

# A FATHER INDEED

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What's a dad to do?

Whenever your kids seem out of control, you can take comfort from the thought that even God's omnipotence didn't extend to God's kids. After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing he said was, "Don't."

Adam asked, "Don't what?"

God said, "Don't eat the forbidden fruit."

Adam exclaimed, "Forbidden fruit? We got forbidden fruit?" Turning, he shouted, "Hey Eve! We got forbidden fruit!"

Eve said, "No way!"

"Yes way!"

God repeated, "DON'T EAT THAT FRUIT!"

Adam asked, "Why?"

God said, "Because I am your Father and I want what's best for you and because I said so!"

God was wondering why He hadn't stopped after making the elephants. A few minutes later God saw His kids having an apple break and He was angry.

"Didn't I tell you not to eat the fruit?"

Adam said, "Uh huh."

"Then why did you?"

Eve answered, "I dunno."

Adam said, "She started it!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"Did NOT!"

Having had it with the two of them, God's punishment was that Adam and Eve should have children of their own. Thus, the pattern was set and it has never been changed.

Jesus once told a story about two sons, and as He did, He also answered an important question: "What's a dad to do?"

Luke 15:11 Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

<sup>13</sup> "A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. <sup>14</sup> About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup> He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant." ' "

<sup>20</sup> "So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

<sup>22</sup> "But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup> And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

Anyone who has tried it knows, fathering a child and raising a child are two very different things. And fatherhood is much less about DNA than about DPE (Day-to-day Presence and Example). The challenge for those of us who have shared our DNA is also to develop the character required for DPE. It is a *process*, and in this regard, there are vital lessons to be learned from Jesus' story, lessons of a father's love.

## Release

First of all, children are their own persons. They may share many characteristics of their parents, both outwardly and inwardly, but they are not their parents. They think for themselves and choose for themselves and learn how to live for themselves. Parents get to coach, but not to control.

I was frequently amazed that my young children thought I *had* to be obeyed! My *actual* authority and control were far less than they appeared, but, thankfully, their perception was their reality.

Once kids begin to discover their autonomy (usually before their second birthday, but especially magnified during their teen years), the challenges to a parent's sense of propriety and order are multiplied. The mom who thinks her unselfish loving care deserves more respect, and the dad who thinks he can control his child like a little soldier, both will be deeply offended by the independent bent of their offspring.

Kids believe they must *try* things. Against all parental advice and conventional wisdom, at times, they simply must.

The younger son in Jesus' story was like that. Long-standing tradition said that the younger son could not receive an inheritance until his eldest brother had received a double portion. But this boy was impetuous. "Give me my portion now!" he demanded. And his father complied.

Was the father wrong? Some would say he was too compliant. Others suggest he was an enabler. We're in no position to judge, for we have so little information to go on. One thing I will note (and this is true for every parent): In every child's life, there comes a time when they must be released from their parents' oversight.

It is painful to let go; it is at least as painful to go. But they must.

In my experience, this is always sooner than expected or desired by the parents. What's more, the timetable can only be told by each individual child. Some prefer to stay longer than others.

When they begin to know it, they will begin to let you know. If we have raised them well, their aim will be to spread their wings and see how it is to fly solo. If we have not done so well, they will just want to get away from us.

All children would like to go, unless we have shielded them so much that they fear life. The best plan is to start young and release autonomy by stages. Instead of insisting on perfect performance, let them learn by trial and error. It is a parent's job to protect them from serious errors while releasing them to learn from casual ones.

Will they scrape and bruise themselves? Yes. Perhaps even break a bone. But bones heal, and young hearts grow rapidly, while cuts and breaks heal.

Most of all, encourage them to trust God and try, and listen to God and learn. Urge them forward; don't hold them back. They need cheerleaders more than prison guards. Love releases.

<sup>12</sup> *The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.*

## **Endure**

Did it cost the son to leave? Dearly. Did it cost his father? Sorely.

When children leave home, it may be for a long time. Their experiment with leading their own lives may have many failures and heartaches. How can a parent endure it?

Children have no idea what angst a parent may go through while they are sowing their wild oats. That's my child out there! I don't know where he is today? I don't know what support he has? Who will protect him?

We cannot avoid the sympathetic pain. Their wounds will be our wounds; their losses, our losses. We will cry in secret, but we may also believe. We may look to God. If our children are to find faith in God, we must exemplify it for them. Most of all, in the tough places. While we continue to encourage them, we must also endure the results of their choices.

Patient endurance is the secret to finding God's will for your life, and for your household's. There are no short-cuts, but there are roadmaps: the Bible is the best; pastoral counsel and peer support are also good helpers.

There is no substitute for patient endurance. It is a fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

*Hebrews 6:12* *Do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.*

A father's love endures.

<sup>13</sup> *"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living..."*

<sup>17</sup> *"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'"*

If we, as parents, have been faithful to respect our children as individuals during their formative years and available for parental counsel when they sought it, they will return.

*Proverbs 22:6* *Direct your children onto the right path, and when they are older, they will not leave it.*

## **Accept**

This young man wasted his father's gift with no thought of tomorrow. Whatever pleased him, he tried. Even when he had lost it all, he sought to survive on his own; he tried every angle he could fathom just to stay alive. But finally something broke: it was his pride.

He realized what he was missing: he was made for more than this. He remembered what he had left behind. Things he failed to value in the past became the very things he longed for most of all. Broken, he returned, hoping in the sympathies of his family, seeking to make amends.

Children who have been released will return as young adults, but they must be accepted as our dear children. They may look differently, think differently, and behave differently, but they are ours—part of our family, part of who we are.

I can think of many other reactions the father in Jesus' story might have had to his wastrel son's return, but this was Jesus' story, so we learn what is best. The father didn't hold back; he expressed his fervent joy, simply to see his son again. As if alive from the dead, he was accepted, just as he was. He had no time for his son's prepared speech. He responded to his brokenness and instantly forgave him. It takes a parent's heart to put so much trust in the possibilities of God's help.

Every parent has some dreams for their kids, but the best dream to hold for your kids are the ones they paint for you with their lives. It may not be the dream you wanted, it may not fill the gaps in your life, but if you will dare to embrace and encourage *their* God-given dreams, they will have a strong chance of discovering that there is a God in this world who loves them and cares to help them along the way. Love accepts.

<sup>20</sup> *"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.*

## **Restore**

The time for enduring was in his absence; upon his return it was time for restoration.

The father in Jesus' story immediately brought the robe and ring and sandals, evidence of his full acceptance and the first steps to restoring him as a full-privileged family member.

Was that just? Was it fair? Was it proper? There was an older son in the house who didn't think so: "It's not fair!" But love can't be fair. Love is greater and higher than fairness. Love is devoted.

Jesus said, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Is that fair? No! Is that love? Yes.

The father's love for his son is undeniable. Love restores.

<sup>22</sup> *"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet.*

## **Celebrate**

It's a long road from the beginning of Jesus' story to its conclusion. That's why the father likens it to losing a son to death. The energy of the celebration corresponds to the length of the journey, the depth of the loss, the weight of enduring. There was only one thing, in the father's mind, that was a fitting response: a party!

<sup>23</sup> *And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast,* <sup>24</sup> *for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.*

So, that's the story of fatherhood, the picture that Jesus left us. A father's love must release, endure, accept, restore, and celebrate.

## Fatherhood

This is a picture of biblical fatherhood. It's not perfect, but it is righteous. What's past is past; we have only now, this moment, in which to act righteously. And in that respect, it is also a picture of the Fatherhood of God (the way God thinks of you and treats you).

God doesn't insist, He doesn't enforce. He tells us what we need to do and what the consequences may be if we do not, then He releases us. We call it freedom to choose; He calls it love. Love begins with self-restraint. God loves us that way.

Sometimes, I wish it were different: I wish He would tell me what to do next, not leave me to my own desires or decisions, but *make me* do the right thing. Those are the most unanswered prayers we pray. Because of His love.

Those unanswered prayers are not because of His indifference, nor His distance, but because of His love. He knows what He's put in us and who He's put in our lives. And because He loves us He trusts us to try, that we may grow. God's love is releasing.

God's love is also enduring. I cannot measure how much I have put Him through—the heartaches, the agony, the grief, the frustration. He has endured so much *from* me and even *more* for me.

God's love is accepting. At the end of a life lived without God or just a weekend away, or a week without reading the Bible or praying, he accepts us. He doesn't demand penance or send us to our rooms first; He just accepts us. He calls us friend, He calls us sons and daughters.

God's love is restoring. Whenever we choose our own way, it is to our own hurt and destruction, impacting our minds and bodies and people around us. When we return, we need restoration. Fortunately, He promised (Joel 2:25) to "give back what you lost" to the enemy. And He doesn't make you "sit down and shut up" because of your losses; He invites you to draw near.

God's love is celebrating. He is celebrating your arrival to the Kingdom:

*Zephaniah 3:17* *The Lord your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing.*

He is excited that you're here today! He loves to see your face and to hear your voice calling out to Him. Because He's ready to respond to you. He has seen you coming from a long way off and He is ready to receive you. He celebrates your faith in this age of disbelief and skepticism.

*Luke 15:10* *There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.*

Listen. Quiet yourself and listen to the singing. Heaven is electric with celebration, because of God's love. Can you hear it?