

Psalm 103:13-14

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[0 : 00] Happy Father's Day, and why not? Let's celebrate fatherhood and resist the cynical conspiracy theorists who are convinced that the day is just a fiendish plot of the greeting card companies. It's good to be a father, and it's also good and necessary to consider what being a father is all about. Let me give you a wee challenge as we begin our sermon. Finish the following sentence, my father is, and you have to finish that. How would you finish that sentence, my father is, my father is like, if that helps? Well, I'll give you a couple of moments to consider that. Perhaps for some of you, your father is no longer with you, perhaps has died, and yet you will have memories, no doubt, of him. Perhaps for some, it's quite painful to even consider how you would finish that sentence. I wonder if any of us would say the following, my father is like God.

I suspect not. It sounds almost blasphemous to say such a thing. How could you possibly say that? My father is like God. If a child in school, in some context or other, were to say to their teacher, my father is God or is like God, I wouldn't be surprised if social services would be called and they'd be knocking at the door in double quick time to see what kind of tyrannical monster there was in that particular home. This morning, I want to consider a verse that speaks about fatherhood, a verse where a father, a human father, is indeed compared to God. Let's read again the verse in Psalm 113, sorry, Psalm 103. Psalm 103, and we'll remind ourselves of what it says there in verses 13 and 14.

It's one sentence in these two verses. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust.

The psalmist very clearly and deliberately draws this comparison between God and a human father.

And it is this comparison that I want us to explore and learn from. And there are three things in particular I want us to notice concerning this comparison. The first is that it is a surprising and dignifying comparison. It's the first thing we're going to develop briefly, a surprising and dignifying comparison. Secondly, and this will be the heart really of what we want to say, is that it is an instructive comparison. The whole point of making the comparison to teach us, to instruct us concerning an important truth. And it indeed fulfills that purpose. It is an instructive comparison.

[3 : 21] And then finally, and this I imagine will be evident even as we develop the first couple of points, but we'll explicitly highlight in the third place that this is a challenging comparison.

So if you have these headings in mind, it will help as we proceed. The first thing then that I want us to take note of is that this comparison that is made by the psalmist is a surprising and dignifying comparison.

And when I say it is surprising, I mean that it is seriously surprising. You see, if the psalmist were saying that a human father is or should be like God in some way, that would be surprising enough.

But he doesn't say that. He says something altogether more surprising. He says that God is like a human father. And I'm not playing with words here. There is a world of difference between saying a human father can be like God in some way and saying, as the psalmist does, that God is like a human father. The second statement, the one that the psalmist makes, where the human father is the ideal, if you wish, the point of comparison is jaw-droppingly surprising to the point of being shocking that the psalmist would express himself in this way. But not just surprising. There's no great merit in being surprised. There's no great profit in being shocked. More than surprising, more importantly, it is profoundly dignifying. It's profoundly dignifying that the psalmist, inspired by the Holy Spirit of God, should deem human fatherhood a suitable picture or visual image to help us understand, in a measure, what God is like. So, to be a father is to be something very special, to be someone very important and honorable.

A good father, a compassionate father, the one who is presented to us in the psalm, a compassionate father, is in a particular, though certainly not exhaustive way, a portrait of what God is like.

[5 : 59] And so I say that this is a surprising and a dignifying comparison that is made in this psalm. But the second thing that I want us to note, and here we will dwell a little longer, because it is, I think, the purpose of the psalmist that we should dwell for a little longer on this second element, and it is this, as I've already noted, that we have here an instructive comparison. This is the whole point of the comparison, to teach or to instruct us, to help us learn something important about God.

In actual fact, the comparison and the manner it is presented teaches us a very great deal about both God and about God's children. First of all, and there's four things that I think we can draw from the comparison in terms of instruction for us. No doubt there are more, but four that I want to suggest to you. First of all, it tells us something about who God is. It tells us that God is our Father.

Now, in fairness, the verse on its own doesn't definitively state that. The verse states that God is like a Father. He's like a compassionate Father. But as we bring to bear the whole and clear teaching of the Bible, we know that God is not just like a Father.

God is a Father. Indeed, He has eternally been a Father. There has never been a moment in time, or indeed out with time, where God has not been a Father. He is the quintessential Father. Long before we became His children, He was Father. The eternal Father of the eternal Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is Father. God is Father. And He is indeed, as we are particularly concerned to grasp this morning, He is indeed the Father of all those who are His children.

[8 : 10] So this comparison, it points us to this very important and significant truth concerning who God is. God is our Father. God is our Father. But the comparison also instructs us concerning who His children are.

You see, it's one thing to say that God is a Father, but a reasonable question that could then emerge is, well, who is He Father to? I am a Father. And you might say that I have self-interest in magnifying the role.

But I have a Father, but I have a Father, and I know who my children are. I won't embarrass them by going into details, but I know who they are. There are other children that I am not the Father of, but I know that I have my children. What about God? Who are His children?

In answering that question, it's very popular to contend that all without exception are God's children. How often have I heard that? If I were given a pound, but every time somebody said, with all God's children, I would be a rich man.

A very popular contention. And in one sense, in a real, though limited sense, it is true. By creation, God enjoys fatherhood overall. But, and it's very important to stress this but, in the Bible, far and away, the more predominant sense in which God is presented as Father is as a Father by adoption. The adoption of His own people. God is the Father of His own. He is the Father of His own chosen people. There is, if you wish, a discrimination. Not in a negative sense of the word. God discriminates between those who are His children and those who are not His children. We are not all God's children by adoption. And this distinction, which we'll just develop a little more in a moment, this distinction is recognized by the psalmist. See, notice how the children of God are described in this verse. Let's read it again. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on His children. Well, it doesn't say that. It says, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

[10 : 39] On those who fear Him. What the psalmist is saying is, yes, God is a Father, but He is Father of those who who respond to this characteristic. Not the Father of all. No, the Father of those who fear Him.

Now, what does this mean? The language is perhaps for some of us a little strange and unfamiliar. It sounds very negative. To fear God, to be terrified by this cosmic figure who is looking over us, ready to punish us. What does it mean to fear God? Well, that in itself is a huge subject that would merit more than one sermon. But let me, for the purposes of respecting the time we have available, limit myself to giving you what I think is an incisive and discerning definition of what it means to fear God. This was a less well-known Puritan preacher, George Bowen. And he defines what it is to fear God in this way. The fear of God is that deference to God which leads you to subordinate your will to His, makes you intent on pleasing Him, penitent in view of past willfulness, happy in His present smile, transported by His love, taken up by His love in more modern English, hopeful of His glory.

That gives us an inkling perhaps of what is meant by fearing God and what the psalmist is talking about here when he says that God is Father and shows compassion to those who fear Him.

So what are we saying? Do we become God's children by feeding God? If we're saying that not all are God's children, some are and some aren't, are we saying, well, if you want to be a child of God, then you've got to start feeding God and that way you can become a child of God. Is that what we're saying? Is this filial status of sons of God, some kind of prize for good, God-fearing behavior? By no means, by no means. And I can't emphasize that negative more strongly. We fear God because we are His children. The respect we show God is an evidence of who we are, not the means by which we become sons of God. And I can only trust that that the distinction is clear because it is such an important one. It does rather beg the question, how then do we become sons of God? If it's not something we can merit by being good God-feeders, how do we become sons of God? Well, I can do no better than read to you familiar verses that we find in the first chapter of John's Gospel. And there we read in the following way, and I think it's probably sufficient for me to limit myself to simply reading the verses without great commentary on them. John chapter 1 and verses 12 and 13.

Yet to all who received Him, that is to all who received Jesus, to those who believed in His name, to those who believed in the name of Jesus. He gave the right to become children of God.

[14 : 20] Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God. We become part of God's family. We become God's children when we believe in Jesus, when we receive Jesus as our Lord and Savior. And so before I go any further, I ask you such an important question, is that true of you? Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? Have you received Him by faith as your Lord and Savior? If you have, you are part of God's family. If you have not, you are out with God's family. He is not your Father if you have not received His Son Jesus as your Savior.

So this comparison that the psalmist uses instructs us. It tells us something about who God is. It tells us something about who His children are. But the comparison also instructs us regarding what we are like and what our great need is as children. Indeed, we could perhaps broaden that and say as human beings what we are like and what our great need is. Well, how so? How does the comparison instruct us in this way? Well, what does the verse say about us? What does the verse say about us?

It says, as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. What it says is that we stand in need of compassion. And what does that say about us?

Well, it tells us that we are weak. It tells us that we are broken. It tells us that we fail. It tells us that in some very real sense we are pitiful. We are impotent and helpless. We are needy. Hence the compassion.

You see, if these things were not so, then there would be no need for God to show compassion to us. If we were all together, if we all had it just so, if we were all great successes in life and everything was just hunky-dory, then why would God show compassion to us? There would be no purpose.

[16 : 29] There would be no need for Him to show compassion. But what this comparison very clearly identifies is that we are needy. That we are needy. That we are broken. That we are hurting. That we are lost. That we are hopeless.

And for that reason, God looks down in compassion upon us. I wonder, do you recognize that description of yourself? Do you rather protest in your own mind? Well, that's not me. That picture that is being painted is not me. I'm not that hopeless, pitiful figure that he's talking about. Not me. I'm all right.

Well, that may be your opinion. Your diagnosis is very different to the one that we find in the Scriptures concerning all of us. This comparison instructs us concerning who we are, what we are like. It identifies for us what is our great need. Our great need is of God to be compassionate to us.

Our great need is that God in compassion would forgive us. Our great need is that God would compassionately restore our friendship with Him. Our great need is that in His compassion He would grant to us spiritual life. And God sees our need. And He appreciates that we can do nothing to sort ourselves out.

And He has compassion. And He has compassion. He has compassion on us. So, the comparison instructs us concerning what we are like and what our great need is. But the comparison instructs us in one further way. How does God treat us? Now, we've really necessarily been hinting at that already. But explicitly to answer that question with the help of the comparison we have here in the verses we're considering, how does God treat us? Is God a distant God? Is He insensitive and unconcerned in the face of your need? Is He even as a father figure tyrannical or severe in His dealings with us? And the answer is no.

[19 : 08] He is compassionate. He is merciful. He is gracious. He is loving. This is our God. A compassionate God, a merciful God, a gracious and a loving God. And notice also something very important and intensely practical. His compassion is informed by His intimate knowledge of us. You see, the verse goes on, or the idea goes on through to verse 14. The Lord has compassion on those who fear Him, for He knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust. It's not just that there is in God some theoretical willingness to help. It's not just that there is in His heart a love or a compassion for us, but sadly, so distant from us, He is ignorant of our need, ignorant of the mixed up, messed up, complex creatures that we are. And so, though He is willing, He can do nothing for He doesn't know us. No. He knows us.

He knows our frame. He knows that we are dust. And it is His knowledge of us that enables His compassion to be just so, just the compassion that we need. It enables Him to deal with us at the very point of our need because He knows us. He loves us, and He does so in a way that perfectly responds to who we are, and to where we are, and to where we are. And He does so not only because He is willing to do so, but because He knows us. I wonder if you have ever heard these words, or maybe even expressed these words, or thought this sentence, if you knew me, you wouldn't love me. If you knew what I was really like, you wouldn't love me. Well, let me tell you something this morning. God knows you. God knows you.

And He loves you. There's nothing that He can discover about you that will put Him off you. There is nothing that He can discover about you that He'll say, oh, I didn't know that. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have made a commitment. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have adopted you as my son.

If I'd known that skeleton in your cupboard, then I would have stayed clear of you. No, we do that. We do that. We discover things about people, and we say, ah, in that case, thus far and no further.

In that case, I will seek love elsewhere. In that case, this relationship can go no further. But God knows you. There's nothing that can surprise Him, nothing that can shock Him, nothing that will lead Him to wash His hands of you. When He committed to love you, He did so in full knowledge of who you are.

[22 : 20] He is a compassionate, tender, and gentle Father. You've messed up. He still loves you. You've let Him down. He still stretches out His hand to you. You've drifted far from Him. He waits with arms open and outstretched even now. How does God treat us? Well, He is like a father. He is a father who has compassion on His children. But as we just draw things to a close under this heading about how God treats us, we can say one more thing. One of the ways in which a human father can show his compassion is how He responds to His son or daughter when they are in pain. If you are a father, indeed, if you are a mother, you can identify with this. A compassionate father feels that pain of his son.

He suffers with his child. Indeed, a compassionate father can go so far as to say, if only I could bear the pain of my son in his place. Your son is ill with a fever and he's wracked with pain. And as a father, you say, well, I wish I could take that pain. I wish I could be in that sick bed. I wish I could take that prison sentence. I wish I had to fight that addiction that he's been gripped by because I love my son and I don't want him to suffer in that way. Now, there may be very few fathers like that, but a compassionate father can in a very genuine way have that sense of wishing to stand in the place of his son. What about God, our Father? Well, when He sees our pain, when He witnesses the ravages of sin in our lives, is there that fatherly response? Is there that vicarious impulse to stand in our place?

And I say, yes, yes, gloriously, yes. God, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, has stood in our place. He has hung in our place on Calvary. He has borne our sin and pain. He has suffered that we might be spared that suffering. So, this is indeed an instructive comparison. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. But finally, this is also a challenging comparison.

And I speak very particularly to fathers present this morning. And I ask you, do you model the compassion of God to your children? If your child was pondering in his own wee and innocent way, if he was pondering, I wonder what God is like? Children ask these questions, what's God like? Or if he was pondering, I wonder what God's love is like? I go to Sunday school and I go to church and I sing songs and it says that God is love. I wonder what that's like? And if your child, your son, your daughter were told, well, read Psalm 103 and verse 13, and your child read this verse, would that help your child children have an accurate picture of what God is like? Now, that is a very challenging question.

The reality, the sad and somber reality for so many children is that this picture creates huge problems. And many, because of their unhappy experience of their own fathers, might conclude, if God is like my father, then I'm not interested. And so I say that this is a challenging comparison, challenging that we who are fathers be fatherly in a God-like manner. As God knows us, so we must rise to the challenge of knowing our children, of taking the time and the effort of engaging in the conversation and the listening that allows us to know them. We will never know them as God knows us, but the challenge is to know them as well as we can, so that our compassion, like God's, be informed compassion. The challenge that we would have compassion on them, that we would be patient with them, that our discipline would be fair and tender, that we would know what it is to suffer with them and indeed on occasions for them.

[27 : 29] And perhaps very particularly as today we will witness the sacrament of baptism, is it not the case that the greatest act of compassion that a father can show to his child is to instruct his child in the faith, to point his child to Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners?

What greater compassion can there be than that? And so to the fathers present perhaps very especially those who have promised so to do. Show compassion to your children by modeling to them the love of God, by pointing them to Jesus, by encouraging them to put their trust in Jesus as their Lord and Savior, by instructing them in the faith. There can be no greater compassion that you can show to them than in this manner. May God help you. May God help us all as so to do. We close.

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