

I make no apologies for speaking mainly about fathers today, as it is the one day of the year where we get a bit of attention, but I acknowledge that not everyone here is a father, or a mother. For some, that time has not yet come. For some, days like today can be a painful reminder of a desire for children that has not been fulfilled, or of a father that is no longer with you - we think particularly of Amanda, Suzie and James Wade this morning. But, whatever your personal circumstances, I hope that you will still be able to draw something from my words, because we all had a human father who will have influenced our lives for good or otherwise, and may have influenced our view of God as our spiritual father.

According to the Daily Telegraph - and what more reliable source is there? - Father's Day is not a modern creation of the greetings card industry, but instead dates back over a century. It was launched in 1908 at the Williams Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church South following a mining disaster in the area that killed 361 men, 250 of whom were fathers. The idea gradually gathered national and international support, with Senator Margaret Chase Smith declaring to Congress: "Either we honour both our parents, mother and father, or let us desist from honouring either one. But to single out just one of our two parents and omit the other is the most grievous insult imaginable."

That may be overstating the case somewhat, but it is certainly true that being a father is just as difficult as being as mother, and no-one on this earth gets it right all the time, Not even celebrity dad of the year Jonathan Saccone Joly - no, I haven't heard of him either; apparently he is a parenting vlogger, whatever that is! There is no job description or instruction manual for fathers. We all make mistakes and we are poor copies of the only truly perfect Father, God.

At this point I should admit to plagiarism, as I have borrowed heavily from Floyd McClung's "The Father Heart of God" - a book that I found very helpful in deepening my relationship with God in my early Christian life.

So, what kind of relationship do you, or did you have with your father? and how has that affected your relationship with God? Does the word father bring to mind someone you can love and trust? someone worthy of loyalty and commitment? Or does talk of God as a father suggest a remote being that cannot be known personally, removed from our daily lives, a sombre and critical old man glaring at anyone who dares to smile on a Sunday?

How do we relate to God the father if that image makes it hard for us to believe he loves us, hard for us to trust him, because of past or present hurt or disappointment. On the other hand, how should we respond to God the Father if we know him to be loving and just? God created us to be like him, to love each other and care for his creation, to be secure and confident in who we are as people. But our selfishness and emotional hurts can sometimes hold us back from being the people our Father created us to be.

Projecting onto God a negative human experience of our father, mother, or any other authority figure in our lives, can deeply affect our ability to relate to him. If you are a father, you have a responsibility to help your children understand God, not just by teaching them about him, but by establishing a relationship with them that imitates the Father heart of God, full of warmth and tenderness, a gentle and forgiving Father God, who wants to be intimately involved in every detail of our lives.

In case the women are beginning to drift off at this point, Genesis 1v27 reminds us that "God created man in his own image, male and female he created them". Maleness and

femaleness are both part of God's nature and each represent unique aspects of God's character. So those of you who are mothers share this responsibility to imitate God in your relationship with your children.

I now want us to look at a few aspects of our relationship with our parents that may be hindering our relationship with God, and the parents among us may be able to serve our children better by working to improve in these areas.

Authority

Imagine you're out for a walk and you meet a dog, you reach out to pet it and the dog cowers away from you, expecting to be hit. Or maybe it comes forwards with enthusiasm and excitement in anticipation of a loving fuss. Do you cower away from God, like the brow beaten dog, expecting him to be like all the other authority figures in your life? or are can you open yourself up to him, confident that he is a just and loving father. We are called upon to show our children discipline in a loving and positive way. Ephesians 6v4 tells us "do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord."

Faithfulness

You are God's child and he calls you by name, but maybe you doubt his faithfulness. Did you feel orphaned by the demands of your parent's careers, do you have childhood memories of broken promises. The love and security of a good home are intended by God to prepare you for his love. If we are not faithful to our children, then we are not teaching them what it is to have a faithful spiritual father. God will not let you down. You can rely on his promises. If you are a parent, your children need to know that they can rely on *your* promises too. We cannot be everywhere and do everything. We will never meet all our

children's expectations, and we shouldn't feel guilty about having to balance the competing demands on our lives, but we should be faithful to promises we have made.

Generosity

Our modern homes are full of fragile furnishings and delicate electronic equipment and children will often be told off for endangering or damaging an article of financial or sentimental value. Children are constantly reminded of the importance of things, their value and the need to care for them. Do we remind them as often of the value, the importance, we place on *them*? and the love and care we feel for *them*? Do we want them to grow up thinking that things are more important than people?

I'm not advocating that children should be allowed to run riot in our houses! We are called upon to be good stewards of what God has entrusted to us. But maybe we need to alter our priorities, in order to communicate God's love to our children. God is innately generous; just look at the extravagance of colour and complexity of design in creation, that goes far beyond simple functional value. When Nicky and I are mountaineering we come across many tiny, intricate and beautiful flowers that had no economic value. God created them purely in order that they might bless the occasional climber with their beauty. God loves to surprise us with those extra little things, those little pleasures that only a father would know we love. God isn't stingy, materialistic or possessive. He knows people are far more valuable than things and he is generous with his forgiveness, love and mercy.

Affection

Despite everything, God loves you. You are at the centre of his affection. Many children, particularly boys, receive little or no display of affection from their father and no compassion when they are hurting, because of our false human sense of masculinity. "Man up" we say,

“boys don’t cry”. But God isn’t like that; his compassion and understanding are endless. He feels our pain more than we do because his sensitivity to suffering is so much greater. So, when we’re allowed to again, hug your son, hug your dad, show them some affection.

We sometimes forget what a doting father God is. Your parents may have kept some of your art work, they may still display that embarrassing childhood photo, but that is nothing compared to God’s infinite capacity to be overjoyed by your success. There has never been another child like you and there never will be. Whatever you become in the eyes of men - famous, infamous or quietly obscure - you will always be a child of God and he will always love you unconditionally.

Presence

That’s presence with a ‘c’, not presents with a ‘t’. There’s one attribute of God that not even the best parent can hope to emulate, and that is God’s ability to be with you all the time. As parents, we just cannot give our children 24/7 attention. We are finite beings with competing pressures to juggle. Maybe we do need to give our children more of our time, but we mustn’t feel guilty about allocating time for ourselves and time for our partner too. However, God gives you his whole attention all the time, as though nobody else in the world existed. 1 Peter 5v7 instructs you to “cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you”. How can he be personally involved with billions of people at the same time? I don’t know, but I know it’s not a problem for the creator of the universe.

As parents, we are often too pre-occupied to show the hoped for interest in the small details of our children’s lives, but God loves the detail. Matthew 12v30 and Luke 10v7 tells us that God know the number of hairs on each of our heads - not so impressive a feat for some of us fathers as we get older, but still a sign of God’s great interest in every aspect of our lives.

Don't resent your parents for not giving you enough time and don't be burdened by concerns that you may not have given your children enough time. Instead, rejoice in the wonderful love of your father God.

Acceptance

We live in a performance orientated world. Acceptance is so often conditional. If your school report is good, if you look pretty, if you have money, if you win, then you are accepted and 'loved'. But our Father God is a God of unconditional love. His love is not based on performance or appearance. We cannot earn his love. He loves because he is love. We have to come to him to receive his love, but we don't need to become a saint first. Come, just as you are. He accepts you and delights in you whether you succeed or fail.

Imagine if I come home one evening with a bunch of flowers for Nicky (it has happened occasionally!) and Nicky rushes off to find some money to pay for the flowers. That's not what we want when we offer a sign of our love. What we hope for is to be loved in return. So what is your response to God's love? Can you receive it without feeling the need to launch into frantic activity to earn his approval? I love the line in Zephaniah 3v17 that says "He will quiet you with his love" We are called to rest in him

The final area I want to look at is Communication

Open warm communication is very difficult for many parents, especially fathers, but what impression of fatherhood do we create in our children if we rarely sit down and properly talk with them and never tell them that we love them. How much time do you spend watching television with your children or parents? Compare that with how much time you spend talking with them. We cannot change our personality, but even the most quiet and shy man

can learn to share his thoughts and feelings with his children, whether they're still at school or grown up with children of their own.

If you're now sitting there thinking you shouldn't be a father, I'm sorry to tell you that you can't resign. However, even God the father doesn't have to work alone, he's part of a team with the Son and Holy Spirit in support and, if you're feeling this parenting thing is too much to handle, I would encourage you to hook up with a couple of friends that you can share with, pray with, be accountable to, and be supported by in the more difficult moments.

If you have been hindered in your relationship with God because your view of him is based on a less than perfect experience of human parents, then I would urge you to set that view aside. Forgive your parents, if forgiveness is needed. Be grateful to your parents if they have shown you something of God's love in the way you were brought up. But, above all, get to know God for who he really is. Every parent makes mistakes along the way, no matter how determined they are to exemplify God the Father. But God is the perfect Father, he always disciplines in love, he is generous, kind and just. He loves you and longs to spend time with you. He wants you to receive his love and know that you are a special and unique person to him. Will you open up and enter into an intimate relationship with him? He is patiently waiting for you to come to him.

AMEN