease God out of religious fear, and earn His favour again, and give that awful thing up and try to do a few good things to redress the balance. But not only does Jesus say here that we can run to the Father because there is forgiveness, it's even greater than that: the Father runs to us! Eh? We've got this religious thing, a lot of false guilt and shame - now don't get me wrong, I believe in the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and I believe we ought to feel a bit wick when we sin - but we are to confess our sins, and He is faithful and just to forgive us. When He does forgive us, when we truly repent and confess, if we're still feeling miserable it's not the conviction of the Holy Spirit, it's the condemnation of the devil. Did you get that? When we really do repent and confess our sin, if we still feel miserable it's not the conviction of the Holy Spirit, it's the condemnation of the accuser, the enemy.

What a picture of Father God running, in verse 20, He has compassion. Now listen: your sin hurts God, and it's because of your sin and mine that Jesus died on the cross - we're not belittling it at all - but you've got understand that He wants you, He loves you, and He doesn't condemn you. Verse 21, he comes and - as we saw last night, I imagine this type of mirror exercise that he performs in the pigpen, obviously no

mirror there - but he is rehearsing, 'What am I going to say to my Dad? Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no more worthy to be called your son' - that's what he practices in verse 19. 'Make me like one of your hired servants. I've broken my trust with you, and I burned my bridges, and I don't even expect - I'm not expecting anything - just make me like a hired servant'. But look at verse 21, the son said to him 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight', he's rehearsing this spiel, 'and am no longer worthy to be called your son', and God stops him - He interrupts him - the father does, a picture of God. He won't let him say: 'Make me one of your hired servants'. How does father, the picture of God here, interrupt in verse 22? '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. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'. And they began to be merry'. He doesn't let him finish his speech, he's not even going to hear the words 'Make me like a slave or a hired servant' - no! You're a son, and you will be a son!

This is beautiful: he got a robe, the best robe, and put it on him. Now I don't want you all to get all theological on me, but this is what it says, all right? He put the robe on before he was washed - true? Before he was even clean, he covered over his shame. Now you work that out whatever way you like, but it's there, and it's beautiful. A lot of us have a lot of shame still covered, it still hasn't been sorted out - but, praise God, if it's under the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ, it's covered! You can be covered, your shame can be covered if you come home. He puts a ring on his finger, that speaks of the family authority. You can belong, you can belong! You see, what has happened from that sexual revolution that I talked about, and through illegitimacy and fatherless families, there's a lot of sense of insecurity and lack of acceptance and belonging. There's a lot of guys and all they're looking for is their father. We could go into the whole area of sexual orientation and everything, and I'll touch on some of those things on further nights, but there are issues here, there is a fallout of gender orientation, sexual issues, that's coming from the breakup of the family. It's not the cause of it all, but it's a major cause of why we're seeing things today that we've never seen the like of before.

But you can have authority, you can have identity, and authority speaks of power. You can have power to overcome the mess and the waste and the prodigality that you've experienced in your life - there is power to be free if you come home to Father! That's what He wants to do for you. In verse 23 the fatted calf was killed, and that's food, isn't it? You can be filled and you could be satisfied with life, because this son was dead and is alive, was lost and is found. I want to ask you as I bring this to a close tonight: have you been found by Father's love? Have you been found by Father's love yet? Now we have a lot still to do this week, OK? We're only dipping our toe into the edge of this great ocean of the Father's love, but I want to ask you: is this how you have seen the Father God? There is such a crisis of identity in our society: 'Who am I? I don't know who I am! I don't know what I'm meant to be!'. Do you know what a law of nature is? Wherever there is a void, something will try to fill it. If you have a void of identity, you have a void of being, you have a void of meaning, you can be sure all sorts of things will come in and confuse the matter even more. But when the prodigal got a revelation of who his father was - wait for it - he discovered who he was. That's what you need! Then he could really celebrate, he could celebrate when he knew who his father was, and who he was as a son, and what was his.

Listen: if you've never been converted, you've never become a Christian, why not tonight? If you've gone on a long journey away from God - once you knew Him, but now you're in the far country - why don't you come home? You've seen into His heart tonight. Or maybe you're a Christian, and you're maybe not in the far country, you're maybe like the elder brother - you've been in the Father's house for a long time, but you've never seen into His heart, you've never understood the love. Maybe you've been trying to earn His pleasure and His favour by doing things, and when you sin you run away from God. Maybe you fall into secret sin that nobody would know about, or your religious friends - you wouldn't like them to hear about that - but that's how you deal with it, and you know it's wrong, but you can't break the cycle because you're frightened to go to God with your sin. That's where we're meant to go, we are meant to bring our sin into relationship with God and ask Him for help and healing for it.

Years ago there was a girl called Maria, and she had a teenage daughter called Christina. Christina was a bit wild. They lived in Brazil, and she wanted to go to Rio de Janeiro and enjoy herself. Her mother was continually trying to convince her not to do this. One day her mother's worst nightmare was realised when she went up to the bedroom to waken Christina for school, and there was no response. She went into the room, and she was gone - her bed was made, her bag was packed, and she had opened the window and left. So, instinctively, Maria knew what to do. She went down to the local pharmacy, she took a load of little photographs, passport photographs of herself, put them in her bag, bought a bus ticket to Rio de Janeiro. She went there and went everywhere she possibly could, she went into bars, into nightclubs, into hostels, into public toilets, phone booths - and she would stick these little photographs of herself on mirrors and noticeboards and signs. When she exhausted all of her resources, the photographs, she bought another ticket home and left Rio de Janeiro.

One morning, after a night where Christina had given more than she ever wanted to, she had been wasted in sin, she was walking down the stairs and in the bathroom in the corner of her eye she glimpsed something that was vaguely familiar - then realised, 'No, it couldn't be!', and she squinted and saw a photograph of her Mum. She reached down quickly and flicked that photograph off the mirror, and turned it round, and on the back was written a message: 'Christina, whatever you have done, wherever you have been, whatever you have become, just come home'. That's the heart of Father God to you tonight: whatever you've done, wherever you have been, whatever you have become, just come home. He loves you, and He wants you, and He wants to heal you, to cleanse you, to fix you.

What a Father - but your Heavenly Father is beyond what you could ever imagine of any earthly father. He says 'You can', if you come to Him, He says 'Yes', if you'll come and confess your sin and turn from it. He has given everything for you, will He not do everything now for you? Let's just pray for a moment before we sing our closing hymn, and I want to first of all invite a response from Christians. Please, every head bowed and every eye closed, this is between people and God but it's good to have outward confession. Is there anyone here and you have lost touch with God - maybe you've never had it, but you're a professing Christian - but you want to return to the Lord? Maybe you're in a far country, or maybe you have immersed yourself in religious activity to buy God's favour, but you have never seen into the heart of Father God. You don't have that intimacy, and you want it tonight, you want to come out of the far country and you want to know relationship rather than religion. Would you raise your hand just where you're sitting to acknowledge need tonight, as an indication - God



bless you - that you're coming to the Father? Just raise your hand high enough so that I can see it, and you can put it down again. God bless you. God bless you, I see your hand, you can put it down. God bless you. Is there anyone else? God bless you.

Is there anyone who has never become a Christian, and you want to come to the Father tonight. You've always felt estranged, you've always felt something is missing, the guilt and weight of your sin weighs you down - and you want to come to the Father who gave His Son for you at the cross, and shed His blood, and you want to come tonight. Is there anyone, young or old, that wants to trust Christ tonight for the very first time? Would you just raise your hand where you are, just so that I can see it and we will pray with you and lead you in prayer? Are there any here tonight who are not Christians? I know these are meetings for Christians, but there might be someone and you never met the Father before. Is there anyone?

Let me lead those folk who indicated in prayer, would you come now and just pray with me - and you've got to mean it yourself from your heart - just pray with me: Father, I come to You in Jesus' name, and I confess my own sin and waywardness - maybe you have to confess tonight that you haven't had a good example of a father, or been a good example of a father. Tomorrow night we're going to pray a prayer of forgiveness towards our fathers, but maybe you might want to do that now, and just say: Lord, I do choose to forgive my father for x-y-and-z. Maybe you have to renounce some false view of God, just say it: Lord, I'm sorry but I thought You were always angry with me, that You didn't want me, that You would push me away when really You're running toward me tonight. Just ask the Lord to cleanse you, and release you, and heal you deep down. Say: 'Lord, I believe now that You are receiving me, You're cleansing me. I ask You to give me a further deep revelation of Your Father heart toward me. Give me the witness of Your Spirit that I am a child of God. Fill me now with Your Spirit. I surrender to You as Lord. Shed Your love abroad in my heart by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen'.

If any of those folk want to talk with me, there were quite a number of folk put their hands up, you can. You might not need to, I would encourage you to come the rest of the week - but if there are any who are in need tonight and they want to talk, that's OK, you might have to wait a little while if there's a number of folk.

Father, thank You that You have revealed Yourself in Your Son, the Lord Jesus. At that cross we see Your heart for humanity - Lord, such love! Dying love! Bleeding love that beats for us tonight! We pray, Lord, that every single heart in this place will feel the heartbeat of grace for them, and that their aching hearts, which are broken, will be healed by Your love. Father, give them a revelation, give us all a revelation, of Your love. Bless those who acknowledged their need tonight, and meet them. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## *The Father Heart Of God - Chapter 3*

# **"Father Flaws"**

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**G**ood evening everyone! Thank you to Scott and to the musicians for leading us in praise, and thank you for coming and joining with us again this evening. Some of you have been out both previous nights, Sunday and last night, and some of you it's your first night - we're very glad to see you, whatever the circumstances are. If you can join us again, we would love to see you - this is a series of meetings, as has been announced, right until Friday evening. We're looking at 'The Father Heart Of God', and I'm taking a specific aspect of that each night. Every piece is a part of a puzzle that is vital to the whole picture, and so if you can be here every night - and I know it's a tall order - we would love to see you. If you can't, they are being recorded on both CD and DVD I believe, so you can make an order for those - there's a sheet out there - and it's vital that this truth for our times, as we saw last evening, gets out and gets into our hearts. So do avail yourself of that, and encourage people to come along the remaining nights that we have.

I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 20, just as an initial reading. We will be looking at other Scriptures, but John chapter 20 first of all. Let's just pray together before we read the Scriptures, and before we meditate upon them. Let's make sure that our hearts are in the right place, and we are attuned to what Father has to say to us tonight. I believe, as I said at the beginning of this series, that there is transforming truth here each night that, if you can get a grip of it, it will change your life. So these are truths that are coming from the very heart of God, and if you can allow your heart to open - well, you'll get a real blessing that you'll never forget for the rest of your lives.

So let's pray and ask the Lord - you pray, 'Lord, speak to me. Lord, come touch my life, come and reveal Yourself to me this evening'. So let's ask God to do that collectively, but you pray for yourself as an individual and ask the Lord to speak to you tonight. Abba Father, we come to You as our Father, the Holy Father, and we thank You for the intimacy that we have in Jesus. We thank You for the spirit of adoption, the spirit of Your Son, which rises up within our hearts and cries: 'Abba Father!'. We thank You that we have not been given a spirit of bondage again to fear, but the spirit of adoption - and, Lord, we want to draw near boldly, therefore, to our Father in heaven. We don't want to stand afar off, Lord, from You, when You want to come near, when You're running to us - as we saw last evening - may we not be running away, may we not be hiding, and may there be no barriers between us and You, for You have demolished the wall of separation between men and Yourself through Jesus at the cross. So, anything that gets in the way, Lord, it's of our making, or perhaps the doing of another who has hurt us or harmed us, and caused us to think wrongly about You. So, Lord, we cry: come by Your Holy Spirit now; and Lord, would You come and give us a revelation again of who You really are, what You are like. May we be like Job tonight, who said at the end of his whole experience, and when he came into that whirlwind and had a face-to-face encounter with You, he declared: 'I have heard what other men have said about You, but now I see You with my own eyes, and I repent of

all that I have said about You'. Lord, as we sang last evening, open the eyes of our hearts, we want to see You the way You really are. So come Holy Spirit, come Lord Jesus. May the very hosts of heaven, Lord of Hosts, be here in our midst. May we know that this is a veritable Bethel, a meeting place between God and men and women. For Your glory alone we pray - and heal hearts tonight - we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

John 20, then, and verse 17: *"Jesus said to her" - that is, to Mary who He meets in the garden after His resurrection - "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren", my brothers, "and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God'".*

Now so far, as we have looked at this truth of the Father Heart of God, we have looked at how Father's Heart 'Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace' - and we're not going to repeat that, that was Sunday evening. Last evening we looked at how this truth is particularly for these end times days, and we read from Malachi 4 that there would be a prophetic ministry of an Elijah-like character in the end times, and part of what he would do was: he would turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and the hearts of children back to their fathers. We saw that before every move of God there has been a social crisis, and the social crisis that has marked us in modern times has been the fatherless generation. We saw that this is a truth that God is beginning to reveal, a fresh revelation of an old truth - it has always been there, and yet we have lost something about how God is a Father to us, and what that actually means. So it is 'A Truth For Our Aching Hearts' individually and as a generation. But tonight we're going to look at 'Father Flaws', we're going to look at hindrances and barriers to us enjoying this great truth of the Father Heart of God.

Now, I've been hinting at this in previous nights, and we're taking it step-by-step - we're not giving you everything in one evening, we couldn't do that - but tonight is going to be a delicate one, as is tomorrow night as we look at 'Mother Wounds'. It's not all about father's faults, but also the wounds that we can receive from our mothers. So let's tonight look at 'Father Flaws'. Now let me ask you first of all: have you ever played that game - I don't even know what it's called - but someone says a word to you, and you have to respond by saying spontaneously the word that comes into your mind correspondingly. Now, you nodded your head, alright! You shouldn't have done that next? No, I'll not pick on you - but I'm going to ask you, Scott. 'Word Association', is that what you call it? Right, well, you're going to play it! OK? 'Magherafelt' - don't think about it, what's the word that comes into your head, now be honest, come on - 'Near home'. Well, that's not bad, I thought it was going to be something negative! Thank the Lord it wasn't, I might get into trouble! Do you understand what it is? You don't want to think about it - I wouldn't have asked the headmaster, I don't think he's here tonight, but I wouldn't ask him to do it, because I don't want you to think. It's not something you think about, it's just a spontaneous - it's more than intellectual, it's internal, it's almost emotional.

Now whenever people hear the word 'father' - well, what comes to your mind? Because all sorts of different things come to different people's minds, depending on their own experience of what a father has been to them. You see 'father' is not a neutral word. If you've had a good parental experience, or you're trying your best to be a good father, you might assume wrongly that for most people this is a positive connotation - but there are very different thoughts come to different people's minds when they hear this word. That is because some folk have been wrongly taught about what a father should

be through the example of their own fathers. We don't want to be too hard on fathers here tonight in all that we say, because often we have only been the type of father, or had the type of father, that they had or that we have had. We learn by example. We have seen how the experience of our own fathers, humanly, can affect our view of Father God. We have also seen how wrong teaching can skew our understanding and our concept of what God is really like. So there are some people who are left with a warm, secure feeling when they hear the word 'father', but there are other folk who are filled with a sense of horror, shame, fear, because they have had awful fathers. Then there is another group of people, which is greater than you would imagine, and they are just left empty. 'Father', when they hear that term, does nothing for them. They are numb. It's not a particularly negative emotion that they express, it's just no emotion at all.

So let me ask you tonight: what does 'father' mean to you? What is the word association when you hear the name 'father'? Is it someone who is loving, fun, tenderhearted, gentle? Do you think of someone who is a protector, a helper, a friend? Or does immediately come to your mind: a stranger, someone who is distant, a bully, an aggressor, an abuser? Now, we have all got biological fathers, but not all of us have had true fathers, not all of us have had 'Daddies'. Ken Symington, in his book on the Father Heart of God, I think it's called 'A Love Like Never Before', tells of a lady who strolled up to him after one of his meetings, and she struggled in relating to God and trusting in God. She was terrified of God, if the truth was told; and the thought of dying, or Jesus coming again and her meeting with God, filled her with absolute horror. An awful place to be - she was a Christian, of course, but this was the way she felt. Her own human father's behaviour had had a profound effect on how she saw herself. To a large extent, how your father sees you is often the way you see yourself. It had an effect on how she saw herself, but also how she saw God. Now, she became a Christian around the age of 10 or 11 years old, but this proved to be a blockage in her Christian life. Sometimes we get this idea that once you're converted everything is sorted, but far from it - that's when the fun begins. She knew God loved her, and she knew Jesus died for her, and she knew she needed Him desperately, and she took that step of repentance and faith - but there was something that was a barrier to her breaking through into the depths of God's love, and it was her relationship with her earthly father. She wrote a poem which very graphically describes her experience, and many others, and maybe yours here tonight. Bear with me, it's quite long, I mightn't read it all, but listen carefully:

'Daddy, what went wrong? I was supposed to be the apple of your eye.  
Yet all I have are memories of how you made me cry.  
You never told me what I did wrong to make you hate me so.  
I couldn't change the things I did, because I didn't know.

I tried so hard to please you, so you'd love me just a bit,  
But we were like a hand inside a glove that didn't fit.  
Why did you take me out of my bed and put me in the shed?  
So many times the things you did left me wishing I was dead!

Most days you said you wished you had a dog instead of me,  
I tried to hide the tears I cried, so you couldn't see.  
You did so many crazy things, going wild with your loaded gun,  
It frightened me the things you did, and you stole all my fun.

When I said I'd gave my life to God it made you hate me more.  
You used to grab me by the hair and pull me to the floor.  
You'd kick me many times to make me say God was not real,  
But at that time nothing you did could take away the joy I'd feel!

Then I heard God was a Father, and that just filled my life with fears.  
It made me want to run and hide, so much screaming, shouting, tears.  
How can God be my Daddy and love me, if you couldn't?  
I tried so hard to please you, and not do the things I shouldn't.

No lights, no heating, some days no food, and no pictures on our wall:  
We lived in total fear of the time when you, from the pub would crawl.  
We felt like prisoners in your house, a place so cold and cruel -  
We weren't allowed to get it right, because you kept changing all the rules.

But they tell me God is not like you, He loves me, He really does!  
And all the things you did to me, they broke His heart, because  
To Him, my life is precious, He doesn't want to punish me,  
He wants to take away my pain, so at last I can be free.

He wants to give me back my smile, He wants to show me how to live,  
He wants to wrap me in his arms, He has so much He wants to give!  
Only, Dad, the things you did to me, they hurt me deep inside,  
And trusting God to love me is so hard - I know, I've tried!

Why could you never love me? You never set me on your knee!  
I missed you so much, Daddy, but you just wait and see:  
One day God will help me, He will take me by the hand,  
He will take me from the darkness into a whole new land.

A land where I'll find my peace, and know His love inside,  
Where at last I will feel safe, and no longer want to hide.  
A place where I can lift my head, and no longer feel the shame,  
A place where I'll have a right to live with joy instead of pain'.

That lady, Dee Smith, goes on in that poem - you can read it for yourself - very graphically to describe not only the pain of her past experience with her father, but the wonder of the love that she now knows through the love of God being shed abroad in her heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. But let me ask you again: what does 'father' mean to you? Now maybe you had a good Dad, and we want to celebrate that - I mean, we're not inferring that everybody has had a miserable father. We want to praise God for fatherhood, and for godly men, and even those who are not Christians but have been good role models and good father figures in the home. But even, tonight, if you have had a good father, don't you think that you don't have a problem - because you could have been so secure in your parental relationships, in your earthly relationships to Mum and Dad, that you don't seek a relationship with God as your Father. This can be a problem, particularly in western middle-class Christian homes that have had good parents. There can be disordered relationships, even in our relationship as parents to our children, or between husbands and wives. What I mean is this: there is a disordered love, whereby we're finding satisfaction in the love of our families in a way that we ought to be finding satisfaction in God alone - it becomes not only disordered, but idolatrous. So we don't search and seek for God, because we're pretty happy with what we've got down here in people.

But, however our parents have been, whether they have been good or bad, we are commanded in Scripture to honour them. So I don't want to be misconstrued this week as being down on Dads or Mothers. Ephesians 6 reminds us that this is one of the commandments of God, and it is the commandment with blessing: 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honour your father and mother', which is the first commandment with promise: 'that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth'. So we don't want to fall into the trap of the blame game, and blaming all our bad behaviour on our Mums or Dads, or Grannies and Grandfathers. We can't blame everything on our parents, and exonerate ourselves of our own moral responsibilities. So we've got to confess our own sins, and we've got plenty of them! We may have been taught wrong, or given wrong examples, but where we have partaken in the sins of our fathers and forefathers, we've got to confess it. Guilty as charged! But equally: we must not be in denial of what our mothers and fathers have really been like. Sometimes I think there are folk, particularly in Christian homes, who are afraid to be honest about how things really were, for fear that they are breaking the commandment and they're dishonouring their parents. You can honour them and bless them, but still tell the truth and not be in denial about how things really were. We must be honest if we're going to move into healing and wholeness in Christ, and we're going to experience the Father heart of God and removal of every barrier.

So we're going to look tonight at some 'Father Flaws', some behavioural traits that can be in our earthly fathers that can get in the way of us breaking into the Father heart of God and His great love. There are five or six here, and they're certainly not exhaustive, but they are common. First of all, there is the performance orientated father - performance orientated. In other words, you only get approval from this Dad through achievement - alright? Now, we want to exhort our children to do their best, to fulfil their potential, but this is not unconditional love. There is a condition upon the approval and favour of this type of father, and that is: you've got to do well. What this does in children is, it breeds perfectionism. Perfectionism can be on a sliding scale - but perfectionists usually are at the top of the scale or the bottom of the scale. The folk at the top of the scale are the high achievers that want to do well all the time, and they are trying to achieve perfection - which, of course, is impossible. They're trying to gain approval that way. But also, if you'll excuse the expression, the bum at the bottom of the scale is also a perfectionist - you know, the dropout, the one who won't try any more - and that's because, if he can't achieve perfection, he's not going to try at all. Do you understand? That is a fruit of perfectionism as well, it's not just the highflyer, it's also the dropout. Sometimes when we have performance orientated fathers, we can be like this.

Let me give you an example: you get all As in your GCSEs, or maybe you get nine A-stars and one A, and this Dad wants to know why there weren't ten A-stars. Now maybe this is the type that you have had, or maybe you are one of these. How does that make a child feel, do you think? Nine A-stars and one A, and Dad focuses on the one A - or, you know, it's out of 10, this test, and the wee child comes in and he gets 9/10, and this Daddy focuses, and Mums can do the same, focuses on the one he got wrong: 'Now why did you get that wrong?'. Or, if he gets 10 out of 10, it's: 'Now, I want you to be doing that every week now'. It's not enough that he did it, or she did it that day, it has to now be all the time. He is never satisfied or pleased. We cannot underestimate the need for praise and affirmation in children. Now I'm not saying, like some - I nearly said 'crackpots', but that's naughty - some strange folk with ideas that

we should be praising kids for doing wrong things and bad things, I'm not talking about that. But we should bring praise and affirmation into children's lives, because it builds them up, it edifies them. Many children are trying to gain the approval of their parents because their parents are performance orientated.

James Dobson, the child psychologist, the Christian commentator and founder of Focus on the Family, says - now, listen to this, this is profound: 'It takes at least forty words of praise to counteract just one word of criticism in a child'. Forty words of praise and affirmation to counteract one word of criticism! Some fathers might think: 'Ach, I'm preparing my boy for this big bad world out there, I don't want him to be a softie - he needs to toughen up!'. You might think that's what you're doing, when actually you're scarring your child. Your child will grow up with a fear of failure. Many very academic, highly achieving children, when they fail first it's like a breakdown for them - because it has never happened before, and they don't know how to cope. You can't go through life without failing, without crashing, without mistakes - but when we have performance orientated fathers or authority figures, there can come a drivenness in our life, a drivenness to be approved by those above us - the need to be accepted. I'm looking inward here as well, I'm looking at myself as a parent and as a Christian leader, supposedly.

Christian homes can be very susceptible to this, because we are high on standards, aren't we? We are high on morals, and we want to live principled lives - and sometimes as parents, it can seem that we are demanding absolute obedience for our children, we're not giving them room to fail and to fall down. The author Jack Frost, whose book I would highly recommend on 'The Father Heart of God', he says that an unofficial survey - I imagine it was in the States - suggested that a high percentage of adult children of pastors, minister's children, experience some form of psychiatric care for depression in their lives because of a heavy performance orientation that was in the home. They couldn't live up to it. By the way, this is where burnout comes from - by a drivenness to try to achieve approval of others, or of expectations, or some bar that you have erected for yourself as a standard, and it's completely impossible; or maybe even, this is how religious people go crackers, you think there is a standard that God is expecting of you, and you're trying to reach it, but it's utterly impossible. So you crash and burn spiritually. You feel that you don't have approval unless you achieve. This is why children need unconditional love expressed to them.

Fathers: do you express unconditional love to your children? When they fail as well as when they fly, can you express love to them? They need to have it expressed, they need to receive it - children are different and receive it in different ways, and you've got to get to know your children. For some children it will be touch, for some children it will be just time, that's all they want is time with you. But here's the bottom line, as we saw on Sunday evening: Father's heart beats with the rhythm of grace, and that's the way our hearts are meant to beat toward our children - grace, unmerited favour! Free, lavished, not because we earn it, or we deserve it, but when we don't we get it - by grace we have been saved through faith! That's the way our God is - you make sure you don't have a wrong view of God because of a father that was performance orientated. Maybe that's where you are living a legalistic Christian life? I'm not going to backtrack on what I've already said, but get the recordings.

The second father flaw is the authoritarian father. It's self-explanatory: he struck fear into you. Your father - excuse the expression, anybody in education - but he was more

of a schoolmaster type than a loving Dad. This is a father for whom rules are more important than relationship. Do you understand? Keeping within the lines, an authoritarian figure - and many of them are Christians. We have to be realistic that many young people have been put off Christianity and the Gospel because of harsh, cold, overbearing authoritarian fathers, the legalistic type.

Another father flaw is the passive father, and this is very, very common. This is the father who is there, but not there. Do you understand what I mean? He's in the house, but he's not at home. Now that can be for many reasons, there can be a disconnect emotionally with a father like this - and, as I've said already, we're not shovelling guilt and shame on our parents, but we have to be real, not be in denial, but also understand that often the way that our fathers have behaved toward us is the way their fathers behaved toward them. It's not all their fault. But if you have had a passive father, it might be that there was a lack of emotion expressed from him to you. He never touched you, he never embraced you, expressed physical love, there were never verbal expressions of affection or affirmation. Often passive fathers are workaholics. We have a concept - and hard work is a good virtue - but we have this concept that we are the providers, and Mummy can do all that lovey-dovey stuff, but as long as I'm putting food on the table and clothes on their back, I'm doing my bit - heating the home, roof over their head, they'll thank me for it later in life, and that'll make up for everything. Let me tell you: it doesn't make up for everything. You can buy your wee girl as many Mini Coopers as you like, it's not going to make up for love.

But hold on, many a passive father is not just a workaholic father, but a Christian father who their children see regularly, night after night after night, lifting up their coat and going out the door and leaving them - they don't know where they're going, maybe they know they're going to church, and church needs them. Do your children not need you? Now, please, I'm not saying you should ditch church, but church culture needs to look at this and ask the question: are we asking, at times, of our families too much at their expense? You only need to look at the figures I've given you about pastor's kids to realise that that is what is happening. Can we not do this better? Then, what can often come is - and this is what we are really getting at - is that God can seem... you know, if your father is a bit distant and disinterested, it would appear, in you - well, that's the idea we get of God. Unconsciously we imbibe this concept that, you know, 'He's up there, and I believe He loves me and everything, but, you know, I just need to get on with my life'. He's not close, He's not intimate, there is no real relationship. There is a song that is sung, and I hate it: 'From a distance, God is watching us' - you know that. He's not at a distance, that is a lie. God is not at a distance! God came in human flesh in Jesus Christ to this world so that He might be close. He became one of us, sin apart of course, but He came into our life, walked in our shoes, bore our sin, took our hell on the cross - you can't get any closer! In fact, when we trust Him and repent of our sin, He comes to live inside us! He's not at a distance! He's certainly not passive, but He's very active in our lives - He shows us Father God.

So if you've had a passive father - and I sympathise with you, I'm sure he loved you and I'm sure he provided for you, and maybe he didn't know how to be any different, and maybe that's you here tonight - but God is not like that. Don't for one minute construe that God is like that. The performance orientated father, the authoritative father, the passive father, and then there is the absent father. Now this can be for several reasons. Your father could have died when you were very young, some fathers



have died before a child was born, or in infancy, or you were so young that you really have no clear memories of your father. That's a serious thing. Then there is desertion, where a father walks out the door and leaves - there can be a myriad of reasons why that happens, and then of course that can lead to divorce. These are reasons why we are living in a fatherless generation. Now, obviously decease, no one can do anything about that, but when it comes to desertion and divorce, we saw last night that just last week the figures have come out from a European Union survey that Britain has the highest divorce rate in all of Europe. In the United States, I'm led to believe that 50% of children wake up in a home with someone present who is not their biological father. Because some of these children haven't known any better - whether father has died, or deserted them, or divorced the mother - they think: 'I'm alright!'. A lot of them do think: 'I'm OK!', because they haven't known any different, and they don't realise how they have been affected by their absentee father. How, deep within their human identity in their spirit, there can be great rejection, there can be a sense of abandonment that they can remember as far back as they were conscious.

I want to tell you tonight: if you have had an absentee father, for whatever reason, you've got to understand that God, your Father, is not like that! Are you hearing this? When you hear the word 'Father in Heaven', don't you associate Him with what your father wasn't. I want you to listen, you can turn with me to it, to Hebrews 13. This is a very familiar verse, but I pray that God the Holy Spirit would apply it to you in a new and fresh way tonight. Hebrews 13 verse 5: 'Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He', that is, God, 'Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you''. Now, who knows that verse? Who knows that verse? Stick your hand up in the air, way up high - nearly everybody, if not everybody, knows that verse. OK, let me read it to you in the Amplified Version of the Bible, which just takes the different nuances of the Greek language and expands it to try and give us a clearer understanding of what is being said. Listen carefully, don't look at your own Bible, just listen to this: 'For He, God Himself, has said, 'I will not in any way fail you nor give you up nor leave you without support. I will not, I will not, I will not in any degree leave you helpless nor forsake nor let you down, relax My hold on you! Assuredly not!'. Is that clear enough for you? Kenneth Wuest points out that in the Greek there are three negatives that precede the verb: 'I will not, I will not, I will not leave you'. Like, what do you want Him to do? What do you want Him to say? Some of you are rocky when it comes to the assurance of your salvation, and I'm not going to enter into that whole debate tonight, but listen: if you have repented of your sins and believed the Gospel, and you have a heart that is seeking after God to walk in His ways - listen, this is what your Heavenly Father says, The Message says: 'God assures us, 'I'll never let you down, never walk off and leave you''. You who have had fathers who walked off and left you, you need to know tonight: that may be a father flaw that your biological Dad had, but not your Heavenly Father.

Finally there is the abusive and aggressive father. For some of us, our fathers were monsters. I'm involved, from time to time, in prayer ministry with people - and you would not believe what goes on in our country, you would not believe it. Maybe your father was the monster of an aggressive type, of which there are many - explosive anger, violence, all sorts of emotional, verbal, physical, sexual abuse - but, you know, there is the other monster that is rather pleasant and charming. Still monstrous, but has this nice side to him. I'm led to believe by some historians that Adolf Hitler was a very amenable person one-to-one, very charming. You see, this can cause a lot of confusion in the heart and the mind of a child, because there are some people who

have been abused in ways that you couldn't even imagine - nor would you want to - and yet they still have an affection towards their Dad who did it. Can you imagine how that scrambles your head? But it's because it's their Dad, and they want to love him, and they want to be loved.

For other people, it's not a father but it's another authority figure who has been abusive and aggressive. Again, I don't want to do think that I'm all down on teachers or headmasters or anything - but, you know, you're doing a very special job, and I hope that you're called of God to do it, I hope it's a calling in your life. I thank God for every Christian teacher and godly example in our schools, but if you are a teacher: don't take your responsibility lightly, because some people are scarred because of the way the authority figure of a teacher behaved towards them - what a teacher said. 'You're stupid! You'll never amount to anything! You can't sing! You can't draw! You can't spell!'. Lest you think I'm too hard on that fraternal, ministers and pastors do the same all the time. There is a lot of spiritual abuse that is going on in churches today, and the sheep are suffering for it.

Children grow up with a lack of trust, there are people who can't trust anybody. It's not that they don't want to trust, but because authority figures to whom they entrusted themselves were untrustworthy, they decide: 'I can't trust anybody, I need to look after myself!'. So they shut down and they protect themselves, and that's why children need security and comfort. Children need to feel safe physically and emotionally. There is no place for violence and explosive anger in the home. Our God describes Himself as a Father of mercies, and a God of all compassion. Now I'm not entering into the debate of how you discipline your children or anything like that, but it should never be done in a flash of anger.

So, what kind of father did you have? Performance orientated? Authoritarian? Passive? Absent? Abusive or aggressive? Many counsellors believe that the majority of a child's identity is formed through the father-child relationship, that's why it's important what our fathers are like. But more than that: our view of Father God can be shaped by the way our fathers have been, and it can make it difficult to relate to God. Now listen to this statement: Jesus was the Man He was because of the Father He had. Did you get that? Jesus was the Man He was because of the Father He had. He, as we saw the other evening, He has come to reveal the heart of the Father - that's what John 15, the prodigal son, is all about - but that's what the life of Jesus was. He is the express image of God's Person, He has come to reveal the heart of Abba. He shows us that God is none of those things above. He's not performance orientated, He has only given us the law to show us that we are sinners and we need grace. He's not authoritarian in a wrong sense. He's not passive, He's very active in our lives - even to the point of coming in His Son and dying on the cross for us. He's certainly not absent, He is present, He's right beside us and He dwells in us. He's not abusive, He's not aggressive. Just look at how Jesus portrays the Father's unconditional love, and you will understand how Heavenly Father is.

So, can I ask you: do you need the term 'father' redefined for you? Whatever your association of words with that word has been, is there a hindrance to the Father's love here that is blocking you breaking through into the wonder of what this is to know Father's heart? Will you tonight, allow Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, to redefine the word 'father' for you? Jesus was the Man He was because of the Father He had - but listen: He's your Father! Jesus said in our opening reading, as He was going to ascend:

'I'm going to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God'. Isn't that amazing, isn't it? God could have called Himself anything He liked, but He called himself 'Father', and Jesus taught us to pray: 'Our Father, which art in heaven'.

I'm going to tell you something: do you know, in the Gospels, Jesus calls Him 'Your Father' more than 'Our Father' or 'My Father'? You look it up, look at Matthew chapter 5, 6, look right throughout and, if you mark your Bible, ring 'Your Father' over and over again. So much teaching there, look at it: how God cares for us more than the sparrows, and clothing the lilies of the field - your Father in heaven, your Father in heaven sees in secret, your Father, your Father. What is He wanting us to know? This relationship that made Him who He was as the Son of God, makes us who we are as the sons and daughters of God in His family.

What is He like? Turn quickly with me to 1 Corinthians 13. What is Father God like? Now I think when I was with you before, last September, it's hard to remember - if it's hard for me to remember you, you'll definitely not remember! - I spoke one night on love, I think, and I took you here and I asked you to substitute the word 'Love' in this great purple passage on love with 'Jesus'. Do you remember that? No? Well, it doesn't matter! Verse 4 of 1 Corinthians 13: 'Love suffers long', Jesus suffers long - OK? Replace it with 'Jesus'. Then I asked you to replace it with yourself, your own name, and we all fall as failures there - but replace it tonight with 'Father'. 'Father God suffers long and is kind; Father does not envy; Father does not parade Himself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek His own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Father never fails'.

Now, how do I know that's the case? Because God is love - yes, He's holy, and yes, God is light - but God is love. What is your substitute for Father? What has become your substitute for this love, this intimacy that you should have? You remember we saw last night that the prodigal joined himself to something other than his father love - what are you joined to tonight? There is a tragedy in our nation and in our world today where there are young men who haven't had great father figures, and they certainly haven't had affection, and they're looking for a father figure - and when they come to the years of adolescence, that affection that they were looking for as children becomes eroticised and they look for sexual partners of the same sex, and it's symbolism for many of them looking for their fathers. Now I'm not saying that's the case all the time, but I believe often it is.

But what have you joined yourself to? For some men it is - and it's not always men - but often sexual promiscuity, because of an emptiness of love in your heart, that father-shaped hole that is there, you're trying to fill it with physical love - the intimacy that you didn't have with your father. Can I tell you what will break the power of pornography, what will break the power of homosexuality - and I don't underestimate the journey that some people have to go on - but what will break every false intimacy that you have substituted for father's love, it is the intimacy with Abba Father, it is getting your heart fed with His love. That's what you've all been looking for, and that's what you have - so what you need to do tonight is, you need to repent. You need to repent of all your sins, but specifically you need to repent of substitutes for Father's love that you have put in your heart and in your life. You need to repent of ungodly coping mechanisms, often addictions are for that reason - to try to cope with pain and emptiness. You need to repent of ungodly reactions: maybe because you have been

hurt, you hurt others. You need to - and this is a hard one - forgive your parents. That doesn't mean they get off the hook, that doesn't mean you need to feel good about what they did, but what it is is: you're getting out of the way, and you're taking them off your hook of justice and putting them on God's so that you can be healed and released, and so the bitterness doesn't cause a root within your heart that will prevent God's love coming to you. You also need to ask for healing and release from any bondage of the enemy, and by faith tonight, you need to embrace true Father the way He really is.

Do you know something? If you come to the Father tonight, like we saw in the prodigal last night, He will be there to lift you up. Let's pray together. Let me just take a moment - that's what all of us really want, that's what we're all looking for. Not the love of an earthly father - though, when that is missing, it can be an aching void in our hearts - but every emptiness can only be filled by the love of Father God. While every head is bowed and eye closed, are there people here tonight - and I know this is a very, very difficult subject for many - but if God has spoken to you and you want to acknowledge that in His presence, and you want all barriers and blockages to experiencing His love shed in your heart, and you want to be healed of father flaws, would you raise your hand just where you're sitting? Quickly raise it and put it down again. Just where you're sitting, don't be afraid now, we are in the presence of God your Father. If you know there is a need, and you need healing for that, just raise your hand. God bless you. Is there anyone else? God bless you.

Now let's pray and just come to Father, He's there, He's already there, He's just there in front of you, He's beside you, He's around you, and He's within you. He is holding you now in His embrace, if you will just release yourself, and relax yourself, and lean on Him, lean on His breast. Confess to Him now the things that you have put as substitutes for that love. Confess to Him any hardness that has come into your life, where you have tried to cope and just plough on, and think: 'Ach, button the lip and get on with it, toughen up!' - but you've damaged yourself, and maybe others, by doing that, maybe ungodly ways that you coped with father flaws. Will you ask Him now to release you from the damage, to heal you, to break all bondage of the enemy that is over you. Ask Him to do that now just where you're sitting, and ask Him now to reveal to you, and receive now in an embracing faith, embrace now the love of your Father. If it helps to envisage, as His arms are open toward you, throw your arms around Him - throw your arms around Him. He wants to raise you up, He wants to lift you if you're struggling tonight.

Oh Father, we can sense Your loving arms around us tonight in this place, roundabout and underneath those strong arms of a loving, tender Father - those everlasting arms that have held the world and the universe in existence for all time. But we thank You that, as Your children, we are cradled in those arms. May every single person here tonight feel it, Lord! We want to feel the hug of our Dads on earth, and we want to feel the hug of our Holy, Heavenly Father. We need to feel Your hug, Lord. May some folk here tonight that have never really been hugged properly, receive Your embrace tonight. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

## *The Father Heart Of God - Chapter 4*

# **"Mother Wounds"**

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**G**ood evening! Thank you to Gordon and the musicians, you're in fine singing voice tonight - those were beautiful pieces and you sang them very well. It's great to be here, and to be here all week in fact. We've been having very special times in the presence of God, I hope you will agree, those of you who have been here. If it's your first night, you're very welcome, and we do trust that you experience what we have been knowing throughout the week as we look into the subject of 'The Father Heart of God'. I don't believe any more in just preaching - don't fall off your seat! I believe that the New Testament mandate was that God worked with them, as they went forth God worked with them - Mark 16 - confirming the Word with signs following. The Word was never meant to be preached devoid of power, and the demonstration of the Spirit of God. People have been waiting behind each night - there have been folk, of course, who have responded in the meeting; and God, I believe, is doing things that we are not hearing about - but there are other folk who have been waiting behind, and God has been touching them in supernatural ways. We give Him the praise and the glory for that. God wants to be a part of our lives - as we saw last night - He wants to be an active Heavenly Father, doing things in our hearts that need to be done, that we might be set free to enjoy His love.

So we're going to look deeper at that tonight. Let us pray, and let us make sure that our hearts are attuned to what He has to say to us tonight. We're not really interested in what I've got to say, it's God we want to meet this evening. So, please, let's come - and I don't know what you've gone through today, probably you've had a very busy time in work, or in study or whatever, or at home - but let's try and quieten our spirits before God, and let's ask Him to come and speak into our hearts this evening. Would you do that? Just pray: 'Lord, speak to me. Lord, touch me. Lord, open the eyes of my heart and give me a deeper revelation of Your love'.

Father, we do thank You that we can call You 'Abba Father'. We thank You for what we have been learning these evenings already. We thank You for what we have previously known of Your great love - but, Lord, we believe that You have been coming afresh to us, and giving us a deeper understanding of Your heartbeat toward us. We do believe, in a prophetic sense, in these last days, that You are turning the children to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to their children. We believe that You want to give us a greater understanding of Your great compassion and grace toward us in the Lord Jesus. Lord, as we come to You again tonight, we just say 'More Lord!', we want more! We want to know You more, and we want to have a greater capacity, Lord. Maybe some of us thought we had got full of Your love these nights, but make our hearts bigger, Lord, to receive more, to have a greater capacity to hold Your love. So we wait upon You, and Lord the subject matter tonight, again like last night, will be difficult for some people - and yet it's necessary for the healing of our hearts. We pray that for those who this is particularly pertinent for, that they will be able not just to be touched emotionally but, Lord, that they will be able to reach out and receive healing and wholeness through the power of the Gospel. We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus, Amen.

Amen. Now, if you haven't been with us, let me just go over where we've been. We're looking at 'The Father Heart of God', transforming truths from Abba's heart to yours. We started on Sunday evening looking at how Father's heart 'Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace', and we will really be exploring that every night because the whole of the Christian faith is about grace. Then on Monday evening we looked particularly at the figure of the prodigal in Luke 15, and we saw how this love of the Father is 'What Our Aching Hearts Long For', and what they need. We saw that in the prodigal, we saw it in our modern day society, and hopefully we saw it in our own hearts: that there is a hole that spells 'Father' in all of our hearts. Last night we looked at 'Father Flaws', how sometimes - and more often than not, because none of us has had a perfect father, none of us are perfect fathers - there have been deficiencies in our earthly fathers that have affected how we view Heavenly Father. I'll not repeat that, you can get the recordings.

Tonight we're going to shift and do something that might seem a bit out of the pattern, looking at the Father Heart of God, we're going to look at 'Mother Wounds'. Maybe you don't watch TV, maybe you don't have a television - I think most houses do these days - some of us might be better without them; but there are, with all the rubbish that comes across the airwaves, there are some good programs still on. Now, who will confess tonight to watching a programme on ITV called 'Long Lost Families'? Come on now, put your hand up - it's very good, isn't it? I was told about it only maybe about a month ago, a couple of programs had passed by, and I thought: 'Well, I'll have a wee look and see what it's all about'. It's Davina McCall and Nicky Campbell who present this series which aims to reunite family members after years of separation. It offers a lifeline to those who desperately long to find lost relatives - it's a real tearjerker, so, men, be careful! Two of the most common themes are children searching for parents, and parents searching for children. Now, if ever you doubted the importance of a father and a mother, you need to watch this programme. Often it's a mother who gave up a child for adoption, generally during the years when it was a great shame to be an unmarried mother, a single parent. So, because of social stigma, often they felt that this was the best thing to do in giving the child up for adoption. These mothers have borne great regret and shame. Now often the child has been cared for by their adoptive parents very, very well, and yet both the parent and the child have felt that something has been missing. Now, watch the programme, but really what it testifies to is: we all need a Mum and a Dad. That's not to put shame or guilt on anybody who is a single parent here tonight, God bless you, you're doing a great job, keep on doing it - I know it probably hasn't been your choice. It's not in any way to put guilt on people who are living broken lives, and who are part of dysfunctional families through no fault of their own - but, nevertheless, God ordered things and engineered it such that He would place lonely people in families. He intended that all of us should have a mother and a father there with us as we grow up and into adulthood.

Now, I've talked a lot about God as a Father over these last nights, and then last evening we looked at how 'Father Flaws' in our earthly fathers can be healed and replaced by our perfect Heavenly Father. But perhaps your father hasn't been a problem in your life, or certainly hasn't been the biggest problem - it has been your mother. Many people suffer what we might call 'The Mother Wound', damage that has been done because of a broken, disordered, and problematic relationship with Mum. We're going to read the scriptures a little bit later on, but let me just explain a few things about motherhood.

Do you know that out of all the creatures in the animal kingdom, storks are some of the most loving and affectionate creatures? I'm led to believe that they can live up to 70 years, and legend has portrayed them as monogamous, although they are not strictly so - but they tend to return to partners and nests where they have laid their young right throughout their lifetime, because they have a very strong tie with their young. So if a stork nests in your chimney, in all likelihood it's going to return someday, because that's where its babies were born - very maternal in instinct. The mother stork watches over her young carefully with great protection, and nurtures her babies. That's why, I suppose, in mythology storks have been characterised as delivering babies - or is that true? You can have a chat with me afterwards and fill me in! But even when storks become older, they still have a very caring instinct. Even when elder storks have difficulty keeping up with the flock in the sky, another stork will often come alongside and fly along beside them, and allow the older stork's wings to rest upon the tip of their wings to carry them along. Storks are constantly touching one another, nurturing and protecting one another, and so we ought not to be surprised to learn that the Greeks named the stork after the word 'storge', which describes family love. It is 'storge' that speaks of nurture, loyalty, empathy, affection and tenderness.

Now, there are four Greek words for love - some of you will know this. There is 'agape', which means the love of God, the greatest love of all. Then there is 'philio', which is friendship, brotherly love. Then there is 'storge' that I've mentioned, this family affection; and then there is 'eros', erotic, sexual love. Now the last two that I've mentioned, 'eros' and 'storge', aren't found in the Greek New Testament - but their concepts are in the Bible. In the animal kingdom, and particularly among human beings, mothers are the primary caregivers and bestowers of 'storge' love. So, in the first two years of every child's life, it is Mum who supplies 'storge' love - now, fathers, generally, it's from the third year to the fifth year - but it figures, doesn't it? It is Mum who carries the baby in her womb, in the warmth and protection and security of her womb for nine months, and then at birth she will draw that babe tenderly to her breast, and she will feed and nurture the child. The mother's 'storge' love will bring bonding, and that is teaching the child to receive love, and ultimately to give love - and a lot of folk can't give it because they've never truly received it - but ultimately the child is learning to trust, to be secure. Now, this is how God intended it.

Turn with me to Psalm 22 please, and we're going to read verses 9 and 10 - Psalm 22: 'But You are He', the psalmist is speaking to God, 'You are He who took me out of the womb; You made me trust while on my mother's breasts'. So, just pause a moment, why did God make it that we are nurtured by mother, and then we are carried and fed by mother - ultimately God is saying here: 'I did this so that you would look to Me, and that you would trust Me, just as you trust Mum, that you would trust Me'. Verse 10: 'I was cast upon You from birth', cast upon God from birth, 'from my mother's womb You have been my God'. Now we're going to tease this out a little bit more as we go through.

So during the first two years of life, the mother is the most important figure for every child - would you agree? So your relationship with your mother is the first experience of communicated love, this 'storge' love. Even in the womb, an embryo, from the very point of conception, will in some way know emotional nurture, or conversely not. In the spirit, I believe, in the human spirit it can pick up positive and negative environments. Now secular studies and medicine confirms this: that the child in the womb is receptive to how the mother is, and what environment it is in. Intimacy starts in the womb.

Let me give you three ways that that happens when the child is born. First of all a child receives intimacy and 'storge' nurture love from mother's voice - do you know that a child in the womb recognises Mum's voice? Did you know that? Did you know that a child in the womb recognises Daddy's voice? That's why they encourage Mums to speak to the child before it is born, to read stories, and it's meant to recognise Daddy's voice when it comes to birth. So the tone that we speak to our children in, it figures, is very important - that, as mothers and fathers, we encourage, we affirm, we build up our children. We touched on that last evening, but that will engender within kids a sense of acceptance, approval, safety, rather than what is often the case: rejection. Some kids will testify that they have felt rejected as far back as they can remember, and usually that means they have been rejected from the womb or maybe even before - and often that can be the case. A pregnancy that's not wanted; that the circumstances of conception are not ideal, whatever that is; maybe a mother who is already overburdened with several children, financially at straits, and therefore this pregnancy is the last thing that she would have dreamed.

It's important that a child feels this affirmation and nurture, rather than rejection and hurtful and harsh words - but the fact of the matter is, many of us, even from our mothers, have received this. A mother's voice is very important. What does your mother's voice mean in your life? We said last evening we want to honour father and mother, that's what the commandment says, we want to bless them, and we want to thank God for the good that they have done - but we don't want to live in some kind of ignorant bubble, where we are in denial of the way things really were, and what has been missing in our parental experience. We don't want to, in some way, be ignorant of barriers that can be there to getting through to God's love - so, how has mother's voice been in your life? I know that control and manipulation is a common problem among mothers. Sometimes that can cause problems when relating to God - do you know why? I'll give you an example. I, when I was preaching on the Holy Spirit on occasion, would have talked about how you need to allow the Holy Spirit to control your life - that sounds alright, doesn't it? An older woman came to me and said to me: 'David, I want to talk to you. I have been learning of the damage that a manipulative, controlling mother has done in my life. Do you see whenever you said that word 'control', even though it's to do with the Holy Spirit, when you say that word 'control' there is something in me that balks, that is terrified, and there is a sort of rebelliousness that rises to say 'I will not be controlled by anybody!' - the reason being, she had been manipulated and controlled as a child and into adulthood, and she was determined that no one should control her again. By the way: she was right. I was wrong, and now I would probably - certainly in that context - talk more about the 'influence' of the Holy Spirit, because one of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. He gives us a freedom to live holy lives, He doesn't have us like puppets on a string - this is the miracle of God's grace: that He empowers us in His power to live lives as we should. But do you see how much damage can be done through a controlling, manipulative parent? And particularly this seems to apply much to mothers - her voice is so important. What's your mother's voice to you? Even if she has passed on now, what does her voice convey? What does the tone of her voice mean?

But secondly, mothers ought to communicate this 'storge' love through their eyes. You've heard the saying that the eyes are the window of the soul, and that is true. A baby, when it is born, it actually doesn't just drink from mother's breast, it drinks love from the eyes. I was talking a while ago to a lady who had been a foster Mum for



many many years, and she had a lot of children go through her home - but there was one time that she was given a very young baby, not long born, but from very disadvantaged circumstances, abusive circumstances. She related how it was weeks before that babe could actually look her in the eye. She would nurse it, she would feed it, she would put it in its cot and try and play with it, and the child would not look at her - there was no eye contact. There are issues of trust there, aren't there, even in a baby? She rejoiced at the day when, eventually, that baby looked and connected with her eyes, and there was contact - and she testified that she could actually feel, as it were, the baby feeding nurturing love from her as a mother figure. It's profound, isn't it, how important our look is?

Have you been nurtured by your mother's love? I don't know what kind of looks your mother gives you, but we need that nurture. Sometimes - and this is a deep subject, and I don't really want to go into it - but sometimes when we have not had the nurture of a mother, we look for nurture elsewhere. When we haven't had that bonding, when there has been separation or deprivation, sometimes people can go to sexual promiscuity to try to fill that love-void. Some other people can comfort eat - it's quite profound when you think of it, just like a baby lies drunk with milk in its Mummy's arms after a feed, that fuzzy feeling can be replaced by comfort eating in an adult - trying to get that sense of satisfaction. Who feeds you? Who are you feeding off? Mum doesn't just feed us with milk, she feeds us with love - or she is meant to. If that's not the case we will crave disordered love, because of a lack of nurture.

So her voice is meant to feed us with love, her eye is meant to feed us with love, but finally her touch - and this could apply also to fathers of course, but we're looking at mothers particularly tonight. Without touch the emotions, and even the body, becomes unhealthy - are you aware of that? Scientists have proven that humans are 4-7 times more likely to succumb to sickness if they do not have a normal dose of nurturing love. Some studies have shown people recover from illness quicker if they have another human being in the home with them, or even for that matter a pet, to supply affection in the recovery. Love is so important. I'm sure many of you can remember after Nicolae Ceausescu was toppled as a dictator in Romania in 1989 that the whole world was aghast with horror when thousands of Romanian orphans were discovered, and they had been kept in these orphanages that resembled concentration camps in World War II - do you remember it? These little children who were rocking in their cots, chained to their cots and their highchairs. They were unwanted, completely neglected, and many people in the West rushed to the aid of these children, to adopt these love-starved kids. But into the mid-1990s the adoptive parents learned first-hand what psychologists had already predicted: that these children, who had never known the nurture of a mother and a father, never been held, never been consoled or shown any form of affection, they were mentally and emotionally crippled beyond repair. Now I'm not saying anything is impossible for God, but without touch and nurture ever in their lives there was, it would seem, irreparable damage. Sometimes when we do not receive affection and touch in the right way as a child, then in our teens we may allow ourselves to be touched in a wrong way. I said one other evening that in adolescence, often the longing for affection can become eroticised and we seek it with the opposite sex and sometimes with the same sex.

Well, let me cut to the chase tonight and ask you a question: how do you think your relationship with your mother has affected you? Be honest before God here tonight: how has your relationship with your mother, as it has been, or as it is, affected your

relationships with other people? Most importantly of all: how has your relationship with your mother affected your relationship with God? You may have been neglected or abandoned by parents, but listen, you've got to understand this: God does not want you to be broken. Do you understand this? God does not want any of us to remain in a broken state. I've got to say that often in evangelicalism our Gospel has been confined to some kind of pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, this concept of heaven, an escape route from hell, and you just live with God for all eternity. Praise God that's part of the package, and it's a wonderful part at that, but that's not it all! In Isaiah 61 the mandate of Messiah, the mission statement of Messiah is that He is anointed to heal the brokenhearted - it's one of the many things that He has come to do - to set at liberty the captives, to give recovery of sight to the blind, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, the good tidings of our God. The slaves get set free, the disenfranchised people who have lost family property get it back, and debts are cancelled - that's the year of Jubilee, that's what goes on! This Gospel that we preach is a spiritual year of Jubilee, where the Kingdom of God comes to break in upon our lives - and God doesn't just tell us, 'Now don't worry about dying, because you'll be alright, you'll go to heaven', but God says, 'Get to know Me, and I will transform your life. I will heal the scars of your heart. I will be to you what others have not been. If your mother and your father have broken you, you don't have to stay in that broken condition'.

Now we were in Psalm 22, turn with me to Psalm 27 for a moment, verse 10 - what a verse! 'When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take care of me' - is that a verse for you tonight? Could you hold onto that? Maybe you feel you were never wanted, maybe you were given up for adoption - there is a verse for you. Psalm 68 and verse 5 says our God is: 'A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows'. Do you remember in John chapter 14, Jesus was saying: 'Look, I'm going now to prepare a place for you' - He was going to the cross, He was going to rise again, He was going to ascend to heaven to be at the right hand of the Father. He said: 'If I go, I will come again' - but later on down the chapter He says, 'Though I'm going, I'm going to send another One to you, another of the same kind' - He is different but He is of the same kind - 'I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you'. Some people have an orphaned spirit, an orphaned heart, even with parents.

I want you to see - and we're looking right into the depths of the heart of Father God here tonight - do you know that God Almighty wants to comfort you with His love? All the connotations of that word 'comfort', that's what He wants to do for you! That's why the Holy Spirit takes the name 'Encourager', 'Paraclete', 'Parakletos', the One who comes alongside and lifts up, the Strengthener, that's why the old King James calls it 'Comfort', 'Comfortos', 'with strength'. It's not a comfort, 'there, there', it's a comfort that's like a blood transfusion - that's what we need - with the love of God.

Now here's a truth that I want to open tonight to you, and this might be difficult for some of you to take, and you may never have heard anything like this before - but I want to build it upon Scripture. The Father Heart of God is filled with a mother's love - did you hear that? The Father Heart of God is filled with a mother's love. Now please don't misconstrue what I'm saying, misquote me, or misunderstand me - I am not saying that God is female, I'm not saying that. God is not female in gender - and, by the way, He doesn't have gender, He is spirit. Of course, He's always portrayed in Scripture as masculine, so I'm not advocating that we pray 'Our Mother who art in heaven', it's 'Our Father who art in heaven' - OK? So are we clear on that? But, having

said that, there is something of God's nature that is reflected in both the masculine and feminine in humanity.

Turn with me to Genesis chapter 1 please, verse 26. Now God is creating the pinnacle of creation which is humankind, and He says: "Let Us make man in Our image", there is the plurality of the Godhead, "according to Our likeness" - and the 'man' there is the generic term for mankind, it's not just the males, but mankind in general, "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth". So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them'. Now, do you see that? Did He only create men, as in the males of the species, in His image? No, He didn't. He created - and we're not talking now about headship, we're not talking about order or roles in the church, that's a whole other week, alright? And I'm not doing it! We're not talking about that, we're not talking about work, we're talking about worth, we're talking about value. Every human being - this is why we believe in the sanctity of human life - every human being is made in the image of God! Yes? Are you with me? Both male and female - but, therefore, this means that there is something in the masculine and in the feminine that reflects the image of God. I believe it's this: that within the heart of Father God, there is a mother's love.

Would you turn with me to Isaiah 49? Isaiah 49 verse 15, and I would jot these down if you're not getting the recordings - these are wonderful verses for you to ponder over and meditate upon at a later time. God is speaking in Isaiah 49:15 - listen to this: 'Can a mother forget her nursing child, and not have compassion on the son of her womb?'. Now, we've been talking about the maternal instinct that is in the animal kingdom, storks, but what about in humanity - it is the mother's love, and what a mother would do for her children. God is asking the question: is it possible that a mother could forget the child at her breast? And He answered: 'Surely they may forget'. Now it is very unlikely, it doesn't often happen, but we know it does happen - that a mother can forsake the child of her womb. But look at what God says at the end of verse 15: 'Surely they may forget, yet I will not forget you'. You say: 'Well, what's that saying?'. Well, listen: why did God, if He is Father, and we know He is Father - we're not disputing that - but why didn't He use the imagery of a Father here? Because He's wanting us to understand that the passionate love of a mother, the affection of a mother, is what beats in His heart for us - even greater than any mother on earth. Though they are so loving, yet they can forget their children, but 'I', He says, 'will not forget you'. Now, what does that mean? His love is even greater, it's even more tender. Verse 16 is also a wonderful verse: 'See, I have inscribed you on the palms of My hands'. There is the demonstration, Calvary, the covenant of God, a new covenant in the blood of Jesus. He has etched our names on the hands of Jesus! What a picture!

But here's a perhaps even more graphic picture, turn to Isaiah 66 verse 11. Now God is speaking of Jerusalem here, in verse 10 it says: 'Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her' - but you've got to understand that in the Old Testament, Jerusalem, the Holy City of Zion, often reflected, and God intended that it should reflect His Majesty. Many of the Psalms talk about 'her bulwarks', and the greatness of her splendours reflecting God. So look at this: "Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all you who love her; rejoice for joy with her, all you who mourn for her. That you may be fed and be satisfied with the consolation of her bosom, that you may drink deeply and be delighted with the abundance of her glory". For thus says

the LORD' - now this is the Lord - "Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream. Then you shall feed; on her sides shall you be carried, and be dandled on her knees. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you; and you shall be comforted in Jerusalem".

Now I hope your picture-maker is working right now - do you see what's happening here? Yes, it's Jerusalem, but it's being used as a picture of God's care of His people, His nation, His congregation are there in Zion - and how does God describe His protection and His affection towards Jerusalem? How does He do it? He does it with the figure of a mother feeding a babe at her bosom. He does it with the figure of a child being hoisted on the hips of the mother. He does it with the figure of a little tot being dandled and dangled on the knees of a mother. Listen to what God says: 'As one whom his mother comforts' - now some of you here tonight need to receive this - 'so I will comfort you'. As one whom his mother comforts, so I will comfort you!

You remember what we have touched these nights - what is God like? How do we know what Father God is like? Jesus is what Father God is like! The disciples were shooing the little children away, 'Get out of the road!', and telling the mothers, 'Take them all away!'. What was Jesus doing? He takes them and He puts them on His knee, and He puts His hand upon them and He blesses them. I hope you're seeing this. In fact, Jesus stood over Jerusalem with the tears tripping Him, and what did He say? 'O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who killed the prophets and stoned those sent to you, how often I would have gathered you, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you would not'. Now, you tell me, why did He use that imagery? Why did He use the imagery? Because a mother hen is vociferously protective in maternal love of her chicks, and so God wants to gather us - and, by the way, you look right throughout the whole scriptures, and you will see that God talks about His wings. He doesn't have any wings, you do know God doesn't have wings? The angels have wings, the cherubim have wings, but they are demonstrations and manifestations of His love protecting us and covering us as a mother.

Do you know that your Father God, He wants to hold you, and He wants to comfort you with a love that is greater than any mother-love? Whatever mother wounds you have experienced, He can heal them. Just like we may have 'Father Flaws', He can eternally overcompensate us for them all, because He is the perfect Father; and He has whatever you have missed out on with your mother, whatever it is of voice, or eye, or touch - whatever you didn't have of that nurture and security that you were meant to have had, He can give you in superabundance what you could not imagine! Do you believe that?

Now I know this is hard for some of you, because this is the first you've ever heard this - but let me ask you: do any of you have difficulty experiencing the tender nurturing side of God? You know, sometimes as evangelicals, conservative evangelicals, we can be very cold, dogmatic, and orthodox in our understanding of everything. We know what the Bible says about God, but it's not touching our heart - that intimacy is not there. In fact, we actually are bit turned off by a tender, nurturing side of God. Maybe the problem is that you have been so damaged that you don't do affection and emotion terribly well. Have you had any experiences? 'Oh, experiences? Don't talk about experiences!' - What? Life is about experiences! Life is an experience - I hope you're having some! I hope this is an experience for you. You can't avoid experiences, but all of a sudden when we come to talk about God, 'Oh, don't talk about experiences'. Is He

not a Person? Do we not relate to Him? If He has the heart of a mother, a greater love than any mother could, as our Father God - do we not experience that? Even the great Martyn Lloyd-Jones talked about how, with our own children, we do love them, and they should understand our love every moment of every day, but there are times when we just sweep them up into our arms and we caress them and kiss them - and there are times when God does that. Do you have any experiences of being caught up with the affection and 'storge' love of Father God?

Does a baby need to do anything to be loved? Does it? If it's in a correct environment, born to a loving, compassionate father and mother - does the baby have to do anything to be loved? No. Having said that, remember my foster friend and the little baby, it was being loved but it wasn't receiving the love - why? Because it wasn't contacting the source of the love, it wasn't looking. Listen tonight: you are loved more than you could ever imagine, and it was demonstrated to you when Jesus bled every drop of blood for your sins. God gave His only begotten Son, but are you receiving that? Are you? Are your eyes looking at your Father's eyes, and are you being fed by His nurturing love?

Turn with me quickly to Psalm 131, I love this Psalm: 'LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor my eyes lofty', or arrogant, 'Neither do I concern myself with great matters, nor with things too profound for me'. Now that's amazing for a start, I mean most of our evangelical bookshops would be emptied if we took that verse seriously, because all the books about this, that, and the other, five and ten views on this and that. You know, sometimes we delve into secret things that are not revealed to us, and we need a dose of humility. But watch this, the psalmist David here is getting humble, verse 2: 'Surely I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with his mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me' - that's beautiful. What's the picture there? The picture is a child that has been fed at mother's breast, and it's satisfied, it's full, its content - and so it is weaned, it is happy. That's the way you need to be in the love of your Father in heaven.

I don't know whether any of you here tonight has ever seen Rembrandt's portrayal - Rembrandt the artist - his portrayal of the prodigal son, the return of the prodigal son. Any of you seen it? Well, go home and Google it. It's a picture of the old man, the father, and the young man, the prodigal, is on his knees. He has already been clothed with the robe, and their celebration is beginning. The hands of the old man, the father, are on the shoulder, on the upper back of the prodigal. If you look very closely, very closely, one hand is bigger than the other. Did he make a mistake? No, he didn't. Art students for years have believed that one hand represents the father, and the other represents a mother's love, a mother's hand - because that's what was in the heart of our Father God.

Let's all pray. Now God has been moving and touching so many people in different ways, but you know - as was even prayed beforehand in our prayer meeting tonight - it's very easy to look at people who we might know in the congregation have dysfunctional families, or a background of brokenness, and apply these truths to them, when we are not responsible for them. We are responsible for how we respond to the word of God, and all of us, including myself, all of us need this truth and the healing that comes through the Father Heart of God, and through the tenderness that He shows that is greater than the tenderness of any mother. Is there anyone here tonight, as heads are bowed and eyes are closed, and you would be free enough to

acknowledge that God has spoken to you this evening? It doesn't mean that you have an issue with your mother, it doesn't mean that you have an issue with your father, it might be just that you have not really understood the full depths of the love that God has for you as your Heavenly Father. Whatever your circumstances tonight, would you be able to acknowledge that God has spoken to you, and that you just now want to receive that love? You might be a Christian, you might not be a Christian - it doesn't really matter - all that matters is that you go out tonight knowing the love of God in your heart. Just for a moment I will give you an opportunity to respond by raising your hand, and then I will lead you in prayer. Is there anyone, and you want to acknowledge that tonight? Just raise your hand. God bless you. Put it down when you raise it. God bless you. Anyone else? God bless. Anyone else in the presence of God, as we are surrounded by a sense of His compassion for us, is there anyone else who will reach out, and like that baby get eye contact tonight with those great oceans of love that are the eyes of your Heavenly Father? Anyone else?

Well, let's pray. If you have acknowledged your need tonight, bring to the Lord whatever scars there are in a father or mother. Would you also please confess your own sin, as to how you have wrongly responded to that, how you have used maybe sins as ungodly ways to cope? We have all done that, maybe we have hurt because we are hurt, maybe we have lashed out because of anger. You confess that and repent of it, maybe repent of dishonouring your parents - even if they have been dishonourable. Would you then choose to forgive them, and acknowledge that before God? Now, it doesn't mean what they did was right, it doesn't mean that you have to feel great about their behaviour or your relationship even now, it's just you're getting out of the way and letting God be Judge. You're releasing bitterness and resentment to Him, and just say: 'Lord, I choose to forgive, I choose to forgive Mum, Dad, for... and the way that that made me feel. I release all bitterness and resentment to You, and I ask You to heal my damaged emotions'. Now ask Him to release you from any bondage from the enemy, and now say: 'Lord, I embrace Your love in all its fullness'.

If you've never been converted, you're not a Christian, you should say: 'Lord, I believe Jesus died for me, and I ask You to forgive me and save me, and make me Your child. I embrace the full extent of Your love now. Would You, by the Holy Spirit, pour Your love into my heart?'.

Now, if you have experienced anything that you want to talk about, that's fine, we can talk with you, we can help you afterwards. Please come back tomorrow night, we will be looking at the 'Elder Brother Disease', the other son in the parable. Friday night we're looking at 'Abiding In Abba's Love'. So please do come back, and let folks know about these meetings. It's been wonderful to be in the presence of God.

Father, may all of us be still, like a weaned child on the bosom of his mother, having fed upon Your love. Lord, particularly we pray for those who need deep healing tonight because of their parental experience, or because of their religious experience, and the damage that has been done to them. Lord, we ask tonight: may they have a holy baptism of the love of God. Drown them in Your love, make them drunk with Your love. For we ask these things in the mighty name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

## *The Father Heart Of God - Chapter 5*

# **"Elder Brother Disease"**

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**G**ood evening all! You're getting better each night at this singing, wonderful singing! It's great to see you here this evening, especially if it's your first time - and there are some folk I haven't seen all week, and I'm very glad to see you here tonight, and some friends who have come - thank you for attending. We hope that you are the recipients of a blessing. We have been in the presence of God this week, there is no doubt about that, as He has drawn very near as we've been looking into 'The Father Heart Of God'. We began on Sunday evening by looking at how Father's heart 'Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace', and we will be touching on that theme again a little bit tonight. Then on Monday night we considered how the Father Heart of God and His love is what this aching heart of mine needs, and yours, and indeed what this aching world needs - what everybody is crying out for and looking for, they don't realise it obviously, and they're looking in all the wrong places. But this is what we were made for: to have intimacy with our Heavenly Father, and when we don't get that we look in other places for intimacy. Then we saw on Tuesday evening how 'Father Flaws', deficiencies in our parental relationships, particularly with our fathers, can affect how we view God and whether or not we actually get through to God. Even if we are converted - how, at times, that can be a hindrance, because of what we have known of a father on earth, how that can be a barrier to His love breaking through into our lives. Last night we looked at 'Mother Wounds', and how it's not just about fathers, but actually mothers can affect us if they have not been everything that they should be before God. Last night, I think it was the first time for many of you, where you considered - and this is to whet your appetite if you weren't here last night - that within the heart of Father God there is a mother's love. If you want to know more about that, you need to get the recording - but, wonderful to know that whatever we have been deficient in, whether it's the love of a father or a mother or both, when father or mother forsake us the Lord will take care of us. Whatever you didn't get in this life through flesh and blood that you are related to, you can be overly and eternally compensated by your Father who is in heaven.

Tonight we're going to look at the 'Elder Brother Disease' - because a lot of folk don't see this, never seem to come to terms with embracing Father's love, and there is a real blockage in their life. Maybe that's you tonight, and some people have been getting through each night, and we have had wonderful things happening afterward in prayer ministry - but maybe you're still here, and you still feel that something is wrong. Well, we're going to read together, but before we do that - turn with me to Luke 15, get the portion of Scripture, and then once you've found that we will have a word of prayer, and then we will meditate upon what the Scripture is saying. We're back into the prodigal son parable, which I would rather call 'The Parable of Abba's Heart'. We have been there several evenings so far, but we're going to go back there again.

Let's pray, and would you pray with me please? The prayer is very simple, it is: 'Lord, speak to me. Lord, reveal Yourself to me'. If you're one of those people I've mentioned

who isn't getting through or this isn't getting to you, well, tell the Lord that. Ask for what you need, ask for what you need, what you don't have right now and what you need - ask Him, and your Father in heaven, I believe, if it's according to His will, will hear. So let's say: 'Lord, speak to me and meet with me tonight'.

Abba Father, we do reverence Your Holy Name, and yet we come with such a deep intimacy, knowing that we are coming as children to an Abba Father in heaven. Lord, we thank You for what You've been doing these evenings, and how You've been softening our hearts in Your presence, and how You've been making us so receptive - for many of us to a love that we have never known before. Yet this is the love that You have ordained for us in Jesus Christ, and demonstrated in His crucifixion and His substitution for us as He dies our death and bears our punishment. Lord, we pray that that love of God would be shed abroad in our hearts again by the power of the Holy Spirit, and that whatever hardness there might be or callousness, Lord, whatever we have grown upon us like a skin of thickness that prevents You breaking through and hinders us loving You or loving others - we pray that tonight, Lord, You would do divine surgery upon us by the Holy Spirit, that You will take Your scalpel and that You will make an incision through which our pain can depart and our healing can come. So come, we pray, Lord Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, Heavenly Father, to minister to every need here this evening. May those who have hard hearts, and whose ears are blocked that they cannot hear - may this be the night that You will come and shake them to the core of their being, for the glory of Jesus we pray, Amen.

So tonight, as we look at 'The Father Heart of God', transforming truths from Abba's heart to yours, we're looking at 'Elder Brother Disease'. We're looking at verse 25, we will not read the whole parable - we've been in it a lot of the week. We are reading the end part, after the prodigal has returned home to the father, come to his senses, and his father has received him - not as a servant, as he had hoped it possibly could be, but as a son again. In verse 25 we begin to see the reaction of the elder brother: *"Now his older son was in the field. And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf'. But he was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him'. And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found'".*

I think it was way back on Sunday evening, if you can remember that far, we emphasised that this parable is not about the one whom we have come to know as the prodigal son. It really isn't! He gets the popular press, but this parable is about God, it is about the Father - that's why I would like to rename it 'The Parable of Abba's Heart'. It's telling us what is in God's heart, particularly towards sinners. This has caused some people, some popular authors, to call this parable 'a parable about the prodigal God', rather than the prodigal son. Now some people are horrified at that, because we associate 'prodigal' with this fellow's wasteful, riotous, immoral living. But the word 'prodigal', if you actually look it up in the dictionary, has the definition 'one who spends



or gives lavishly or foolishly'. Now, the young fellow did that with his inheritance and sowing his wild oats, but this parable is all about a prodigal God who lavishes the undeserving with love and grace. 'Oh, we couldn't use the word 'foolishly' about how God loves us' - well, actually the Bible talks about the foolishness of God. If you look at 1 Corinthians chapter 1, you will read there that the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. So God, as He is depicted here in this parable, He is a prodigal God.

However, another common mistake with this parable is not just to focus on the prodigal son, so-called, at the expense of the prodigal God; but to forget that this is a parable about two sons. When you look at verse 11 at the beginning, Jesus said: 'A certain man had two sons'. When we look at these two sons, we see the contrast between law and grace, between performance-based religious attitude toward God, and a loving relationship with God as our Heavenly Father. You see, if you miss this second son in the parable, you miss, I believe, the punchline - and boy does this punch pack a punch towards those who were questioning and challenging the behaviour of the Lord Jesus Christ toward sinners. You remember I pointed this out on Sunday evening, the context of these three 'lost' parables is found in verses 1 and 2, where the religious Pharisees, this highbrow sect in Judaism who wanted to bring every facet of life into line with the Old Testament law of Moses, they were horrified, scandalised and aghast at the fact that Jesus, this Man, receives sinners and eats with them. So Jesus tells this story of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son to communicate the heart of God - for that's Jesus' job. He has come to reveal the Father: 'He who has seen Me, Philip', Jesus said, 'He who has seen Me, Philip, has seen the Father'. He was the Word of God, and a word is an expression of the mind in the heart. He is the express image of God Almighty, so if you want to know what God is like you look at Jesus - and here is Jesus touching the untouchable, here is Jesus purifying the unclean and the defiled.

The religious elite cannot handle it, they are horrified and scandalised - but this is Abba's heart. It is a stumbling block, it is a rock of offence to them. So the punch of this parable is directed towards this religious crowd, the exclusives. The elder brother represents them. But of course, they are dead and gone long ago - but you're here! I want to ask you tonight: could this elder brother be a picture of you? Is the elder brother a disease that you have as a heart condition? Do you suffer from this elder brother syndrome? I personally believe that this condition is epidemic in the church, especially in Ulster. I would go as far as to say that it is pandemic in the world, because religion is in the world and this is a particularly religious disease. We're going to focus on the church - religion is very popular in the world, the world is not agnostic or atheist, the majority of people in the world believe in some kind of God, and they suffer from this problem, the elder brother disease - but let's concentrate on the church and you.

In 2002 George Barna Research Group polled Christians nationwide in the USA to find out how widespread legalism was - that's people who are obeying rules and the law rather than having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. Of course this applied to the American church, and the survey found that one in six surveyed by the statement: 'The Christian life is well summed up as trying to do what God commands. How would you respond to that statement?'. Of the one in six surveyed, out of them, if you agreed with that statement, 57% strongly agreed with it, 25% somewhat agreed, and that brings a total of 82% who were in general agreement

with the statement that that is what the Christian life is all about - it can be summed up as trying to do what God commands. The only problem if you're in that massive 82% of general agreement, if you're in agreement with that statement the only problem is: it's absolutely wrong! That is not what Christianity is about, because that statement is performance-based. It's more about doing than about being, it emphasises rules rather than relationship with God. A clear reading, generally, of the New Testament teaches that we come to God by grace, not by law. This is what this elder brother character is showing us.

Now, I want to share with you in the time that I have: how to know if you are the elder brother or not. OK? Are you ready? Look at verses 25 and 26, the first thing that I want you to see about this elder brother disease is: there is no spirit of celebration. The older brother was in the field, and he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing, and he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. Now please note this: the elder brother was near the house, he is near home, but he couldn't understand, neither could he enter in to the enjoyment of the celebration for his brother coming home. Now that reminds me of the disciples, and particularly Judas Iscariot, not understanding the exuberant worship of the alabaster box and the spikenard ointment that the sinner woman broke over the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know that story in Matthew 26 verses 6 through to 9? The objection and the protest that is made is: "That could have been sold, that's very costly, it could have been sold and the money could have been given to the poor!". Jesus had to reprimand them and defend that sinner woman. He said that what she had done, she had done for His burial, and would not be taken away from her. He went on to say that not only did the fragrance of that anointing fill the house, but in fact it would fill the world because, Jesus said, wherever the Gospel would be preached, this story of that woman and what she did would be recited.

You see, such hilarious giving, such extravagant worship is prodigal. It appears to be wasteful, some think it to be foolish, it certainly is lavish and spends all - but it is something that Christ is pleased with. Not only did the fragrance of that perfume fill the room, it filled the world! And it's still filling the world! But you see, there was a religious stuffiness and stiff-shirtidness with these disciples that we see within this elder brother. Let me tell you something: it goes far beyond reverence and godly fear - this is Les Misérables, misery. Have you ever encountered this? Miserable Christians - is there such a creature on the face of the earth? They are miserable themselves, with all their religion, and they are not content until the whole world is miserable along with them. So this form of 'Christian', they police others by externals, which is the easiest way to police anyone, and they frown on others who express too much joy. They will tolerate you feeling happy, just don't show it! Charles Swindoll calls them 'grace stealers'.

Now, remember I asked you Presbyterians the other evening what the answer to the first question in the catechism was? What was that answer? The chief end of man is to? Yes, to glorify God and enjoy Him - enjoy Him! Remember I said that evening that if it was written today, probably there would be a bit of pressure to drop that word 'enjoy'. It gives the wrong connotation, doesn't it? Not that Presbyterians would be like that or anything, I don't mean that whatsoever! But God wants to be enjoyed! There is something wrong really - and I'm not saying we won't face persecution, that is coming and it's coming big-time, and I'm not saying that your life will be always 24/7 filled with happiness, and some preachers are giving that impression wrongly - but there is a

joy deep down in the midst of the storms in the bowels of the boat that we can have as Christians that transcends whatever is going on outside us. God wants to be enjoyed, but there is something wrong in our hearts - and it may indicate the diagnosis of the elder brother disease if we are not enjoying God, and we don't like others enjoying Him too much either.

Do you remember in Galatians chapter 4, they had got sucked into legalism, law, and Paul says: 'You group of Christians at one time would have plucked your eyes out and given them to me' - because probably he may have been shortsighted or badly sighted - and they were so exuberant in their love and sacrifice, they were so joyful that they would have done that at one stage. But Paul had to say to them: 'Where has all your joy gone?'. You see, it had got eaten up with this disease.

If you look at verse 26 you see that he doesn't understand what's going on, why there is this party. He calls the servants and asks: 'What do these things mean?'. He didn't understand the people enjoying themselves, he didn't understand them getting excited - and do you know something? There are some long faces that attend churches on a weekly basis, and sometimes on a nightly basis, and they really can't understand people enjoying themselves in the presence of God - and they would like to censor it. If that is you, even secretly in your heart, it's probably because you've never seen into Father's heart. You don't understand these Christians that get excited, maybe you are a person that is more interested in getting things right, than what we read in verse 32. Look at verse 32, the father says to this elder brother: 'It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found'. This is what was right: rejoicing! Does the Bible not say that all heaven rejoices over one sinner that repents? We would need 100,000 sinners to repent for some of us to get excited, would we not? Even some of us would think it is unbecoming and unseemly to do such a thing in church as get excited - and when you're sitting in front of the match on a Saturday, boy do you get excited! Do you not?

Friends, listen: on one occasion this Jewish pharisaical spirit tried to silence the crowds on Palm Sunday that were welcoming in their King, their Messiah. It may have been very shallow, but they were quieting them down - 'This is unbecoming, this is unseemly!'. Jesus said: 'If they do not cry out, the rocks will!'. Do you have a spirit that cannot celebrate? Look at verse 27, even after the explanation: 'Your brother has come, and because he has received him safe and sound, your father has killed the fatted calf' - now, remember, this was the servant explaining to this elder brother, this elder son - even after this he just doesn't seem to get it. I have questions about the Bible when I'm reading things, I hope you ask questions too - and I'm saying: 'How did he miss all this happening?'. I mean, he was out in the field and he was busy and all, but how did he not notice that his brother who had been gone for - we don't know how long - was now home? Obviously he was on the father's property, he was in the father's household, but he wasn't close enough to the father to know what was actually taking place. It's ironic here, to me anyway, that the servants seem to be more clued in about what was happening in father's house than one of his sons. I think there's an application there, because it's amazing that sometimes people outside of the church, people in the world we might say, see through religious hypocrisy and self-righteousness quicker than we do in all the trappings.

Sometimes folk outside God's Kingdom get unconditional love quicker than we do. Do you agree with that statement? Do you? Don't be afraid to now, nobody's going to

throw you out - well, I'll not throw you out anyway! But listen: I've got Scripture for that - have you ever heard of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Do you know what the parable of the Good Samaritan was teaching? It was another punch in the jaw, metaphorically speaking, to the Pharisees - because they felt that there was no one more despicable than a Samaritan. Remember what a Samaritan was, they considered them as mongrels in a religious and ethnic sense. They were mixed not only in race, but in religion, and they were idol worshippers and had a false way of worshipping God way up there in the North - OK? So the Jews have no dealings with Samaritans, and Jesus tells the story of the priest and the religious Levite going past this man who is lying beaten at the side of the road on the road to Jericho, and who is it that stops? It's the Samaritan! He takes him on his horse and he cares for him, and he takes him to the inn and he pays for it - and you know what the Jews' reaction was? 'This is not possible, that could not be! This is not typecasting! Samaritans are wicked people, they are unclean, they are religious mongrels!' - but Jesus was saying: 'They, with all their supposed error, according to you, can show more love and compassion and more of God's heart than you do with all your truth'. That's what Jesus was teaching: 'Someone that you despise and think is unworthy, and is not right with God, they can be nearer to what I'm teaching than you are, and you've got the truth'.

The good Samaritan got it. How is your spirit of celebration? How is it? Be honest now. Now I'm not saying that you have to take on somebody else's personality for your temperament, I'm not saying that; and I'm not saying that you should be all, 'Oh, look at me, and what I'm doing' - but here's what happens: do you see when you get caught up with God and God alone, you don't get self-conscious about what other people around you think. In fact, you just lose everybody else in the presence of God, and all you care about is God and getting bathed in His love and responding to Him - that's all that matters. So you're not doing anything to impress anybody, and you're not doing anything to embarrass anybody, and you're certainly not doing anything to say 'Oh, everybody look at me, how wonderful I am'. You're forgetting about yourself, you're forgetting about everybody else, and you're focused on God. Can I say that if all of us were like that, we wouldn't be seeing what anybody else was doing - isn't that right?

Have you got a spirit of celebration? If you don't, it might be because you're an elder brother or sister. Something else: his devotion was expressed through anger. Look at verse 28: 'He was angry and would not go in. Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him' - wow! Nobody is questioning the elder brother's devotion here. It's very clear, as we will see later on, how hard he is working in the field for his father. But I believe it was easier for the elder brother to be a slave in the field than to be intimate with his father. That's a profound statement: sometimes it's easier for you to do all this Christian work than have intimacy with the Father, because intimacy with the Father will open us up to the woundedness that is in our heart, to the issues that need to be dealt with. Sometimes some folk submerge themselves in alcohol and drugs and promiscuous living, but there's a whole lot of folk that submerge themselves in religion, and the evangelical type as well. 'Keep yourself busy and you'll forget all those painful things!' - but when you come into contact with the intimacy of the Father, He begins to heal the hurt. But, you see, the hurt has to come to the surface.

You remember 1 Corinthians 13, that great wonderful purple passage on love. Paul told there that you can be highly spiritually gifted, you can speak in the tongues of men and angels, you can prophesy, you can have faith that moves mountains at your word,

you can be so loving and charitable that you give all your possessions to the poor, sell everything you have and distribute the finances, you can even be a martyr and give your body to be burned - but if you don't have love, you're nothing. Well, let me ask you very simply: are Christians known here in Ireland for their love or for their anger? Now, let's be honest. What are you known for? Be honest now. Now, maybe I shouldn't be saying this in the church, but I like Frank Carson - is that a sin? Not yet, hopefully it's not a sin yet! Now I'm not saying everything he said or did was right, but he was a funny man, you've got to give him that! But he was a profound man in some of the things he said, and here's one statement of Frank Carson's - he said: 'There's too many Catholics in Ireland, and there's too many Protestants in Ireland, and there's not enough Christians'. I say 'Amen' to Frank Carson on that one. Too many Protestants, too many Catholics, and not enough Christians.

Jesus said: 'By this they shall know that your My disciples: that you love one another'. It used to be in the early church that people pointed at Christians and said: 'Behold how they love one another!' - and what are they doing now in our nation? There are saying: 'Look at these Christians!' - and it's not just a Roman Catholic/Protestant thing, it's in all the denominations - at one another's throats! Even in individual churches! Why is it that we cannot get on with one another? Sometimes we pride ourselves - and this is what I'm getting at - that our devotion can be expressed through anger. This elder brother was angry, he didn't get this celebration stuff, and he was so angry that he wouldn't go in.

Now, don't misunderstand me, there are things that we ought to be angry about. But how do we express our Christianity? Do we express it with angry aggression or with loving compassion? Are we defined by what we are against or what we hate, or how we love people? That's the way it's meant to be - but the elder brother disease, this is a symptom: it expresses devotion to God through anger. He was angry and would not go in. No spirit of celebration, and devotion through anger.

Thirdly: his self-righteousness led him to separate from his family. Do you see what it says here in verse 28? He would not go in! Have you ever heard that before? Have you? Have you ever heard any Christian say: 'Oh, I wouldn't go in there! Oh, I wouldn't go to that place!' - what? Now I'm not suggesting that you should have no discernment, I'm not suggesting that you should be a baby Christian that just puts everything in your mouth that lies on the floor and that has 'Christian' written on it. We've got to trust the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and guidance, but we've got to also beware that we can have a self-righteous attitude that leads us to divide from those who are truly our brothers and sisters in Christ, whatever the name is above the door of the building that they worship in.

You see, there are three aspects of legalistic pride. The first is traditionalism - do you know what that is? Now listen: there is nothing wrong with good traditions, there has always been an historic heritage in the Christian church and we need to be careful that we don't lose it. But traditionalism worships those traits that have lost their meaning now, do you understand? They were good traditions once, and they were brought into being because it was helpful and it was wise at the time, but now you won't let go of the thing even though it doesn't any more serve its purpose - that is traditionalism, and it's not of God. Jesus had to say to the Pharisees, who were well-meaning and they really wanted to please God, he said: 'By your own traditions, the traditions of the elders, you have made void the laws of God'. You see there can come a time where

they actually cancel out what God intends, 'And so you tithe mint, and cummin, and anise', He said to the Pharisees, 'but the weightier matters of the law, things like justice and mercy and love, you leave those things undone. You're so obsessed about not drinking a gnat in your wine, and you sift it through your teeth' - that's what it means when Jesus said 'You strain at a gnat'. Have you ever seen anybody drinking wine through their teeth? Anybody drinking through their teeth wouldn't be a very pleasant sight - that's what these Jews did, they drank wine through their teeth so that the bugs got caught. Some of you might have trouble - no, I shouldn't say that! Do you understand why they did that? Because those bugs were unclean. But Jesus says: 'This is what you do with a gnat, you strain at a gnat, and you swallow a camel. You were worried about the wee gnat, and you're drinking in big camels of unrighteousness and you don't even realise it'.

That's what traditionalism will do: we get all uptight about these wee things, these man-made rules - not things in the word of God now, but man-made rules - and some of them have lost their meaning today, and we leave the things that God is concerned about undone. The second aspect of legalism is self-righteousness, which is obvious. We think of ourselves better than another, and that leads to the third aspect of legalism which is judgementalism. Traditionalism, self-righteousness, and then judgementalism. The elder brother was a judge, a critic, he was a haughty separatist. He was angry against what he saw as something that was wrong, and he would not go in and have fellowship with his brother nor his father. He built himself up by tearing his brother down. I want to tell you tonight: there are whole ministries and whole organisations, that are built on this foundation of putting themselves, exalting themselves, by criticising others and pulling them down.

Look at verse 30, this is the elder brother speaking: 'But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him'. He was so bitter, you can feel it, can't you? Do you notice this: what does he call his brother? 'This son of yours' - he had such a root of bitterness, that he wouldn't call his brother his 'brother'. I heard only this week, and it's not related to anybody here tonight - I hear it regularly at times, and it grieves me, but I heard it again this week - about a true brother saying to another brother: 'I can no longer have fellowship with you because...' - and if you knew the reason, you'd probably roll around on the floor laughing. It's not funny, but it's so utterly ridiculous. This is what I'm talking about, where we can't call our brother 'our brother'. Listen, I'm going to tell you what I believe the Bible teaches: if someone has repented of their sins and believed the Gospel, I don't care what their background is, I don't care where they're still worshipping, they're my brother or they're my sister in Jesus Christ - and I need to reach out my hand and receive them and give them fellowship. I don't wait until they're like me till I do that, alright? Not until they're a Presbyterian, or a Baptist, or Brethren, or whatever label you like - no! No matter what they are or what they have been, if they are a disciple of Jesus Christ and desiring to follow Him, I need to encourage them, I need to build them up, I need to edify - not pull them down and wreck! Any fool can wreck a thing or wreck somebody.

'This son of yours'. But here's a lesson: if we don't know how to truly receive grace from God, we won't be able to offer it to other people. That's a lesson if ever there was one. You see, if you haven't a heart that has seen into Father's heart, and you know that it beats with the rhythm of grace, in all likelihood if you have a performance-based relationship with God, everybody else will have a performance-based

relationship with you. So they have to live up to your standard before you can give them the imprimatur, and say: 'Ah, they're a good fellow, they're a good Christian, they're a proper Christian now - they're the real thing, them boys'. Until they let you down, and you hear about them doing something that you wouldn't do - you become the standard. Because you have a performance-based relationship, that's the way you think God is with you, He's looking down and thinking: 'Now come on, you can do a wee bit better now. Oh, that was bad, pull your socks up! Oh, what? I told you about that before!'. You think God is up there doing that, and that's the attitude - as I said the other evening, you become like the God you worship. So if you have a performance-based relationship with God, you will have a performance-based relationship with your brother.

Isn't it amazing, Jesus was holy, harmless, undefiled and separate from sinners - yet He never had a standoffish attitude. Isn't that remarkable? Jesus was never holier-than-thou, and yet He was the holiest of all. Now, what right have you to look down your nose at anybody else, whatever they're doing, if the Son of the Living God didn't? Let me ask you a question: would you rather be right than have a relationship with God and have a relationship with your brother and sister? Because if that's you, you've got a problem. How you relate to others, even those that you don't agree with - particularly those that you don't agree with - says a lot about how you actually relate to God. We can all disagree, but we can disagree agreeably. The elder brother demonstrated a far greater concern for laws and lives - and that's the mark of a legalist: getting it right! Being right is more important than relationship: 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. I know a good fellow said that, but you know sometimes we can be so isolated in our self-righteousness. He was right, thank God he was, but sometimes we say that about absolutely two flies crawling up a wall, or what colour the kitchen should be painted in the church: 'Here I stand, I can do no other'. We're nailing the thesis to the wall every 24 hours about issues - this was the Gospel Luther said that about! The big issues today are the issues that we are not getting hot and bothered about.

With you, like the elder brother, is it more about saving face than saving grace? Have your convictions become restrictions for you and for others who share them? Is your freedom in Christ being robbed? He had no spirit of celebration. His devotion was expressed through anger. He was self-righteous, and it led him to separate from his family. Fourthly: he condemned the sins of the flesh, but he condoned the sins of the spirit. Look at verse 30 again: 'As soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him'. You remember there were two sons in this parable, one was rebellious and this elder one was religious. Can I say, as Neil Anderson says: make sure that you get the prodigal to the Father before the elder brother gets to him. Make sure you get the prodigals to the Father before the elder brother gets to them. The prodigal was guilty of the sins of the flesh, the obvious ones let's say - harlots, drunkenness and all the rest, revelry. But this elder brother was guilty of the sins of the spirit, the not so obvious ones. I did a series once on 'Sins We Have Sanitised', sins that we have made acceptable to us. Often they are not the external things, the dirty things we might think of, but they are internal.

Let me show you, 2 Corinthians 7, turn with me to it. Keep your finger there in the prodigal son, 2 Corinthians 7 verse 1: 'Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh' - that's the prodigal - 'and the spirit' - that's the elder brother - 'perfecting holiness in the fear of God'. Sins of the

spirit, things that other people can't see. You see, legalists can police the outside. You know, if you're lying drunk in the gutter in Magherafelt or Cookstown on a Friday night, well, that would be you finished in the church, that's it! I'm not saying we should be going about doing that, but you can be sitting in the pew, and you can be in a position in the church, and you can have a root of bitterness in you for 25 years - but you think the boy in the gutter with an addiction problem is worse than you. You need to think again. You that are slandering and backbiting, spreading rumours, getting in the way of the work of God.

Let me show you. Do you remember the 'Top of the Pops', we have a top ten list of sins - and they aren't God's top ten. Turn with me, please, to Proverbs 6 verse 16: 'These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look', there is number one - top ten, number one, a proud look. Have you ever seen a proud look in church? What? That's probably the best place to go and look for it! Go to a business meeting, you'll not know where to look for proud looks. I'm not being facetious, I've been in them. A proud look, 'a lying tongue', you can go to the same place if you like - a lying tongue. 'Hands that shed innocent blood', now you remember that you don't have to actually literally kill somebody to have murder in your heart. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that if you just hate your brother, that's enough. 'A heart that devises wicked plans', Christians would never do that! 'Feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies', and look at this, 'and one who sows discord among brethren'. One who sows division among brothers - God hates it! It is an abomination to Him!

Now unless I'm reading a version that drops verses out here and there, there is no mention of adultery here, there is no mention of drunkenness, homosexuality isn't mentioned in this list. Now I'm not saying those things aren't big to the Holy God of Heaven - sin is sin, and we have to be careful at comparing them - but these are the things that really get God going. So why are they the things that don't bother us? Why is that?

Finally, ultimately the elder brother's condition stemmed from wrongly relating to God, verse 29. Back to the prodigal in Luke 15, verse 29. His lack of a spirit of celebration, his devotion that was expressed through anger, his self-righteousness and separatist attitude, his condemning of the sins of the flesh and condoning the sins of the spirit - they all stemmed from him wrongly relating to God. Verse 29: 'He answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends''. I said to you the other evening, this older brother was relating to God more like an employee to an employer, rather than relating to God as a child to his father. Now, you might get on with your employer, and God bless you if you do; but it's a totally different relationship than you ought to have with your Dad. Is that not right? Who talks to their father like this: 'Oh, I've served you these many years, and you never rewarded me'? He was wrongly relating to his father, and this is the elder brother disease of wrongly relating to God on a performance level, and all these other symptoms come from it. These two sons are very different, and yet they are very similar. One was rebellious, the other is religious; one was a miserable lawbreaker, the other is a miserable law keeper. But the problem with both of them is the same: they really never knew the heart of their father, neither of them! Both were self-centred: one in sins of the flesh, the other in sins of the spirit - but the father loved both of them in spite of their flaws. These two sinned in very different ways, but



their solution was the same: the love that is in the father heart.

Whether you're a wayward prodigal or an elder brother tonight, the answer is the same. Now maybe as God's Spirit has been brooding in this meeting tonight, you feel like you maybe are an elder brother? I believe, by the way, that there is an elder brother in all of us - so nobody should be getting off the hook tonight. I believe there is a Pharisee in all of us, I believe there is a legalist in all of us. But I want to tell you tonight: if you have identified that this describes your photofit, in God's eyes that's not how He sees you. Now listen, I want you to hear this: even if you're displaying these symptoms of this disease, that is not - if you're born again child of God - that is not the way God sees you. This father saw him still as a son, look at verse 31: 'He said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours''. You see, the elder brother didn't know what he had in his father, and he wasn't enjoying what was already his. You see, the elder brother already had the love of his father - look at that in verse 31: 'all that I have is yours'. He already had it! He didn't need to keep trying to prove himself and earn it!

You're here tonight, and even if you are displaying these character traits of the elder brother - listen, you need to hear tonight: just quit! Stop! Stop striving, stop driving, stop trying to earn, and enjoy what you already have! You see, this is the secret: when you know whose you are, you're a child of the Father, you will begin to understand who you are and then you will know what to do. You see this elder brother didn't understand the love that was in his father's heart, he didn't know that he was the son that his father thought him to be, and so he tried to perform to earn his love. Yet all the time, all that the father had was already his. The tragedy is: he could have used his father's resources at any time. Would you go back to verse 12? Look at the beginning of this parable, the younger son said to the father: 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me' - now, read this, read your Bible - 'So he divided to them his livelihood'. Did the prodigal son get it all and waste it all? No, he divided equally between the elder brother and the prodigal his livelihood. So this son had his inheritance: 'All that I have is yours', and furthermore this son actually stayed in father's house - but it was his anger and his pride that kept him away from father's heart.

You could be in Father's house tonight, you could be saved, and you could be in the household of faith and worshipping - and I don't care where - but you could be considered by all and sundry and yourself as right with God, but you're not seeing into Father's heart because of elder brother disease. Both these sons were in father's household - and you know the story is often preached is a gospel message, and I have done it and continue to do it - there's not a problem with that. But this story is really about the restoration of a true relationship with God, not the start of it, but a relationship with God that was somewhere at one point - the prodigal was at home, and this elder brother was in the house, but he wasn't really getting through to God. This story is all about how wayward people and religious people can have true relationship if they could only see into Abba's heart.

I don't know whether you've ever noticed this about this parable, but it's open ended - do you notice that? We don't know whether this elder boy ever gets it, we don't know whether he falls down at his father's feet and says: 'I didn't realise all I had, and I'm sorry for being so hardhearted and trying to earn'. I don't know how it ended for the elder brother, but how will your story end? Let us pray.

I just want to take time now in the presence of God. People are dying, not for laws, but for grace. They are dying to know the Father's love. Here in these Pharisees was a crowd of people who knew their Bible, but they didn't know their God; they knew their Bible, but they didn't know the heart of God. Our churches in our land are filled with well-meaning Christians with mountains of Bible knowledge, but with molehills of knowledge of God's heart. You could be one of them here tonight. Now I'm not going to ask you to respond if you're a Pharisee or an elder brother - but if you want to, you should do. But as I said: there a Pharisee in all of us, there is some part of us that tries to earn God's favour and doesn't rest in grace. If you're a person who has realised that its grace and grace alone, and God has spoken to your heart tonight - you mightn't even be a Christian yet, but you've been trying to earn God's favour and buy your salvation. I don't care where you are on the road, as long as you've got it tonight. Maybe you've been a very legalistic family, or the version of Christianity that you got injected into you when you were young is of this ilk and you're finding it a bondage to break away from, and you can't get through because of all that stuff - but you want to break through tonight and truly know the heart of God.

Where you are seated, while heads are bowed and eyes are closed, is there anyone who will acknowledge that God has spoken to them tonight, and they want to open their heart - no matter how hard it might seem to be - you will prise it open and let the grace of God and the love of Abba Father flood into it by the help and power of the Holy Spirit? Would you raise your hand just where you are seated? God bless you. God bless you. God bless. There are people raising their hands throughout the building, is there anyone else? God bless. God will honour you for acknowledging your need tonight. Anyone else? God bless you. Anyone else? God bless. God bless. We're not going to prolong this, but we want to give an opportunity for you to respond to the word of God. People in leadership, people in ministry - is there anyone else?

Now let's pray, and you respond to the Lord, you who have acknowledged your need. Just confess to the Lord - what is your sin? Self-righteousness? The Bible says God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble, so humble yourself and God will not be able to resist you. He can't resist someone who humbles themselves. Confess your sin, whatever it is. Maybe you have been hurt - and we've all been hurt if we've been hanging about church for long enough - and there are probably people we need to forgive. Maybe an elder brother has hurt us, and we have become that elder brother or sister, because we have hardened ourselves to others lest we get hurt again. Maybe we have a critical spirit, maybe we censor those who are happy and excited in God - maybe we don't even realise we're doing it, but we are cursing them. Do you know that can happen? Out of the same mouth comes blessing and cursing. We can be saying: 'Oh, give them a few months, ach, they're young young now, wait till they hit life - boy, that'll knock that nonsense out of them!' - that's a curse. You're wishing them ill. We need to repent of these things. Maybe it's anger, you have been angry - and maybe things have been done that are wrong. Wait till I tell you: ministers, elders, leaders in churches make mistakes all the time - amen? Because they are human - and, newsflash: you make your own mistakes too! The half of you - I shouldn't say it, I'll not say it. You need to pray for your leaders, not slander them. 'If all the breath thus vainly spent, in heaven to supplication was sent', imagine what would happen!

Repent, ask the Lord to forgive you, and - by faith - embrace His Father Heart and let it melt yours. Renounce the devil and all his works, ask the Lord to deliver you from

any hold of bondage that the enemy has had over you, and ask the Lord now to melt your heart and set you free, melt your heart and set you free. Do it now.

Lord, I pray for everyone here tonight, that You may do a great work in all our hearts. How could any of us have pride when we consider the greatness of our God, and the humility of Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord? How could any of us stand beside the cross of Jesus and have pride or judgementalism, when there is a thief beside Him who cries for mercy and he gets it? When the soldiers around Him are piercing His hands and His feet, He says to them: 'Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing' - how could any of us have pride? Forgive me for my pride. Abba Father, You have again graced us to see into Your heart, and we have seen that there is a cross there. Lord, You have allowed us another gift: to see into our own hearts, and to see the Pharisee and the hypocrite there. May all of us tonight be able to say with the Apostle: 'I am crucified with Christ', that when we look in from now on we will see a cross in our hearts, and Jesus on the throne - that we may love our God with all our being, and love our brother and our enemy. For Jesus' sake, Amen.

## *The Father Heart Of God - Chapter 6*

# **"Abiding In Abba's Love"**

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**W**ell, good evening everyone. Thank you to Gordon and to the praise group. Thank you for your thank you, and for your kind words, for having been here and having had the privilege of ministering to you this week - and I do mean that: it has been a privilege, not just to be with you dear folk in fellowship, but to have the joy of studying God's word. The preacher always is the better recipient of blessing, I believe, labouring in the truth and then delivering it - hopefully in the power of the Holy Spirit, and knowing the blessing. I have seen lives that are being changed before my very eyes. It's all God's doing, and it's wonderful to see it and we give Him all the praise and all the glory - for it's only God can do anything worthwhile, isn't that right? We have been seeing it, and we praise God for it and rejoice. I rejoice with you, those of you who have been able to embrace this great truth of 'The Father Heart of God'. We're not finished tonight, tonight is the crescendo, I believe, and I'm excited about what God is going to do. But thank you for being here, some of you have been here every night - I have to be here every night, but you don't, and I do appreciate that. So thank you for coming. Some of you, it's your first night tonight - where were you? No, I don't mean that! We're glad to see you, and if you can avail yourself of the resources and catch up, I believe you will be blessed.

We're turning in our Bibles tonight to Jude - that's the little book before the last book, the book of Revelation - so Jude, it's only one chapter so it shouldn't be hard to find the chapter. The verses we're going to read, verses 20 and 21. Now, when you get that portion, let's pray and ask God to speak to us. Would you do that? Those of you who have been here during the week, we have been praying before we come to the Scriptures and asking God to speak to our individual hearts - would you do that just now? Say: 'Lord, speak to me, reveal Yourself to me, show me more of the depths of Your love for me. Teach me not only how to receive it, but how to have a greater capacity to receive more of Your love, and how to share it with others, that others might see Your love in me'. So let's come and open our hearts, and become attuned to what the Spirit has to say to us tonight.

We bow our knee before the Father, of whom every family in heaven and earth is named. We worship at Your feet tonight Father, Abba Father. As we approach You with fear and reverence - recognising that You are holy, holy, holy, God - we thank You that we have this depth of intimacy that we can call You our Father. Lord, I pray just now that every single one of the people gathered here - those who have been with us during the journey of the week, those for whom it is their first time here - that everyone would get a glimpse into Father's heart tonight, and would learn how to abide in Abba's love. So we wait upon You, Lord, we pray for Your light and Your love to flood into this place, into our minds and our hearts, and to dispel all the darkness - put out all the darkness - out of this room, out of the atmosphere, out of our lives, that we will be filled with Your light, Your truth, and with Your love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

So we've been looking these nights at 'The Father Heart of God', transforming truths from Abba's heart to yours. We started off on Sunday evening - and I might test you to see if you can remember the subjects, some of you look as if you're panicking now! Sunday evening was that the Father's heart 'Beats With The Rhythm Of Grace'. Monday night was that this truth is 'What Our Aching Hearts Long For And Need'. Tuesday night we looked at 'Father Flaws', and how our earthly fathers can affect how we view God in heaven, and the connotation of the very term 'father'. Then Wednesday evening we looked at 'Mother Wounds', and how in the heart of Father God - who is a Father - there is love stronger than any mother, even with a mother's touch, and we looked at several scriptures for that. Then last evening - can you help me out, what did we look at last evening? Yes, 'Elder Brother Disease' - we looked at this other son in the parable of the prodigal that we have been in several evenings. Tonight we're looking at 'Abiding In Abba's Love'. You see, it would be very easy for us to get a sort of momentary glimpse - or, it's more than that, it should be a seismic revelation - of the love that's in Father's heart, but where do we go from here?

So let's look at this from verses 20 and 21 of Jude, just as a starting place: *"But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God"*, and that's the phrase I want to emphasise tonight, *"keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life"*.

We spent a lot of time this week in the parable of the prodigal son, which I would like to retitle and designate 'The Parable of Abba's Heart' - because, as we've seen, it's not about the prodigal, and it's not even about the two sons, even though there is more than one son in the parable; it's about the father, it's about the Father's heart that is shown in Jesus as He goes and touches the untouchable, and does the unthinkable and expresses the love of God to sinners. But the prodigal parable is not about the beginning of a relationship with God - and though we sometimes, preachers, use it in a Gospel and evangelistic context (and I'm not against that, I do it myself) - essentially the parable is more about restoring a relationship that should already be there. Both sons were self-centred. One was self-centred concerning the pleasures of the flesh, the other was self-centred in his performance relationship with his father, but he was engaging in the sins of the spirit as we saw last night. But essentially both sons used their father for what they could get out of him - it's important that we notice this.

They used their father, rather than valuing intimacy with him, valuing him for who he really was. The prodigal valued him for his inheritance, and I said a few nights ago that when he came and asked his father for what was going to befall him, he was essentially saying: 'Dad, I wish you were dead, six foot under, so that I could get my hands on your money' - how must that have made father feel? He just wanted what was coming to him, his inheritance. But the elder brother wasn't that different in that he was serving and slaving for his father in the field in order to earn wages and gain reward, gain his father's favour. Now there is a great danger that we as Christians, if we have the conversion new birth experience, that we are in Father's house - just like both these sons - and we know some of the benefits of sonship, but we are rather selfish in the way in which we relate to God.

Let me give you an example: for some Christians, it's all about salvation, everything revolves around being saved and knowing you're going to heaven, and having the assurance of sins forgiven. Now that's not wrong, that's a great blessing and benefit of

the Gospel of course. Then there are other Christians, and there is a great emphasis on spiritual gifts and spiritual experiences - and, again, that is not essentially wrong. Scripture teaches us to desire earnestly the best gifts of the Spirit and, as we saw the other night, the Bible is full of spiritual experiences. Whilst none of us live a daily routine of spiritual phenomena, this Christian life is a journey of experiencing God in a personal way - and that is all there. But there is a danger that we look to get things from God, whether it's getting out of hell and going to heaven, whether it's getting the slate clean and all our sins purged, whether it's spiritual giftedness and all sorts of supernatural abilities - we can do all of that, desire all of that at the expense of actually valuing God for who He is, and pursuing spiritual intimacy with Him.

You see, if you only relate to God in a superficial way, you will either end up like the young son in the far country seeking other satisfactions, or you will become a religious formalist that is completely detached from the reality of who God is and what He wants to do. I have to say that I believe that's one of the reasons why there is spiritual famine in the church in general here in the Western world - because we pursue God for what we can get out of Him, rather than pursuing Him for who He is, valuing intimacy with Him as our Heavenly Father. I also believe it's the reason why sexual sin is at an all-time high within the Kingdom of God. I know I've touched on this on several evenings, and I haven't gone into it in much detail. Figures and all sorts of statistics are floating around, but one indicates that upwards of 50% of men within church circles struggle with sexual sin and sexual addictions. The prodigal teaches us that if we don't value our intimacy with God as Father, we will end up seeking other substitutes, and we will end up going way far from God into a far country, and eventually wallowing in the pigpen joined to something other than God.

Other people don't go down the immoral route as such, but they try to find meaning in power, in possessions, in position, in other people, places, or performance - just like the elder brother. It doesn't really matter. As we saw last evening, the answer and solution for both these sons was the same. Their empty hearts needed to discover their Heavenly Father, and appreciate the love that he had for them. That's what you need tonight. Whether you're trying to find satisfaction in religion or in the world, your emptiness, the aching void in your heart, will only be filled by the revelation of the Father Heart of God and appreciating who He really is. You see, who He really is as Father will move you to the place when you will discover who you truly are. There is a great crisis of identity in the world, even in the church - we don't know who we are, and we don't know how to behave, and it seems that we can't behave right. But when you realise who your Heavenly Father really is, you will discover who you are truly, and also how you should be living.

Can I just say: this is the way to holiness, this is the path to sanctification - not 'trying to be holy'. If you're one of these Christians that's trying your best, and struggling and striving, and you have a drivenness, but you are not abiding in Father's love, this is the reason why you're always falling flat on your face. You cannot achieve holiness by trying. Indeed, I would go as far as to say that holiness should not be taught separate from intimacy with God. That's a very strong statement, but I believe it is true. For years from pulpits right throughout our churches - whatever particular denominational persuasion it is, that doesn't matter whatsoever - holiness has been preached, different strains, different understandings of it, and many people have had burdens upon them: 'I need to do better, I need to live cleaner, I need to stop doing this and start doing that' - and they cannot do it! The pharisaical religious spirit is putting

burdens upon people that cannot be borne, and those that are teaching them - including myself on occasion - can't even shift them with our little fingers, that's what Jesus said of the Pharisees. We put burdens on people, but we can't deal with them.

You see, the secret to holiness - if it is a secret, and it's not, it's an open revelation in Scripture - is intimacy with Heavenly Father. Because, you see, it's impossible to get holiness any other way. When you preach holiness without intimacy, all it does is condemn people and weigh them down. It is wholeness that leads to holiness: knowing who our Heavenly Father is, our identity in Him as sons and daughters in the Kingdom, we then know how to behave because of who we are related to. This is right throughout the New Testament: what you believe affects the way you behave. What you do does not determine who you are - that's the religious performance spirit - what you do does not determine who you are, who you are determines what you do. So when you understand who Father is, you know who you are, and then you know how you ought to behave. Are you with me?

So, do you know who your Heavenly Father is, and do you know who you are? Or are you still struggling and striving to try to be what you think you ought to be, and what God expects of you, but there is a shortfall of intimacy with God? Do you remember in Matthew chapter 4, where Jesus was tempted, led into the wilderness by the Spirit and tested by Satan? Satan came to Jesus and he said: 'If You are the Son of God turn these stones into bread' - do you remember that? What a lot of people don't realise is that Satan is a serpent, and his subtlety is great. He dropped a word, a very important word, in that temptation. He called Jesus the 'Son of God', and he's quite happy to do that - that's something he knew he wouldn't get away with diluting with Jesus, he's standing before the Son of God, he knows exactly who He is - but there is one very significant word that he dropped. Do you know that word is? Well, go back a chapter to Matthew chapter 3, and what happens there? It is the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist says: 'I need to be baptised by You', and Jesus said, 'No, to fulfil all righteousness, you baptise Me'. Jesus is baptised of John the Baptist, and what happens? It says the heavens cleaved, the dove or semblance of a dove comes down as the Holy Spirit anoints Jesus, and there is a voice that comes from the Excellent Glory - and what does it declare? 'This is My Beloved Son'. Satan dropped the designation 'Beloved'. Now, why is that significant? It's significant because it is keeping ourselves in the love of God that will make you holy and enable you to resist temptation. It's relationship, it's knowing that you are beloved of God.

So, do you keep yourself in the love of God? In fact, Paul, when he came in Romans - after spending 11 chapters expounding the wonder of the Gospel and how we ought to take it to the ends of the world - he says in chapter 12 verse 1: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice', and you know the rest of those two verses. But the whole point is: because of everything that God has done for you in love, all of these blessings, your response ought to be just surrendering everything. As we sang last evening at the close of the meeting: 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all'. You see, when we get a true revelation of the love that is in the Father heart of God, we will then be able to hate sin - only then - because then sin will become a threat to our intimacy with Heavenly Father, and we don't want to lose that. That can only happen when we know who He is, the love that is in His heart, our identity as sons and daughters in Him. Can I tell you: that is who we already are. If you have repented of your sins, believed the Gospel, you already are a child of God. John 1:12: 'To as many

as received Him', that's Jesus Christ, 'to them He gave the', power or the authority, 'the right to be called the sons', the children, 'of God, even to as many as believed on His name'.

You see, we are striving to be someone, aren't we? To be a better Christian, to earn God's favour - it's that performance-based relationship we talked about last night, the elder brother disease - when we've already got it! If we would just stand under the open heaven, as Jesus stood that day at His baptism, and realise that in Christ we are accepted in the Beloved, and we are beloved sons and daughters of God. Amen?

Now, let's see tonight what we already have as we seek to abide in Abba's heart. There are two things I want to share with you, two very simple things. The first is the truth of adoption. If you're going to abide in Father's love, you've got to understand the truth of adoption in Scripture. Now there are two ways to have a child, generally speaking: naturally and through adoption. Now, naturally you get what you get, isn't that right? There's not much choice there, boy or girl, well, really - unless you're going to go down the scientific route, it's frightening with engineering today - but generally you can't choose a boy or girl; you can't choose their personality type, whether they are extrovert or introvert; you can't choose blonde hair and blue eyes, or dark hair and brown eyes. What you get is what you get in natural birth, but in adoption you see what you're getting - do you understand? When you adopt a child you get a full history of the child's background, family, lineage, warts and all - it's all in the open. The Bible teaches us that when we become Christians, we discover that we have been adopted by God the Father as His children. Listen: the Father knows who you are, He knows everything about you.

You see, some of us don't know who we are. Some of you don't appreciate that you're unique, one-of-a-kind. I mean, this never ceases to amaze me: you think of the 7, nearly 8, billion people on the face of the globe this evening. Out of all the billions of humanity, there is not two that are identical - even identical twins are not identical. Isn't that remarkable? You are special, in this myriad of human faces you are unique, and God has made you the way you are. He has formed you the way you are, you are not a mistake. You may have grown up not liking yourself, or wishing that you could change this or that, but you need to hear what God says about you - not what pop culture, or the glossy women's magazines, say about you and what weight you should be and what height you should be and what complexion you should be. Listen to what God your Father says: 'For You created my inmost being', says the psalmist, 'You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise You, because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days were ordained for me, written in Your book, before one of them came to be. How precious to me are Your thoughts, O God, how vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of the sand'. Amen!

God knows your full history. He knows the good, the bad, and the ugly. There are no surprises, He knows everything - and yet He loves you, and He made you. Maybe this is a bridge too far for some of you, but I have to say this: He likes you, He likes you! Now I'm not saying He likes everything you do, and I'm not saying He necessarily loves your lifestyle or some of the choices you've made, or the personality that you may have become through some of those lifestyle choices - but I want you to



understand this evening that the miracle of this message that we preach that is the Gospel of God's grace, is that knowing you the way you really are, and knowing me the way I really am, He wants us! He wants you as His child! Not only does He want you in His family, the Bible teaches that He has actively pursued you!

We saw the other evening how, when we sin - particularly as Christians - we tend to run away from God, and we become fearful of Him; when we can run to Him, like the prodigal, walk toward Him for forgiveness. But we saw from the prodigal that God was running to the prodigal! We run away from God, God runs towards us! John 6:44: 'No one can come to Me', Jesus said, 'unless the Father who sent Me draws him' - that's amazing, isn't it? God knows everything about you, even the stuff you have forgotten and you're ignorant of, and yet He wants you. He wants you as His child, and He pursues you. He desires that we should know who we are, and He also desires that we should know what we have in the family.

Could you turn with me tonight Romans chapter 8, we're going to spend a wee bit of time there. I have a lot to say to you tonight - am I allowed to take a wee bit extra tonight? I know that's pushing it, because I can go on a bit in normal terms - there was no response there, which is a wee bit disconcerting! Can I go on a wee bit longer, is that alright? You're hardly going to say no, are you? I hope not. Romans 8:15, these are marvellous verses: 'For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together'.

Now, to be adopted in Bible times could give you, potentially, a number of problems. Often for children who were adopted, sometimes out of slavery into families, there was a long adjustment period for them - you can understand that. Here would be a child with the mindset of a slave, and come into this home and only have related to a master as a slave, and don't know what it is to relate as a son or daughter to a father. Imagine no longer being forced to do things against your will, things that you used to do on a regular basis. You can imagine the adjustment, and the time that it took. Also, moving from the poverty of a slave to knowing the blessing of being in the family - and some slaves that were adopted still had this mentality of poverty and slavery; not enjoying, in other words, what was actually theirs with their father. We can be like that, we can still have the mindset of a slave, we can still have the poverty of a slave. I want to ask you tonight: what is it that keeps you back from moving in and living in your inheritance as a son or a daughter of God?

Look at verse 17 of Romans 8: 'If children, then heirs; heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ' - that is profound. Do you remember in the prodigal son, it says that a certain man had two sons, and the younger son came to him and asked father to divide his livelihood - and it was divided, the inheritance was divided between the two sons, they were joint heirs if you like. Imagine, would you, four children in a family, and the last remaining parent dies. All the possessions, property, is split equally between the four in the family - you can imagine the solicitor sitting behind the desk with the will before him, and he says to them: 'You are all joint heirs'. You know what that means, don't you? What one gets, they all get equally. Now you look at this verse, verse 17: we are joint heirs with Jesus. What does that mean? To be joint heirs with Jesus? Listen: this means that God makes no difference between you and Jesus! He makes no difference

between His adopted sons and daughters and His Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ the Lord of Glory. That means that whatever is Jesus' becomes yours, whatever destiny is Jesus' becomes your destiny, whatever inheritance is given to the Son of God becomes your inheritance. You are a joint heir of God in Jesus Christ - that blows my mind! You are in the will with Jesus, whatever He gets you get!

Now that also includes suffering in verse 17, and we've got to be prepared for that. I said the other evening as we looked at 'Father Flaws', that very probably you think of yourself as your father on earth thought of you. What your father pronounced over you, his attitude toward you, that may be reflected in your own self-image. But when you take this into this realm of our Heavenly Father, what does our Heavenly Father think of us? What does He say of us? What does He pronounce over our lives? Well, it's in His will: what He thinks of His Son, what He gives to His Son, what He's going to do for His Son! If you turn - not now but at a later time - to Ephesians chapter 1, you will see another sphere of the doctrine of adoption. We read there that we have been raised with Jesus Christ, we have ascended with Jesus Christ, we are seated with Jesus Christ, and we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus - wow!

Now I know where I am tonight, but that makes me want to dance - I could do a dance up here! The truth, the truth of what it means to be a joint heir with Jesus! Some of you here tonight have been listening to what the enemy says about you, what your parents and other authority figures have said over you, and what you have agreed in self pronouncements over yourself - and you're not hearing what God your Father says about you! You are an heir of God, and a joint heir with Jesus Christ the Son of God! Are you getting excited about this? I tell you: adoption in the New Covenant is even greater than that - do you know why? Because you could be an adopted child in the legal sense in our society or in biblical times, but even today, and you could have the same legal status as a biological son or daughter - but you could never ever be flesh and blood, biologically related to your adopted parents. Correct? But we read in Peter's Epistle that as children of God we become partakers of the divine nature - wow! We become biologically related to God - now it's not biological, but it's spiritual. We get God's life, we get God's likeness - look at verse 16 of Romans 8: 'The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God'. Oh boy, that is wonderful! Do you know what your adoption means as a child of God? Are you living in your inheritance? Or are you living with the mindset of a slave, still under some legalistic system? Are you living as a spiritual pauper, not tapping into the wonderful inheritance of your Father's house that is all yours? Whatever belongs to Jesus is now yours, and you can share it with Him!

Do you know that in a slave house in Bible times, a slave would have called their master 'Pater'? It's a stricter sterner word for 'father'. Do you see if that slave was adopted and put into the family of his master? He would no longer call his master 'Pater', he would call his master, his father, 'Abba'. God longs for you to call Him 'Abba'.

We've looked at adoption, that's intrinsic to abiding in the love of God. Now finally I want us to look at 'Abba', this word, this designation, this name that God wants you to call Him. Can I ask you: do you call Him 'Abba'? Do you call God 'Abba Father'? Do you know Him as 'Abba'? James Montgomery Boice in his footnote in his commentary on the book of Galatians has a reference to an essay that was written, an academic essay,

in 1965 by J. Jeremias, and it's entitled 'Abba' in a larger work, a larger volume, called 'The Central Message of the New Testament'. So there is this essay entitled 'Abba' in a great work called 'The Central Message of the New Testament' - and I believe that the name 'Abba' is the central theme of what Jesus Christ came to do. He came to reveal the heart of the Father towards lost sinners, and He wants us to know Him as 'Abba'.

Turn with me quickly to Galatians chapter 4. We've seen the word 'Abba' in Romans 8, the name 'Abba', but come now to Galatians chapter 4 verse 4: 'But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons' - look at this verse - 'And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'. Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ'. You're meant to call God 'Abba, Father'.

Now no one ever addressed God directly as 'My Father' in Bible times. The reason being: it was construed as disrespectful. Yes, God was often understood as the Father of the nation, and maybe even the Father of the faith, but no one would ever have dreamt of considering Him personally as 'My Father'. We believe that Jesus always used this form when addressing God in prayer, to the absolute amazement of the disciples. We've only one reference of Jesus using it in the Gospels, and that was in Matthew chapter 14 in the Garden of Gethsemane, where he cried: 'Abba Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will' - that's the only time we see it mentioned in the Gospels. These other two mentions are in Paul's writings in Galatians and Romans - but in the Gospels the word for 'Father' in the Greek is 'Pater', but of course Jesus and His disciples and His contemporaries didn't speak Greek, they spoke Aramaic. So we believe that whenever we find the word in the Greek New Testament 'Pater' for 'Father', behind it was the use of 'Abba' in the spoken Aramaic. The only exception to that is when Jesus was hanging on the cross, and He cried: 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani', 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'. So Jesus used this Aramaic term 'Abba' of Heavenly Father in prayer, and He also encouraged His disciples to use this form of address for God, and they did. Now this was amazing to the disciples, utterly shocking and obnoxious to the Jews - it was utterly unseemly, and too intimate. It was overfamiliarity at its worst: that Jesus should address the holy God of heaven as 'Abba'.

Now let me give you a bit of the derivation of this Aramaic word. I don't want to confuse you, but this is important. 'Abba' is the male of the equivalent 'Imma', which is derived from Aramaic baby-speak. When a little tot was starting to learn to speak, they would say 'Ab-ba', 'Im-ma' - just the way in English, 'Da-da', 'Ma-ma', is spoken by little babes. This is where this is coming from. Jesus is calling the all-holy God of heaven 'Abba'. Now please don't misunderstand me, and please don't misconstrue or misquote what I'm saying here. We need a reverential approach to God, and in the Lord's prayer there is balance: 'Our Father who art in heaven' - there is the intimacy 'Our Father', but there is also the reverence and the godly fear. There is the basis on which we come to God our Father, sonship; but there is also the reverencing of His holiness - our Father is the holy, holy God of heaven. He is not an overindulgent grandfather figure, He is a true Father. Sometimes, as we see in Scripture, He has to discipline us - that's how He shows His love towards His sons and daughters. But nevertheless, even though we want to reverence God, even though we want to show

respect and godly fear, we must never dilute the revolutionary intimacy of what it is to come and say: 'Abba Father'. Look at the Lord's prayer, He is 'Abba' first, 'Abba Father' first.

Now this is the picture, OK? Please get it. This is the picture: a little Jewish home where there is a little Jewish boy, and Daddy is out all day working at a building site or something like that, or out as a Shepherd with the sheep. He comes back after his shift and opens the door, and little Benjamin comes running up the hallway and throws his arms around his neck, and cries: 'Abba! Abba! Abba!'. God's word says that that is what is meant to rise up in your heart towards your Father in Heaven, that's the relationship that you're meant to have to God: this childlike awe and affection that a toddler has for his Daddy. We ought to experience that towards Father in heaven. Now I'm not suggesting - and there are some people that get this truth, and they run away with it in such a way that it becomes utterly disrespectful and inappropriate - yet there is a religious spirit that will say: 'What you're saying now is irreverent, it's overfamiliarity, it's too much!'. Well, if you're going down that line, you have never seen into the heart of Father God. Never.

John White says: 'Such a carnal sort of dignity must go, and the humble trust be added. When you know Him as 'Abba' your faith will be simpler, clearer, your prayers at once reverence, intimate, informed'. I'll level with you here tonight: there are three things over the last six or seven years that have utterly revolutionised my Christian life. One has been the truth of the Person, the baptism, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. A second is the truth of grace, and not only how we can receive grace from God, unmerited favour, but how that allows us to show grace to others even though we don't agree with them - and so, if we don't have a performance-based relationship with God, others don't need to perform to earn our favour. But the third truth is the truth of Abba Father, and I'll never forget the day that that revelation dawned on me. I have grown up in a Christian home, I've been converted from a child, and I knew God is my Father of sorts - but never as my 'Abba'. I can remember sitting back on my easy chair in my study - and I don't know how long I did it, but I just cried from my heart like a baby: 'Abba, Abba, Abba!'. Do you know what that is? Some of you have explored the father flaws that have been in your life, the wounds and the damage that has been done - do you know you've got such a Father in heaven, such an Abba in heaven? Do you know you're adopted into the family? You don't need to stand afar off from God, but you can come boldly into His presence. You're not only a servant, and you're certainly not a slave, you're a friend of God and you're a child of God - and you can come into His immediate presence and call Him 'Abba'.

There is a famous image from 1963 of John F. Kennedy at his desk during the Cuban missile crisis, some of you may have seen it. There were many dignitaries assembled in the Oval Office of the White House to discuss the crisis, but the photo of this meeting reveals that - while these leaders were in serious discussion - little John Jr, John Kennedy, he's playing under the president's desk at the president's feet. All the VIPs had to show credentials to enter the Oval Office in the midst of this potentially global crisis, but this was the president's son and he had a right to be there - and his father wanted him there. Why? Because of who he was. There was a picture in the press of the present-day President of United States, Barack Obama, and his youngest daughter hiding behind the sofa there - creeping into the oval office while the president works. Nobody else could do that only a child of the president. Listen: do you know who you are? You've heard this week about who Father is, but do you know that you

are His child? Do you know you are adopted? Do you know the inheritance that you have?

The book of Romans, the book of Galatians, and the book of Ephesians talk about adoption - and all three of them connect it with the Spirit of God. You can't know the truths of adoption, or the Father heart of God, or your inheritance, without the Spirit. Right at the very beginning of creation it was a perfect creation, and Adam was the pinnacle of God's order - but even in perfection Adam recognised his need for intimacy. An intimacy that couldn't be found in creation or any of the animal kingdom, and it was when Adam recognised his need of intimacy that God met his need, and He gave him Eve. Over this week, have you recognised your need for intimacy with God as your Father? Have you recognised that perhaps you have been seeking other idolatrous intimacies elsewhere? Well, if you will recognise your need tonight, He will meet it. Whatever you don't have, if there is something not there and you need it to be there, ask God for it tonight and He will give it to you. 'If you, being evil', Jesus said, 'know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more' - how much more - 'will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit' - the Spirit of adoption that rises up, the spirit of God's Son that rises up within our hearts, and witnesses with our spirit that we are the children of God - and it cries 'Abba!'. Then you will abide day-by-day in Father's love.

Just as we close this meeting and this week - what of your response? He is the Father, but are you His child? Maybe you're a Christian, but are you living as a child or as a slave? Can I first of all address those who would consider themselves Christians - and I would ask you: has God spoken to you again tonight of adoption, of intimacy with Abba Father, and you know that you haven't had that but you want that? You want to repent of any hardness or any difficulty, you want to bring wounds that have caused you to have a skewed view of Heavenly Father - you want those healed tonight, but you want to have a revelation of the love of God shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit tonight. While every head is bowed and eye is closed, would you acknowledge that as people have been doing every single night - would you acknowledge, by just raising your hand, your need of the love of Father's heart just now? God bless you. God bless. God bless. There are several hands going up - God bless you - around the building. Is there anyone else? God bless you. God bless. Anyone else?

Now, as I said, if you haven't got it, ask for it. In fact, it is there, it's what you already have - ask the Lord to remove whatever barriers there are. Bring to Him your sin: idolatrous things that have substituted for intimacy with Him - repent and renounce them. Renounce and revoke words that you have spoken over your own life that have been like curses, and words that others have spoken over you that have brought oppression over your life - because you have believed them and taken them into your identity. Ask the Lord Jesus to break the power of those, and to break the power of the enemy over your mind and over your heart. By faith embrace your identity as a child of God, and embrace your 'Abba' in heaven.

Do that now, those of you who are Christians, just in the quietness. While you're doing that - is there anyone here, and you've never taken that step of repentance and faith to become a Christian, to receive Christ as Saviour and Lord, and be able to be called 'a child of God'? Is there anyone here tonight, and you now know you're known by God, and loved by God, and Jesus died and showed God's love by taking your sin, and you want to know God as your Father? Is there anyone here tonight that will say 'I want to become a Christian'? Would you raise your hand just where you are in the

presence of God - young or old, it doesn't matter, as long as you know what you're doing. Is there anyone who wants to say 'I will be a child of God, God will be my Father. I don't want the slavery of sin any more, I want to belong in God's family'. Just raise your hand, I will see it, and you can take it down again and we will help you in prayer.

Now, as has been announced, I'm available afterwards. Please do stay for a cup of tea, but if you want to speak with me - and I would emphasise, please, that it's needy folk that we really want to spend our time with. If you want to talk tonight, maybe you have been putting it off from other evenings, stay behind.

Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God our Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, remain with us as we seek to keep ourselves in the love of God. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we pray, Amen.



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