

Fatherhood and the Gospel

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Opening remarks: (The Honor is it to preach at First Pres, God's faithfulness in equipping me to do this, and the sermon theme for Father's Day.)

I'd like to read the text one more time before we begin to think about the beauty of the contents within. You can follow along in your Bible's, either digital or physical. I will be preaching from Psalm 103, verses 10 through 14. This is from the English Standard Version.

¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
¹³ As a father shows compassion to his children,
so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.
¹⁴ For he knows our frame;
he remembers that we are dust.

This is the word of the Lord. *Praise be to God.* If you would bow your heads, I will open us in prayer.

Prayer: (Help us to believe that this is truly how God relates to us. Help us bridge the distance from the head to the heart. Help us to learn about how Fatherhood is a rich example of the gospel, given for us to understand God's unconditional love for us.)

Sermon:

From the passage this morning, I would like to make three simple points if you are keeping notes on the outline in your bookmarks found in the bulletin. **First, the relationship we have with God our father is greater than we can imagine. Second, this relationship means that God knows us personally and still loves us. And third, there is a way to remember these truths and believe them.**

Here is the first point: the relationship we have with God our father is greater than we can imagine. At the start of Christmas break my sophomore year at Belmont, I recall driving the 500 mile trek up from Nashville, Tennessee back home with my parents. I love driving, and so I insisted that I drive my dad's midnight blue Audi A8 for the final leg of the trip. I consider myself a cautious driver and so I felt comfortable with such a responsibility. I remember being very worn down from a busy semester and eagerly awaiting the rest of being home and sleeping in for the break. When we finally arrived at the house, I dropped my parents off at our front door and then continued to pull the Audi into a tight space in our garage. Moments away from finally parking the car and walking into the house, I heard a high-pitched screech from the back-right side of the Audi as I pulled the vehicle into the garage stall. Thoughts rushed into my head such as "how can I pay to have this expensive car repainted and the scratches buffed out?" and "how will I explain this to my dad, who takes care of this car with great care?" Ashamed and disappointed in myself, I came inside and told my dad about the numerous, extensive scratches above the back-right tire. We came out to inspect it and my dad looked at the gashes and turned to me and said, "I don't want you to worry about this right now, you just got home. I have a friend who owes me anyway who can try to buff it out." I went inside and was able to rest knowing my dad loved me and he would do what he could to reduce my debt. In the end it cost me nothing.

I didn't have the resources to pay my dad back for my mistake. He knew that I was broke, and so he dealt with the cost himself. You see, my dad knew my frame, and though he knew I could have avoided this mistake (and he won't let me pull the Audi into our garage to this day), my dad showed me compassion because of his love for me. Is this not the way we

relate to our heavenly father and He to us? Our passage today talks about how our perfect heavenly father deals with us, which is not according to our sin but according to his steadfast love. He dealt with our debt himself because of his steadfast love for us! Every day we crash His Audis into trees and garages both knowingly and unknowingly, and yet God's compassion does not run out on us. Our transgressions are removed "as far as the east is from the west." This is to say that our sins are infinitely far removed, destroyed even! Referring to this verse in Psalm 103, Charles Spurgeon, known as the prince of preachers, put it this way:

"If sin be removed so far, then we may be sure that the scent, the trace, the very memory of it must be entirely gone. If this be the distance of its removal, there is no shade of fear of its ever being brought back again; even Satan himself could not achieve such a task."

Who among us does not worry about our sins of the past effecting our present or future? We need to meditate on the reality of God's steadfast love and watch that fear slowly wither away. Our relationship with God is not karma or prosperity gospel based. We do not live in the state we do because of our sin or our "specks of righteousness" but because of His grace working in *both* the good and bad things in our life.

Here is another wonderful illustration I came across recently. In his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning shares a story of a Catholic woman seeing visions of Jesus. Rightfully skeptical, a local bishop tests this for himself and asks her to ask Jesus what the last thing he confessed was in his recent confession. She agreed, and after 10 days, she called the bishop and asked to meet. They met up and with anticipation, he leaned forward and asked: "What did Jesus say?" Her reply was this: "Bishop, these are his exact words: 'I CAN'T REMEMBER.'"

Our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west friends. Jesus does not remember our sins because he dealt with them.

But wait, it gets better. Our passage points forward to the reality that in the New Testament, Jesus manifests the reality that those who believe in him become God's children! Many of us celebrate the fact that we have been justified before God by faith in Christ and are not treated according to our sin, but sometimes we forget that we are not only treated

neutrally, but positively—we are delighted in by God! How can this be? Because God sent His son and treated him according to our sins and He treats us according to Jesus' righteousness! Look at our passage again. We see that without God's great mercy we were to be punished for our sins, then God has justified us and "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to iniquities," and then David, inspired by the spirit of God, tells us "as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him," and again that "as a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him." We were talking about freedom from punishment, now we are talking about adoption, a mysterious reality revealed in the New Testament by Jesus. This is the great beauty of Christianity friends!

J. I. Packer, in his seminal book entitled *Knowing God*, points out this beautiful reality.

"Adoption is the highest privilege that the gospel offers: higher even than justification... To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater."

He also comments on this reality about the significance of adoption into God's family as His children.

"You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all... For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God. 'Father' is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption."

Some might comment that thinking of God as our father could be harmful, because after all, aren't our fathers' sinful and sometimes abusive of their natural influence and authority in our lives? The answer is certainly this is true—our earthly fathers are either mere signposts of

God's love or not at all a reflection of God's love, but we can slowly recognize what a good father looks like. We can fall into God's protective, strong, and tender arms. King David, who wrote this Psalm also penned Psalm 27, which says the following in verse 10.

“For my father and mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me in.”

I know it's Father's Day, but let us not forget that God shows nurturing motherly characteristics as well. In chapter 49 of his prophetic book, Isaiah writes in a similar vein for our mothers out there to relate to. Here are verses 15 and 16.

“Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.”

Even when the best of our parents fall short, God does not. His steadfast love endures forever. So we see that adoption language is powerful as we reflect on God's true love for us. To the parents in the room, has it ever occurred to you that your love for your children is a tiny fraction of God's love for you? However unconditional that love may be, God's love for you is less conditional and deeper still. God gives us metaphors in the Bible so that we can engage our emotions and heart.

One might now ask, who is it that receives this love? The passage today tells us that it is for the who “fear God.” We must recognize that “the fear of the Lord” in the Bible often refers to a reverence or natural awe for God that we develop—similar to the natural awe we have for our fathers as sons and daughters. This is a natural phenomenon that follows placing our faith in Jesus. Is this love actually conditional then, if we have to fear God to receive this kind of relationship? Recall the second verse of John Newton's famous hymn *Amazing Grace* with me that was played earlier this morning:

*“Twas **grace** that taught my heart to fear, and **grace** my fears relieved. How precious did that **grace** appear the hour I first believed.”*

Faith and fear of the Lord are available to everyone who desires a relationship with Christ and yet, in a grand mystery, these can only be given by God—they cannot be achieved by

us! They are manifestations of the kindness and unconditional love of our Father in heaven. Fear of the Lord is a sign of childhood under God. The Bible concurs. Ephesians 2:8-9 say this:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

God’s love *is* unconditional, and it is available to everyone.

Moving on to the second point now: God knows us personally and still loves us. I want to now think deeply about what it means for God, our father, to know our frame. It is one thing for God to love us, it is another thing for God to know the depths of our being and still love us. Our passage today closes by reminding us of God’s compassion on us because He knows us. He doesn’t know of us in abstract way but knows us deeply and personally. We can be reminded of Pastor Jeff’s sermon two weeks ago about Jeremiah’s commissioning in his teen years into prophetic work. God says this to Jeremiah in chapter 1 verse 5.

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

The Hebrew for the word “know” is used in several ways in the Old Testament, and it is a very intimate word. For example, when the Old Testament talks about the sexual union of Adam and Eve, it uses this same word—*yada*. *Yada* is used to describe the intimacy of the knowledge of a husband to his wife and vice versa. Does God know *all* of us, warts and all, and still love us? Yes.

This knowledge also shows us that God can relate to us and us to Him through Jesus. Many of my favorite conversations with my parents happened right before I moved away to college. Realizing that I was entering into adulthood, my parents began relating to me on equal terms in this special season, telling me stories of when they were my age and being honest about the mistakes they made and the wise decisions they made. Can God, our father, relate to our struggle with temptation and the hardships and decisions of life? Yes. Look at Hebrews 4:15 with me. It says:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”

This is another precious reality of our faith—God came to dwell with us, to relate to us and save us. || This passage is talking about Jesus, who was tempted in every way. He knows our struggle because he lived it. He is relatable and knows our frame. He is not the track coach sitting on the side lines yelling at us telling us what to do. Rather Jesus already ran the race and has come back to resuscitate us and carry us to the end, knowing every drop of sweat on our head and desire to quit in our heart. Do you struggle with loneliness? Jesus was abandoned by all his friends. Are you tempted with the pleasures of this world? Jesus faced those temptations. Have you been falsely accused and found guilty of a crime you didn’t commit? Jesus was. The list goes on. If we read through the Bible we begin to realize how approachable and relatable Jesus is.

He knows our struggles and the brokenness of this world. In fact, Jesus came to earth because God knew our frame and knew in the deep trenches of our sin that we could not redeem ourselves. God loved us enough to send His own son to make us His children. In his gospel, John shares this truth in chapter 1 verse 12.

”But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”

A final point: there is a way to remember these things and believe them. How do we believe these truths and let our hearts be changed by the reality of God’s love? First, we need to recognize how pervasive our sin is and make a big deal of forgiveness like David does in this Psalm. It has been noted that this is likely one of the later Psalms written by David because of his keener understanding of his sin and need for forgiveness. In just these five verses, he references his sin, transgressions, and iniquities three times. The Puritans understood David’s perspective and used to say that if you were in a dry season in your faith, you ought to try repentance. They knew that as you offer all your sin to a forgiving God, your heart will be naturally warmed. This itself is an act of trust that draws us closer to God. (I know sometimes in my own life I am tempted to hold on to my sin and punish myself so that God doesn’t have to,

but this is actually an act of distrust in what was accomplished on the cross and is false repentance. We need to take our sins *to God* and know that He has disposed of them, thus making punishment unnecessary, just as today's passage points out.)

We need to pray for understanding of our transgressions against God but we must *also* pray to understand the reality of the cross. Jesus is the reason that God does not treat us according to our sin because God treated Jesus according to our sin. When the Bible says "[as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him,](#)" it does not leave us with just an abstract idea of what that means but shows us a tangible person in space and time who manifests it. Jesus crossed the height difference between heaven and earth. The cross of Jesus is perfect, steadfast love. Steadfast love is resolute and determined. Jesus was *determined* to go to the cross to win *you* back. Meditate on these realities and you will find the gap between the head and the heart slowly is bridged and you will bask in that freedom. The cross counted.

Psalm 103 opens with this way:

["Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name! Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's."](#)

David is reminding himself of God's love and faithfulness. If David was on the side of history before Jesus' sacrifice and still celebrated God's steadfast love, how much more can we remind ourselves, *with certainty*, of the reality of our freedom in Christ! Structurally, this Psalm is both individual for David but also communal in the content of the middle section we are reading today. For this reason, this Psalm is an example of our need to remind ourselves *individually and each-other communally* of who God is and the meaning of the cross *daily*. We must be intent on spending time in prayer and in God's word by ourselves and also engaging in Christian community where we encourage each other with the truth of our state as beloved by God! Sunday mornings and church are great for the latter of these, but we all need this encouragement from each-other more than once a week. These are practical ways that the

Bible gives us to be formed by the reality of what we believe. I'll say it one more time: if we want to experience the freedom of the gospel and the beauty knowing God as our father, we need to iron out intellectually what the Bible actually says about sin and the cross of Jesus, and then pray it into our hearts as we remind ourselves and each-other of this reality daily. We will find that God has been glad to reveal these things all along.

Friends, our father in heaven knew our frame, and because of this He knew that we could not redeem ourselves. So, in utter compassion, He sent Jesus to die on the cross to redeem us. *This* is steadfast love. How could we remain unchanged by this? Pray with me.

Closing Prayer.