

The Father Heart of God

"What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." - Tozer

Everyone on the planet has some kind of a concept of God. Colossians 1:15 tells us, The Son (meaning Jesus) is the image of the invisible God. So those who are in relationship with Jesus, continually get a clearer understanding of God. But for those who don't know Jesus, their concept of God is inaccurate.

Q: What do you think about God? (i.e. Is he real? Does he care about people? etc.)

To start we have to go to the beginning, to the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 1-2 we see that God created Adam & Eve to be his image bearers and the stewards of all He had created. There was no fear or doubt or anger in their relationship with God. They lived in perfect shalom with Him. In fact they used to walk with God in the cool of the day.

To some of us that might sound incredible, but to others of us that might sound terrifying. Adam & Eve experienced both of those feelings. They experienced the joy of being in close relationship with God, their creator and King, and total shalom in them & the world. But eventually they also experienced shame and fear in God's presence because they had done the unthinkable, they had removed Him from the throne of their hearts and put themselves there, and from that moment things were never the same.

We live in the fallout of Adam & Eve's choice to break shalom and perfect relationship with God. Sometimes we make choices like them, that make our relationship with God feel really distant & rocky, and keep us from seeing Him rightly. And other times choices are made by others that hurt us and affect the way we see God. Often hurts from our fathers play a big role in the way we see God, our heavenly father. Today we're going to look at some of the misconceptions sin causes us to have against God and then look at a story Jesus told that gives us a beautiful picture of who God, as our Father, really is.

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Some common misconceptions about God:

1. God is a cosmic killjoy - When this is our view of God, we see him as harsh and severe, When we think of him we see a no fun allowed sign. If you've ever read *The Secret Garden*, it's like God is Colin's grandfather.

In reality - God is the kindest person in the universe. He loves when we laugh and find joy in life. He is not harsh at all when we really know him. Is he serious about sin? - Yes for sure, but not to suck all the fun out of life. He hates sin because he loves you.

2. God is a Santa Claus - When this is our view of God we see him as a God of performance. We think we have to perform in order to be accepted, so we start to believe things like: "God will bless me if I'm good." or "In order for God to bless me I have to _____."

In reality - There is nothing we could do to earn Father God's love. Rather than trying to earn it, we instead need to learn to receive the Father's love.

"God doesn't love me any more when I perform well. Our evil cannot diminish His love. Our goodness cannot increase it. Our faith does not earn it any more than our stupidity jeopardizes it. God doesn't love us less when we fail, or more if we succeed. Father's love remains constant." - Max Lucado

3. God is disinterested in you. When this is our view of God, we think He is distant & couldn't care less what we're going through, how we feel, or the pain we're experiencing.

In reality - God is personal. He cares about all the things in our lives, from the little things to the biggest thing. He is eager to demonstrate to you that he loves you. He is not distant or uninterested in who you are. In fact, He cares more than you could imagine.

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4. God is a perfectionist or faultfinder. He is never pleased with what you do. You can try your best, but your best will never be enough.

In reality - he died to love and forgive you. God is holy and he expects excellence, but he is not a perfectionist. In fact, Psalm 103:14 says, "for he knows how we are formed, he remembers we are dust."

We tend to imprint our perfectionistic tendencies upon others. Most of us received our perfectionistic patterns from our parents. If I view God as a perfectionist I'll never be an overcomer because I'll view myself as a failure. I'll feel like God is against me, never for me

A toddler takes 400-700 falls before they actually learn to walk. With each fall they are learning balance. When they finally take a first step there is great celebration, not that they took a hundred steps, but that they took one. That's how God views us. Dr. Alicia Britt Chole says it this way: "We cheer a child's first attempts to stand not because they succeed, but because the effort is evidence that the desire to stand is in their hearts."

5. God is an Angry Judge - When I come to him God is already angry and ready to throw the book at me. Why bother, he's already decided I'm destined for hell.

In reality, God is a righteous judge who longs for every wayward son & daughter to be returned to the father. God is angry at sin, but his posture toward people is that he'd rather save you than judge you. The Bible is a love letter, not a warrant of condemnation.

An example of this is a young lady with an eating disorder who might say, "Oh Jesus don't come now. I'm at my worst. This is my place of shame." His reaction though, with eyes full of love & hurt at her pain would be to wipe her mouth, look her in the eyes and say, " I'm going to help you overcome this."

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6. God is a control freak - If I give my life to him He is going to control me. I will never make another decision on my own. He's going to make me hate my life.

In reality - God is a gentleman. He does not force us to do anything. Control is not loving. God is love. Love always gives a choice. We trust God because he is worthy & has proven himself to us, not because he forces us to.

7. God is religious - He is pleased with outward performance. He cares more about what we do for Him, than the fact that we are his sons and daughters

In reality - God is not interested in religious performance. He was clear with the Israelites about that over & over again in the Old Testament and Jesus was clear about that with the Jewish religious leaders in the New Testament. He loves us because he loves us, not because we do all the right things. God prefers that we prioritize being with him so much more than us doing things for him. To quote Dr, Chole again, "God never wanted to use you. He has always longed to love you."

Q: Which misconception about God do you believe most often? Why do you think that is easy for you to believe?

Read Luke 15:11-31

Q: What are your initial thoughts or questions about this story?

Q: What point do you think Jesus was trying to make by telling this parable?

Jesus told this story to tax collectors & sinners, people that the super religious people didn't think He should waste His time on. Jesus wanted both them, those who were marginalized & ostracized, and us, to understand clearly the Father's heart because God is our Father. He loves us enough to let us choose whether to follow him or go our own way. He won't force us into living day in & out in relationship with him, but we all have some sort of relationship with him, like a son or daughter and a father. When you are ready to be in close relationship with him, he runs toward you, full of grace, and compassion.

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We see that the younger son tries to apologize, to set things right with his father. He acknowledges his sin, his foolishness, his shortcomings. In Chi Alpha language we would say he repented, meaning there was a change of mind, heart, & direction in this son. The depth of the son's repentance is surpassed only by the Father's love. The father received the prodigal fully. He didn't hold anything against him. The fact that the Father ran to him was actually culturally inappropriate. Grown men didn't run, but the father ran toward his son, the one who embarrassed and hurt him. His love hadn't changed. He loved his boy and he was excited to see him. And he showers him with gifts, not of things that are practical or necessary, instead with things that showed the depth of the love he had for his son. They symbolized his standing as a son, not a servant. The father explains why he gives the gifts and welcoming party. He says - "For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."

Now that would be a great ending to the story, right?! But it's not. Obviously the older brother held bitterness in his heart against the younger brother & their father that had built up over time. The father comes out to beg his other son to come in, but the older son felt that the celebration of the younger son was an insult to his faithfulness and obedience. He didn't understand his full rights as a son. He may have done the right things, but his heart was not right. G.Campbell Morgan explains, "His story reveals the possibility of living in the Father's house and yet failing to understand his (Father's) heart." He lived with the Father, but didn't know that he was compassionate and forgiving, loving and gracious. Can you imagine anything worse than receiving the Father's love, but then having to live with the older brother?! While the younger one was foolish and wild, the older son is just as lost, except he is self-righteous and full of pride.

Like the older son, it's possible to do all the right things, but not understand the gracious heart of the Father. We cannot earn God's love. We simply are loved. All we have to do is accept it. The only truly good life is one lived knowing you are loved by the Father.

In the safety of his love you don't have to search for meaning or truth or purpose because you are his, and that God-given identity satisfies all the desires of your heart that you have been trying to fill with meaningless pleasures and pursuits. Did you notice, in the parable, the Father wasn't nearly as interested in what his sons did, as he was in

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the fact that they were his sons. And that's how God feels about you. You are His child. You are His beloved.

When we see God rightly, as this incredibly good Father who runs toward us, we see Him as He truly is. He invites us to sit at His table, to daily feast on Him, in full assurance that He loves us.

Q: What thoughts or questions do you have?

Q: Have you ever considered that love like this is available to you? How do you think your life would change if you could accept God's love?

Pray with one another to see God rightly.