

The Marred Image of the Father

So much of who we are and the choices we make in life come about as a result of the relationship we have with our parents. The dynamics of what we experience in that structure shapes the core of our identity. Once we are removed from those influences, we then have a choice to follow the examples set before us or to make our own way in the world we are presented with. In this lesson we will explore the role of a father and the tainted image we tend to project onto God. We will look at many types of fathering that represent brokenness and then dig in deep with the True Father and begin to see that He is our only true representative of a perfect father.

We were made for relationship. God intends that we learn and grow in the context of relationships with one another.

The Role of a Father

- Protection – provides physical and emotional protection.
- Provision – provides for the family's support with food and shelter.
- Discipline – corrects and teaches in the ways that are right.
- Mentoring – models future relating and patterns for life.
- Encouragement – provides support and encourages us as we grow.

God calls us to obey our parents.

Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
Exodus 20:12

No matter what age we are, our parent's approval matters to us. If you came from a non-Christian family, some of the things your father expected or still expects of you might have gone against your Christian beliefs. God still asks us to honor our parents, no matter what family He placed us into. There will be times in life when God lays something on your heart that others may not fully understand, yet we must be prepared to act in obedience.

The Marred Image

Parents are to be a representation of the nature and character of God. Fathers, in particular, become a reference point for authority. Ultimately, they are a picture of God to us.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – His eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made ...
Romans 1:20

The flaws our earthly fathers exhibited throughout our childhood can become our underlying perspective of God. Let's take a look at what type of father you might have had, and you can test yourself to see if you projected your father's behaviors onto your Heavenly Father.

Broken Types of Fathering

No parent has the luxury of a trial run at parenting. They learn as they go. And they bring to that experience the way they themselves were raised. A father may be present one moment and gone the next. He may relate to his children one way and then seemingly out of nowhere begin to relate another. There may have been things going on in our families that we knew nothing about at the time, or perhaps we did, but it was no consolation compared with the loss we experienced. No matter what kind of father you had, you should be able to identify some characteristics below.

The performance-oriented father gives love as a reward for performance in areas such as chores, education, sports, etc. The success of his child is a reflection of himself. This type is common in our culture. They produce a perception of God the Father as one who demands religious performance.

- The result is a Christian who believes he is truly loved only when he is performing well. His experience of love is usually sparse and fleeting.
- Conversely, he believes that God punishes him when he fails to perform well or measure up to others' expectations

The passive father was most often absent from home, not really present when he was home, or nondemonstrative. Fathers who traveled constantly, were workaholics, were alcoholics, were divorced or absent, died at an early age, or were emotionally stoic could fit in this category.

- The resultant perception of the Heavenly Father is that He also is distant, non-caring, uninvolved and non-demonstrative. The Christian from this background often has difficulty getting in touch with the Father's love. Girls will conclude that they must have done something wrong to cause their Father not to love them.

The punitive father believes discipline is a display of love, often leading to some degree of emotional, physical or sexual abuse.

- The resultant perception of the Heavenly Father is that He is stern, harsh, unforgiving and unloving. Fear and anger often block the Father's love in the lives of Christians with such a perception.

The permissive father gave an excess of pleasurable things to his children instead of giving himself in love. These things came in the form of extravagant gifts, permitted sensual indulgences and lack of proper discipline.

- The Heavenly Father is seen as benevolent but impotent. The Christian is left with questions about the genuineness of His love. Lack of discipline and boundaries can lead these Christians to practice self-denial to achieve goals. The lack of clear guidance leaves them with an inability to follow through with their commitments.

With women, it is not uncommon for Dad to have stepped out of her life at a certain point – things could have been great until ... puberty. A lot of fathers are afraid of what puberty means and the changes it brings in their daughters. Instead of searching for new ways to relate or looking for aspects of their daughter they can still identify with, they withdraw completely, and a loss of relationship takes place.

That's the point where everything went wrong. Before I hit puberty, we were close. I would sit on his lap in front of the fireplace, like I was his little girl. But when I started to change, my dad withdrew physically and emotionally from me. Up to that point, I had learned from him what it looked like for men to relate to women. But when he stopped being an active part of my life, that picture changed. This was all subconscious for me at the time. It made me think that the changes with my body, and the changes in general that I was experiencing, were bad. Which in turn made me think that I was bad.

Celina

To be able to embrace God as our Father will require laying down our broken images of imperfect parents.

Knowing the True Father

Whether we experienced much of a relationship with our earthly fathers or not, we deeply desire and need it. We were created to desire it, and we can have that relationship with our Heavenly Father even if we barely knew our biological dads.

The way we have a relationship with God the Father is through Christ.

We were made by God, for God.
Our lives have meaning and value
because of His love of us.
He desires an intimate, passionate
relationship with us.

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Luke 18:17

Jesus reveals to us what God is like. He is perfect in passion towards us; unwavering in His commitment to our well being, and able to touch our deepest needs. For salvation, God asks that we take on the nature of a child to receive from Him. Jesus tells Nicodemus in John 3:3:

Unless a man is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.

God wants to re-parent us. As we learn to trust Him, a new image of Him as a strong, loving Father fills the void left by our earthly father.

God as Father

Just what kind of father is God? Scripture, which is the ultimate source for knowing God, reveals Him as follows:

- Deuteronomy 1:30: “The LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son.”
- Isaiah 64:8: “Yet, O LORD, you are our Father. We are the clay, you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand.”
- Isaiah 9:6: “... Everlasting Father ...”
- John 14:23: “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”
- Deuteronomy 31:6: “The LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”
- Hebrews 12:10: “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness.”
- Psalm 56:8: “Record my lament; list my tears on your scroll.”

Change comes about through a renewed mind and heart. To attempt to change behavior without addressing the underlying issues is not dealing with the real problem. The Word of God changes our thought patterns and decision-making processes.

These verses show God as powerful, yet tender. He has the power to make us into anything that brings Him pleasure, yet He holds us gently when we need Him. He is the perfect balance of both sides.

Now that you have a glimpse of God in excerpts from His Word, can you believe what it says about Him? Regardless of what your experience has been, can you lay aside the wrong thoughts you’ve had about your Heavenly Father and believe these words of truth?

The facts are clear. God loves you. He didn’t want your father to neglect you or abuse you in any way. He’s sorry you’re hurting. He wants to help. Right now your feelings may be far too intense to allow our Heavenly Father to comfort you, but He’s willing to wait until you are ready.

Robert S. McGee, *Father Hunger*

Take a few minutes right now to pray and ask God to lodge these words firmly in your heart. You can’t begin to trust Him until you believe the truth about Him. Pray for these truths to take root in your spirit. God wants you to believe what His Word says, and He genuinely wants you to know Him as He really is. Praise God that we don’t have to become “stuck” because of how we were treated at home. Ask Him to help you realize and live in that freedom.

Reflection & Journaling

Day 1 – The Role of a Father

In your notes you read that a father is supposed to provide protection, provision, discipline, mentoring, and encouragement. Since our fathers are fallen creatures, they have fallen short of perfectly reflecting our Heavenly Father to us. This, of course, affects us in many ways. One way is that it affects our view of the Heavenly Father.

Below each of the things your father was supposed to model and provide for you, write a brief summary of how your father impacted you in these areas.

Protection

Provision

Discipline

Mentoring

Encouragement

Encouragement can come in many forms. Our fathers may or may not have encouraged us in areas of talent, or achievement, or godly character traits. Another important area in which we need encouragement and affirmation is in our gender. In what ways did your father affirm you in your gender?

Day 2 – The Marred Image

From the beginning God ordained that the parent-child relationship is an authority structure designed to teach us how to function in life. A result of this being modeled well is that we grow up understanding how to respond to and respect those who are over us. Part of our learning about authority includes learning submission. As we observe our fathers (as an authority figure) submitting to those over them (God, government, employer, etc) we also learn about submission. Ideally, we also learn that those who are in authority over us act in ways that benefit and protect us.

Many of us do not view authority in a healthy way because those over us so grossly misrepresented it. If our fathers did not assume the role of authority in our homes, or if they misrepresented it, our ideas of fatherhood have been marred.

Growing up, was your father the authority figure in your home?

How did this impact you personally?

Day 3 – Broken Types of Fathering

Today we will take a closer look at broken types of fathering and how they affect our view of God as our Father.

Performance-oriented fathering is very common in our western culture today. To perform well is an applauded behavior. Performance does have its proper place. How we perform as children determines the discipline we receive, the responsibilities we're given, and what brings rewards. This performance-based lifestyle continues into adult life.

This is also the way performance is depicted in Scripture. We are disciplined and rewarded according to our actions. We are entrusted with more when we are faithful with a little. The problem occurs when performance is attached to our worth and value. When we receive love and acceptance from our fathers as a result of our behavior then the Heavenly Father's love is not represented as unconditional. Grace is something we only understand on an intellectual level. It is a concept, not a reality, in our lives.

Do you often find yourself seeking to please others in order to win their approval and acceptance?

Often performance-based Christians are more comfortable in churches that tend to be more legalistic. Having rules to follow gives a sense of being able to control and ensure your acceptance.

Which of the following items best describe your relationship with God:

Performance:

- I obey Him.
- I serve Him.
- I read the Bible faithfully.
- I go to church regularly.
- I serve on several committees.
- I don't smoke, I don't chew, I don't go with girls that do.

Grace:

- I love God.
- I want to spend time just being with Him.
- I know that God is good.
- I love to express my heart to God in worship.
- I feel joy in His presence.
- I desire to please Him.

Do you think there is anything you should be doing (or not doing) to improve God's view of you?

The passive father inaccurately represents our Heavenly Father in a different way. It seems he doesn't really care for us. His lack of involvement or absence leaves us feeling we are less important than other things. We don't matter much to him. It also leaves us feeling that we are on our own and unprotected. It is up to us to care for ourselves. This is a lie that the enemy delights in because it keeps us feeling disconnected, and it motivates us to be our own protectors, our own saviors, and our own life-givers.

Do you often feel that your happiness depends on you? That you must lookout for yourself because no one else will?

Sometimes the fact that we weren't important in the lives of those who were supposed to care for us causes us to respond to our own need by becoming for others what we long for ourselves. A tendency to rescue, to be strong, to be there for others in need may be manifested in the way we relate to others and in the type of relationships we seek out.

Have you noticed that you are deeply sensitive to the hurts and needs of others and therefore often find yourself in relationships where you can "minister" to those needs?

If you would describe your father as a punitive father, one who is very harsh in his discipline, or who was abusive in some way, you most likely have a very difficult time viewing God as good and loving. Emotionally it may be difficult for you to connect to the Father. Fear, guilt, anger, and grief are emotions that may overwhelm you at times if you were abused. In order to protect yourself, you may have withdrawn emotionally, or conversely, become very angry and aggressive.

In your heart do you secretly doubt that anyone is trustworthy?

Do you find that although you may “believe” many truths about God, those truths do not seem to penetrate your heart? Do you have trouble *feeling* God’s love for you?

or, do you find that you *feel* too intensely – as if your emotions completely control your life, especially those of fear or anger?

The permissive father failed to love us in a different way. Remember that love is moving toward someone with his or her best interest in mind. It is doing what is best for them. The child who has had so much given to him and who has been “protected” from the consequences of his irresponsibility grows up with a lack of discipline and confidence. He also feels a sense of entitlement. When there are no consequences to his actions he wonders deep inside whether or not he is truly loved.

Do you find yourself typically taking the easy way out?

Do you have trouble feeling legitimate grief over your sin?

Day 5 – God as Father

In Proverbs we find a collection of sayings from a loving father to his son.

In each chapter, a father appeals to his son to learn from the wisdom of those who have gone before. A father's heart for his son emanates from each page, appealing to his son to avoid the snares in life that bring unnecessary pain and loss, which is the portion of the ignorant and foolish.

The heart of the father we hear in Proverbs is nothing other than the Father-heart of God who longs for His sons and daughters to live in peace and blessing.

New Life Forty Day Devotional Guide

Through this lesson, many of you have seen that you need to be re-parented by the one and only perfect Father. The book of Proverbs can give you insight into what it means to be parented well. Would you consider “reprogramming” your mind by reading through the book of Proverbs over the period of a month (a chapter a day)? Take some time right now to ask the Holy Spirit if this is the right time for you to be studying Proverbs. HE will direct you in the course of your healing.