

Healing from a Father Wound

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Wounded Children

The TV program *Sixty Minutes* once interviewed a murderer in prison. When the host asked him about his father, he said that he was a National Football League star, but he added, “He’s not a star at home.” Then he broke down and cried. The father had not had time for his family and ultimately had deserted them. This prisoner had nothing but hate for the man who had withheld his love and had created a giant father wound in a young man who became a killer.

We once invited missionary families to come to our house and discuss an upcoming seminar on MK’s (missionary kids). The next day, one of the mothers, whose children also came, told me that her daughter had said to her, “I didn’t know a father could love his children like Paul did.” All I did was to hold one of them in my lap playfully. Her missionary father had deserted his family while they were in Africa, and she was feeling the wound.

One time a couple came up for prayer after the morning service. They said they loved each other but were separated. The wife confessed, “I guess I find it hard to trust people or God, because my father was mean to me. Now I can’t trust my husband.” The father wound can affect us our whole life if we don’t get it healed up.

A lady who struggled with depression once asked for prayer at a conference in Norway. As a child she would often ask, “Daddy, are you fond of me?” He would joke with her, “Let me see, what day is it?” He laughed—and she cried—inside. Thirty years later she still felt the wound and found it hard to receive God’s love.

A teenager who battled with pornography asked for prayer during a three-day congregational mission. He was a fine young man on his way to a Christian college. He had told his mother about his problem, who, in turn, told the father, an elder in the Bible-believing church. But the father said nothing to the boy, who wondered what his dad thought about him. He had better say something soon, or his son will be coming for counseling in a few years for a different problem, often more serious—a father wound.

Wounds In Bible Characters

Jacob grew up with a father wound. One can easily understand why: “Isaac loved Esau, because he ate of his game; but Rebekah loved Jacob” (Genesis 25:28). God had chosen Jacob, but his father clearly had not, and it didn’t feel good to be in second place. The mama’s boy competed with a more athletic-type brother, scheming for his father’s love and blessing. He eventually came to a place of healing and maturity, but not before he had made some grievous mistakes that almost cost him his life. Many children have grown up feeling like Jacob, that their father or mother loved a sibling more than them.

When Jacob grew up, he did the same thing with his children. He “loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:3,4). No child wants to come in second with Dad, but being a favorite has its liabilities, too. Jacob and Joseph both paid for the favoritism.

King David was a better fighter than he was a father, and it had an effect on his son Absalom. When Absalom killed his half-brother in revenge for raping his sister, he fled home. Even after David was

comforted in the loss of Amnon, he did not bring about the return of Absalom until Joab urged him to do so. Then when Absalom finally returned, David ignored him as if he didn't exist. Had David healed the wound by receiving his son back into his heart and into his home when the fugitive returned, he might have saved his son from death and his own heart from awful grief. But he, like many fathers, seemed immobilized, and he took no action to repair the rift. It almost cost him the throne, and it did mean a bitter end for Absalom, so full of potential, so winsome, so charming, and so full of hate for a man who loved God and who loved women, but didn't know how to love his own son. When David heard the news that Absalom was dead, he cried, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Samuel 18:33).

Sometimes dads seem paralyzed when it comes to reaching out to their children. It is not that they don't love them; they just lack the ability, the sensitivity, or the willingness to make the needed connection.

As a young pastor I used to exhort the parents at my church to be better fathers and mothers. I preached sermons to them on how to be more effective with their children. Then I realized that many of them had a father wound. Trying to tell crippled parents to do a better job is like telling a wounded soldier to get back on the front lines; he needs critical care first. And that is just what a lot of people in the Church need.

Many Suffer from a Father Wound

Children naturally imitate their parents. My children sometimes enjoy jogging with me. When Israel was younger, he used to end up on my shoulders. When I run, I have a habit of spitting. I don't spit at people; I spit into bushes. So when I spit, Israel would spit. But his didn't travel as far as mine—about to the end of my shoulder. I would say, "Israel, don't do that." Then a few blocks later I would forget—and spit. And so would Israel.

When I was coaching my son Andrew's basketball team, we once called a time-out to talk to the players. Joe Lubinski, my assistant, was

reviewing our strategy, and I was listening attentively in a crouched position with my hands on my knees. Israel, then two, left the stands and got right next to me and assumed the exact same posture. I didn't even notice, but his mother grabbed the camera and preserved the moment.

My son wants to be like his dad in every way. He wants to run with me; he even wants to spit like me. God has put it in the heart of children to imitate their parents. They know that Mom is the most beautiful person in the world and that Dad is the strongest. (One little kid said, "My Daddy can beat up your Daddy," to which the other little fellow said, "That's nothing, so can my Mom.")

God wants us to love our parents with all our heart and trust them completely, because according to His plan, parents will be the first to introduce children to a loving heavenly Father. When parents, whom we have every reason to trust, violate that love, it creates confusion and pain. When your heart has been open the most, it creates the deepest and most hurtful wound if torn. When a child concludes that work is more important than he or she is, or another woman, or a hobby or when promises are broken, or relationships severed, or love denied, or common courtesy not extended, or time not given, a father wound can afflict the heart and remain for years. We all crave love, belonging, and acceptance. It is meant to come first in the family. When we receive rejection instead in whatever form, like teasing, harsh words, unfair demands, or avoidance, we wonder if we are worthy of love. And even sadder, we may wonder if God is worthy of love.

I am calling it a "father wound." It may be a mother wound, a pastor wound, or a sibling wound. One lady, who had a brother-wound, once came for ministry after a service. She and her brother were in business together, but he had somehow managed to take it away from her.

The evidence of the wound is often varied. For the killer on Sixty Minutes it was anger. For the lady in Norway it was depression—anger turned in. For the woman in a struggling marriage it was distrust. Other symptoms include inferiority, fear of manhood or womanhood, unexplainable anxiety, or an overly critical attitude.

Why do you suppose that when St. Paul addresses parents for the first time in his letter to the Ephesians, he says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians. 6:4). Because fathers who don’t make caring for their children a top priority will do just that, and their children’s anger won’t go away quickly. Paul told the Colossian fathers, “Do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged” (3:21). I’ve seen a lot of discouraged children (of all ages) since I’ve been sharing this message, and sometimes the discouragement has lasted for decades. Not a happy picture.

One father played ball often with his boy. He would tell him, “Catch the ball ten times in a row and I’ll buy you something.” He’d throw the ball to him nine times, then on the tenth throw he’d make it impossible for the boy to catch it. He thought he was teaching him to try harder. He was, in fact, training him for failure. He was saying in effect, “No matter how hard you try, it won’t be good enough.” He was creating anger rather than incentive, an anger that left the boy feeling as if he’d never make it.

Another father was happy when a son was born after two daughters, because he wanted to raise an athlete, but this boy was not athletic. At the age of twelve, the dad took him to a softball game and yelled, “Watch them! Learn!” After the game he asked his boy, “When are you going to grow up and become a man?” He really meant, “...grow up and become an athlete.” The boy felt his father’s rejection and hated him for it.

One son had hoped his father would some day ask forgiveness for the times he had hurt him. On his deathbed, the father said, “Jim, remember all times I disciplined you and you didn’t deserve it?” Jim leaned in, waiting to hear what he had longed to hear for many years. ‘Finally,’ he thought, ‘Dad is going to make it right.’ The dad went on, “Well, there were times I didn’t spank you when I’m sure you deserved it.” He died moments later and with him the hope for the mending of a broken heart.

It's not just the "bad" fathers that can stir up anger. When I was the principal of a Christian school, a junior high boy whose parents were solid Christians told me through his tears that they teased him about liking girls and that it didn't feel good at all. He was hoping for support but received ridicule instead.

Parents, do whatever you can to connect with your children in a positive way. Listen to them, find out where they are, ask them questions, and take them along with you when you go to the store. Reach out to them, play games with them, pray with them before they go to bed, communicate, communicate, communicate. You'll be glad you did when they thank you years later for loving them, even if they don't always thank you at the moment.

America's answer to this problem has been to say, "We don't need dads." Fathers are mocked and made the brunt of jokes on TV sitcoms. When I was growing up, it was more often the women in the home who were the target of the jokes, "the dumb blond, the scatter-brain broad," Lucy, Gracie and the rest. That's all changed. Today it is Dad. Father no longer knows best; in fact, he's a jerk. When it comes to family matters, dad doesn't have a clue. Even the good father, the Bill Cosby types, are laughed at, and both caricatures are damaging.

At a recent funeral, the pastor greeted us with the apostolic benediction, but with one word changed: "Grace and peace be to you from God our Creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." I thought, 'Where did the Father go?' What shame causes us to correct the Book to accommodate a social mandate? Many in the church and in society don't see the connection between the killer and the father wound, the divorce and the dope, the workaholic and the truancy. But recent sociological studies have been making the linkup. When the data are all in, it will say what God said 2500 years ago, that the land without fathers is under a curse. The last verse of the Old Testament reads that "revival will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:6). The option—the judgment of God. The nation without strong families and strong fathers lives with a curse. Repentance lifts the curse

as fathers return to their greatest assignment—their children. When revival touches down, it affects relationships in the most important institution and building block of society, the home.

Healing From a Father Wound Comes As...

1. We Acknowledge Our Wounding.

When a pastor friend, Joseph Johnson, came to our church for a mission, he ended his message by inviting anyone who needed a hug to come to the front. These people were met by others who had agreed to give hugs to any who felt the need for comfort. I knew that my assistant had experienced some wounding from his father, but on that day he “went public.” He walked forward and was hugged by one of the leaders at Trinity—for twenty minutes, while he cried and cried. He was acknowledging the pain. Emotional reactions, like anger or depression, often anesthetize the hurt, and it is easy to deny or ignore wounding in the past. Allowing ourselves to go past the anger to feel the pain starts the healing process.

After speaking to a group of pastors in Norway, I invited those who needed special encouragement to come up for a hug. I stationed leaders in the front to receive them. We waited—and waited. When no one came, I prepared to sit down. I figured it was probably too hard for Norwegians to expose their needs in this way. Finally, an elderly pastor walked to the front. When he got near to my ministry partner George Johnson, he began to cry and fell into his arms. Then others followed. He told us the next day in broken English: “Tank you for waiting for us. It vas so difficult for us Norvegians—and so important.”

I once preached at a church in the Midwest on keeping score. The worship leader, a young man with a beautiful singing voice, came up afterwards with tears in his eyes. He said, “I guess I’m still trying to find my father’s approval.” He was acknowledging a wound.

Wounds are created not only by erring parents, but also by life experiences over which people have no control. Some missionary kids speak

of the pain at being sent away to a boarding school at an early age. This is the way most missionary societies functioned, but that doesn't help the ten-year old girl sort out feelings of loneliness, isolation, perhaps even betrayal, when she knows she is loved, but yet must say good-bye for another month or two?

A pastor friend of mine was a teenager when his father died of a heart attack. He was an All-Conference wrestling champ, and he toughed out the loss. Twenty years later he acknowledged that he still had a wound, when an older minister at a pastors' retreat said to him, "Come here. Let me give you a hug." And he wept for the grief he felt at losing a dad.

One way to help us come to terms with our wounds is to finish this sentence: Jesus, I wish my father would have_____. I have tried this with a variety of groups. Here are some of the responses: Jesus, I wish my father would have spent time with me... hugged me...told me he loved me...not abandoned us...talked to me...shown me respect...prepared me for adult life...cared enough to listen...been there...not put me down.

We're not bashing dads; we're taking a step toward restoration. What could have been, should have been, might have been—wasn't, and it hurts to think about it. We begin the healing process by acknowledging that the wound is there. Time probably doesn't make it any better, and it may even aggravate it. Too many have lived long years carrying a father wound and have not known how to deal with it. Many people have been lonely or ashamed for an unknown reason, or insecure and have not known why. It may be that they have a wound that needs to be exposed and healed.

2. We Forgive Imperfect Parents.

A young man once came forward after a service. As I began to pray, I envisioned in my mind a picture of a boy being dragged through dirt. I asked him if he had been made to feel unimportant, like dirt. He said, "All my life." I asked him if he wanted to deal with it, and he responded affirmatively, so we went through these steps. I asked him

to write down on a piece of paper what he felt his dad owed him but had not given him. A few minutes later he had his list. I told him that the list was like an IOU. We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). An offense is like a debt owed. I explained to him that when he thought of his father, he would pull out the bill and demand payment, at least in his emotions. That is what it means to carry around unresolved bitterness. We somehow think that we are hurting the people we resent, but, in reality, we are hurting ourselves the most. Anger gone to seed is like a cancer in the soul that grows and poisons our whole life. I told him that forgiveness was often a difficult process and I would understand if he couldn't forgive his dad right away, but if he could, I wanted him to tear up the IOU. I explained that forgiveness is not a feeling; it is a contract. We are agreeing with God to release the offending person to His justice and mercy rather than taking it into our own hands; we are not saying that the person didn't hurt us or that we are releasing him from blame. It made sense and him, and the young man tore up the debt. That night he was praying at the altar for others with a new-found peace on his face.

Forgiveness means tearing up these IOU's we are carrying around. We tell God that those who have hurt us don't owe us anything. (They probably won't pay us back anyway). We release them from any obligation to us and into the hands of God. If people aren't able to forgive, I encourage them to carry the note around as a reminder of what is happening in their hearts. Forgiveness releases us from the negative bond to those who have hurt us so that we can escape from our past and walk into a healthy future.

An older lady almost dragged a girl forward after I had preached on God as our healer. She said, "My friend must get healing." I asked the girl if she wanted it, and she answered, "I must. I am destroying my life."

"Who are you hating?" I asked.

"My mother," she responded. "She's been so cruel to me."

We worked through the process, and she tore up the IOU. Then I introduced her to a counselor at the church who would continue

counseling with her. Forgiveness is often both an event and a process. She took a big step that night by acknowledging the wound, but she would need to keep walking.

One day I was speaking with a woman whose husband had left her and two children for another woman. I explained to her that forgiveness is like tearing up an IOU. Then I told her that she had two choices: either forgiving the debt or carrying it around. When I handed her the bill, she didn't wait for me to explain what to do with it—she ripped it up. As one counselor said, "It is easier to act our way into a new way of feeling than feel our way into a new way of acting." We may not feel forgiveness when we take the step, but it often comes later.

Parents who realize they have caused a wound can, of course, aid in the process by asking forgiveness of their child.

3. We Receive Forgiveness For Imperfect Responses.

We are not responsible for what people do to us, but we are responsible for our responses. One can understand why children carry anger toward parents who betray them. But that doesn't mean it doesn't affect them. So St. Paul writes, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31). When we ask God to forgive us for our wrong responses to the hurts of others, He tenderizes our hearts, making them more open to Him and to others. Unforgiveness blocks us from God's love. Many of those who struggle with receiving God's love are carrying unforgiveness, and it locks up the heart to receiving love. The blood of Jesus brings deep healing to hurting hearts. God "heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds" (Psalm 147:3). It was prophesied of the Messiah that He would be sent "to bind up the brokenhearted" (Isaiah 61:1).

He accomplished it at the cross, where He was afflicted with a Father wound: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole,

and with his stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). His Father wound caused the blood to flow that cleanses guilty sinners and enables them to forgive others. Jesus died for the neglect of the killer’s dad, for the missionary’s desertion, and for our wrong responses. He was “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted,” that the wounds we carry may be healed.

Clearly, we are not addressing the subject of father wounds so we can criticize bad parents; it is just the opposite—we know our own failures. So as we receive God’s grace, we are able to extend it to others who have wounded us.

4. We Receive the Father’s Affirmation.

The Gospels record two times that the Father spoke affirmation from heaven to or about His Son. The first came before Jesus even began His public ministry. God is so affirming; people often aren’t. Many of the wounded are like flowers that have been stomped on and bruised; they need to be built back up, supported, encouraged. No one does this better than “the God of all encouragement.” As we learn to listen to His voice, not the voice of a guilty conscience, the voice of the accuser, or even the voice of other people, we experience the strength of His affirming love. He is like a good father who says to his children, “I am really proud of you. I enjoy being with you. You bring me much happiness. I’m glad you are in our family. Your obedience gives me joy.” The Father’s love far surpasses that of any earthly parent. Paul prays that we can come to understand its height, depth, breadth and length. Those being healed of father wounds are able to receive this love, and they grow to live in its daily delight.

Has your sin or sorrow made you distrust God’s love? He forgives—and He heals.

5. We Seek To Be Like Our Father.

Paul writes, “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Ephesians 5:1). We’ve heard it said before, “Hurt people hurt people.” It’s also true that loved people love people. We are the objects

of our Father's incredible love (literally, His "agapied" children). He is fascinated with us; He can't get us out of His mind. He is like parents of a newborn, staring down in joy, delighting in each movement.

As we accept this kind of compassion into our wounded hearts, we are healed sufficiently to pass the same kind of love on to others. This pleases our Father, who longs to convince a broken world that He is a healing, saving God. And rather than struggling to make God love us because others don't, we relax and receive. Then we are empowered by His grace to be instruments of His love, the love that wept over our pain and overcame it.