

Lesson 2

WHAT KIND OF A FATHER IS GOD?

Introduction

For some of us, the word *father* brings back memories of warm bear hugs, laughter, and security. For others, *father* triggers complex feelings and painful recollections. The following story was written by a woman who courageously overcame childhood experiences that might otherwise have blocked her ability to receive the love of her heavenly Father. Her hope-filled witness reminds us that we all can find our way to Abba, Father, no matter what our experience of *father* has been.

I grew up in a house with a cinder block fence in front. The fence was four feet high. One day when I was still young enough to be looking up at that fence, my father set me on top of it and told me to jump to him. Little as I was, I knew he would not catch me, and I told him so. He assured me again and again that he would catch me—that I could trust him—that he would never let me fall. We must have argued back and forth for at least five minutes. Finally, I gave in to his request. I still wasn't sure he would catch me, but the hope that he might catch me impelled me to take the risk. I launched myself into the air with arms outstretched and hopes high. Dad stepped aside at the last minute and watched as I hit the grass. Then he leaned down over me, put his finger in my dirt-smearred face, and said, "Don't ever trust anybody!"

Many women have had horrible experiences with the men in their lives—men who should have loved them and protected them, but who hurt them, neglected them, or used them instead. I can relate to these women. You might be wondering how I ever learned to trust my heavenly Father. I wonder the same thing. I think that, through many traumas, the Father hid my heart in His hands. I don't know how He did it, but I know that He did it. I did not escape my youth unscathed, but the Father has made provisions for me to heal and find wholeness. I have walked a journey of discovery about the person of God. Like most people, I projected my earthly father onto our Lord. Little by little, I have come to know God better. Little by little, He has granted me the grace to

strip away my misconceptions and replace them with the truth about my heavenly Father's character.

I know that some women cannot imagine a heavenly Father who is safe, loving, and protective of them. Their image of masculinity has been so perverted and disfigured that they are unable to open their hearts to anything masculine. I believe this is one of the reasons that the Father gave us a heavenly mother. Intimacy with the Virgin Mother is a safe and sure way to the heart of God. If past wounds keep you from knowing God's love for you as His beloved daughter, cling to Mary as you study the character of God the Father.

God's desire is for our earthly parents' love to be a taste of the unconditional love He offers us. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reflects on how we are to respond when they have failed to love us well:

The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father. (CCC 239)

As you study this lesson, ask the Holy Spirit to use the knowledge in your head to ignite the truth of God's boundless love for you in your heart.

Day One

GOD IS LOVE

Read 1 John 4:16.

1. This Scripture passage tells us that God is _____.

2. First Corinthians 13 tells us what love is. If God is love, then a description of love is a description of God. List the characteristics of love/God (from verses 4–6). Some of the virtues are stated in the negative. Write each virtue as it is described in the Bible, and if it is stated negatively, rewrite it in the positive. For example, *doesn't lie* would be written as is, and then restated as *honest* or *tells the truth*.

A.

B.

C.

D.

E.

F.

G.

H.

I.

3. List the things love/God does (from verses 7–8). Again, write them as they are described in the verses, and then restate them in the positive, where appropriate.

A.

B.

SAMPLE

C.

D.

E.

Go back and circle all the qualities and actions of God that you find difficult or impossible to rely on. Write them in the space below:

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Give Him the chance to reveal Himself to you.

When important people in our lives fail to love us well, we often allow those experiences to cloud our impression of who God is and how He loves us. The truth is, God's love is perfect, never failing, and ever enduring. Take some time to reflect on the qualities and actions of God that you find difficult to rely on. Ask Him for the grace to separate your experiences of faulty human love from your beliefs about God's love. Ask Him to reveal Himself to you, and for grace-healed eyes to see Him as He is.

Day Two

GOD IS FAITHFUL

1. Read Isaiah 49:13–16. What do you learn about God's faithfulness from these verses?
2. Read John 3:16–18. Why did God the Father send Jesus into the world? What was His motive? What does this reveal about God the Father's heart?

3. God cares about you personally, so much so that “even the hairs of your head have all been counted” by Him (cf Luke 12:7). According to CCC 27, “The desire for God is written on the human heart because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself.” Why does God continually draw us to Him? What does God want to give us? See CCC 27 and 30.

These truths are beautifully summarized in this commentary on John 3:16 by Father John Bartunek:

“God loved the world so much that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life.” No hidden agenda, no selfish undertones—pure generosity. This is the heart of God, of the Lord who longs for our friendship. Only when a Christian internalizes this fundamental and overarching motive of God does Christian discipleship really begin to mature. This is Christ’s revolution. That disinterested, self-forgetful love has the power to overcome all evil and renew every human heart and the human race as a whole.¹

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . He is FOR YOU.

We question a person’s faithfulness to us when we sense that his or her motive in the relationship is self-seeking. When we recognize that someone is really out for him- or herself, we know that a time may come when we end up hurt or betrayed. This is why it’s so important for us to recognize that God’s desire for us is utterly pure. He is not self-seeking. He has proven on the cross that His love for us is selfless. “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (John 15:13) Take time to reflect on how Jesus proved His faithfulness to us on the cross. Thank Him for resisting the urge to call down legions of angels to rescue Him. Thank Him for staying there until your freedom was won.

¹ Father John Bartunek, *The Better Part* (Hamden, CT: Circle Press, 2007), 819.

Day Three

GOD'S HEART IS REVEALED BY JESUS

Oftentimes, we think of God as a harsh father—one who judges and condemns—while we see Jesus as the tender one, the merciful one, the approachable one. But the truth is that every gentle quality we see and experience in Jesus is true of God the Father as well. “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being.” (Hebrews 1:3)

1. In the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, Saint John Paul II writes, “The light of God’s face shines in all its beauty on the countenance of Jesus Christ, ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15).”² How do the following verses confirm that Jesus is a true representation of who God is? See John 10:30, 10:32, and 12:49–50.
2. What gets in the way of our experiencing an “intimate and vital bond” with God the Father? See CCC 29 and share any insights from your own experience.
3. According to Colossians 1:15–22, who makes forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation with God the Father possible? How was this achieved?

[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in [Jesus] were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things were created by [Jesus] and for [Jesus.] [Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent. For in [Jesus] all the fullness [of God] was pleased to dwell, and through [Jesus] to reconcile all things for [God], making peace by the blood of his cross (through

² John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), 5.

him), whether those on earth or those in heaven. And you who once were alienated and hostile in mind because of evil deeds, [Jesus] has now reconciled in his fleshly body through his death, to present you holy, without blemish, and irreproachable before [God]. (Colossians 1:15–22)

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Your Father wants to embrace you tenderly.

We imagine that God's disapproval of us brings separation, but in reality, whenever there is a chasm between God the Father and us, it is because we have rejected Him. We do not trust Him, and we act apart from His loving guidance. Yet God waits for us, and He thirsts for our friendship. Spend some time contemplating any distance you might be experiencing in your relationship with God. Have you been too distracted by worries and busyness to open your heart to Him? Is there a sin you need to confess? Have you been confused and wrongly assumed that God didn't want to draw close to you? Be assured, He loves you and waits for you. Jesus has made a way for you to go straight to the heart of God. Don't let anything or anyone hold you back from Him.

Day Four

GOD LOVES US AND HATES SIN

Many accounts in the Old Testament teach us that God will not tolerate sin. He lays out serious consequences for those who disobey His commandments. How do we reconcile this image of the “fire and brimstone” God with the loving Father we have been learning about this week?

Imagine you have a little girl who is the love of your life, and one day she disappears. You go to great lengths to find her. You search for days, frantic with despair that you might never see her again. You agonize over the loss of your precious daughter.

When you finally find her, she is dirty and smelly. She is covered with cuts, sores, and bruises. Your little girl is crawling very slowly as she approaches you. She is burning up with fever. What will you do? You will wrap your arms around her, carry her safely home, bathe her carefully and lovingly, treat her wounds, and then take her to the doctor. If medication is prescribed, you will purchase it and give it to her exactly as the doctor instructs, because you want her restored to full and vibrant health. It's not

that you don't love her the way she is—you want her to be healthy and whole *because* you love her.

Now try to imagine that when you find your baby girl hurt, infected, and sick with fever, you see a hungry lion stalking her little body, pacing in the shadows, ready to pounce. This is why she used her last bit of strength to crawl away! If you can get the lion to come after you, perhaps she can escape. What will you do?

What does God do?

This filth and sickness is a picture of the sin that infects us. The lion is Satan, and sin is his invitation to approach us. God loves us in the same way we would love a precious daughter. He loves us just as we are, and *because He loves us*, He demands that we be removed from the things that hurt us and can even kill us. He makes a way for us to be clean, healthy, and safe. We can be restored in this way because Jesus got “the lion”, Satan, to come after *Him* instead of us. Jesus suffered and died in our place, in order to offer us a way to escape.

God does not reject us because of sin. He rejects sin because of us. It is true that God hates sin. He hates disobedience because it threatens us, it hurts us, it covers us in filth, and it invites the enemy to draw near.

Read Luke 15:11–32.

1. The prodigal son must have been covered in filth when he returned home. At what point did his father run to him?
2. Was the son completely sorry for what he had done to his father?
3. Jesus is telling us that this is what our Father in Heaven is like when we repent. Is this what you expect from your heavenly Father? If not, what do you expect?

Quiet your heart and enjoy His presence. . . . Don't let sin get in the way of living in freedom.

God loves you but hates sin. Why? He hates what sin does to you. Jeremiah 5:25 says, "Your sins have turned back these blessings from you," and there's nothing God wants more than to pour out His blessings on you. God knows that sin separates you from Him, lessens your love for Him, and ultimately enslaves you. "Do you not know that if you present yourself to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience which leads to righteousness?" (Romans 6:16)

God wants His daughters to be free! That means He wants you to run to Him when sin has entangled you. He wants you to ask Him to wash you clean, to heal your wounds, to give you a fresh start. Your experience of freedom is directly proportionate to the degree to which you take confession seriously. What is holding you back? Turn to Him. He will meet you with outstretched arms of mercy.

Day Five

SAINT'S STORY

Saint Scholastica Outdoes Her Brother

If your scale is broken and you don't know it, you'll think you weigh more (or less) than you really do. And then you will adjust your eating and exercise habits inaccurately based on your belief, causing all kinds of unnecessary turbulence in your life. If only the scale had been accurate, or you had known that it was broken!

The *Catechism* (239) tells us that the scale by which we measure God's fatherhood is broken. We tend to judge God the Father based on our fallible human fathers and what they have shown us about fatherhood. In fact, it should be the other way around:

The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends . . . human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.

A rightly famous (and true) story about Saint Scholastica illustrates the surprisingly pure goodness and power of God the Father.

Scholastica was Saint Benedict's younger sister. They both grew up in an aristocratic family in central Italy in the late 400s and early 500s. Benedict was given a remarkable vocation: He was the father of Western monasticism. He wrote the rules for monastic life (*Rule of St. Benedict*), which became the basis for monasteries and monastic orders that flourished in the Dark Ages and continue through today. He also founded one of the most famous monasteries in the world, right on the outskirts of Rome: Monte Cassino. (Allied bombers devastated it during World War II, and American benefactors paid for its reconstruction.)

While Benedict was breaking ground on Monte Cassino, Scholastica formed a community of nuns not too far away, using the same rules of life her brother had formulated to create one of the earliest convents in Europe. During the years when their communities were near one another, Benedict visited his sister once a year. At the end of his last visit to her (she died just a little while afterward), she begged him to stay with her that night and continue their lively and deep conversation. He refused, since staying out past sunset would have been a breach of his rules. She insisted (maybe she had a presentiment that she would soon die), but he stubbornly refused. Her eyes flashed, and then she buried her face in her hands as tears welled up in her eyes. Right then, a violent storm broke out. It was so violent that Benedict and his companions couldn't even step out the door; they were forced to continue their visit.

Then occurred a famous little dialogue preserved for history by Pope Gregory the Great, Benedict's biographer. Benedict scolded her, "May God almighty forgive you, sister; what is this that you have done?" Then she raised her head and looked up at him with a mischievous twinkle in her tear-brightened eyes. "I prayed you to stay," she responded, "and you would not hear me; I prayed to almighty God, and He heard me!" Saint Gregory goes on to explain, "No wonder if at that time she were more powerful than he. . . . For according to St. John, 'God is love,' so with good reason she was more powerful who loved more."

When we say that God is Father, too often we think first of the long white beard and the stern, sometimes cold and distant stickler for perfection or enforcer of rules—kind of like Saint Benedict on the night of his last visit to his sister. But the essence of God's fatherhood is found elsewhere. His unlimited power is never, ever divorced from His unlimited goodness and His overflowing, individual love for every single one of His precious daughters.

Do you believe, as Saint Scholastica believed, that God your Father hears your prayers regarding the desires of your heart, and He delights in giving you what is best?

Conclusion

“For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’” (Romans 8:15)

“As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, ‘Abba, Father!’ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” (Galatians 4:6–7)

I think we sometimes look at Christianity as the way to make sure that we are forgiven. We’re covering our bases so that we are “safe” (as in the baseball kind of “safe”). But when we stop there and go no further, we totally miss out on what God (and Christianity) really offers. What God is truly after is so much more than just forgiving us. He *wants* us. He longs for us to come home to Him, our heavenly Father. Christianity is all about relationship.

When we read the story of the prodigal son, we can mistakenly think it’s all about the son finally coming to his senses and asking for forgiveness. But the real focus of the story is the father’s heart. It’s the picture of the father running to his son the minute he sees him on the horizon. It’s about the compassion and joy and mercy that the father is completely thrilled to pour all over his child. And that is exactly how God the Father feels about you.

You are the daughter of a strong, faithful, totally engaged Father, a Father who loves you too much to ignore self-destructive sin in your life, a Father who made sure you had a safe way to get home to Him even before you were born, through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Your Father is going to go the distance with you. He knows that you need Him for the long haul. You need to be able to count on Him to stay when everyone else leaves. You’ll never stop needing His direction and guidance and parenting. And that’s okay, because His love for you is never ending. His arms are always open. You are His beloved. You are safe with Him.

My Resolution

In what specific way will I apply what I learned in this lesson?

Examples:

1. List the characteristics of God the Father you have trouble relying on. Read this list every day and keep your eyes open to see God loving you in these ways.
2. Make a conscious effort to reject any lies or half-truths that might keep you from trusting God with childlike sincerity. Take a risk and count on the truth about who God is—always faithful and true!

My Resolution:

Catechism Clips

CCC 27 The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for: The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator.

CCC 29 But this “intimate and vital bond of man to God” can be forgotten, overlooked, or even explicitly rejected by man. Such attitudes can have different causes: revolt against evil in the world; religious ignorance or indifference; the cares and riches of this world; the scandal of bad example on the part of believers; currents of thought hostile to religion; finally, that attitude of sinful man which makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call.

CCC 30 “Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.” [Psalm 105:3] Although man can forget God or reject him, He never ceases to call every man to seek him, so as to find life and happiness. But this search for God demands of man every effort of intellect, a sound will, “an upright heart,” as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God.

CCC 239 By calling God “Father,” the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents, who are in a way the first representatives of God for man. But this experience also tells us that human parents are fallible and can disfigure the face of fatherhood and motherhood. We ought therefore to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He is neither man nor woman: he is God. He also transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard: no one is father as God is Father.

SAMPLE