

I Have Trouble Seeing God as a Loving Father

In his ministry, Jesus often made reference to God as our father. When we believe in him and his ability to save us through Jesus, we become his children and heirs. God wanted to be our father even before the creation of the world.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (Romans 8:16-1)

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love, he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. (Ephesians 1:4-5)

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. (Luke 12:32)

Embracing God as a loving father can be difficult for anyone without a nurturing, healthy relationship with an earthly father. Our childhood family experiences significantly influence our view of God. This view is particularly colored by the way our parents related to us. Persons who were raised in critical, hurting families have difficulty comprehending a loving and forgiving God because it is not within their range of experience. In such families, God is often presented as an unavailable, punitive being ready to condemn those who fail to meet the spiritual ideal.

A healthy view of God is challenging for those growing up without emotional security and affirmation--the foundation for healthy self-esteem. With these basic emotional needs unmet, children grow up believing they are unlovable and incapable. Fear of abandonment prevails and the capacity for emotional intimacy is compromised. In hurting families, children are often loved for what they do rather than for who they are. When love is based on external behavior rather than what is on the inside, mistakes and failures become catastrophes. As a result, emotionally needy children learn to hide their "true" selves and present "false" selves to others.

Hurting families have a set of unhealthy spoken and unspoken rules and messages by which family members operate. These rules are often handed down from generation to generation, perpetuating toxic family dynamics and the notion that the true self is not acceptable. Family rules that are roadblocks to positive self-concept and a healthy view of God include:

- Don't talk about feelings.
- Don't feel.
- Be perfect. Be strong.
- Do as I say, not as I do.
- If you can't be perfect, look perfect.
- Don't talk about problems.
- Keep the family secrets.
- It's not OK to play or have fun.

3. How have these messages influenced you as an adult?

4. We tend to impose the characteristics of our earthly parents on God, our heavenly father. This sometimes makes it difficult to have a close, loving relationship with him. List characteristics that describe your father as you were growing up. (Mothers are important too, but the traits of our father seem to have more impact on our view of God. This is true even if your father was absent.)

5. List characteristics that describe your personal view of God, your heavenly father. Put a star beside the characteristics you listed for God that are also traits listed for your earthly father or mother.

In effective families, love is expressed in a non-judgmental and affirming manner. There are two basic tenants of healthy love:

- In a loving, caring relationship, the safety exists to be vulnerable. Each person in the family can be themselves without fear. There is no need for a false self.
- Trust is a function of time. When trustworthiness is proven during tough times over and over again, bonding and family intimacy occurs. Healthy love grows as trust grows.

Take a look at the list below. These are the specific characteristics of loving relationships that allow unconditional acceptance and personal growth.

In a healthy family, members . . .

- are sensitive to each other's needs.
- can be themselves without fear. Everyone is treated in a respectful and non-abusive manner.
- feelings are valued and not discounted.
- listen carefully and try to understand the point of view of other family members even if he or she doesn't agree.
- are not afraid to share and be shared with, even when it involves unpleasant things.
- have a good sense of self; they can be their true selves.
- are honest with one another without manipulation or games.
- can be angry, sad, overwhelmed and vulnerable and still feel safe, accepted.
- can set personal boundaries without others taking it personally.

Thought Questions:

1. These characteristics and concepts address earthly relationships but some can be applied to a loving relationship with God. How do these love concepts apply to a relationship with God?

2. Look at the traits you marked as common to both your father and God. Are these traits characteristic of a loving relationship?

3. When persons have not been exposed to many healthy relationships, they may feel uncomfortable with a God who is loving, forgiving and sensitive to their needs. They may even find themselves testing and sabotaging their relationships with God. Is your love for God healthy? Why or why not? Have you tested or sabotaged your relationship with God? Describe how and why.

God's Loving Family Messages to His Children

Because God is a good father, he gives us loving messages about how important we are to him. He lets us know that he is trustworthy and will always be there for us, even through difficult times. God's wants us to know:

- You're my child and a very important part of my family. Christ is your brother and you are co-heirs with him.

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. Romans 8:16-17

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. . . Ephesians 2:6

And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows. Matthew 10: 30-31

- I love you very much.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. Ephesians 2:4

- My love for you is so great, it may be difficult for you to comprehend. The love of a parent is sometimes beyond a child's understanding.

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:17-19

- My love for you is unending and never ending. You can always rely on it.

Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed says the Lord, who has compassion on you. Isaiah 54:10

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. I John 4:16

- Nothing you do will separate you from my love.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

- I love you even when you don't love me back.

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. I John 4:10-11

- I know everything about you because I love you. "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it." Max Lucado

And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Matthew 10:30

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. Romans 8:26

- You don't have to be perfect for me to love you.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Romans 3:23

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. Ephesians 2:4

- I won't hold your mistakes against you because you are my child and I love you.

God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having cancelled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:13-14

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 1 John 4:9

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. Ephesians 1:7-8

Therefore, there is not condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1

- I'm patient with you when you make mistakes because I want you to live with me forever.

He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation. 2 Peter 3:15

- Because you are my very own child and I'm a loving father, I will sometimes allow you to experience consequences and face difficult situations so you can become stronger and more mature.

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. Hebrews 12:7-8; 1-12

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. James 1:2-4

Christ learned obedience from what he suffered. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered. Hebrews 5:8

- I understand when you're hurting. I'm concerned and want to make you feel better.

Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. Psalm 147:5

God offers compassion and mercy James 5:11

He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds. Psalm 147:3

- I love you so much that I send my spirit to you to guide and comfort you during difficult times.

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. Romans 5:5

In the same ways, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. Romans 8:26-27

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation? Hebrews 1:14

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. I John 4:13

- No matter what you've done, I'll give you the wisdom to heal when you ask for it.

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. James 1:5

- I want to give you the gift of eternal life in heaven based on my love for you, not based on the number of good things you have done.

But when the kindness and love of God appeared, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:4

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. Eph. 2:4-8

For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Romans 3:28

- Because you're my child, you'll receive an imperishable inheritance that is kept in heaven for you.

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. I Peter 1:3-4

- I'll never take back my gifts to you.

For God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Romans 11:29

Thought Questions:

1. Do these messages change your personal view of God? In the space below, rewrite any unhealthy and inaccurate God messages or traits you received from your childhood family. Make them messages that more accurately reflect God's love and true feelings.

2. 1 John 4:18 says: *There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.* We cannot love completely and feel fear at the same time. Is your relationship with God based on love or fear? Explain why this is true.

3. If your relationship with God is based on fear, what can you do to change this relationship to one based on complete love?

Here are some ideas.

- Pray for God to help you see his love for you. Ask him to show you how to love him completely.
- Find a spiritual mentor with mature faith who can offer guidance and model God's love.
- Write out all the scriptures you can find that describe God's love for you. Read them every day.
- Meet regularly with a prayer partner to share and pray for understanding and acceptance of his love.
- Address unresolved childhood family issues that color your view of God.
- Talk with your pastor, counselor or someone else you trust about spiritual concerns that interfere with your relationship with God.