

A FATHER'S LOVE God's Love for His Children

2017

*'For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*¹ From a human perspective, it's very hard to fully grasp the immensity of God's love for us. However, when the nature of his love is supernaturally revealed in us, our immediate response is to love Him back with all our heart. And that's what happened to me some forty years ago.

Since then, God has been the center of my life, and my greatest desire is to obey Him and to follow Him until he decides it's time for me to spend eternity with Him. However, have I ever failed Him or will I ever fail Him again till then? To the first question, I can honestly answer that I have. As for the second one, I would be bragging to say it will never happen again. *The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak*²... Despite the fact that I believe in God and accepted Christ in my life many years ago, I realize that my 'old self' gets in the way more often than I would like to. But he's a loving God and he always shows me how I grieve Him or where I need to improve in my walk with Him, which usually leads me to repentance. In his mercy he then forgives me, strengthens my faith and helps me walk closer to Him.

However, if at some point in my life I grow apart from God, give in to temptation, leave the straight and narrow path, go astray and continue to live in sin, would there be a point of no return for me?.. *Can I ever be too far gone to return to God hoping that he will forgive me and take me back?..* It would be such a dire situation that I never wish to be in... so help me God..., but is it foolish of me to even think of questioning myself about it?

With this question in mind, I headed out the door to find the preacher. I walked briskly toward Park of the Palms and found him working in his flowerbed. On his knees, his upper body bent over, he was holding a small shovel in one hand while pulling weeds with the other. He was so absorbed in his work that I hesitated to interrupt him, but I finally decided otherwise.

"Good morning!" I said cheerfully.

He raised his head looking up in my direction and with a quick move of his hand shielded his eyes from the sunrays that blinded him.

"Oh, good morning young lady! How nice to see you!"

"You have such a beautiful garden!" I commented. "You must be working very hard to keep it this way."

"It requires maintenance, but it's a good exercise for me," he replied, smiling. "Gardening and walking, that's what keeps me going!"

"Would you be ready to take a short break?" I asked. "I'd like to talk to you about something."

"Well, I would be lying if I said I didn't need one. At my age I got to pace myself, you know," he replied as he straightened himself up. He took his gloves off, then wiped his forehead with his red scarf.

"That scarf will need a good wash once you're done here!" I commented laughing.

“It sure will! Come and let’s sit on the front porch. It’s shady and there’s always a nice breeze coming from the lake.”

We headed toward two empty chairs and I sat on one of them. He went inside and came back out with a glass of iced tea in each hand.

“So, what’s on your mind on this lovely morning?” he asked as he handed me a glass and sat down.

“Well, I just finished reading a book³ which, I must say, triggered some soul-searching on my part, and I would like to share it with you if you have time.”

“Like I always say, I’ve got all the time in the world! So, this book, tell me more about it.”

“Well, it’s the story of a little boy who follows his dad - a tent preacher - all over the place to preach the gospel and play gospel music. The boy has a very special gift singing and playing the guitar. Because of his young age, he becomes very popular and at every meeting, the tent is always full with people coming from nearby towns to hear his father preach, but mostly to hear the boy perform.

“When the boy becomes a teenager, he doesn’t want to be under his father’s shadow anymore and wants to fly solo. His father loves him very much and warns him that it would be better to stick around a little longer...

“As time goes by, the boy grows bitter and angry and finally rebels against his father who has always been very kind to him... So, at eighteen he takes his father’s truck without asking for his permission and leaves to be on his own to make a life for himself... At some point, he discovers in the glove compartment, a substantial amount of money which were donations from the last meeting... He knows he will need this money to survive before he makes a name for himself in the business and decides to keep it.

“To make a long story short, the boy’s life doesn’t turn out the way he thought it would... He never contacts his dad, spends all the cash that doesn’t belong to him, gets himself into a lot of trouble and almost loses his life in the process... Notwithstanding the fact that he’s still alive, his body is in such bad shape that his years are counted.

“After about twenty years of pain and suffering – physically, emotionally and financially - he finally decides to come back home to tell his father that he’s sorry, that he’s been a very ungrateful son... Unfortunately, he learns that his father had passed away... Oh, what a painful reality he now has to face...

“His father always anticipated the return of his son, but when he realized that he was at the end of his life, he wrote a letter telling him that he always loved him and that he forgave him a long time ago for what he did... The father then asked a friend to hold on to it and give it to him upon his return. So, he did. After reading the letter, the remorseful, repentant son turns his life around, and through extraordinary circumstances gets his health back.

“This is obviously a brief summary, but for some reason this story really touched my heart...” I said with misty eyes.

“The astonishing love of a father for his son is really hard to understand in this case, isn’t it?” he

commented. "What a beautiful story!.. It has some similarities with the parable of the prodigal son⁴ Jesus gave one day, don't you think?" he asked.

"That thought didn't cross my mind, but you have a point." I replied.

"If you remember the parable," he continued, "it's about two sons and in the middle is a loving father. It would be justified to call one the bad son and the other, the good one, based on the story.

"The younger son shamefully asks for his share of his father's estate even before his death. The father must be overwhelmed with grief by now, but because of his deep love for his son, he agrees to his request and gives him his freedom ... So, the son leaves home and lives openly in wickedness and immorality. But like the son in your story, his life doesn't turn out the way he thought it would, and he eventually comes to his senses... He evaluates his sin, where it leads him, and realizes that he cannot change his life on his own. So, he's going back home, trusts his father will take him back even if he finds him unworthy to be called his son.

"Now, listen to what happens next. This is truly amazing!.. His father sees him a long way off, which means the father has actually been waiting for him, hoping for him, loving him while he's gone... The father sees him, feels compassion for him and runs to him, throws his arms around him and kisses him. He then makes preparations for a big celebration in his honor. All is forgiven. The past is forgotten. The son is reconciled with his father. And the father not only takes him back as a son, but he gives him all his privileges. That's the beauty of it all, isn't it?"

"It truly is..." I replied. "And after listening to these stories, how can anyone doubt God's capacity to love sinners *even* before they repent?..

"It's truly God's joy to save lost sinners and take back the ones that have strayed." he commented. "But in this parable, have you ever questioned yourself about the other son?.."

"No...not really."

"We usually don't hear much about him. The attention is mostly focused on the prodigal son. But you know, he is as bad as his young brother in that he doesn't even try to convince him that what he's doing is morally wrong. And when his brother returns home and he hears about the big celebration his father has planned, he gets angry. His father is the happiest man on earth, but he doesn't share his happiness. And you know why? Because he thinks it's unfair... His father is being unfair to him... He stayed home, he did everything he was supposed to do and did it the way his father wanted him to do it, but his father never prepared a feast for him... Undoubtedly, this son performed very well. But did he really love his father? Did he have a relationship with him?"

"It doesn't seem like it..." I answered. "So, you're saying that both are equally bad. They have no relationship with their father. In essence, their love for him is non-existent or superficial at best."

"Exactly. The younger son is indifferent, totally oblivious to his father's feelings. His lack of respect for him is obvious. He is selfish. He only thinks of what he could gain in getting his part of his father's inheritance even before his death, which seems unthinkable to me... It proves that he simply doesn't love him. He has no relationship whatsoever with his father but at the end, he repents, comes back, admits his sin and is forgiven. He now has a close relationship with his father.

“The other son does everything according to code, so to speak. He thinks that his righteousness is enough to gain his father’s approval, but he doesn’t have a close relationship with his father either. He doesn’t think that he’s as bad as his brother... I could compare him to some believers who call themselves religious. Oh, they may appear to be good, humanly speaking. They help people. They’re kind and charitable. They’re philanthropic. They go to church... But, you see, at the end of the day, we’re all sinful people from birth because of the fall of Adam and Eve. And if our motives to do these things is to glorify ourselves and not God, then it’s wrong. We begin to convince ourselves that by doing good works we’re far better than we really are... Our works then produce self-satisfaction, self-gratification and pride which is the most serious of all sins.⁵”

“Wow! These words must be hard to hear for those who are doing some good works out there, don’t you think?” I asked, kind of surprised by his comments.

“Well, what I’m saying is that if anything we do is not done to glorify God, then it’s done to glorify ourselves. And that’s the sin of all sins. They’re really expressions of human pride. I may ruffle some feathers here, but I’m saying this in love... I truly am.”

He certainly pulled no punches but I detected a certain sorrow..., a certain melancholy in his voice, which I somehow found reassuring.

As he set his eyes on the horizon without adding another word, I felt that everything had been said on the subject. Our conversation then turned to lighter topics, and I completely lost track of time. At some point, however, I realized that we had been chatting for over an hour.

“Wow! Time really flies in good company!” I said as I stood up. “I’m sorry I took so much of your time... But let me just say before I leave that I truly enjoyed our conversation. I hope we can do this again!”

“I’m sure we will. I’m always available... Take care of yourself, young lady.”

As I walked back home, I realized that no matter how low we may have stooped morally or spiritually. How indifferent or angry we may have been at God. How far we may have strayed from Him or how self-righteous we may have been, there’s still hope. We can always return ‘home’... And when God acknowledges a repentant heart, he always provides forgiveness. He takes us into his loving arms, embraces us and our relationship is restored. That’s what I call, the amazing nature of the heavenly Father’s love for his children!..

¹ John 3:16

² Mark 14:38

³ Long Way Gone by Charles Martin

⁴ Luke 15:11-32

⁵ Proverbs 16:18

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