

A TOUGH ACT TO FOLLOW**Psalm 103; Galatians 3:39-4:6**

Intro: Fatherhood has many milestones and so does Father's Day.

There is the first time a new dad experiences fatherhood when that first little one is born. Even though this is such a milestone it never loses its wonder as you see each new little one come into the world.

Then there is the first Father's Day when you are honored for what you are and what you aspire to be. And even though you have been contemplating this thing called fatherhood for months, and maybe even years, it is only now that the full weight of what it means to be a dad begins to settle in. And yet there is so little a new dad knows

And then there are the milestones of a child's life that bring joy or pride or sadness or even fear and sometimes all of them all at once. Things like:

The first step . . .

The first fever . . .

First ride without training wheels

The first day of school . . .

The first soccer, hockey, or T-ball game . . .

The first drive in the car . . .

The first date . . .

Graduation . . .

When he or she gets married . . .

That first grandchild . . .

And finally there is the first Father's Day when one is fatherless. . .

I was fortunate. Kathy's dad died three days before her 18th birthday, but I had my dad until I was 41. Perhaps your dad died when you were even younger than that. Perhaps he was never even a part of your life. Perhaps he was there but you were never close. No matter what, a Fatherless Father's Day holds a different set of dynamics – especially if it's the first one.

In the weeks and months after my dad died in December of 1998, I pondered the whole Father thing in a whole new way. All those milestones I mentioned earlier passed through my mind, the most poignant one was, very obviously, he was no longer there.

I remember asking more intentionally, what did he pass on to me and what will I pass on to my children, and eventually, grandchildren? It didn't take long for me to realize that I had a tough act to follow.

My dad was extraordinary person. He was Daddy to all of us. I remember when she was little, Emily once asked me why we called him Daddy. She was puzzled by the fact that we as mature men and women didn't call him Dad or something less childish than Daddy. It was because, truth be told, he just always would be Daddy. He was always the care giver, the wise word, the encouraging word, the admonishing word – even to his adult children. He was . . . Daddy.

The ironic thing about all this is that Daddy only knew his own Daddy for eight short years. His father died of pneumonia when Daddy was less than nine years old. When his mother remarried a few years later – in a more or less arranged marriage orchestrated by her church leadership, Daddy's step-father proved to be, putting it very nicely, a very poor example of a father. By the way, I did not hear that from my dad, who rarely, if ever, spoke ill of anyone.

In the end, Daddy learned how to be a daddy mostly on his own. Sure, he had the example of a wonderful father that he only knew for such a short time and he had a very godly grandfather with whom he spent a lot of time as he grew up, but in a lot of ways Daddy learned on his own.

How did he do that? And how, if you did not have a father that you remember, or if you did have a father that you do remember, but he was someone you want to forget, how do you know what a good Dad is? What is the pattern? Look to the Word for the pattern. What we find there is a tough act to follow too, but it's doable. Let's look at our text for today, which Karen read earlier, and pull a few of these good Dad pointers out. I'll make a short comment on a few and then finish with a lengthy story that is the icing on the cake. First. . .

Dads forgive v. 3

- Our heavenly Father forgives all our sins according to v 3. Not just some. ALL! The other night at VBS I did a great object lesson (Describe iodine/bleach) When we ask, God forgives – completely. Dad’s need to model forgiveness as well.

Dads are compassionate vv. 4 & 13

- God is – dads must be too. But look at the responsibility here on the part of God’s children and children in general. Compassion deserves reverence in return. All too often I see irreverence toward dads – especially from Hollywood. Too often fathers are treated as little more than buffoons. Let’s not take a cues from Hollywood.

Dads provide v. 5

- I think we were pretty poor as we were growing up. Nobody told me that and I never felt it, but looking back, I’m pretty certain we were. My parents never let on a lack of money, and Daddy always provided. God satisfies all our desires. Dad’s need to make sure that needs are cared for.

Dads are just v. 6

- (When Daddy didn’t spank me). God doesn’t treat us as our sins deserve – neither should dads.

Not only are dad’s compassionate, but they are gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love v. 7 – 11

- The old song says *Grace, grace, God’s grace. Grace that will pardon and cleanse within. Grace, grace, God’s grace. Grace that is greater than all our sin.* That’s pretty great. Dads should be so gracious
- God is slow to anger, and he doesn’t harbor anger. I think once of the biggest issues in society today, and too often in Fatherhood, is the issue of anger. Let it go Dads!!!
- Notice in verse 8 that God is abounding in love. In Ephesians 5, Paul admonishes husbands to love their wives. And we reply, “But of course we love them! Don’t we?” And the point is, we need to take our cues from our heavenly father and love MORE. Dads, can you say, “I LOVE YOU!”?
- And finally . . .

Dad’s leave a legacy of blessing v. 17 & 18

- *But from everlasting to everlasting, the Lord’s love is with those who fear him,* Psalm 103:17. Everlasting to everlasting is a long time! Think about that kind of faithfulness dads.
- A couple weeks ago Kathy and I had breakfast with a man who had discovered in his adulthood some very disheartening information about his father. He didn’t elaborate, but it clearly had resulted in broken trust and a nearly, completely severed relationship where there had previously been a close, father/son bond. The pain on his stoic, Native American face was obvious. I just need to say this dads, leave a legacy of blessing dads.
- The perfect illustration of all these characteristics can be found in in Luke 15 in the story of the Prodigal Son – which by the way is often a parallel passage for our text, Psalm 103. In Luke 15 we find a dad who could have been justified in at least coldly receiving his son home from his far off country wonderings, but instead as the young man comes home his father was out in the street waiting for him. Phil Yancey tells a similar story that I’m going to close out with. It’s kind of long but so powerful – sit back and listen.

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents a bit old tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. “I hate you!” she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play. Because newspapers in Traverse City report in lurid detail the gangs, the drugs, and the violence in downtown Detroit, she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she’s ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she’s ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car—she calls him “Boss”—teaches her a few things that men like. Since she’s underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline “Have you seen this child?” But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends are runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. “These days, we can’t mess around,” he growls, and before she knows it she’s out on the street without a penny to her name. She still turns a couple of tricks a night, but they don’t pay much, and all the money goes to support her habit. When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. “Sleeping” is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in down town Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she’s hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she’s piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

“God, why did I leave?” she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. My dog back home eats better than I do now. She’s sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, “Dad, Mom, it’s me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I’m catching a bus up your way, and it’ll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you’re not there, well, I guess I’ll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada.”

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn’t she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her father. “Dad, I’m sorry. I know I was wrong. It’s not your fault; it’s all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?” She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn’t apologized to anyone in years.

The bus has been driving with lights on since Bay City. Tiny snowflakes hit the pavement rubbed worn by thousands of tires, and the asphalt steams. She’s forgotten how dark it gets at night out here. A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves. Every so often, a billboard. A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. Oh, God.

When the bus finally tolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone “Fifteen minutes, folks. That’s all we have here.” Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips and wonders if her parents will notice. If they’re there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepares her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They’re all wearing goofy

party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech "Dad, I'm sorry. I know . . ."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

Conclusion: That's a picture of our heavenly Father and Dads that a good pattern to follow. Your kids need a Christ Following dad. Paul tells us *If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. What I am saying is that as long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave, although he owns the whole estate. He is subject to guardians and trustees until the time set by his father. So also, when we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."* Galatians 3:29 – 4:6 (NIV)

That name "Abba" is Aramaic for Daddy. We have a real Dad and he's a tough act to follow – we can do it, he made it that way. Amen.

The prayer circle is available up front here for anyone needs to pray or be prayed for.