

Chapter 10

LIKE FATHER, LIKE CHILD

The reason the mass of men fear God, and at bottom dislike Him, is because they rather distrust His heart, and fancy Him all brain like a watch.

—**Herman Melville**

Angie changed the subject whenever she heard anyone say, “When I grow up, I want to be like my daddy.” She had never known her father. Angie had been conceived in an African police cell. An officer had raped her mother while detaining her overnight on minor charges. Rough justice indeed! Had DNA tests been available in her country, paternity could have been established. That would have meant little to Angie. No one says “Daddy” to a paper certificate. The word usually fits between sobs, giggles, or shouts. A DNA fingerprint cannot compare with strong, warm, reassuring arms wrapped around a little body. A father is much more than a genetic donor; a father is a life invested in a relationship with his child—a life worth emulating. God is a father in both senses—a creator who stays involved.

God is everyone’s Father because He spoke a word and created humankind, fashioning us from dust. When the Bible says God made us in His image and likeness, it uses words that allow for a father and child to be similar but to have

unique, individual traits.⁶⁴⁵ God's name, **Father of spirits**, emphasizes that our spirits originate in Him, not in our natural parents. He is our spiritual Father. Paul called Him, "the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name" (Eph. 3:14–15).⁶⁴⁶ Failing human fathers don't define fatherhood—God does.

The first reference to God as Father speaks of the nation of Israel: "Is not He your **Father** who has bought you? He has made you and established you" (Deut. 32:6). Here, we see the same double involvement that we saw in Chapter 9 when we considered His name **Possessor**. He created us and paid a ransom for us. When the Israelites became a nation, they had every reason to be confident in their relationship with their heavenly Father. First, He made them; later, He bought Israel out of slavery in Egypt and declared, "Out of Egypt I called My son" (Hos. 11:1). "The LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son" (Deut. 1:31 NIV). He chose Israel to be His special, treasured possession out of all the nations on earth. The Israelites had no additional intrinsic value; they did nothing outstanding to qualify, but He chose them nonetheless.⁶⁴⁷ Moses hammered the point home for Israel by calling God the **Rock who begot you** and the **God who gave you birth**. The words are graphic. They evoke images of God writhing in pain like a mother in labor. That's the beginning of His love for us.

Father

Heb.: *'Av*
(Deut. 32:6)
Gk.: *Patēr*

Abba

(Mark 14:36;
Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6)

Rock who begot you

Heb.: *Tsur yeladekha*
(Deut. 32:18)

**God who gave
you birth**

Heb.: *'El mekhohlelekha*
(Deut. 32:18)

The Gap

The world is full of the cries of children like Angie, cries that go unheard because the fathers left their children, perhaps even before birth. For many people, a huge gap separates God's standard for fatherhood and their experiences of it. Their families were far from heavenly. In the absence of a nurturing human father, Angie found it difficult to relate to her heavenly Father. Where there should have been a peg in her life experience on which to hang the truth about her heavenly Father, there was a blank wall. When someone told her God loved her more than the best father ever could, the words fell into a confused heap. Others grow up with fathers around, but their relationships contain painful memories of abuse or impossible demands. Such fathers give little freely or

willingly; new bikes have to be earned with grades, and treats feel like tricks. Perhaps the father is unpredictable. The children hardly know what he will do or say. They do not know where they stand with him, so they learn to withdraw. Maybe the relationship is rigid, formal, and characterized by stiff handshakes instead of tender touches. It is no surprise that people with such experiences tend to suspect God of similar coldness, and they approach Him with the same caution.

We perceive life through the grid of previous experiences; this grid is an inner translator of new experiences. For Angie and others like her, any suggestion of intimacy with a father figure triggers a foghorn out of a murky and painful past. It screams a warning: “Relationships are too difficult; you will get hurt if you expose your heart too much.”

My own experience was happier. I had less difficulty knowing God as my Father because my natural father, although imperfect, was involved. He attempted to balance his love for his children with his responsibility to provide for us. He worked hard as a schoolteacher, but after facing the challenges of the classroom and a long commute, he was exhausted. To some extent, even the best fathers fail. They can never supply all the love and resources a child can absorb. Human strengths have a downside too. My father excelled at teaching and sometimes he continued to teach at home. During family outings, I often played hooky in my mind while he lectured my brother, my sister, and me on details of British history.

Sadly, I chose to withdraw from my father. It began as petty jealousy (you remember, the “green-ey’d monster”) toward my younger brother. I had a sense that he was favored and treated leniently. My gradual withdrawal left me hardly speaking to either of them. Our relationships had plenty of potential for wholeness, but they suffered from my foolish and immature choices. The distance between us continued for several years before healing came.

The nation of Israel behaved worse, despite God’s love. We find Him lamenting in Isaiah, “Sons I have reared and brought up, but they have revolted against Me.” He continues, calling them “sons who act corruptly!” (Isa. 1:2–4). Jeremiah’s prophecy echoes Isaiah’s: “Then I said, ‘How I would set you among My sons and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of the nations!’ And I said, ‘You shall call me, My Father, and not turn away from following Me.’ Surely, as a woman treacherously departs from her lover, so you have dealt treacherously with Me, O house of Israel” (Jer.

3:19–20). William Barclay called sin a “crime against love. The sinner does not so much break God’s law as he breaks God’s heart.”⁶⁴⁸ When rebellion or withdrawal infects a relationship and communications falter, it is hard to stop the gap from widening.

The fact that *’Av* (Father) is used as a title for God only nine times in the Old Testament is symptomatic of the damaged relationship.⁶⁴⁹ Descriptions of God’s fatherhood are few, and they refer generally to the nation or the race. The only individuals who related to Him as Father were a few kings.⁶⁵⁰ His Old Testament reputation as a father is unappealing. He appears to demand honor and respect, and reproof is a sign of His love.⁶⁵¹ We only glimpse His compassion as He mercifully gathers His children and reaches out as a “Father to the fatherless.”⁶⁵²

The blind spot for the Father carries over to New Testament times; religious Jews refer to God as Father only once in the Gospels.⁶⁵³ In the Jewish literature of the time, references are sparse. Jews thought of God in terms of obedience to the Law and as Father of the nation, rather than the individual.⁶⁵⁴

The Parable of the Stunted Sons (Luke 15:1–32)

Considering the background, it is interesting to note that one of Jesus’ most memorable parables starred two sons and their father. I hesitate to call it “the parable of the prodigal son” because each character teaches us valuable lessons. While the father epitomizes God’s Father-heart as he welcomes back his immature and wayward son, the elder brother demonstrates a tragic, stunted sonship. He is not a happy, free child and he fails to be like his father. The family likeness is lacking. The clue to his dysfunction lies in his father’s words to him in verse 31: “Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours.”

One day, those words struck me; I realized that they described my background. I grew up with my father at home. I had more than my basic needs supplied. I had known the Lord from childhood, but I still lived in brokenness in three ways, just like the elder son.

Resources

Although the elder son had lived with his father, serving and obeying him, he complained, “You have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends” (v. 29). Apparently, he expected his father to take

the initiative to provide a barbeque for him. Even though the father had advanced him his inheritance, something inhibited him from drawing on those resources or asking his father.⁶⁵⁵ Yet, Jesus taught that it is good to ask our Father for what we need. Healthy, happy children run to their father, confident that He possesses resources and that he delights in giving His children good things. Asking is normal in our heavenly Father's family.

Relationships

The elder son always resided with his father, but his family ties were weak. His fiercely pointed accusation toward "this son of yours" was gently but firmly met with, "this brother of yours" (vv. 30, 32). In his shrunken and immature sonship, he refused to acknowledge that "all that is mine" included his brother.

Rejoicing

In the absence of a meaningful relationship, the elder son objected to the reunion party. On the other hand, the waiting father, who had scanned the horizon and had run to embrace his lost son, celebrated lavishly.⁶⁵⁶ Love that covers a multitude of sins is a family trait—evidence that we are God's children.⁶⁵⁷

These three areas of brokenness in the parable point to immaturity in both players and listeners. In its benign form, immaturity appears in the dry dullness of a dutiful elder brother who is relationally detached and lives in spiritual poverty amid riches. That was my situation. My family was healthy and loving, but I withdrew from having close relationships with some of them through my own wrong choices. Much of Israel was in this condition when Jesus came; after 450 years of prophetic silence, their relationship amounted to dutiful ceremonies. They had little sense of God's blessing on the nation.

Don't forget the third player in the parable, the prodigal son. He typifies people who lose faith in their Father's abundant love. Setting out on a quest for greener grass, they scrape together dry, stringy pods in a kingdom of darkness. They can't imagine that the Father would ever want them back without either subservience or considerable restitution on their part.

But remember, Jesus held up the parable like a mirror to Pharisees and Scribes who were choking on His reception of sinners.⁶⁵⁸ He highlighted the worst form of immaturity: religion retching at the idea that bent coins, black sheep, or sin-stained wanderers could have any place in God's family.

Such immaturity is a hideous and shriveled distortion of what God intends for His children.

To each group of immature sons, Jesus addressed not only the parable, but also His life. Revealing God's fatherhood was central to His purpose, so this one name is worth devoting a whole chapter to. The Old Testament concludes with Malachi's prophetic promise about reconciliation between the hearts of fathers and children.⁶⁵⁹ That Jesus accomplished a far more important reconciliation is evident from the dramatic increase in the use of the Greek word *patēr* (father) for God. It occurs 168 times in the New Testament, and 94 times in the Gospels alone. Jesus came to show everyone what the Father was really like. He came to bridge the gap and to make a way back to Him. So, let us look at Jesus' mission, which included teaching and modeling relationship with the heavenly Father.⁶⁶⁰

Mission Accomplished

Even as a boy, Jesus knew He belonged in His Father's house.⁶⁶¹ He referred to God as His Father and often spoke of Himself as **the Son**. He said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), yet (this may seem paradoxical) the Father is sovereign over the Son.⁶⁶²

Beside the simple name, **Son of God**, Jesus was called **Son of the living God**, **Son of the Father**, and **Son of the Blessed One**.⁶⁶³ Paul used a phrase that literally means **Son of His love**. A common introduction in the epistles emphasizes their relationship: "the God and **Father of our Lord Jesus Christ**."⁶⁶⁴ John spoke of **God the Father** and the **Son of the Father**.⁶⁶⁵

Jesus' relationship with the Father is unique in many ways. It existed before anything else.⁶⁶⁶ The degree of mutual knowledge between Father and Son is unmatched.⁶⁶⁷ Jesus' name surpasses angelic names precisely because He is His Father's Son, and He sits at His right hand.⁶⁶⁸ In the parable of the vineyard, Jesus cast Himself as the ultimate messenger who is superior to both vine-growers and slaves because He

The Son

Gk.: *Ho hyios*
(John 5:22–23; 6:40)

Son of God

Gk.: *Ho hyios
tou Theou*
(Matt. 26:63)

Son of the Father

Gk.: *Ho hyios
tou Patros*
(2 John 3)

Son of the living God

Gk.: *Ho hyios tou
Theou tou zōntos*
(Matt. 16:16)

Son of the Blessed One

Gk.: *Ho hyios
tou eulogētou*
(Mark 14:61)

Son of His love

Gk.: *Ho hyios tēs
agapēs autou*
(Col. 1:13)

is God's beloved Son.⁶⁶⁹ From the Father's perspective, Jesus is His **Beloved**, in part because He is the only Son. The fact that Jesus is one of a kind makes Him infinitely precious, and this underlies the name, **only begotten Son**.⁶⁷⁰

Jesus existed eternally with His Father, and the Father sent Him on His special mission.⁶⁷¹ Jesus came and ministered in His Father's name.⁶⁷² The Jewish

Beloved

Gk.: *Agapētos*

(Mark 12:6)

Ēgapēmenos

(Eph. 1:6)

Apostle

Gk.: *Apostolos*

(Heb. 3:1)

religious system included a chain of authority. Leading rabbis laid hands on their disciples to commission them to continue the work. As Jesus taught in the temple, the Pharisees demanded His credentials: "What right do you have?"⁶⁷³ The book of Hebrews calls Jesus the **Apostle**, emphasizing that He was sent as an authorized representative. In Jesus' case, the Father was the commissioner.

The paternal character sketch, which was hardly more than a pencil outline in the Old Testament, was colored in by Jesus' example and teachings. Jesus revealed the Father to us so clearly that He could legitimately claim, "If you knew Me, you would know My Father also."⁶⁷⁴ For

The Faithful Witness

Gk.: *Ho martyrs,*

ho pistos

(Rev. 1:5; 3:14)

that alone, He deserves the title **the faithful witness**. Jesus showed us what it means to live among all the distractions and temptations of human life while remaining close to the Father.

In Psalm 65:2, King David addressed "**You who hear prayer**." Much of Jesus' teachings on prayer came in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus describes a Father who is so involved in life that He spots falling sparrows.⁶⁷⁵ Jesus speaks of our "Father who sees what is done in secret,"

Lord of the harvest

Gk.: *Tou kyriou*

tou therismou

(Matt. 9:38;

Luke 10:2)

readily rewarding our devotion and hearing our prayers.⁶⁷⁶ Once, Jesus taught His disciples to pray to the **Lord of the harvest**. Most famously, He introduced us to "Our Father," whose name is hallowed and whose kingdom we should seek.⁶⁷⁷ The first two words of the prayer teach volumes about

effective prayer—it oozes with relationship. The relationships are vertical with the Father and horizontal within an expanding family of believers. Our Father loves answering prayers, especially those prayed in agreement with others.⁶⁷⁸ Meaningless repetitions or "magic-formulae prayers" insult Him.

Without a relationship, prayer degenerates to attempted manipulation—a verbal rubbing of the genie’s lamp, a babble of abracadabras, or a panic button to press in a crisis. How unnecessary! The Father knows our needs even before we ask.⁶⁷⁹ With faith-filled prayer, we place an expectant trust in a Father who loves to give good things to His children because they ask Him.⁶⁸⁰ If only the elder son had understood that.

Jesus addressed most of His prayers to “Father.”⁶⁸¹ There were two exceptions. First, His agonizing cry on the cross: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”⁶⁸² The cry came right at the point when Jesus felt separated from His Father. The second exception was in the prayer recorded in John 17 when He spoke to “the only true God” (v. 3). The rest of that prayer is typical of His style. Jesus addressed His “Father” six times, including variants like **Holy Father** and **Righteous Father**.

Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, which is similar to Hebrew. So, He didn’t say “*Patēr*” but “*’Abba’*.”⁶⁸³ Children of all ages still say “*’Abba’*” in Jewish homes

today. It is often the first word a child vocalizes: “Daddy!” Jesus’ revelation of His Father was somewhat revolutionary. Not only does the Father desire a deep relationship with His people, He delights in them addressing Him in the simplest and most intimate way. The fact that the Aramaic word, *’Abba’*, crossed the language barrier to enter the Greek New Testament shows how big an impression Jesus made by using it.

Doing the Father’s will is another family trait.⁶⁸⁴ Jesus submitted to His Father, delighting to obey even when it led to suffering.⁶⁸⁵ Obedience took Jesus to the cross to pay our penalty for straying and rebelling. He walked that path in tremendous security because He knew where He had come from and where He was going.⁶⁸⁶ Because the Father had shown Jesus His crucifixion in advance, He could look beyond death and feel confident in God’s assurance of restored glory.⁶⁸⁷ As events tumbled toward the cross, Jesus knew the Father was still in control. Therefore, He maintained His claim to be one with the Father, even though it resulted in His death.⁶⁸⁸

With one last cry, “Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit,” Jesus died and completed His redemptive mission (Luke 23:34, 46). He was raised through the glory of the life-giving Father,⁶⁸⁹ and He quickly sent a message to

Holy Father

Gk.: *Patēr hagios*
(John 17:11)

Righteous Father

Gk.: *Patēr dikaios*
(John 17:25)

His disciples. Mary delivered the message, and it still reverberates: “I ascend to My Father and *your Father*, and My God and your God” (John 20:17, my emphasis). The ultimate restoration of children to their Father, which Malachi spoke of, had been accomplished. The door was open for all people to be God’s children by adoption.⁶⁹⁰

Before He ascended to share His Father’s throne, Jesus commissioned us to baptize new disciples in the Father’s name.⁶⁹¹ The Father poured out His Spirit

Spirit of His Son

Gk.: *To pneuma tou
hyiou autou*
(Gal. 4:6)

to empower us to continue that mission.⁶⁹² Now, filled with the **Spirit of His Son**, we too can call on Him in the simple intimacy of Christlike children: “*Abba*” or “Dear Father.”

Decades after the ascension, the disciple John saw a revelation of Jesus and the end times. In it, John glimpsed our own future too. He saw the names of Jesus and the Father written on faithful foreheads as a profound mark of belonging to God.⁶⁹³

That sense of belonging has already begun, and it is reflected in the word “Christian.”⁶⁹⁴ James referred to “the fair name by which you have been called” (James 2:7). The family likeness, which the “fair name” points to, implies increasing love and righteousness, and diminishing sinfulness.⁶⁹⁵

Bridging the Gap

The Father, who Jesus revealed, wants no older sons or prodigals to be away from the heart of the home.⁶⁹⁶ He aches to have His children return to receive His welcome. So, what about people like Angie who strain to bridge the gap between their painful experiences of human fatherhood and their developing relationships with the heavenly Father? How can any of us be sure of His love, and how can we exhibit the family likeness? The first letter of John the apostle contains a helpful framework:

See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:1–3)

How great is the Father's love for us? Jesus said that someone who has been forgiven much will love much.⁶⁹⁷ Some returning wanderers have been so impacted by the Father's unexpected forgiving embrace that they are the ones who find it easiest to live as His children. Now, I'm not suggesting that you go on a binge of sin to maximize your experience of forgiveness. All sin separates us from the Father. He has already extended His forgiveness to each of us. We should reflect on that and on the great investment that He made to adopt us—He gave the life of His sinless only Son.⁶⁹⁸

John emphasized, “such we *are* . . . now we *are* children of God.”⁶⁹⁹ Our position as God's children is an established fact. Even if a painful experience presents an obstacle to understanding the relationship, our position is still true. It is true because He redeemed us with the blood of His Son. At the end of his prophecy, Isaiah declared, “You, O LORD, are our Father, Our **Redeemer** from of old is your name” (Isa. 63:16). William Barclay summed it up: “In the sense of paternity, we are all children of God; but, in the sense of fatherhood, we are children of God only when He makes His gracious approach to us and we respond.”⁷⁰⁰

Isaiah knew that God wanted His family of faith to grow. He promised foreigners “a name better than that of sons and daughters . . . an everlasting name which will not be cut off” (Isa. 56:3–7). We are no longer spiritual orphans or slaves to sin and Satan; we are God's children through faith in Jesus. (John 14:18; Gal. 3:26) The outpoured Spirit, who is called the **Spirit of adoption** and **Spirit of your Father**, guarantees it. No matter what our backgrounds are, accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior by faith makes it a fact—we are God's children. When we bask in that truth, it thaws our hearts. What a relief to be able to drop our guard in the presence of a Father who knows everything about us and still desires our company.

John said, “we love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). As we discover His love for us, love begins to bubble up from us, and it overflows to touch others. We want to “be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1; see also Matt. 5:16). He is the **Father of mercies**, whose love does not fail even when people are hostile to Him.⁷⁰¹

Spirit of adoption

Gk.: *To pneuma hyiothesias*
(Rom. 8:15)

Spirit of your Father

Gk.: *To pneuma tou patros hymōn*
(Matt. 10:20)

Father of mercies

Gk.: *Ho patēr tōn oiktirmōn*
(2 Cor. 1:3)

Our lifelong pursuit of Christlike-ness (the essence of spiritual maturity) begins as a natural and joyful outpouring of our love for God. If we take our eyes off the Father's love for us, the relationship easily deteriorates into a dry, pharisaical ritual. Then most people throw up their hands in resignation to a growing sense that "I will never achieve His standard." Of course, you won't! None of us can.

Maturity lies in a place of balance between God working in us and us allowing Him to. The Father first draws us to Jesus and then keeps us there in His name.⁷⁰² But the Father cannot work until we soften our hearts, respond

Vinedresser

Gk.: *Geōrgos*
(John 15:1)

Potter (also Creator
and Maker)

Heb.: *Yotser*
(Isa. 64:8)

to His wooing, and return from wandering. When required, the **Father of spirits** provides life-giving discipline. A beautiful work begins to mature. In it all, the Father is the **Vinedresser** who cultivates fruit throughout our lives, bringing glory to Himself.⁷⁰³

Isaiah portrayed the process using a name that is related to "Creator." "But now, O LORD, You are our Father, we are the clay, and You our **potter**; and all of us are the work of your hand" (Isa. 64:8). The Father who created and redeemed us is a potter as well. Our Creator and Maker stays involved. We can imagine Him squeezing our character as if He were shaping a clay vessel. As we are willing, He molds us into the likeness of His Son. One day, He will complete the process.⁷⁰⁴ In the meantime, we are motivated to keep responding to His love, no matter what we face.

The Finish Line

The writer to the Hebrews described our life like a race:

Therefore, since we have so great a crowd of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb. 12:1–2)

Our progress toward Christlike-ness is like a school's cross-country race. Often, my classmates and I used to run six or seven miles in the rain, along

muddy English farm tracks and even through snow. By the five-mile marker, I was panting clouds of steam, and I had to walk to catch my breath, especially when I was going uphill.

Now, I won't mention names, but some kids cheated—they would tuck their bus passes into their shorts. The course overlapped the bus route in places, so it was easy to ride the bus and alight just before the school gate, hoping the sports teacher wasn't watching. How we would love to do the same in the Christian life.

Honest sportsmen like me had uplifting experiences as we rounded the final street corner. Looking down the road, we could see the school gates. Only four hundred yards! A hot shower, dry clothes, and a chance to go home early awaited us. During competitive runs, a crowd watched and cheered.

Imagine the exhilaration. As we turn the last corner, a final shot of adrenaline propels our aching legs to a glorious sprint finish. It's like the Olympics.

While we run our earthly races with endurance, let's remember that not only a crowd of witnesses is watching. Our Father will be at the finish line Himself to welcome and reward us—not for being perfect, but for running our best, just as Jesus did. Our heavenly Father's welcome won't be a stiff handshake but a warm embrace.