

Biblical principles and examples

Our Father Which art in heaven

One of the most common and fundamental Scriptural images of God in the Bible is as a Father. But why is this imagery so common and so important? John Nicholls (Chelmsford, UK) examines what God's character and behaviour as a Father teaches us about what sort of fathers and parents we should be. He then turns to the question of what we can learn about God from our own experience of parenthood.

GOD IS THE perfect Father. We know this from what He reveals in His Word, from what we see around us in the Creation, in our own experience of His good hand in our lives, and in His relationship with His Son. In the disciples' prayer Jesus teaches us to address God as our Father, and in his teaching he frequently referred to God as 'my Father'. Believers who are baptized are His adopted sons and daughters.

But in what ways is God a Father from Whom we can learn about parenthood? This article looks at the Divine attributes that are ideals for human parents to strive after, and then, more subjectively, at how we can learn about God's Fatherhood from our efforts to be good parents.

The knowledge and wisdom of the Father

Perhaps the wisdom and understanding of our God comes first to our minds. That wisdom, seen in the Creation all around us, and present in His Word, is the foundation of the Fatherhood of God:

"For He knoweth our frame; He remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103:14);

"Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things" (Mt. 6:31,32);

"But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (10:30).

And Psalm 139, read in a positive and encouraging frame of mind rather than a negative and fearful one, shows us the absolute knowledge that our

heavenly Father has about us. Wherever we are in the earth, and whether it is day or night, He sees us and understands our thoughts. His hand leads us and His right hand holds us, like a father's. This caused David to exclaim, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (v. 6).

As human parents, we can understand the physical needs of our children; we can help them develop skills of speech and physical co-ordination when they are young; we can lay the foundation of their spiritual growth by encouraging them to read the Scriptures and join in with our prayers. We can provide a loving environment at home and in the ecclesia, and support them in as many ways as we are able.

But as they grow and become distinct personalities, we do not understand their thoughts near or afar off, as God does ours. We cannot control the circumstances that befall them as they start to go to play-school or pre-school or beyond. We can only pray that our Father, Who blessed us, will likewise bless our children and grandchildren, glorifying His Name in each of them. Proverbs gives us good advice about coping with our inadequate understanding to guide our children, and the wonderful adequacy of God: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths" (3:5,6).

The love and mercy of the Father

Although the knowledge and wisdom of God are infinitely greater than ours, all His dealings with men have love as their foundation and ultimate objective. "God is love", and it was love that resulted in the giving of His Son. All love is ultimately derived from God and it runs through His works. We see it in the abundance of the harvests which give us our food; it is seen in the beauty of Creation in all its rich diversity, its colours and changes through the seasons.

The love of God is seen in His dealings with Israel. After telling them, through Moses, that He

loved them (Deut. 7:7), He told them that He humbled them in the wilderness, and suffered them to hunger, that they might know that they lived not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of His mouth. They were to consider that, "as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee" (8:3-5). In our stumbling way as parents we discipline our children, attempting to correct the selfishness and assertiveness that are natural to them.

The writer to the Hebrews comments on this: "Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but He for our profit, that we might be partakers of His holiness" (12:9,10).

But with any chastening we have to blend mercy, knowing that we may not be that much better than our children. The psalmist says, "He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is His mercy toward them that fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear Him" (103:10-13).

Jesus, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (which also deserves the title of the Parable of the Merciful Father), shows the compassion of God: "when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him" (Lk. 15:20). How different from this the grudging elder son! What a lesson for us as we try to cope with our wayward children! Let us not make any unnecessary barriers between them and ourselves. Let us eagerly care for and look for those wayward ones whilst they are still "a great way off", for love can conquer all things.

The constancy and justice of God

Two further attributes of God as a Father which we must strive to follow are His constancy and His justice. As parents our moods are changeable, and so are those of our children. We are not unchanging like our Father. James says, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with Whom is no variableness neither shadow of turning" (1:17). Like the sun, He is always there, constant in all that He says and does, our rock, shelter and strong tower (Ps. 61:2,3). Try as we

might, we can never be like that to our children; we tend to be weak and erring, inconsistent and not always reliable.

God's love is constant and dependable. His love for His national son, Israel, is unchanging despite their waywardness (Jer. 31:3). Through Hosea He says, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely: for Mine anger is turned away from him" (14:4). The writer to the Hebrews gives us encouragement to continue to love and trust our Father: "... for He hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (13:5,6).

God's justice is also unchanging. His eternal principles are laid down in Genesis and continue to the completion of His purpose, at the end of the millennial Kingdom. The psalmist declared, "Thy judgments are a great deep" (36:6), unfathomable indeed. The Lord Jesus said that God's justice is without partiality: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you . . . that ye may be the children of your Father Which is in heaven: for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust . . . Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father Which is in heaven is perfect" (Mt. 5:44-48). We mortal parents are not as constant as this in the standards of behaviour that we expect of our children. We tend to shift the boundaries and fail to keep to them consistently, and, worse still, we do not always keep them ourselves.

God's perfect relationship with His Son

Jesus' relationship to his Father is the supreme example of a father and son. The Gospel of John particularly shows us the intimacy that Jesus shared with his Father. In the Gospels we are told of two occasions when God said to Jesus, in love and encouragement, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17; 17:5). He did not provoke His Son to wrath by asking impossible things of him. Possibly the Father spoke daily to His Son (Isa. 50:4). The bond of love and understanding between them must have grown so that an intimate spiritual union between them was reached. That intimacy must have developed over the years, so that by the time Jesus was thirty they were united in their outlook and aims.

The earliest hint we have of this close partnership to be comes in Genesis 22, where we are told twice that Abraham and Isaac "went both of them together" to the place of sacrifice (vv. 6,8). The father was, we are sure, full of sadness

but also faith, and the son, perhaps thirty years old, compliant and trusting in his God. It was a foreshadowing of him who said with conviction, "Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me" (Jno. 14:11), and who had earlier said, "Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again" (10:17). Jesus honoured his father to an extent that no man before or after him has done in rendering such total obedience and trust.

Learning about God from being parents

We learn from being parents ourselves how much better our heavenly Father is than we are. We marvel at the patience and goodness of God to us, and how impatient and merciless we can be with our offspring. But perhaps the main lesson we learn is that our children need all the love we can give them, and our constant prayers. Their spiritual development needs the blessing of God. When problems arise we can ask God's help to overcome when we have done all that is appropriate for us to do. And the long-term issues that affect our children—coming into the Truth, the friends they make, the marriages they contract—should be matters of prayer from the time the pregnancy is confirmed. God has wider issues into which to dovetail the birth of our child.

If our children come into the Truth we experience the joy that John talks about in his lovely letter to the well-beloved Gaius: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (3 Jno. v. 4). As parents and children walk to the Kingdom together, and our relationship as brothers and sisters in Christ blossoms, we can

in some measure understand the feelings of God as His very own Son humbly accepted the great responsibility laid upon him. We can, in measure, appreciate the pathos, but also the triumph, of the Father-Son relationship in the Gethsemane prayer, "O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done" (Mt. 26:42).

Patience and tolerance of the fact that our children's personalities and characters will have differences from our own are Divine qualities that we appreciate more and more as we grow up with our children. God is in no hurry. His timing is perfect. We want things to happen quickly and in the way that we think is best. Our Father's view almost certainly differs from our own. We have to wait for our children to reach the right time for them to be baptized, to come to it with their own conviction. Their choice of partner might be different from what we envisage. If we have made this a matter of prayer then we should be wholehearted in our acceptance of their chosen partner, and love them and their family as dearly as our own children.

We pray that the infinite mercy, patience and wisdom that God has shown to us will be shown to our children and grandchildren. With the passing of the years we are humbled by the goodness and love that He shows to us when we do not in the least deserve it: "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear Him, and His righteousness unto children's children; to such as keep His covenant, and to those that remember His commandments to do them" (Ps. 103:17,18).

Biblical instruction concerning families

What do the Scriptures reveal about the purpose of families and the responsibilities of parenting? In this article David Burges (Leamington Spa, UK) takes us through the vital Biblical principles and teaching.

NEARLY ALL OF US experience family life at some time in our lives, either as children or as parents, or both. The Bible demonstrates that from the beginning the family, comprising parents and offspring, has been the

basic biological unit designed by the all-wise Creator for mankind in general, and especially for the people He has chosen for Himself.

The first man Adam was provided with an ideal companion in the woman, and the two of them were blessed by God and instructed to be "fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28) by the bearing of children. Indeed, the woman was named Eve (Heb. *chavah*, 'causing to live') by her husband