

When I was asked to preach, I immediately thought of a very familiar passage from the third chapter of the gospel of Matthew. It is in many ways, a definitive passage on fatherhood. It's the interaction between God the Father and Jesus at Jesus' baptism.

We are going to look at this passage in three different ways. The first way is a great piece of parenting advice, especially for dads. The second way is a great piece of crucial theology. And the third way is asking a hard question.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment, heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Matthew 3:13-17

Let me set the context. This is the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry. The John in this passage is John the Baptist. Although they are the same age - both around thirty years old - John has already started his ministry. Now he is called John the Baptist, not because of ties to a denomination but because he was baptizing people - literally immersing people like we do here at CPC - as a sign of repentance. He is a unique guy. He wears clothes made of camel hair with a leather belt around his waist and his food consisted of locusts and wild honey. And he lives in the desert. Some refer to him as the last Old Testament prophet. His main ministry is to tell the people that the Messiah is coming soon. He and Jesus know each other - they are related - and their mothers introduced them while they were both in their mother's womb.

John is preaching and baptizing near the Jordan river. He is there because he needs the river to baptize in. And Jesus comes to meet him there - Galilee is north of there by less than 30 miles.

In verses 13 through 15, we see that Jesus' request to be baptized is met with skepticism from John. John knew who Jesus was. He knew that the baptism should be the other way around. But Jesus was clear that he was to be baptized as a sign of the start of his public ministry. To be clear, his was not a baptism of repentance. Jesus had nothing to repent from; he was sinless! His baptism was more of an anointing for his public ministry. What Jesus meant by "to fulfill all righteousness" is that he must fulfill God's command in this. God's commands are always the basis of righteousness. We see in the gospels that Jesus was always mindful of what God the Father would ask him to do. And he always obeyed. Let's get to the first lesson.

Parenting Advice

Scholars argue that it is unclear who heard God's voice. Was it the crowd who must have been there or just Jesus and John? The answer is it doesn't matter! God the Father chose to do something for Jesus and John that would for impact them both.

For Jesus: God the Father addressed the biggest needs of every child from their parents. He told Jesus, "You belong to me. I love you, and I am pleased with you." It has been said that every human is born looking for where they belong; looking to be loved; and looking for someone's approval. God the Father wanted to remind Jesus who he was and that he was deeply loved and God was so deeply proud of him. Why did he want to remind Jesus of this?

Well if you look at the beginning of Chapter 4, what happens next? It is the 40 days of temptation of Jesus. God knew how hard this next time would be for Jesus. Do you think Jesus ever thought back on these words from his Father throughout the temptations? Of course he did. He remembered who he belonged to; who loved him, and that his Father was greatly pleased with him.

And for John: God clearly told him that Jesus was the Messiah. This is the one you were preparing the way for. He wanted John to know that his preaching and ministry were not in vain.

So here is the great piece of parenting advice: Tell your children that they belong to you. Tell them that you love them. Tell them that you are proud of them.

All children - even adult children - cannot hear this enough. I have never met anyone who said their parents told them they loved them too often. But I know lots and lots of people that say they rarely, if ever, heard that their parents loved them or were ever proud of them. This seems particularly true about fathers.

This sense of belonging, love, and acceptance is especially crucial as you send your kids into the world. Just as Jesus went to his time of temptation, our kids go out every day. You will be stunned how many better choices they will make if they hear your words in their heads saying: "Hey, remember who you belong to. You are loved. You don't need to do that stuff to feel accepted. You already are!

Dads - please take this on as an assignment. When you get home today either go see or call or if out have to, send a text or email, and tell your kids these words. And then try to do it on a regular basis. Sit back and watch what it does to your relationship.

Crucial piece of theology.

Theology is the study of God and his nature. Here it is: God reveals himself to us as our Heavenly Father. Now if you grew up in church this

seems so obvious that you might be saying to yourself, so what? But know that this was not how the Jews had primarily viewed God. It was Jesus who began to teach that God is our heavenly Father. In fact, Jesus makes more than 150 references to God as Father. Jesus lets us in on the fantastic news that we can have an intimate close relationship with God. Jesus even taught us that we should refer to God this way in our prayers. Remember the first line in the Lord's Prayer? "Our Father in heaven..."

To be clear, this didn't have to be this way at all. God could have easily just declared himself as God. Full stop. A being that couldn't and shouldn't be approached by mere humans. Many gods are viewed like this in other religions. Or he could have declared himself as King. One where we are only his subjects that could approach him only when he felt like it. Or he could have revealed himself solely as a Master, with us as his slaves. With no rights and viewed only as his property for him to do with as he pleased. But he did not! This is the good news! The God of the Universe wants us to be loved and treated as sons and daughters, loved at every turn. In Ephesians chapter 1, it says that before the creation of the world, God chose those who believe in Jesus to be adopted as his sons and daughters. The term used in that passage is a legal term referring to the full legal standing of an adopted heir in the Roman culture. We can be His children with all the rights and benefits.

We cannot and should not take this for granted. It is the heart of the gospel. But we must choose to accept Jesus. Being born in a Christian family or culture no more makes you a Christian than being born in a hospital makes you a doctor. You need to decide to accept this incredible gift.

Now the other wonderful benefit of this great truth is that we, as humans, can see what fatherhood can and should look like. Sadly, many of us know poor fathers than great ones. But just because you had a poor earthly father, doesn't mean you can't have a perfect heavenly Father.

I have a very good friend, who is a wonderful father. We share the things we do well and the things we do poorly as dads with each other. But we remind ourselves that even at our very best moments of being a father, it is only a tiny glimpse of how good our Heavenly Father is. For we are fallen beings and can't come close to attaining the goodness, wisdom, love, and the discipline of how our Heavenly Father is. This leads us to the last lesson for today.

All of this teaching begs a hard question.

What do you do if you never had a good earthly father? How do you deal with the hurt and disappointment of this? Let me share a story from my own life. I was born in the 1950s and was the youngest of seven children. I had five older sisters, so you should be much nicer to me from now on. My dad was 42 when I was born. To be honest, he was tired of being a parent to young kids by then, and so I was basically

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

raised by my older siblings. Sadly, while he was there in the house as I grew up, he seemed indifferent. However, and I will spare you the details, he also did and said some things to me that deeply hurt. I'm 63 years old and remember them like they happened last week. By the time I graduated from high school, I had decided I would leave the house and never come back. I essentially wrote him off.

A few weeks after high school graduation, I flew to Europe to meet my older brother, whom I adored, and we lived out of backpacks for nine weeks traveling all over Europe. It was awesome! He and I were together 24/7 and talked about everything. Strangely, when he and I spoke of our father, it was as if we were describing two different men. He had a wonderful time with him. I, of course, had not. When I told him how I felt about our dad, I remember him carefully listening and being compassionate with me. But he also challenged me to forgive him. My brother explained that I was the one who would keep losing in this if I didn't forgive him and begin to move on. He didn't want me to stay wounded and become bitter. This was hard for me. In fact, it took weeks to sort it. But I remember praying to the Lord and asking for his help in forgiving my dad. And asking for his help so I could give my dad a second chance to be in my life.

When we returned from Europe, I had a few days before I had to leave for college. We went to be with my folks. I intentionally decided to view my dad in a new light. It was good. I'm happy to say we became friends. He lived another 29 years. Our relationship was never better.

Why do I tell you that story? Because the wounds of a father hurt deeply - even the unintentional ones. But usually, it's the wounded that continue to be hurt. If you are here today and you are in that situation, I encourage you to break the pattern. Let the Lord deal with your father; you deal with your own hurt.

Please know that you have a Heavenly Father who loves you deeply and understands your hurt. He wants you to forgive and move on. Don't become bitter and stay angry.

This is really important but very hard work. I have a dear friend who is a world class family and marriage counselor. He told me most of this work has to do with the wounds from the families people grew up in. So, I asked him if he could recommend one book on this subject, which would it be? He suggested Forgiving our parents, forgiving ourselves by Dr. David Stoop.

If you are here hurting today because of your relationship with your parents, please strongly consider getting this book and allowing your Heavenly Father to help heal your past. We also have a great biblical counseling team here in the church that would love to help you. Your Heavenly Father so wants to spend time with you. He delights in every time you approach him.

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