

“Thinking about Dad”

Romans 8:14-18 ¹

I’m happy to say that I’ve received very few anonymous notes over the years—probably only two or three. The only one I actually remember gently asked me to do more “hellfire and brimstone” preaching. I think the underlying intent of the note was a worthy one, namely the desire to be encouraged toward greater faithfulness to God, although it would have been much better to sign it or to have a face-to-face conversation.

In the opinion of the note’s author—who was in another congregation—I’d do more good if I “stepped on toes” more often with my preaching or was “in your face” more frequently. The truth of the matter is that I do sometimes say some pretty strong things, but I try not to say them in the angry and vitriolic style that is in fashion in some circles, knowing full well that a few will miss my point if it doesn’t come wrapped in a two-by-four. To tell the truth, I used to be more inclined to use two-by-fours than I am today, and I hope this morning to help you understand why I changed my approach.

The apostle Paul had tried the two-by-four method, too, which we sometimes refer to as “the way of the Law.” Although he had kept the ritual laws so flawlessly that he called himself “without fault” (Philippians 3:4-6), Paul discovered to his dismay that all that vigorous law-keeping did not succeed in putting him right with God. His conscience was still burdened and his spirit was still anguished.

In his wonderful little book, *He Loves Me!*² Wayne Jacobsen pointed out that, like Paul, most of us undertake our life with God in a struggle with what he calls “the favor line.” The favor line is the invisible line or bar that tells us whether or not we’ve met enough of someone’s expectations to attain his or her approval. Our parents had such a favor line, and we knew well how to work it. Each of our teachers in school had one; each of our friends has one; and our boss has one, too. So it’s only natural to assume that God has a favor line as well.³

Unfortunately, our attempts to manage the favor line cause us to end up where one teenager did: “Same old thing, Dad. God is good. You’re bad. Try harder!” And that conclusion causes us to spend much of our spiritual lives alternating between the emotions of shame and fear—not a very happy place to be, at all.

One of the more famous “favor line” conversations in the New Testament is Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man who ran up to Him, knelt down, and asked, “*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” (Mark 10:17). As the conversation develops, it’s clear that the young man really thought he was doing pretty well at keeping God’s commandments, but, like Paul, he was still unsure that he had gained eternal life, and he had little confidence that his present course would achieve it. “*What must I do!*” he pled.

Now what the man expected was that Jesus would give directions about how to raise the bar a little higher—which is what I think my anonymous pen pal was asking me to do—but what Jesus actually did was to put the bar forty feet in the air: “*Go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*”

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on June 21, 2015, Fathers’ Day.

² Wayne Jacobsen, *He Loves Me! Learning to Live in the Father’s Affection* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007).

³ Jacobsen, p. 45.

I don't think that Jesus really expected that to happen, although it would have been fine if it had. What Jesus really wanted was for the man to give up his efforts to exceed God's favor line by "being good," and to simply cast himself upon God's love. Jesus was not, and is not, opposed to "being good," but God's desire is for us to live holy lives out of gratitude for our salvation, not as a means of trying to secure it.

Today, as in every generation, there are many people who honestly believe that God's love provides insufficient motivation to cause most people to live moral lives. Instead of love, they argue, what's really needed is a hefty dose of fear and judgment to keep folks on "the straight and narrow." While we may be able to understand that sentiment, the truth of the matter is that persons who try to substitute the fear of retribution for the transforming power of God's love haven't experienced that love to any significant measure.⁴

Now it may well be true that fear of consequences is a necessary tool for managing bad behavior in a fallen world. Indeed, before Jesus died on the cross, there was not much else that worked; and God Himself used fear to help keep sin in check among the chosen people. As the psalmist put it, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*"

Although the fear of God is not *wrong*—God told us that it was the beginning of wisdom—it's only the *beginning*. It's the first rung on the ladder that leads to knowing the wonder of God's love. Love is the end of wisdom. As Jacobsen put it, "If you don't love God, you would be well-served to fear Him. At least that might keep you from behaviors that will destroy you and others around you. But once you know how much God loves you, you'll never need to fear God again."⁵

Some folks, both in the Church and without, worry that the knowledge that God loves us "no matter what" will lead to spiritual laziness, moral laxity, and lots of bad behavior. On the face of it, this would seem to be a reasonable fear, but in reality the opposite is true: "The more rooted we are in the love of God, the more generously we will live our faith."⁶

This truth is as paradoxical as Jesus' warning that the only way to "save" our lives is by "losing" them. The fact of the matter is that living in God's grace leads to freedom from sin, while living under God's judgment leads to even greater sin. This has always been so, though the paradox defies human logic. That's because you and I are far more used to conforming to external pressures than we are to being transformed by God's Inner Presence. Many people, having never experienced that Inner Presence, doubt that it will work. But it does.⁷

Once, when Wayne Jacobsen was leading a retreat, a young man approached him to say, "Over these two days I've listened to you talk about God as a loving Father. Since I became a Christian I have served only a mean God, fearful every day that I might miss his will and be rejected. I really want to believe he is the incredible Father you speak about, but I've decided not to."

"Really? Why is that?"

"I'm just not sure you're right. I've thought about this over the last day or so, and I've made a decision. I'm going to keep serving the mean God. The way I figure it, if I'm right and serve the mean God, then I'll be fine on Judgment Day. If I'm wrong and he is the Father you're talking about, he will understand why I did what I did. If I change now and serve this loving

⁴ Jacobsen, xv.

⁵ Jacobsen, p. 79.

⁶ Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Chosen Books, 1986), p.

⁷ Jacobsen, p. 145.

Father, then what happens if he turns out to be the mean God I've always thought him to be? Then I'm in trouble."

"Certainly, that's your choice, but before you decide, can I ask you a question?"

"What's that?"

"*Would the God you're serving ever trade His life for yours on a cross?*"

"No way!"⁸

My friends, the Good News is that "*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. . . . God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Corinthians 5:19, 21).

We really do have a God who traded His life for ours, and *what Jesus wants us to experience is a relationship with the Father such as He himself has*. While Jesus, as God the Son, has an absolutely unique, eternal relationship with God the Father, as God-in-human-flesh, Jesus experienced a relationship with the Father that actually is available to us (John 17:20-26).

That's where our text comes in: "*For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. **And by him we cry, 'Abba,' Father***" (Romans 8:14-15).

As you may know, "*Abba* and *Imma*—daddy and mommy—are the first words Jewish children learn to speak. And *Abba* is so personal, so familiar a term that no one ever dared to use it in address to the great God of the universe, until Jesus did."⁹

You and I can understand such reluctance. We would never presume to be so casual and intimate with Governor Hogan or with President Obama, so why in the world would we be so presumptuous with Almighty God? Well, here's the difference. There are in fact two persons in the world who can go to the President in their comfortable clothes, snuggle next to him, and laugh and play with him, and you know who they are—they are his daughters.

Our text tells us (and many other texts do, as well), that at the moment we place our faith in Jesus as our Savior, Messiah, and Lord, in that same moment we are adopted into God's own eternal family (Romans 8:15). In that moment, we become God's children, co-heirs with Jesus of all the riches of heaven, and we are able to enjoy the same intimacy with God that Jesus Himself does. That such intimacy is available to us is truly amazing and is amazingly true.

Now what the text actually says is that we are adopted "*as sons*," and such gender-based language grates on our "sophisticated" twenty-first century nerves, but Pastor Tim Keller noted that a woman in his congregation helped him understand what's really going on in this text:

"She was raised in a non-Western family from a very traditional culture. There was only one son in the family, and it was understood in her culture that he would receive most of the family's provisions and honor. In essence, they said, 'He's the son; you're just a girl.' That's just the way it was.

⁸ Jacobsen, pp. 38-39.

⁹ Professor Joachim Jeremias declared that "There is not a single example of the use of *Abba* . . . as an address to God in the whole of Jewish literature." Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Philadelphia: SCM, 1967), p. 111; cited in Richard Foster, "Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home," *Richard Foster's Prayer Treasury* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 134.

“One day she was studying [this passage and she] suddenly realized that the apostle was making a revolutionary claim. Paul lived in a traditional culture just like she did. He was living in a place where daughters were second-class citizens. So when Paul said—out of his own traditional culture—that we are all sons in Christ, he was saying that there are no second-class citizens in God’s family.

“When you give your life to Christ and become a Christian, you receive all the benefits a son enjoys in a traditional culture. As a white, Western male,” Pastor Keller said, “I [was blind to] the sweetness of this welcome. I didn’t recognize all the beauty of God’s subversive and revolutionary promise that raises [every one of] us to the highest honor by adopting us as his sons. Our adoption means we are loved like Christ is loved. We are honored like he is honored—every one of us—no matter what.”¹⁰

Now while this joyful reality is potentially true for all of us, my anonymous note writer was correct in noting that it is only *potentially* true. As much as we might wish it to be—indeed, as much as *God* desires it to be—heaven is not the universal destination of all humankind, but only of those who have experienced this “adoption as sons.” Billy Graham’s daughter, Anne Lotz, illustrated the point like this: “Lots of people want to visit my father’s home in western North Carolina. They drive up the long drive and come to the gate. They knock on the gate and say: ‘Dr. Graham, let us in. We’ve read your books; we’ve watched you on TV; we’ve written to you; and we want to come to your house.’

“And my father says: ‘Depart from me, I don’t know you. You’re not a member of my family, and you’ve not made any arrangements to come.’

“But when I drive up that same driveway and knock on the gate, I say, ‘Daddy, this is Anne, and I’ve come home.’ The gate is thrown right open, and I go inside, because I’m the father’s child.”

Jesus told us that heaven is His Father’s house, and His Father has the right to decide who comes in and who stays out. God actually says that He will welcome anyone into His home—*anyone* can come—but they have to first accept adoption into His family through faith in Jesus Christ. If we choose to accept God’s offer of adoption, we’ll be welcomed into God’s home, because we’ll be our Father’s children.¹¹

What all this means, my friends, is that **love will take you farther than law ever will**. When Jesus said, “*If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching*” (John 14:23), what He meant is that if we get the loving right, the obeying will take care of itself. And that’s why I put the two-by-four “of hellfire and brimstone” down a long time ago.

I’ll not help you to live a joyful and holy life in full obedience to every command of Jesus by beating you over the head with how awful you are. Yes, hell is real, and sin is everywhere; but the only thing that can actually draw us out of our sin and into joyful Hope is the discovery that God has already moved us above the favor line. *That’s what the cross was all about.*

My friend, God is not keeping score. Your life is not a balance sheet. And the only question that matters is whether or not you’re going to choose to trust your *Abba*, your heavenly Father, and choose to live in His love, or whether you’re going to continue the futile effort of trying to buy your way in. **Can you even begin to imagine how you might live differently if you were absolutely convinced that your *Abba*, your Father in heaven already loves you as much as an infinite God can possibly love? *What would you do if you were not afraid?***

¹⁰ Tim Keller, “The Christian’s Happiness,” www.preachingtoday.com.

¹¹ Anne Graham Lotz, “Finding Meaning in September 11,” www.cnn.com, 12.11.06.