

THE PRESSURE OF THE PERFECT FATHER

Dr. George O. Wood

At the beginning of this message today on Father's day I want to share with you three scriptures. You need not turn to them because they're relatively brief.

The first is from the lips of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:48 "Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect." Knowing that that is a goal that none of us have yet arrived at what the Lord's intention is of perfection.

Paul writing to the Thessalonians says in 1 Thessalonians 3:10 "Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith." The perfect person doesn't lack anything. But the fact that we lack suggest that we have not yet attained to perfect.

Then what do we do about living with imperfect people? 1 Peter 4:8 "Above all love each other deeply for love covers over a multitude of sins."

As this message progresses today I want to weave these scriptures together and especially bring them together at the close of today's message.

My sermon today is entitled "The Pressure of the Perfect Father." I'll be very candid with you and share with you that I did not intend today to preach a Father's Day message. This message really resulted from a staff discussion at our weekly lunch this past Wednesday when I was asked by one of the staff what are you preaching on for Father's Day. I said I'm continuing my series from the book of Revelations 2 and 3, Jesus' concerns for the church. We're going to look Sunday at his third concern for the church reflected in the letter to Pergamum, Will we compromise a little?

The staff member said, You mean you're not preaching about fathers on Fathers Day? I said no, I'm not. Why aren't you? I said, For one thing many of the people there will not be fathers and I don't want to simply key in on fathers when there's mothers and daughters and sons and single men and women. I don't want to zone in on one exclusive group. I said, besides that I'm uncomfortable speaking on the subject of being a father. The reason I am uncomfortable is that my own kids aren't out of the nest yet. I sort of felt that until they had their own track record maybe I should be quiet on telling other people how to bring up their kids and be fathers.

I am keenly conscious that I am not a perfect father. And to relax you all, I'm going to ramble a little bit today. I rarely do that. I try to do straight line. But allow me as my dad so often used to say, "Let me speak to you today from my heart."

The minute I said I'm not a perfect father and therefore I don't want to speak on the subject, my mind went back to an article I read when I was in seminary from *Christianity Today*. It addressed the theme of preaching. Should we only preach what we have experienced?

The idea behind the article was that there are going to be sometimes we come across instances in scripture which are more righteous than our own behavior as preachers have exhibited. Therefore should we only preach those things which we have experienced? Or should we preach even

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those things, which the scripture teach which we had not yet tasted of ourselves if indeed it's taught in scripture. The conclusion of the article was Yes, you must preach the Bible and not your own experience. If you only preach what you have experienced you will lead a congregation on the very shaky sea of subjectivity. We need to be rooted in God's truth, not just our own human truth.

I knew the minute I said I can't preach on it because I am not a perfect father that my own thoughts were coming back at me.

I used the justification too that I looked through scripture trying to find a passage of scripture, which would lock on, on the ideal father. And I really can't find one. Other than Jesus' great story of the lost son in Luke 15. In fact, when you look for a role model of good fathering in scripture it is simply not there. Except one or two cases. I can think of one off hand. The earthly Father Jesus – Joseph, husband of Mary.

I searched through the Old Testament and all the major character are not described in terms of being ideal fathers. Abraham, for example, the patriarch. He was a great man of faith but a good father? Ask Ishmael whether he was a good father or not. The seeds of preferential treatment of one son or another are still being sown in the world today because Ishmael was kicked out when he was 12. He was not the favored kid.

Isaac had a favorite kid. He was not that hot of a father. He liked Esau. He and his wife, eternal arguments over which kid was better than the other. She liked Jacob.

Then Jacob, again preferential treatment passed from father to son. Jacob preferred his one kid over another. Joseph was his favorite kid. When Joseph wasn't around any more then there was Benjamin.

Then the kings. David may have been a great king, but a great father he was not. If you don't believe that look at what he did with Absalom. Incomplete forgiveness toward Absalom. His own house and his marital situation were so confused. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, he may have had a lot of proverbial wisdom but practicality in terms of how to raise children he did not demonstrate well. He had one of the worst sons, and one of the most messed up families. But if you try to have a 1000 wives, you're going to be messed up too.

Solomon has never been one of my most favorite people in the Bible. Fortunately for Solomon, God treated him just like he treats us. He justifies us on the basis of our faith in him. Solomon, I would not use as a role model for a father.

I'm kind of stuck. I have this pressure. I feel pressured to be a perfect father. I think men here if they're fathers, want to be perfect fathers. We want to be perfect. We hear the word of Jesus: "Be you therefore perfect."

Then we find out that we are in fact not that way. That we're imperfect. If I preach I want to preach on the ideal father, the perfect father. And I don't know of any and I'm not one myself. And I can't find any scripture outside of Joseph. I could have preached on him but I've done that several years ago and I don't want to repeat myself. Perhaps we need to hear something about imperfect fathers. That so many of our problems come about as a result of our idealized expectations that we have of ourselves and the idealized expectations we have of others.

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I thought that might be right. I was talking to an attorney friend this week and he was relating to me a speech he had heard where an individual had quoted an article, and we're reaching that article now to see exactly what it said. But the article said that a study had been done on military bases where the James Dobson film series had been shown about parenting and about family relationships. The follow up study had shown that a good number of families following that film series, several months after the film series had concluded that there were more problems in the home than before they saw the film series.

That kind of stunned me because I believe wholeheartedly in James Dobson's ministry. This story is not meant to at all detract from that. But what the researcher went on to say was when people get their expectations raised to an idealized state of what it means to be the proper husband or the proper wife, the proper parent, and they try to go back and immediately take all that they learned, put it into action and they find that they can't just jam it all in right away. The frustration level rises tremendously.

I don't know if you've ever experienced that or not. But I suspect that there's some reality to that kind of phenomenon.

I also know that there are so many different ways we've experienced father. Each of us has had a father. And each of us has a different kind of relationship with the fathers that gave us birth. Some of those relationships we've had with father on an individual level in this room if I were to ask you to talk about your relationship with Dad, you would give a report that was absolutely full of warmth and idealism. And there's just nothing about your dad that's ever struck you as being wrong. I think Corrie ten Boom had that kind of a dad. When you read her works you read about the watchmaker and Harlem, Holland. You had this sense of a great patriarch and a loving warm vulnerable, godly human dad.

But on the opposite end of that spectrum are people in this room who could give testimony to being verbally and physically and perhaps sexually abused. You had that kind of a father.

There are people on the Corrie ten Boom side of the spectrum and there are perhaps people in the congregation who has perhaps had violent fathers.

When I began researching sermon literature and material on fathers I found that most sermons I encountered on the subject of fathers the minister took it as his responsibility on Father's Day to sort of whip the fathers into line. We ministers are sometimes great at that. We dump out more guilt than the Holy Spirit does. We can make people feel real bad quickly. Sometimes we do that. Sometimes we do it unintentionally.

Sure enough I found that a lot of illustrations on fathering were sort of down pat and negative in tone. I came across one of Boswell, the famous biographer of Samuel Johnson. It seemed like when Boswell was an adult he used to talk very mystically about the one day in his childhood when his father spent all day and took him fishing. It must have been the only day in his whole life where his father ever spent any time with him and it was the happiest day of his childhood. In recounting that day he always used to talk about *The Day his father took him fishing*. One day somebody heard Boswell say that for the nth time so they went back. They had access to Boswell's father's journal. They decided to go back and see what the dad had said of that day

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since the son had thought so highly of it. Here was what was written in Boswell's dad's journey of the day, "Gone fishing with my son today. A day wasted." A real positive thought, isn't it?

I could immediately build on that and say, Fathers are you spending enough time with your children? Don't you feel guilty when you think of that? Maybe we should.

Did you know that the official flower of Father's Day was the dandelion? The more it is trampled on the more it grows.

The pressure of being the perfect father. I want to surface today two problems that I think relate to the pressure on men to be the perfect father. I think this could be used of the perfect mother or the perfect child or the perfect parent. It can fit a number of different role definitions.

Age does a marvelous thing for you. When I was younger I could never speak from experience but now I've watched life go by enough that now I think I can say some things in addition there's my experience with the scripture and I can have my own judgement which I feel is valid and can say like Paul, "This is not the Lord's word. This is my word. But you judge it to see if it bears witness to what the Spirit is saying."

Two problems I see today in homes. There are a lot more than that but I especially want to address these two as they relate to the perfect father.

One I think is a problem present in many Christian families. It's the problem of the family where there is disappointment about the husband's role as spiritual leader of the house. It may be that the wife thinks of herself as more spiritual than her husband and wishes her husband would become the spiritual leader. It may be that the wife doesn't think that about herself but just cops out of her own spirituality because she says, My husband isn't spiritual so what could be expected of me? Or maybe the wife is simply not satisfied with her husband's spirituality and therefore there is deep dissatisfaction in the home over spiritual roles being played out by the man as both husband and father.

And the term spiritual headship has been a term, which has especially been, used a lot in our generation that has sometimes been a help and sometimes been a club to men. It's a term that's found in 1 Corinthians 11:3 and Ephesians 5:23. I've had over the years wives to tell me things like, "I've tried to get my husband to be the spiritual leader of the home and he refuses. He won't read the Bible with the children or pray with them or with me." The result of this problem is that the wife loses confidence in her husband because he is not the spiritual giant that she thinks he should be. The problem is especially compounded if the husband is making any effort at all to serve Christ or if he is assuming some role of leadership in the church. Because then the distinction between what he is in public and what he is in private becomes all the more apparent and it appears to be a gross hypocrisy.

As I look at this problem in the Christian family today, and I don't think it's an uncommon problem, I would like to suggest to you some things that will not work in changing that man into being the spiritual leader the family wants him to be. Five things I know will not work. They won't work in getting anybody to change. Pressure will not work. Guilt will not work. Lecturing will not work. Criticism will not work. Setting in judgment will not work. He may need a dash of those and put them a little bit together. But in plentiful measure those elements of approach simply do not work.

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The only thing that really works is a heart that is filled with unconditional acceptance and love and seeks without language to bring about behavior change.

It's interesting how the early church dealt with this problem. The problem crops up twice – 1 Corinthians 7 and 1 Peter 3 where you have Christians who are married to non-spiritual people. It may be a wife married to a non-Christian husband or it may be a Christian husband married to a non-Christian wife. And they're struggling. I think especially the wife is struggling. And that's the import of 1 Corinthians 7, with this unspiritual man who is not saved. I think I can put the story a little bit forcibly by suggesting that one of the problems that was taking place in the early church where you had a Christian wife and a non Christian husband is the Christian spouse comes to church and there is the wonderful support and encouragement of God's people. Then goes to a Bible study group and again has wonderful encouragement and support. There inevitably comes a time of association with other people in the body of Christ where there's that moment in a small group you join hands together and you pray for one another. One day in one of the Bible studies Mrs. Whatever is blindly joining hands with the people in her group and she discovers that she is holding the hand of the thirty-five year old bachelor Christian man. And she's about thirty-three with two kids at home. And her husband has had an overnight hangover from his last drunk and he's watching the Sunday morning cartoons. Suddenly she's in hand to hand contact with a fine Christian young man of marriageable age. Something is going on between them more than skin touching skin in that wonderful holding of hands when you pray. She's saying to God, "Why can't I have a spiritual husband like this instead of who's at home recovering from his drunk? I want an ideal man and the guy I've got is not ideal."

The apostle Paul writes and says, "Don't you divorce that non Christian unless he absolutely refuses to live with you because of your faith. You win him." Paul says, Who knows whether or not it is you who will save him.

Peter goes on to build on that in 1 Peter 3 and says; "By your quiet and peaceable spirit you will minister to that individual."

I think what Paul and Peter are recommending at that point in terms of change is reminding all of us who want people around us to change whatever their relationship is with us that we best bring about change not by nagging, not by criticality, not by judgmentalism. But by non-verbal acceptance and love of tremendous doses.

All husbands and all fathers, all wives and all mothers, all children and all parents need prayer and encouragement and affection. These are better instruments of change than criticism, blame and negativity.

I'm going to get out now own thin ice. I think that one of the myths that we have lived with as Christians is that if the father does not assume his role as spiritual head of the house then the children are going to turn out bad. Scriptures teach us men to be the spiritual leader of our home. But I have known homes and I think you have too where the father has not really been the spiritual head but the children have turned out to have a vibrant faith in Christ nevertheless.

I want to share with you a couple of things about my own home, my background, that have not been easy for me to share.

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My father, many of you knew my dad, he's only been gone from us three years. I miss him. The 11:00 service and I look out and see the spot where he used to sit. He'd always come into the service late because he was really bugged by the fact that lights were left on in the building when nobody was in the room. So to save the church money on the electrical bill he would be out turning off the lights. That's the way he always lived. Sparse and economical. Dad was a missionary and dad was a pastor. But my dad was not the spiritual leader in our home as we stereotypically define it. I cannot remember five occasions if that many when my dad gathered us as family and said, Let's open the Bible and pray together. For one reason or another dad found that extremely difficult to do. I think part of it was his background. Part of it was the fact that his own dad died when he was two and that his step father came at a time in his life when there were ten kids in the home under 16 years of age. His father made him go to work when he was in the third grade and kicked him out of the house when he was sixteen. He had no modeling going on in his home and it was remarkable that he turned out like he did serving Christ.

All of us kids today, the three of us, are serving the Lord. None of us appear to have been damaged by the wear. I have on the other hand talked with kids who grew up where there was a strict family altar and an external observance. But it was uncomplimented by love for God and love for other people and family but it was just *we are going to do this*. Am I at all suggesting that one doesn't use a family altar? By no means. But I am suggesting that there are more ways of judging spirituality in a person's life.

I have inherited all of my father's old sermon notes. I've got a file about 2½ feet thick. Dad ministered in the Pentecostal church at a time when many people thought good preaching was not to study, to simply open your mouth and the Lord would fill it. The best way to get a sermon was to simply get up and begin speaking and go whatever direction the Spirit would enable you to. And good preaching was never to use notes because that was unspiritual.

And Dad would study and he would study hard. He would write in his chicken scratch handwriting, he had the hardest handwriting to read, this organized material. Although he wasn't in the family the spiritual head that I fanaticized he should be as a kid growing up in that home, I discovered when I got older that there were spiritual values nevertheless that he communicated to me. And the great thing my mother did in that home is that she never downed my dad to us kids. She never said, Dad should be doing this but I'm doing it instead. She just very quietly with us gathered us around and read the Bible to us and prayed with us. That was kind of our family life.

It's been very difficult therefore with that parental example for me to even myself break out of some of that molding. I think I know enough now to say to wives and families that are here that if the husband is finding it difficult to take the lead and get the Bible out and read it and have family prayer together, don't think first of all that his spiritual impact on the kids is only contained in that moment. But also you as a wife can create an environment where the Bible and prayer can be an invitation rather than a club. Where you yourself can take out the word and say, Let's read the Bible tonight and have a word of prayer.

I want to encourage couples to ease up on one another. We live in a time of great expectations. I time of high demand society. A time when we do not have any room for delayed gratification and the credit card is the instant symbol of the fact that we have no room for delayed gratification. It's we've got to have it all and we've got to have it now. One of the terrible things we do to one another – and I do this to members of my family and I'm sure you do it to

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members of your family – we all get an ideal of what the perfect person is, what the perfect child is, what the perfect husband is, what the perfect wife is, what the perfect parent is. And if somebody doesn't live up to that, then we set in judgment upon them and we keep trying and trying and trying to get them to change.

I see the gospel as something other than that. I see God as first of all coming to us and saying, I unconditionally accept you and it is out of the nurturing of God's love for us that we are welcomed to change. Criticism is like an ice blast. It freezes the object. But love melts the objects. Love draws out and blame freezes up.

As men let's grow in the Lord. But as families, let's encourage one another.

Another problem I want to address relates to the theme of the pressure of the perfect dad. For some of us we have had to come to terms with our dads. Maybe we're still coming to terms with accepting our dads, or maybe in some cases, needing to forgive our dads. For some in this audience the idea of accepting your dad or forgiving your dad is a foreign notion. You love your dad so much you're absolutely ecstatic about him and in your eyes there's nothing he's ever done that's wrong. But others have had to accept. Still others need to forgive.

I had a long struggle to learn to accept my dad and understand where he was coming from. I think part of the reason was I had such a rigid idea of what it means to be a perfect parent. That's why I told the staff I was not comfortable of speaking on the theme of the perfect father on Father's Day because I have struggled so much in my own life over this.

I shared a couple Sunday nights ago a story which I'll repeat since many of you weren't there. I held it against my dad for years that when I was a kid, a teenager growing up, he never once put his arm around me. He never once verbally said to me that I can remember, "I love you." The older I got and watched the ideal that I thought a family should be the more I resented dad for that. Wisdom does a lot of things to you. But I got to thinking one day, Have I judged my dad wrongly. The same dad that was unable to hug me and unable to say to me, I love you, was the dad who when I was a teenager learned my paper route so well that he could throw one side of the street while I threw the other side. He would collect half of my paper route for me while I'd collect the other half just to save me time. I'm ashamed of what people thought of him as a grown adult out there carrying a dirty paper bag on his shoulder. He'd be slinging papers with me.

And I was saying, Dad you don't love me because you haven't put your arm around me and said, I love you. I wasn't saying that verbally. I was saying you're not my ideal. And all the time he was out there throwing papers.

This is a file of my parents' letters to me. In my early days in college when they began writing me I threw the letters away, then I began to realize one day there's going to be some day when they're not here and I'd like to be able to have these as a memory. I'm so glad I kept this file. It brings me such rich inspiration.

Mom was the writer in the family. Dad wrote about one twentieth of the letters. I was going through this file the other day and all of a sudden there surfaced this whole struggle again of my idealized expectations of my dad. There was a letter written and dated my wedding day. December 27th, 1965. Dad didn't come to our wedding. At the time he was in between

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churches. He did not have regular income. He was working at minimum wage on an hourly basis. He really felt he did not have the money to make the trip from California to Alabama. So mother got on the bus and came. But dad writes me on my wedding day.

“Dear George, here is my bookkeeping on the car deal. Should my figures be wrong, kindly help me in this matter.” On he goes to list what the car cost, what payments he had made, how much I had helped him on the payments and the bottom line of how much I still owed him. It’s my wedding day. Then he says at the bottom of the letter: ”This is your total giving to me. At least that’s what my records show. What do yours show?” The joke of that and I think he knew, I had no records. When I got this letter after we got back from our honeymoon I thought here is my dad giving me a bill on my wedding day. It doesn’t say, you’re getting married today! Love! It’s just what do your records show? I think I wrote dad a real hot letter and the kind of wrote me back saying if that’s the way I feel about it then forget the bill.

As I have evaluated that since then I’ve realized dad was saying to me, “Son, I recognize that today marks a difference in your life. You’re getting married. It’s time you started being a man, paying your own bills, paying your own way. Nobody’s going to pay your way any more. I acknowledge that and recognize that.” In dad’s terms and in dad’s language through that letter I think he was saying the best he could, I love you. It wasn’t what I was looking for at the time. But looking back he is drilling me on the matter of being financially responsible was one of the things I’ve needed most in my life and benefited from.

It was my dad who pressed me to get an education. It was my dad who insisted that I do that. Because he had never had the opportunity. It was my dad who was never able to say to me directly, who was yet so proud of me. Three years ago I was sitting in my office. Dad had been through surgery. He was for two weeks in the ICU. He was doing well enough that day that they were going to move him out of his room into a regular room out of ICU. We were thinking everything was going well. Midday I get a call from the ICU saying, You better come down. Something is happening with your dad.

Dad had always talked about dying because he had had a lot of illnesses in his life. But I remember when I walked in that room and saw my dad for the first time no longer alive I was stunned. I had no words to summarize that moment.

A nurse came by whom I didn’t know. She said, “Are you his son? I was just talking with your dad about you this morning. I want you to know that all he was talking about was you. He was so proud of you. He loved you so much.” I wish I had been able even three years ago to be as mature hopefully as I am now. I wish there had been one moment in my life when I had stood right in front of my dad looked him right in the eye and said to him, “I dearly love you.” I wish I had given him a hug with everything I had in me. The closest I ever came was a hug on the side.

I wanted the ideal dad. Only too late did I realize I had just the dad that God had that would make the character that he wanted me to be. And almost too late did I realize that your dad doesn’t have to be perfect in order to be a great dad. I held it against my dad that he was a minister and that he preached to others. Yet some of the things I thought should be present in his own life weren’t. In doing so I so easily missed all the right things that were there.

I want to encourage Christian families to ease upon one another. To accept one another and to forgive one another. Maybe you’ve never been able to say to your mom or your dad, I love you,

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and hug them. Maybe there's some real legitimate reasons why you haven't been able to do this because of abuse in your life. If you're not able to go all the way of a hug and kiss, begin with saying to God, "I forgive and release my dad of this." Even if your dad is gone, say it. Because unforgiveness will wind up hurting you.

We need to express our feelings to one another. In days when we have parents with us, when they're gone will never come again. If they're alive we need to say it when they're alive.

My son, George Paul. Gave me permission to use this. When my mom died, his grandma, he was eleven years of age. He wrote an essay at school. Since I save things, when this essay came home I looked at it and said I love that. I'm going to put that away. As an eleven-year-old this is what he said about the death of his grandma. It's called "My feelings. Whenever I hide my feelings I get nervous. When my grandma died I was no nervous I couldn't do the simplest schoolwork. I couldn't sit down very long because I would shake my leg. [We didn't even know that was happening.] For about four days after grandma had died, I couldn't sleep very well. I would get super hot in my bed from abnormal sweating. I would have to talk for a while to calm myself down. Finally I talked to my parents. I let it all out and I immediately calmed down. From now on I talk about my problems. I let it all loose and I feel a lot better."

I've done my fair share of counseling of families with problems. That little lines "I let it all loose and I feel a lot better." Letting it all loose doesn't mean dumping on somebody. But it means to be able to share from your heart without worrying how something is going to be taken. There needs to be room in our family life for hugging and for talking and for feeling better.

The gospel songwriter said, "I must tell Jesus all of my troubles. I cannot bear my burdens alone." That's so true. I think I speak to many fathers today including myself who really want to be the spiritual head of their home. But who don't know how or have fears of failure.

Take courage. You can be all God calls you to be. Open the door. Be vulnerable. Talk with your family and admit that you aren't everything that you'd hoped to be. Ask for their help and their hand.

"Be perfect", that's so hard. Thank God the scripture says that what is lacking in our faith can be completed. While it's being completed love covers. Love covers a multitude of sins.

Our Lord Jesus, many families and homes today, there's such great pressure. We put such high demands on one another. We thank you Lord, that you reach out and have high goals for us as well. But all of us are so keenly conscious of our humanity. We fall short. We fall short as moms, we fall short as dads, we fall short as children. Lord, as a parent I pray for all the parents here that we would be released from the pressure of producing the perfect child. Help our concentration as parents be on loving our children not perfecting them. Where there is great love there will be great maturity developing. But where there is little love and much demand for perfection, our children will be broken by our rigidity. Deliver us, Lord from the pressure of producing the perfect child. The child who must look perfect. The child who must always get an A. The child who must always do everything well. Help us to give our children unconditional acceptance and support without simply on the other hand letting our children cop out and just drift along and not giving them any structure. That's not what I'm praying. But I am praying that you will save us from being neurotic with our children. And I pray for the expectations we have of our wives and of our

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husbands. Lord Jesus, deliver us from those. Help us to accept one another first. Lord, may children today reach out to a mom or a dad or both and says on this special day, I love you. If there's a child that does not have a father, their mother has become their father and their mother. They do it for mom as well. May this be her father's day. But to say to that parent, I really love you. Lord, it seems like we were thrust into parenthood before we were ever ready. Childbearing occurs in the young years before we gets wise. We make so many mistakes Lord, as parents. May our children be able to love us anyway. Thank you for our children. Thank you for family. Complete what is lacking in us, Lord. But I'm sure today I don't want anybody to take as an excuse for somehow going out and drifting along and not trying. Lord, save us from simply setting in judgment. I thank you for my mom and for my dad. Thank you for all the moms and dads here today. We want to go out from here strengthened. We want to go out knowing that love covers a multitude of sins. There are friends here today who are still in the injury that occurred to them as a result of bad parental relationships. Bring your healing and your forgiveness. Mend what is broken. We bring this healing prayer, Lord Jesus, to you. Let this be a day of closeness with one another and with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.