

Psalm 103

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[0 : 00] So, I want to show you something that I've got here.

It's a Father's Day card, and it says, Best Dad in the World. Now, I have to kind of confess something here. I actually printed this out, so how sad is that? But anyway, that's what it says, Best Dad in the World.

And it's quite a common phrase you find on Father's Day cards. I've observed seeing other people's Father's Day cards. Not that I'm hurt or resentful or anything, but no. But it is a common phrase that you see.

And, you know, when I see that, I think, well, it's just such nonsense, isn't it? Like, you know, by no stretch of the imagination do I come close to being the best dad in the world, whatever that looks like.

But, hey, it sounds like the kind of thing you would say on Father's Day, I suppose. And in fairness, I can't get too excited about Father's Day or all these special days that seem to proliferate.

[1 : 04] There is, I don't know if you're kind of being aware of it or notice it or are concerned about it. I'm sure there are more important things to be concerned about. But the proliferation of themed Sundays, every Sunday seems to have a theme now.

And you're being encouraged to just have that theme prominent even in the case of conducting worship. And if we carry on along this route, there won't be any regular Sundays, which I'm a great fan of.

I like a good regular Sunday. But there are all kinds of themed Sundays now. And Father's Day, I guess, is one of them. But rant over, it is good to be a father.

If God has given us that opportunity to be a father, then that is a blessing, a responsibility, and a privilege. And it's also good and necessary to consider what being a father is all about.

And I want to spend a little time doing that this morning. Though I should stress at the outset, for those of you who are maybe thinking, well, I'm not a father, so there's not really much here for me. The manner in which we're going to do so, I think, will allow for much of what we say to be helpful, I trust, certainly relevant, to all of us, regardless of whether we are fathers or sons or whatever our status is.

[2 : 22] Let me give you a wee challenge and see if you can, and I'll give you just a wee moment to do this. If you can finish the following sentence.

So I'll begin the sentence, and I'll allow you in your own mind to finish the sentence. So the sentence begins like this, my father is, and then you have to finish the sentence.

So I'll give you what? One, two, three, four, five seconds. So, I wonder if you managed to finish that sentence. I would be very surprised if any of you finished the sentence in this way, my father is like God.

You know, by all means, after the service, you can approach me and say, well, that's the way I finished the sentence, but I would be very surprised. It just doesn't sound right. Apart from it being unlikely that that's the thought that would come to mind, there's something about that sentence that doesn't sound right, at least to my ears.

But maybe we need to think again. I want us to consider a verse that speaks about fatherhood and where a father is indeed compared to God.

[3 : 34] We've read the Psalm, Psalm 103, and let's just return to that, and we're going to focus our attention on two verses there in Psalm 103. As a father has compassion on his children, this is verse 13, 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. And so there the psalmist very clearly, very deliberately draws this comparison between God and a human father.

And it is this comparison that I want to explore and learn from. And I want us to notice four features of this comparison. First of all, I'm going to note how it is a startling comparison.

I hope in what I've already said there's a sense of that. It's a startling, surprising comparison. But then secondly, I want to just notice that it is a very dignifying comparison.

And thirdly, it is a very revealing comparison, a very instructive comparison. It reveals a great deal about who God is and what God is like, and indeed, who his children are and what his children are like.

[4 : 51] And really, that's where we're going to be concentrating our attention. And what we say there really is relevant for all. And then finally, notice that the comparison, as well as being startling, as well as being dignifying, as well as being revealing, is also challenging.

So let's think about this comparison that the psalmist draws in these different ways. First of all, then, it is a startling comparison.

And when I say that it's startling or surprising, I really do stress just how seriously startling it is. You see, if the psalmist were saying that a human father is or should be like God in some measure or in some way, so if God were the point of comparison, so if the psalmist were saying, well, here's God, and you fathers, you should be like God in some way, that would be quite challenging.

But what the psalmist is saying is different to that. It's much more staggering what he's saying. He is actually saying that God is like a human father.

Now, I'm not playing with words here. It's not just, well, it all sounds just the same. There really is a world of difference between saying a human father can be like God in some way and saying that God is like a human father.

[6 : 15] The second statement, which is what we have in the psalm, where the human father is the ideal or the model or the point of comparison is indeed a very startling way to express a truth about God.

But there it is. That's what the psalmist does. As a father, a human father, a fallible human father, has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.

You want to know what God looks like in some measure? Well, a human father can help you understand what he's like. That's what the psalmist is saying. And so, I repeat, it is a very startling comparison that he employs.

But the second thing I want to say, and it's very connected, really, with the first, is that it is a dignifying comparison. It is 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 what God is like.

So, to be a father is something very special. To be someone very honorable, that being a father, that very reality of being a father, is deemed a suitable picture for presenting something concerning who God is and what God is like.

[7 : 42] You see, a good father, a compassionate father, very particularly this aspect of fatherhood, a compassionate, merciful, loving father, is in a particular, not an exhaustive way, but in a particular way, a portrait of what God is like.

So, this comparison that the psalmist employs, it's startling, but it's also a dignifying. But thirdly, and this is where we're going to pause and spend a little bit longer, it is a revealing or an instructive comparison.

Of course, this is the whole point of the psalmist using a comparison. It is to teach, it's to instruct, it's to reveal some truth about God, to help us learn something important about God.

And 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. It tells us something very significant about who God is.

And the obvious conclusion we draw from what the psalmist says is that God is our Father. Now, in fairness, the verse on its own doesn't definitively state that.

[8 : 59] The verse says that God is like a 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. He is the quintessential Father. He has eternally been Father.

Long before we became His children, He was Father, the eternal Father of the eternal Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

God is Father, and He is Father of all who are His children. And so, the verse points to that reality about God, that God is Father. But it also speaks to us and instructs us concerning who His children are.

Now, it's sometimes popular to contend that all without exception are God's children. You've maybe heard people express themselves in that way. We're all God's children.

[10 : 03] Now, in one limited sense, that is true. By creation, God does enjoy fatherhood over all. He is the creator of all. And in that more general sense, even the Bible sometimes uses that language.

You find it in the sermon there in Athens that speaks of God as Father of all by creation. But in the Bible, far and away, the more predominant sense in which God is presented as Father is as our Father by adoption.

We read the verses in Paul's letter to the Galatians that touch on that. God has, of His own initiative and employing His own prerogative and grounded in His own grace, has adopted a people for Himself, has adopted sons and daughters.

So, those who were not His sons and daughters have become His sons and daughters by adoption. He is the Father of His own, of His own chosen people.

And this distinction is recognized by the psalmist because we can note how the psalmist describes God's children in this verse. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

[11 : 22] So, the psalmist is acknowledging that there's a distinction. God treats some in this father-like manner and others He does not. And who does He treat in this father-like manner?

Well, those who fear Him. So, the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. That is how His children are described in this verse, those who fear Him.

Now, what does this mean? Let me just read you a sentence that I read that attempts to define what it means to fear God. And I think it's helpful to think about this a little bit because the expression is maybe a little bit scary.

It sounds a bit forbidding. You know, this requirement to fear God. And we might be a little uncomfortable with that kind of language.

But let me just develop a little bit of an idea of what it means to fear God. And as I said, I'm simply going to read how one has thought to describe this, I think, helpfully.

[12 : 22] The fear of God is that deference to God which leads you, leads us, to subordinate our will to His. Makes you intent on pleasing Him.

Penitent in view of past willfulness, happy in His present smile, transported by His love, hopeful of His glory. That is what it means.

Or at least gives some insight into what it means to fear God. And what the psalmist is saying is it is this fatherly treatment, this compassionate fatherly treatment is afforded to those who fear Him.

So what are we saying? Do we become God's children by fearing God? Is this status as sons and daughters some kind of prize for good, God-fearing behavior?

Well, by no means. We fear God, we honor, we respect God because we are His children. The respect we show God is the evidence that we are sons of God, not the means by which we become sons of God.

[13 : 34] It is because we are sons and daughters that we show to God this honor, this respect, this fear, to use the language, of the psalmist. So if that's not the way we become sons of God, by good, God-fearing behavior, how do we become sons of God?

Well, the Bible gives us a very clear answer to that question. We can turn and see what is said in John 1, and verses 12 and 13. So John 1, verses 12 and 13.

Let me just read these very familiar verses. And John says, in answer to our question, how do we become sons and daughters of God?

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

Children born not of natural decision, natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God. How do we become sons and daughters of God that we would be treated in a manner described, with this compassion that the psalmist speaks of?

[14 : 49] Well, we become sons and daughters of God when we receive Jesus as our Savior, when we trust and believe in Him as the one who died for us. and opens up the way for us to become right with God, to know forgiveness of sins.

That is how we are granted the status of sons and daughters of God. Maybe we should just pause, even just for a very fleeting moment, and pose the question, is that true of you?

Do you believe in Jesus? Are you trusting in Jesus as your Savior? Have you received Him as your own personal Lord and Savior? Because it is to such that God grants the privileges of membership of the family of sons and daughters, and as such, to be treated as sons and daughters, with the compassion that this verse speaks of.

So, this comparison that the psalmist employs is revealing in this way, in that it tells us important truths concerning who God is and who we are as His children.

But it also instructs us regarding what we are like and what our great need is as men and women.

[16 : 08] How so? How does this verse point us in the direction of a better understanding of what we are like and what our great need is? Well, what does the verse say about us? It says that we stand in need of compassion.

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. Now, it's very obvious, but implicit in that is that we stand in need of compassion.

And that is true. We are weak. We are broken. We are failures. We are pitiful. We are impotent. We are hopeless in so many ways. We are needy, hence the compassion.

If we were all, you know, self-sufficient and all together and able to live our lives without any help, if there were no flaws in our character, then there would be no need for compassion to be shown to us.

It's precisely because we are needy that there is this need for God to show a compassion towards us. That is who we are, and that is what our great need is.

[17 : 12] Do you recognize that description as one who is in need of God's compassion? What is our great need that God, this compassionate God, can meet?

Well, there's our great need for forgiveness, for restoration of friendship with God, the need for spiritual life that only God can grant. God sees our need.

He appreciates that we can do nothing to sort things out for ourselves, and He has compassion on us. But the comparison that we have here in the psalm instructs us in one further way regarding how God treats us.

This God of whom the psalmist is speaking, is He a distant God? Is He a God who is insensitive and unconcerned in the face of our need?

Is He perhaps even worse? Is He a tyrannical God or severe in His dealings with us? Of course, the answer to that is no, none of these things.

[18 : 20] He is compassionate. He is merciful. He is gracious. He is loving. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who feed Him.

He sees our need. He sees our condition. And He is merciful towards us. He has compassion upon us. And note something very important, that God's compassion is informed by His intimate knowledge of us.

Notice what the verse, or the second verse, verse 14, goes on to say. Really, the same sentence is continuing. The Lord has compassion in those who fear Him, for He knows how we are formed.

He remembers that we are dust. So, His compassion is informed by His intimate knowledge of us. It's not simply a case that we have this willing God who's willing to be compassionate, who has the desire to be merciful to us, but He doesn't really know us.

He doesn't really understand us because He's so distant and we're so different from Him. And so, there's this good intention on His part, but it's not informed by knowledge.

[19 : 38] No, far from it. He knows us. He knows we're dust. He knows us better than we know ourselves. And so, His compassionate dealings with us are informed by His knowledge of us.

He knows that we are mixed up and messed up and complex creatures. He knows us inside out and He is still compassionate even knowing what we are like.

He still loves us and He does and He does so in a way that perfectly responds to who we are and where we are because He knows us. I wonder if you've ever heard somebody say these words or express this thought, if you knew me, you wouldn't love me.

Well, God knows you and He still loves you. He is compassionate for He knows how we are formed. He remembers that we are dust.

He is a compassionate, tender, and gentle Father. You have messed up. He still loves you. You've let Him down. He still stretches out His hand to you.

[20 : 49] You've drifted from Him. He waits with arms open and outstretched even now. How does God treat us?

This compassionate God, how does He treat us? Well, He's like a father. He is a father who has compassion on His children. We can maybe say one more thing as we develop this reality or this truth.

One of the ways in which a human father shows his compassion is how he responds to his son or daughter when they are in pain. A compassionate father feels that pain, as does a compassionate mother, perhaps even with greater intensity, I don't know.

The compassionate father suffers with his child. You know, a compassionate father could go so far as to say in a given circumstance, if only I could bear the pain of my son in his place.

Maybe when it's a young child suffering and they don't really understand why they're hurting, whatever pain it is that they have, and a father feels, well, if only I could bear that pain for him.

[22 : 02] Certainly, that is a sentiment that you would find in a compassionate father. Well, what about God, our Father? When He sees our pain, when He witnesses the ravages of sin in our lives, is there that fatherly response, that vicarious impulse to stand in our place?

And of course, the wonderful answer that we find in the gospel is yes, there is. God, in the person of His Son, has stood in our place. He has hung in our place in Calvary.

He has borne our sin and pain. He has suffered that we might be spared that suffering. And so, this startling comparison, this dignifying comparison, is also a very revealing and instructive comparison that tells us something about what God is like and what we are like, how God treats us in our need of His great compassion towards us.

But then there's a final thought that I want to just mention more briefly, a final aspect of this comparison, and that is that it is, or we could describe it as a challenging comparison.

I'm speaking now very particularly to those present who are fathers. And the question that I pose to you is this, do you model the compassion of God to your children?

[23 : 29] If your child was thinking or pondering, I wonder what God is like, or I wonder what God's love is like. It's the kind of questions we would want our children to think about.

And if they were thinking about that, or if they posed you that question, and your child, your son, your daughter were told, well, read Psalm 103 and verse 13, and that will give you an insight into what God's love is like.

And your son went and they read, as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him. Would they say, ah, I get it. I get something about what God is like.

He's like Dad. He's like, His love is like my father's love. His love is something like my father's compassion for me. Would that verse, would this verse, help him or her to have an accurate picture of what God is like, at least in some measure.

Of course, the reality is that for many, this picture would create huge problems. The picture is a valid one, but the reality is that for many, it would create, as I say, huge problems.

[24 : 35] For many, the response would be, well, if God is like my father, then I don't want to know such a God. And what a tragic reality that that is, but it is, for many, the reality.

And so, this is a challenging comparison for those of us who are believers, for those of us who are disciples of Jesus, who seek to live our lives as directed by God in His Word.

Well, we have this challenge that our fatherhood, the manner in which we love and conduct ourselves as fathers, would in some way present an accurate portrait of what God is like and of what God's compassion is like.

It is a challenging comparison to be fatherly in a God-like manner. To know your children. We've noted how God knows us. He knows how we are formed.

He remembers that we are dust. To know what they're going through, to know their struggles, to take the time that is required for that to happen, and to have compassion on them, to have patience, to exercise discipline that is fair, but also tender, to suffer with them and for them, to instruct them in the faith, to point them to Jesus.

[25 : 55] Well, may God help those of us who are fathers and who still have that responsibility in greater or lesser measure to stand up to the challenge of it.

Well, let's close. How do we respond to this beautiful picture that is painted for us of our God? As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

Well, maybe the best way we can respond is to echo the words of the psalmist as he begins and ends this very psalm within which these words are found. Praise the Lord, O my soul, all my inmost being.

Praise His holy name. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word. We thank You for the Bible. We thank You for all that we discover and learn about You.

We began our service this morning singing the hymn Behold Your God. And we thank You that in this psalm we're given an opportunity to behold something of You and of what You are like.

[27 : 08] And we do thank You for the reality that You are a compassionate God. We thank You that You are a God who knows us, who knows our weakness, and whose compassion is informed and molded by who we are.

It is always just so, always exercised in a way that is fitting and suitable for us, wherever we are and whatever our circumstances might be.

And so we thank You that You are such a God. And we pray that we would, indeed, that we would all in some measure reflect something of Yourself, that as fathers, as mothers, as believers, we would be compassionate in our dealings with one another.

And we pray all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.