

Question: How can I view God as a loving Father when the relationship I have experienced with my earthly father has been very strained?

Those of us who have had good earthly fathers have been truly blessed. A good father has not only provided for the material and physical needs of his children, but he also has met their needs for acceptance, affirmation, authority and discipline along with a sense of security, warm affection and love. Such men deserve the respect and honor that God commands children to give their fathers (Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:4). We should be thankful for the special opportunity to honor them on Fathers Day. On the other hand, children with fathers who have been unloving, indifferent or even abusive, often find it difficult to relate to God as Father. Thus, we need to make a clear distinction between fatherhood on earth and the Fatherhood of God.

While Jesus taught his followers to speak of God as “our Father in Heaven” (Matthew 6:9), he in no way implied that our earthly fathers are God or that God is like our earthly fathers. Fathers on earth reflect the Fatherhood of God only to the extent that they imitate the ways of God the Heavenly Father. Use of the word father does not imply that earthly fathers and the Heavenly Father have the same character. For example, Jesus once applied the word father to the devil, calling him “the father of lies” (John 8:44). It is as unfair to judge our Heavenly Father by the character of all earthly fathers as to judge everyone who may have the names Bill and Sue as being just like criminals who have those same names.

We must also understand that God represents the perfect, ideal Father (Matthew 5:48), a standard no earthly father can ever measure up to. Jesus once said, “If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!” (Matthew 7:11). Earthly fatherhood raised to its very highest level can give us only a faint glimpse of the wondrous Fatherhood of God. But every father of this world has sinned in some way; he has his flaws. To expect perfection in our earthly fathers is as unfair as to look for perfection in their children. For a young child, Daddy can do no wrong; but at some point she learns that he has his weaknesses and failings. When this happens, some children become so disillusioned with their fathers that they have great difficulty trusting them

again. However, most eventually come to a more realistic understanding of life in this world. Both fathers and their children stand in need of forgiveness and grace from one another and from God.

Once we understand the above distinctions between earthly fathers and the Heavenly Father, we can appropriately honor our earthly fathers for who they are even with their limitations. But we can also find our greater father needs met by the Father who is Lord of heaven and earth (Luke 10:21). Jesus spoke of a time when “brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child” (Matthew 10:21), but the Psalmist said, “Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me” (Psalm 27:10). As “a father to the fatherless” (Psalm 68:5), God has not given us “a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but . . . a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Romans 8:15). No other father has ever loved his children to the extent that God has loved us. Even if your earthly father has died or has deserted or abused you, the Heavenly Father stands with open arms and tenderly calls you to be enfolded in His eternal embrace. Get to know him and allow him to be a father to you as only he can. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!” (1 John 3:1).

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