

THE GOOD FATHER **Dr. George O. Wood**

On this Father's Day I want to take as my theme the subject, "The Good Father."

I was reflecting on the fact this last week that there was a time in my late teens and early twenties that I ever wondered if I would ever find a wife to marry. Let alone become a father. I remember so distinctly about being worried about having children, worried that if I had children they were doomed to look like me or maybe they wouldn't like me.

Like most of our worries, however, these had no substance. If only when I was young I had realized that Jewel was praying this prayer all the time that she was single.

"At sweet 16, I first began to ask the good Lord for a man.
At 17, I recall I wanted someone strong and tall.
The Christmas I reached 18, I fancied someone blond and lean.
Then at 19, I was sure I would fall for someone more mature.
At 20, I thought I'd find romance with someone with a mind.
I retrogressed at 21, and found college boys most fun.
My viewpoint changed at 22, when one man only was my cue.
I broke my heart at 23, and asked for someone kind to me.
Then vague and blase at 24, for anyone who wouldn't bore.
Now Lord, that I'm 25, just send me someone who's alive."

So we get to be parents in different ways, don't we? That however is better than the poem I ran across about the couple that kind of married late in life. It says, "The bride, white of hair, is stooped over her cane. Her faltering footsteps need guidance. Where down the church aisle with a wan, toothless smile, the groom in a wheelchair came riding. And who is this elderly couple you ask? You'll find when you've closely explored it that here is that rare most conservative pair who waited until they could afford it."

If we had known what these kids were going to cost us we might have waited until we could afford it.

On a serious level, I'm looking at the theme today, "The Good Father." I realize that not everyone's experience with their human father has been good. We have 90 children going up to a camp beginning tomorrow whose earthly experience with a human father has not been good. And there are some I'm sure within this audience who do not have a real warm fuzzy kind of feeling perhaps about Father's Day.

For persons who have had that kind of negative experience with a father, when we as Christians come along and talk about our heavenly Father, and worshipping the father, that is often filtered through the lens of our own experience. I've found it has been difficult for some of us to come to more accurate biblical understanding of who God is as father because we have taken the word "father" and colored it with our own experience.

Jesus however came to teach us that God is our Father. And that we are to call him Father.

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What kind of a Father is he?

When I was in college, my first year I took a course of introductory psychology. This textbook Introduction to Religion and Psychiatry (I keep the books over the years.) This quote in this book, the one thing I remember from it was a little application that the author made to how intimidated a child must be living in an adult world. By transference the author went on to say that when we live in this tremendous universe of gigantic proportions how much intimidated we must feel in regard to who is the parent who has brought us into this world and who really governs the universe.

The writer said something like this: to appreciate the position of the child the adult must be able to use his own imagination to picture himself in a relatively similar situation to that of the child. Here the adult would be completely at the mercy of giants about 25 feet tall. These giants would speak a language unknown to the adult and make demands he could not understand. They could handle the adult with ease, picking him up and swinging him high over their heads. When the adult tried to investigate things about him, many of his actions would be misconstrued. He might get his hands slapped or be put in a stockade called a crib or playpen. He might be given a few things with which he could occupy himself but they would be chosen by the giants. The adult would have to conform to an unexplained routine they imposed on him. By sheer physical force his clothing would be changed regardless of his wishes. When he was hungry he would have to wait until the giants deigned to feed him because he could not reach or prepare the food himself. If he did by chance find something to eat the giants might forcibly take it out of his mouth. Then they might feed him something he did not like or want. All of these things would be done in the best interest of the adult but he would not know it. He would have to live in a house of gigantic proportions where each step on the stairs was more than two feet high. He would not be tall enough to look out the windows. The doors would be almost 30 feet high and the doorknob possibly five feet above his head. The furniture in the house would be fitted to the requirements of the giants. In a situation such as this the adult would be physically helpless and entirely dependent upon the giants for his continued existence. If he could assure himself that the giants were good giants he would have no anxiety.”

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As mortals living in a vast universe we know immediately by looking at the proportions of the world and the universe in which we live that we are living in a universe that is made by a God whose proportions are far greater than our own. The critical question arises. We know he’s great but is he also good? Is the little prayer that some of us have prayed since we were children true? “God is great, and God is good.” Maybe it’s been difficult for some of you to feel the love of Father God because you’ve had a broken human model. Or sometimes maybe we feel too sinful and feel too worthless and feel that God is too holy. That they produce service to him out of duty rather than service to him out of the spontaneity we enjoy in a father child relationship.

Is it possible as a Christian you’re able to affirm theologically that God loves the world but you have difficulty grasping that the Father loves you? That he is a good Father.

I put before you a couple of texts today, three in all.

Jesus says, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” If we want to know what Father God is like all we really need to do is look at Jesus. John 14:9.

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Then a second text that Jesus used. John 15:9 “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” So if we look at the Father, we look at Jesus and see who the Father is. And if we look at how Jesus loved us by transference we can see how likewise Father God loves us. Only a good father can dearly and deeply love his children. By watching how Jesus loved his own we can draw our own conclusions about how Father God loves us and how therefore we are to love our own.

There are so many facets to Father God’s love that one almost could start anywhere and go on endlessly. But I want to select three that especially the Lord shows us about the good love that God gives us. And the attitude the good Father has toward us.

These three facets all speak on how God loves us.

The first thing that really speaks of his love and the goodness of his love is the fact that he loves us immediately. God does not have to make up his mind as to whether or not he is going to love us but spontaneously, instantly immediately God has a deep and abiding love for each one of us.

To show you the difference in God’s immediate love for us let’s take a moment and look back earlier in this service where we took time to greet one another. It was probably most likely a surface contact greeting unless you were setting by someone you’ve known for a long time. I doubt if there was in any of the transactions in the greeting time an overwhelming emotion where we said to one another, “I love you so dearly and so deeply. I would do anything I could to help you. I’d pay your mortgage if it were due. I’d sell my house. I’d even give my life for you. Let me embrace you.” Can you image the change that would happen in us if every time we greeted someone already in our heart we were thinking, “I want to love this person.” And isn’t it wonderful to think the moment we come into God’s presence unlike us who may be saying I want to love this person but yet we don’t know a lot about them so we’re really incapable of giving them the kind of love they want or need, the Father who knows us from the beginning to the end is able to not only say immediately, “I love you,” but is able to say in that knowingness of us to love us completely, dynamically, and deeply.

I remember holding each of our children when they were born, for the very first time. I especially recall because it was such a new experience when Evangeline was born, our first child. I had been in the father’s waiting room. In those days they didn’t let fathers in the delivery room. I’d been pacing back and forth for hours. And it was hours – about 16 or 17 hours that she was coming into the world. Finally early in the evening I had almost given up hope so I had begun to watch the TV. I remember distinctly. I was watching *Batman* when Evangeline was born. A nurse interrupted the program and came out and told me, “You are a father.” And they brought this little girl to me. As I looked, from underneath the blanket came one of her tiny formed hands, still blue from the womb. What do you say to your daughter? But I instantly loved and liked her.

My human love however was limited to the fact that at that point there was only a few minutes or seconds of history between us so the love could not be as fully formed as it would be today.

However when we come into existence, God from the beginning loves us with a complete love. He has an instant disposition to us of loving us. I think we see that in watching how the Lord

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really loved people. Look at some bonding that took place immediately in people that the Lord met.

For example, the rich young ruler. The gospel says that “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” He could have said, “There’s a smart young know it all over there. Runs with the singles crowd. Maybe he’s got everything. Maybe he’s been spoiled by his over indulgent parents. I’m not sure I can love him. Why don’t you just stand over there? Stand against that wall for a minute. I want to look you over. I want to make up my mind about you. I want to decide whether or not I’ll love you.” None of us can imagine Jesus doing that to this man.

Or take the woman of Samaria. No one had ever really loved her. They had used her, insulted her, talked about her behind her back. To me the fact that she had five husbands and was now in a live-in arrangement suggests that she had a bad father-daughter relationship as well. Because she had spent her life searching for the security of a man. The men in her life had not loved her. Jesus looking at her doesn’t say to her, “Lady, why don’t you set over there by the well and let me back off and take a look at you. You’ve got a very bad record. I’m taking a chance if I even talk with you. You’re pretty much scum. That’s what everybody recognizes. I hate to be so bold to suggest that’s what you are but that’s what the scuttlebutt of the town is. You’ve made such a mess of your life. Why should I decide to help you anyway? What’s there between us? I must decide if I can love you.”

Or think of Nicodemus. Jesus does not say, “Nicodemus, you are an important man. You have great wealth. You can be of use to me. You have the right contacts in Jerusalem. I think I’ll love you because you’ve got pull. I can use that kind of influence.”

None of us can imagine Jesus loving a person that way. A person’s position or wealth does not buy his love. Nor does a man or woman’s dark past keep that person away from his love. For his love is immediate.

When Jesus meets Peter he doesn’t say to him, “Stand there, Peter. I want to take a look at you. Can I trust you? What good will you be to me? What will I get off my investment in you? If I put three years into you what am I going to get in return?” No, immediately the gospel tells us that he said to Peter, “Come and follow me.”

He doesn’t hold any one of us away at arm’s length. There’s no one whom Jesus has to learn to love. That’s the difference in his love and our love. I’m working at learning how to love. Jesus doesn’t have to learn to love any one of us.

God is love. It is the very essence of his being to love us and to love us dearly. His love is not conditional. We may say in loving another person, “I love you. I love you because you’re pretty. I love you because you’re smart. I love you because you’re nice to me. I love you because you love me back. I love you because you bring class to my life. I love you because you bring me fun or whatever reasons we have.” Jesus does not love us, *because...* he just loves us.

His love is immediate. Our past cannot keep us from his love. The woman who was taken in adultery and brought before him was not kept away from his love by her past. I think, by the way, that woman represented in John 8, if Jesus were telling the story today, he would probably tell it of the woman who had had the abortion and was brought to him. Would that keep him

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from Jesus loving her? I think there are many women in our culture who have had abortions. I'm not trying to justify that. It's wrong before God. But like all sins if we will come to Christ and make contact with him and ask for his healing and his repair that sin too is forgivable. There's absolutely nothing that can keep us from his love.

At the other end of the social spectrum, just because you're wealthy and religious like Joseph of Arimathea that does not keep you from his love. He loves you. He loves you well. No matter what your struggle. No matter what you've done to yourself or to other people, his love is immediate.

Saint Paul reflects upon this in Ephesians 1:4-5 words that are difficult for us to get a hold of because they use language that maybe we think, Paul how could you say that? But it says, "He chose us in him before the creation of the world." Then it goes on to say, "In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Christ Jesus."

What Paul is saying is in the beginning when the world was not and the immensity of space stretched lampless and unpeopled we were in the mind of God. God was already planning to save us. God was already loving us when we were not even yet in the flesh. We were loved by God.

Maybe you've had this problem, I sure have had it. I've had trouble in my life understanding how God could personally love me. I have no problem abstractly understanding God so loved the world. I have problems when people tell me, Put your own name in John 3:16 – God so loved George Wood. I can accept that God loved people in mass, but God love me personally as an individual? Single me out?

We think God has so many followers. How can he adequately love them all? But he does. He's the heavenly Father.

When we were expecting our second child George Paul, I remember conversations that Jewel and I would have wondering, since we loved Evangeline so much how we were going to handle a second child. We literally did not know what you do with parental love. If you have a second child does this mean you have to give less love to the first child? Do you divide that love up? Isn't it amazing what you think as a young parent? When we found when the second child came along we loved the second child just as much as we loved the first child and we discovered something about love. Love does not divide. Love multiplies. You don't divide love. You multiply love.

That helped me to understand how our heavenly Father can take all of us in this room and all of us in this world and because of his omniscience and because of his being all places at one time and because of his great love, he is able to love each of us individually and personally as well as loving all of us. There's not a single one of us in here that God had an instant disposition to dislike. Regardless of whether you feel God likes you or not, the scripture says God loves you. And God's never struggled with that. God's never said, "I love 99% of the people in this world but George down here? I just don't know."

He's never struggled with loving anyone of us in this room. His love is immediate.

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The Lord shows us that. “He who has seen me has seen the Father ... I have loved you. ... Love one another as I have loved you...” Jesus will say.

So the good Father has an instant love for his children.

Another thing about the good Father’s love is that his love continues for us. It continues. A lot of things don’t last. Our sad experience of life teaches us that love does not always last on a human scale. It does not always continue. Think of the phrase from 1 Corinthians 13 “Love never fails.” That’s God’s love that’s being described. The heart of God in his continuing love is described in the book of Hosea where the Lord looks upon people who are leaving him and are rebellious toward him and remembering that he brought them with cords of tenderness and compassion out of Egypt. Much like a father remembrances of an adult child, “When you were a little boy I used to pull you in a red wagon.” Somehow no matter what the adult has done those memories of childhood stir a fresh awakening in God. This is how Father God talks about his people. I know you’re rebellious now but I remember when you were in the little red wagon and I pulled you out of Egypt and brought you into freedom. Therefore the Lord is saying to his adult children, “How can I give you up? How could I let you go?” The question is asked in such a rhetorical way that God is literally saying, I cannot give you up and I cannot let you go. Jesus does not say to his disciples, “I love you today. Follow me. But I’m not sure I’ll love you always. But follow me today.” His love continues.

Jesus’ love continues for his friends. Peter denies him. He curses at the mention of his name. He runs away and leaves him. He leaves him to the angry mob and to the nails. But Jesus does not leave Peter. After Jesus is raised from the dead he finds Peter. He searches out Peter specifically and one of the great moments of the gospel is that little phrase, “And he appeared also unto Peter.” Love continues. And it is of Peter that he asks three times, “Do you love me?” The reason he had to ask the question is because he loved Peter.

Are you the friend of the Lord that you start out to follow? Somewhere along the line did you turn back or commit sin or become cold? Are you afraid that he no longer loves you? He loves you. His love continues.

One of the most influential stories that’s guided my life on the love of God and has helped me in times I’ve felt I have so failed God that he couldn’t continue to love me is the story that Dave Wilkerson told of himself early in his ministry where he had had ministerial burnout while trying to establish the first Teen Challenge center in Brooklyn, New York. He’d worked night and day, neglected his family in the process and felt very guilty about having neglected his family. One evening he came in late in the evening. It was the early morning hours he was awake. He went over to the little bunk where his oldest daughter was then sleeping. He picked her up and as he did so, the girl in her sleep reached out to him. Even in her sleep this little girl was reaching out to David and was clinging desperately to him. It, of course, was a psychological recognition that he had been so neglecting this girl that even in her sleep she was trying to grasp him. He just began weeping as he realized his failure as a father to love his child. He felt so cast off by God. He felt like he wasn’t a success in his ministry, in spite of the gang members that were being saved, he felt like he was a total failure as a husband and a father.

He began pacing the floor, holding his girl. He said he felt a voice say to him, *David, drop you daughter*. He said, “No Lord!” He walked a while longer and he said he felt the voice again, *David, drop your daughter*. Again he said, “No, Lord.” Then a third time the voice came saying

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to him, *David, drop your daughter*. Unlike Samuel who said, “Here am I. I’ll do what you want,” David a third time said, “No, Lord, I will not drop my daughter.”

And the fourth time the voice of the Lord came to David and said, “And what made you ever think I would drop you?”

That’s helped me so much to realize that God’s grip on me is so much stronger than my grip on God. He is not a fair weather friend. His is not a fair weather love. His love stays fresh. It doesn’t get old to him.

He loves his friends and he even loves his enemies. You never hear Christ crying from the cross, “I hate you for this! I’ll get even with you for this!” He’s saying from the cross to his enemies, “Father, forgive them.” His love continues unabated for friend or for enemy.

I think that is why the writer of the great hymn *The Love of God* put in the third verse, pictured the love of God in such a dynamic way, “Could we with ink the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade, to write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry. Nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky. Oh, love of God! How rich and pure. How measureless and strong. It shall forevermore endure, the saints and angels song.”

His love is immediate and his love continues.

And then a third great dimension of his love is that his love endures. It endures. There is a limit to everything on earth. My time of this message is drawing to a close, our time in worship this morning is soon ending. The hours of this day will soon swiftly flee and before long another day will be closed. Longfellow said it well, “Too soon the noon becomes the afternoon. Too soon today be yesterday. The blue eggs in the robin’s nest will soon have wing and beak and breast and flutter and fly away. Too soon today be yesterday.”

Our years likewise have a point of termination. We’re so full of life this morning but we’ll not always remain filled with human blood. Within 75 years all of us in this room probably, if the Lord tarries, will have passed on. The things we crave – companionship, security, or influence or power or wealth, position or leisure are things we cannot hold. All things will pass away. What is permanent? What endures? His love is permanent. His love lasts.

That love which brought the Son of God from heaven to earth, from earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave and from the grave to glory. That love which was weary, hungry, tempted, scorned, scourged, buffeted, spit upon, crucified, pierced, which did fast, pray, teach, heal, weep, sweat, bleed and die. That love is eternal. And that love will eternally embrace you. Jesus says I will never leave you nor forsake you.

The marks of God’s love are immitatable in our own life. Jesus gives us in John 13:34 a new commandment “Love one another as I have loved you.” When we add that to the scriptures today we see Jesus is saying first, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” Secondly, “As the father has loved me, so love I you.” So we know how the Father loves by seeing how Jesus loves. Then the third thing Jesus adds, “Now that you’ve seen how the Father loves by my loving you, you love one another as I have loved you.” You go to work in developing this kind of love that is an immediate love. Not a love that creates suspense in people. Not a love that

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puts them conditionally out there while we make up our mind whether we seek their highest and best welfare. But you love instantly as well. And you have a love that continues. Because love is not always comfortable and relationships are not always comfortable. We must work through the tough spots in our relationships. Love continues and love lasts.

The little saying is so true, God loves you. It may also be true, And so do I.

Our Father, we come to you today and we are so glad to have you as our Father. We are so small in this vast world and universe, which you have created. We get 30,000 feet up in the air and look down on the landscape of earth, we don't even appear. We're so small that we can't be seen from a distance. Yet we're so very large to you. We're so very important to you. More valuable than anything you have made is us. For the world will pass away and the heavens will melt with a fervent heat. But when everything has passed away you purposed that we continue, that we abide in you and in your love. In living for us and in dying on the cross for us, you've forever answered any question, which we could legitimately ask, How do I know that the Father loves me? Greater love has no one than this who would lay down his life for someone who was not even his friend. You laid down your life for us, Lord Jesus. Your whole mission was a demonstration for us that we are loved by God. Forgive us for letting at times our broken human relationships shatter the mirror, which we should hold in our heart that adequately celebrates and reflects your love. For so often we have let the broken models of love which we have experienced to be an indicator of how we think you're loving us. When all along your love is pure undiluted and undiminished. We thank you for that love. We are loved of you. May we walk in your love and may we in our family relationships, although our love is not as perfect as your love and though our love must be developmental, we pray that it may be developing along the lines that you set for us. A love for one another that is immediate, that is unconditional and continuing and a love that endures. We seek this Lord in your name. Amen.