

Sunday June 18th, 2023

Father's Day

Psalm 103

"Fathering Like God"

Do you remember the pig craze of the 1980s? People shelled out thousands of dollars to own one of these exotic house pets imported from Vietnam. Their breeders claimed these were quite smart and would grow to a weight of only forty pounds. Well, they were half right. The pigs were smart. They could be trained to walk using leashes, do tricks, and use a litter box. But they tended to grow to about 150 pounds and could become quite aggressive.

What do people do with an unwanted pig? Pig roasts are not the answer; their meat is tough, stringy, and marbled with fat. Fortunately, Dale Riffle came to the rescue. Someone had given Riffle one of these pigs, and he fell in love with it. The pig, Rufus, never learned to use its litter box, and developed this craving for carpets and wallpaper and drywall. Yet Riffle sold his suburban home, and he moved with Rufus to a farm in West Virginia. Then he started taking in other unwanted pigs. And before long, the guy was living, literally, in hog heaven.

There are currently 180 residents on his farm. According to an article in U.S. News & World Report, they snooze on beds of pine shavings. They wallow in mud puddles. They soak in plastic swimming pools and listen to classical music. They wait their turn for one of Dale Riffle's belly rubs. They socialize in affinity groups. And they never need fear that one day they'll become bacon or pork chops. There's a waiting list of unwanted pigs that are trying to get a hoof in the door at Riffle's farm.

Dale Riffle told the reporter, "I think we're all put on earth for some reason, and I guess pigs are my lot in life." How could anybody in his right mind fall so totally in love with pigs?

I'll tell you something even more amazing. An infinite, perfectly holy, majestic, awesome God is passionately in love with insignificant, sinful, sometimes openly rebellious, frequently indifferent people. God loves people like you and me. In fact, God loves us so much that he wants to adopt us into his family. And even beyond that, he wants us to call him "Father." That's even beyond what Dale Riffle was willing to do! The Bible never teaches that everybody becomes a child of God automatically. We are adopted into his family. Today we want to focus on three dimensions of that grace.

God's grace is described with four characteristics in Psalm 103:8-12.

We find this described in the verses of today's text, Psalm 103:8-12. When it comes to his love for sinful people, God's got a long fuse, a short memory, a thick skin, and a big heart. Let's look at each of these. Verse 8 describes God's patience with us: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

" He's got a long fuse. This is a quotation of something Moses had written some 500 years earlier. Many other Bible writers quote this phrase, first recorded in Exodus 24.

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While Moses was at the top of Mount Sinai conferring with God Almighty, the people were having a party. These people whom God had just delivered from bondage in Egypt were expressing their gratitude to God by worshipping an idol of a golden calf made from discarded jewelry. On top of that there were drunkenness and immorality.

The Scripture says that when God saw this, he was angry. God told Moses to step back. He said, "Mo, I'm going to nuke these party animals." (That's the Living Bible paraphrase.) "I'll start a new nation with you. How about it?" Moses fell on his face and appealed to God's grace. God agrees with Moses and withholds his righteous wrath. He forgoes punishing these folks, but he adds, "I'm through with them. I won't destroy them, but I will no longer go with you, Moses. You're on your own."

Once again Moses pleads with God to reconsider. Once again, amazingly, God agrees. He even promises to give Moses a new copy of the Ten Commandments. You'll recall from the story; Moses had shattered the original copy when he came down the mountain and found the people partying. This is the only case we know of in the Bible where all Ten Commandments were broken simultaneously.

God takes Moses back to the top of Mount Sinai, and before he begins dictating these moral imperatives a second time, Exodus 34 says that God passed in front of Moses proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness." That's the verse quoted by David in Psalm 103:8.

Yes, God gets angry. But God puts up with a great deal before reaching his boiling point. Repeatedly, the Bible tells us the reason God exercises such great patience is that he's hoping we'll take advantage of this extension of his grace to turn from our sin, seek his forgiveness, and begin to obey him. Yet most of us make the mistaken assumption that God's patience really means that he isn't that concerned about our disobedience. And so, we abuse his patience. Thank God he's got a long fuse.

In verse 9 it says, "He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever." A guy complained to his buddy that whenever he argued with his wife, she got historical. His friend said, "You mean hysterical." He said, "No, historical. She dredges up the past and reminds me of every time I've failed her in the past." We do that with our kids sometimes, don't we? Our kids do something wrong, and we remind them of the previous times that they did the same thing.

Father God will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever. God chooses to have a short memory. Psalm 130:3 tells us that if God kept a detailed record of our sins, none of us would ever be able to stand before him. In Isaiah 57:16, God says, "If I kept throwing up in your face your past failures, if I chose to retain an angry disposition toward you because of your sin, your spirit within you would grow faint before me. You would wither up and die."

Can you imagine this? I go to God for forgiveness because I've unleashed a torrent of harsh words on one of my kids. I say, "I did it again, God. Oh, please cleanse me from this sin and give

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me the strength to manage my mouth." And God says, "You did it again? That's putting it rather mildly, Darrell. This is the time you've done it this week. And, Darrell, I stop forgiving after fifty. Sorry, pal, but your punch card is all punched out." Is that how God operates with us?

Thank goodness, once I've sought his forgiveness, he doesn't keep on accusing. He doesn't keep on harboring his anger toward me. He chooses to have a short memory where previously forgiven sins are concerned. Verse 10 says, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities."

If God punished us every time we deserved it, we would be in a perpetual state of receiving retribution. Every time we turned around, God would be chastening us for a selfish attitude or hurtful words or prideful spirit or materialism or indifference to the needs of others or something. The Bible word for this thick skin of God's is forbearance. The Bible says, "Love covers a multitude of sins." There are a lot of things that God never brings up to us because he's chosen just to ignore them. Love covers a multitude of sins.

Scripture says God doesn't always treat us as our sins deserve. If God doesn't give you what you think you deserve, be grateful. God has got a long fuse. He's got a short memory. He's got a thick skin. Verses 11 and 12 say, "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west so far has, he removed our transgressions from us."

The psalmist tells us that when we ask God to forgive our sins, he removes them as far as the east is from the west. Do you know how far that is? Truth is, it can't even be measured. I almost brought a globe to show you that the east and west are further apart than the north and south. If I start in North America and go north, eventually I get to the top of the globe at the North Pole. If I continue the same direction, I start going south. Eventually the north meets the south.

But if I start in Simcoe and keep going east, when will I start going west? Never. The psalmist says God will remove our sin from us—not as far as the north is from the south, but as far as the east is from the west.

If you ever wondered how serious God is about taking care of your sin, he has all sorts of metaphors in Scripture like this one to describe what he desires to do with your sin. Micah 7:19 says, "He will trample it under foot and throw it into the deepest part of the sea." Isaiah 38:17 says he'll put it behind his back where he can't see it. Isaiah 43:25 says he'll blot it out. Isaiah 44:22 says he'll sweep it away just like a morning mist that gets burned off by the sun. Jeremiah 31:34 says God will refuse to remember it; he'll just block it out of his memory.

Have you ever experienced that sort of forgiveness? How big a heart does the Heavenly Father have for forgiven sinners? It can't even be measured. This morning he wants you to bask in his grace.

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He wants you to come, confess your sin, trust in Jesus Christ, allow the work that Christ did on the cross—the pain, the penalty for your sin—to be applied to your account, to be forgiven, to be cleansed, to be filled with his Spirit.

Even as God's children, we sometimes don't take full advantage of his forgiveness.

But I want to tell you something. Even if you've experienced that, it's possible as a child of God that you're not basking in his grace today. You're not taking full advantage of his forgiveness. You've forgotten that this God has a long fuse and a short memory and a thick skin and a big heart. You may never have had an earthly father who was characterized by these traits, but your Heavenly Father wants you to be secure in his love.

Verse 13 says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. For he knows how we're formed. He remembers that we're dust. As for man, his days are like grass. He flourishes like a flower of the field. The wind blows over it and it's gone, and its place remembers it no more."

The Bible describes our frailty in these verses in a couple of ways. Neither of them is very flattering. At the end of verse 14, the Scripture says we're like dust. The second picture of our frailty is that of grass, or flowers that temporarily flourish, and then the wind comes along, and it's gone. Grass and desert flowers don't stand a chance in that sort of harsh desert climate. David is describing our frailty, the brevity of our lives. We're not as invincible as we sometimes think we are.

The good news is that like a compassionate father, God understands our tenuous nature. God factors in our frailty when he weighs his responses to us. I'm not suggesting that God always handles us with kid gloves. Every good dad knows that there's an appropriate time to demand a certain toughness of our kids.

There are times when it's appropriate to demand something of our kids. But good dads also know their kids' limitations. Good dads also consider a son or daughter's age, or temperament, or peer pressure or physical health, or school struggles, or popularity issues. Do you think that our Heavenly Father is any less sensitive than an earthly dad who weighs these factors when dealing with a child?

Isaiah 42:3 says that God is careful not to break a bruised reed. There are examples in Scripture of people with whom God dealt far more gently than they deserved because he considered that they were dust. They were desert flowers.

One of my favorite characters is the prophet, Elijah. Most of the time, Elijah wasn't the sort of guy who needed a lot of coddling. He was used to standing up against wicked kings and powerful false prophets and stubborn crowds, and he did it fearlessly. On one occasion he challenged 850 false prophets to a contest. He said, "Let's prove once and for all whose God is the real God."

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He had them build an altar, then call on their God to send fire from heaven. Of course, nothing happened.

Then Elijah did the same thing. He built his altar, called upon God, and God sent a fierce fire so intense that it burned up the rocks of the altar. This was a major victory for Elijah. But in the process of confronting the false prophets, he had humiliated the wicked queen Jezebel, who sent word to Elijah that she was now going to kill him. Elijah, normally a very courageous man, ran and hid. He was physically exhausted. He was spiritually depleted. He was starved for a good meal. He was totally despondent. And he was in a whiny mood. He told God, "It's over. I just want to die."

In God's father heart, he knew Elijah was dust, a desert flower. God miraculously provided Elijah with food, and he caused him to sleep a long sleep. When Elijah woke, God assured him that he was not alone, and he held out hope for the future. Then he set Elijah on his feet. When was the last time you were in one of those situations where you threw up your hands and you said, "I can't take any more?"

"I can't take one more demand from my boss. I can't take one worse medical report. I can't take one more friend moving away. I can't take one more moral failure in the same area. I can't take one more morning of waking up with pain. I can't take one more sleepless night with my infant. I can't take another customer rejection, another cruel word from my spouse, another unpaid bill."

Doesn't God know how much I can take? Yes, intimately. In fact, God knows better than you know. And as well as God knows your limitations, God also knows what he's capable of doing in and through your life if you'll just call on him.

Verse 17 says, "But from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him." This is the third time that David has made this point, that God's love is for those who fear him. In verse 11, David says, "Great is God's love for those who fear him." In verse 13 he says, "The Lord has compassion on those who fear him." This must be an important point if David needs to repeat it three times. As I thought about it this past week, it raised a couple of questions in my mind, some clarifications I needed.

First, what does he mean by fear? Does God want me to be afraid of him? David defines fear in the very context. He tells us what fear is in verse 18: "Those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts." To fear God is to know and obey God's word. If you don't know it, you can't obey it. And even if you know it but you don't obey it, then you don't fear God. If you don't fear God, then you can't experience his love. Which leads me to my second question.

Doesn't God love everyone? John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world." But on the other hand, the only people who totally enjoy God's love are those who fear him.

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Jesus said it this way in John 14:21: "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he's the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my father. I too will love him and will come and show myself to him." Fearing God is the path to experiencing his presence and love in our life.

Are you experiencing the full measure of the Father's love in your life? Or have you been forfeiting that opportunity because of a lack of obedience? Now, he wants you to know his love for forgiven sinners. He wants you to know his love for frail seedlings. He wants you to know his love for fearing sons and daughters.