

# LEANING INTO GOD'S LOVE

## WEEK 1

"That is who God has revealed himself to be: not first and foremost Creator or Ruler, but Father... The most foundational thing in God is not some abstract quality, but the fact that he is Father."  
Mike Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*

"You sum up the whole of New Testament religion if you describe it as the knowledge of God as one's holy Father. If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.... 'Father' is the Christian name for God."  
J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*

"What would it feel like in your heart to know that God not only accepts you but that he also richly enjoys you? To know that your company is his pleasure, your fellowship his joy, your face his delight? What effect would such a viewpoint have on how you think about God, yourself, and others? How would that belief shape your view of all things—even how you chart the whole course of your life?" Scotty Smith, *Objects of His Affection*

### Why This Topic?

- Our view of God affects every aspect of our life. A. W. Tozer wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." Our walk with God, trust in God, and obedience to God is directly affected by our view of God. As we think of God as a good, loving Father we will then trust and love him as beloved children.
- Too many people view God the Father as the "bad cop" and God the Son as "the good cop." Too many people—even in the Church—wrongly think of God the Father as harsh, distant, or cold.
- Because there are hindrances and obstacles—whether from spiritual temptation or fallen earthly figures—that can subtly twist our thoughts of God the Father and disrupt our relationship with him.
- There is a human longing for love that is only fulfilled through the love of Triune God. All other loves are snacks compared to this feast. We will not rest until we rest in the love of God, and when we rest in God's love, we can rest in and through anything. As Augustine famously wrote, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."
- Experiencing the love of God is how we are changed, mature, and can in turn love others well. We can only love well when we know we are loved well. God's love changes us and provides the stability, security, and rest that helps free us from insecurity, lack of assurance, guilt and shame, and many other spiritual temptations.

"The love of Christ, being the love of God, is effective and fruitful in producing all the good things which He wills for His beloved. He loves life, grace and holiness into us; He loves us into covenant, loves us into heaven." John Owen

## A Few Important Things to Remember

### 1. God is Triune.

What we learn about the love of the Father is seen in the Son and Spirit and true of the Son and Spirit.

- a. All three persons share the same divine attributes.
- b. All three persons of the Trinity are all involved in God's works, will, and acts. The New Testament does highlight specific actions of each person in the Trinity as we experience their work. For example, we're told the Father chooses us and sends the Son, the Son dies to pay for sin, and the Spirit convicts us of sin and regenerates our hearts. Wherever we see or consider one, we should recognize how all three participate.  
"No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One." Gregory of Nazianzus (4<sup>th</sup> century)
- c. The invisible Father is known through the incarnate Son, who is the exact image of his Father. Jesus helps us more clearly grasp what God is like. We read that God is compassionate in the Old Testament, and even see his compassion to Israel in their sin, but there's something so personal, compelling, and tangible about what this compassion looks like "in the flesh" when Jesus feels it for a widowed mother who loses her only son, and then he raises the son to give him back to his mother (Luke 7:11-17).
- d. Therefore, when I talk about the Father in this class specifically, I am not trying to minimize or exclude the Son or Spirit but want to shine a spotlight specifically on the Father.

### 2. God is all his attributes all the time.

God is not a conflicted being where his mercy and wrath are at odds with one another and he has to pick one in any given circumstance. God is all his attributes perfectly and seamlessly. This is known as [divine simplicity](#), which isn't to say that God is simple like we might think of simple, but that he is not made up of parts. Matthew Barrett writes: "God is not made up of parts, nor is he compounded or composite in nature. That means he does not possess attributes, as if his attributes are one thing and his essence another. Rather, his essence is his attributes and his attributes his essence. God *is* his attributes."<sup>1</sup>

This is important because we can think of God in a distorted way by pitting his attributes against one another or making him a conflicted being. God is all his attributes all the time and they work in tandem as one rather than conflict or compete. "Given divine simplicity, it is imperative that we integrate all the different elements of biblical revelation with one another. Simplicity prohibits us from isolating the attribute of divine love from God's other attributes. Indeed, we cannot rightly understand any one of God's attributes apart from the rest."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Barrett, "Divine Simplicity," <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/divine-simplicity/>

<sup>2</sup> Garry Williams, *His Love Endures Forever: Reflections on the Immeasurable Love of God*. (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016).

When we think about God as our Father, we can skew our view of God by emphasizing some attributes while ignoring others. If we think of God in terms of holiness, transcendence (meaning he is beyond us and above us), glory, and righteousness but we fail to consider his patience, mercy, grace, and gentleness we will have a cold and angry God. Or, if we only think of God in terms of being “a God of love” and we don’t think of him as righteous and just, we have a sort hippie in the sky who just wants peace and love and will overlook all the sin and problems of the world. God is all that God is all the time and perfectly, in the way that only God can be.

### **3. “God’s love” in Scripture can include different aspects and depths of his love.**

The Bible doesn’t talk about God’s love the same way every time, or that he loves various things or people in the exact same way. The Bible speaks of God’s general love for the world and all that’s in it, but the Bible speaks about a unique, personal, steadfast, and gracious love he has for his people. Most of the Bible’s language about God’s love is directed at his people and not true of those who are not his people.

For a helpful read, see “[5 Key Realities the Bible Teaches about God’s Love](#)” by D. A. Carson at [crossway.org](http://crossway.org).

### **4. The relationship between the heavenly Father and earthly fathers is crucial to understand God’s love.**

God is the ideal Father and earthly fathers follow the pattern of him, not the other way around. The father to child relationship helps us understand aspects of God the Father’s love, but because of the failures, weaknesses, and imperfections of earthly fathers, this pattern can also twist and confuse the kind of Father that God is. We need to understand where there is overlap and where there are differences, but earthly parents (at their best and when they most reflect God) can be a great window into experiencing God’s love.

“Unfortunately, we tend to define the archetype by the types; we confuse the shadows with the substance. For instance, we take our experience of our earthly father’s love and project it back onto God, when in reality we need to look first at God our Father to see what an earthly father is meant to be.” Scotty Smith

“You realize, don’t you, that God designed the father-child relationship in order to teach us about him? Our sovereign God did not simply seize on it as a convenient illustration; he designed it with his relationship to us in mind.” Jamie Dunlop in “[How God’s Father-Love Could Change Your Life](#)” at [thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org)

## **Hindrances to Knowing God as a Loving Father**

# **1. Undermining and warping our view of and trust in God as our good Father was Satan's original temptation for humanity in the Garden and he continues to tempt us like this today.**

Satan's tactics are the same today as they were in the Garden (Gen. 3). He wants to stir up mistrust about God's goodness, kindness, love, and care. He wants to plant seeds of doubt about whether God will provide, if God truly loves us, if God sees and knows what we're going through, or if God has good plans for us. Our Enemy wants us to think God's boundaries are too restrictive and there's something out there that can make us happy he's not telling us about. He tells us that God has left us on our own and we must figure things out, handle it ourselves, or find help from someone other than our Father. Satan twists the words of God and sows seeds of doubt about God in order to turn our hearts away from him.

"The lie of the serpent in the Garden of Eden was that God is an uncaring Father and so we should go it alone. Satan didn't dispute the existence of God nor his power. The lie was that God doesn't care. All the evidence was to the contrary. God had placed Adam and Eve in a place of security and plenty—and given them the fruit of every tree except one. His provision was complete. Yet humanity believed the lie that God is distant and uncaring. We still do. Still today, says Jesus, our problem is that we lack faith (v 28). We don't believe God cares. We think of him as distant. We see this world as unfathered." Tim Chester, *Enjoying God*

"It is, [John] Bunyan says, the devil's work to promote a fear of God that makes people afraid of God such that they want to flee from God. The Spirit's work is the exact opposite: to produce in us a wonderful fear that wins and draws us to God." Michael Reeves, *Rejoice and Tremble*

Nothing is "more grievous to the Lord, nor more subservient to the design of Satan' than for believers to have such 'hard thoughts' of God." John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*

## **\*\*Group Discussion**

Read Genesis 3:1–7 together out loud and then discuss the following questions. (Keep in mind the context of God's fatherly relationship to Adam and Eve—who he loves, provides for, and gives wise instructions to—and how the serpent's words, questions, and accusations aim to create mistrust.)

1. What are some of the ways Satan tried to cast doubt on God's character, goodness, or provision or create a sense of mistrust or uncertainty in Adam and Eve's mind about God?
2. How does the serpent erode trust in God from the children by pressing on God's boundaries, rules, and plan for them?
3. How does their view of God—and think in terms of him as their Father—shift in this short exchange?
4. In what way does their sin and idolatry find its root in failing to trust, rest in, and obey their Father?
5. How are temptation and idolatry for us often rooted in wrong thoughts about God or a mistrust of him as a loving and wise Father? Can you think of an example where specific temptations, doubts, or struggles connect to wrong thinking about God as your Father and what that means?

6. How we might we apply this then when it comes to fighting doubts, lies, temptations, and idols by remembering who God really is as our Father and what that means for us as his children?
7. What role might God's promises play in standing firm on who God is and who he is for us when we're discouraged, thinking wrongly, or tempted to believe lies about God or ourselves?

**2. We can import onto God our experiences from people (authority figures, parents, or leaders).**

"Undealt with wounds from the past can limit and distort our experience of God's love. Like a broken bone that was never set, a broken heart, in time, can throw everything out of whack and define how we walk or limp through life and the knowledge of God. It is as we learn the relationship between our sinfulness and our woundedness that we begin to understand how our hearts serve, as John said, as 'idol factories.' We create substitutes for the love of God and the God of love." Scotty Smith, *Objects of His Affection*

"Growing to know God as a Father means dropping our guard and letting the goodness of God heal our wounds. My father has not been present, but my heavenly Father is omnipresent. For some, their father might have put his desires for money, power, or sex over the needs of his family. God, however, is a Father who will never fail us." Callie Sivils<sup>3</sup>

- 3. Undealt with suffering, grief, spiritual doubts and questions, wounds in the faith, past trauma, or other things can affect our view of God if ignored or not processed and responded to biblically.**
- 4. The love of God described in the Bible can seem too good to be true because no human beings love one another like God loves us (perfectly, with such grace, unconditionally, etc.).**
- 5. Bad theology or bad teaching.**
- 6. Idolatry—making a god in our own image or according to how we think he should be.**

"And it is not just that we are quick to replace the living God with gods of our devising: the world is already filled with innumerable, often wildly different candidates for 'God.' Some are good, some are not. Some are personal, some are not. Some are omnipotent, some are not." Mike Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*

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<sup>3</sup> "[Absent Dad, Present Father](#)," by Callie Sivils at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org)

## 7. Ongoing sin can impact our relationship with God.

- Unconfessed sin disrupts our experience of God's love and fellowship with him.
- Even when we confess our sin, we can let guilt or shame hang around and hinder our walk with God.
- We can be so in love with the world that we think little of or do not experience God's love.

## 8. Some of us simply struggle to receive love or believe we are loved.

# Understanding God's Fatherly Love

## 1. What is Love?

- "Love" can lose its meaning because we use it so often and so broadly today. We love everything from ice-cream to friends to God.  
"While we still probably understand the meaning behind the way we're using it in any given situation, all the repetition is having a formative effect on us—the word *love* doesn't always hit us the way that it should and in the way that the Bible often intends it to hit us when it's speaking of the way to love God and others....Because of the way that our culture tends to think of love—almost off-hand or flippantly—when it comes to being told *God loves you*, it can fail to land on us with the beauty and significance that it should."<sup>4</sup> Jen Wilkin
- "Love" can be used in a fluffy, over-sentimentalized way that has little specificity or depth to it. Love today might be more of a feeling, or love is reduced to only what others feel like is loving to them.

"The love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized." D. A. Carson, "Distorting the Love of God?" in *The Love of God*

- Christians can hear about "God's love" and still think in terms of something God must do—act lovingly toward us—but not believe God loves us in the sense of liking us.

"I find the term 'kindness' really helpful when I'm thinking about God the Father. 'Love' is such a big word and it can embrace a rather formal caring. We could, for example, use it to describe a father who worked hard to provide for his family, but never showed any interest or delight in his children. Maybe this is how you think of God the Father. He's good and he does the right thing. He loves you in the sense of providing for you. But you think of him as distant or detached. If so, think of his kindness. Let the word play on your imagination. God is kind. He shows us kindness." Tim Chester, *Enjoying God*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/how-culture-can-warp-our-view-of-gods-love/>

- God's love is no shallow, insignificant, cold, or vague idea thing. For just an appetizer of what the Bible tells us about God's love, we're told God's love is better than life (Ps. 63:3). Only by tasting God's love can we then pass on his love to others (1 John 4:16). It's described as precious or priceless, a strong refuge we can hide in (Ps. 36:7). God's love is enduring (Ps. 136; 1 Chron. 16:34), unfailing (Ps. 107:8-9; 109:26; Is. 54:10), everlasting (Jer. 31:3), undeserved and unmerited (Rom. 5:8), generous and gracious (John 1:12; 3:16), lavished on us (Rom. 5:5), sacrificial and selfless (John 15:13), compassionate (Ps. 86:15), covenantal and faithful (Deut. 7:9), caring (1 Peter 5:7), patient (Ps. 86:15), and forgiving (Neh. 9:17). As we think about God's love, let's let the Bible inform our understanding of this rich and life-giving reality that belongs to us as God's children.

## **2. God *the Father's* Love: What's Involved in God as our Father**

Though we should be careful not to limit or misunderstand what it means for God to be Father by the imperfections, limits, and failures of earthly parents, we do get a glimpse of what it means for God to be Father through earthly fathers (and mothers), especially when they most imitate God.

"While it certainly includes appropriate exercise and expectations of authority, is commonly also associated with love, care, compassion, provision, protection and sustenance.... In reflecting on how God behaved toward them, Israel found it natural to use the imagery of human parenthood as a way of describing the character and actions of God. God's protective, supportive, compassionate and forgiving stance toward human beings could readily be portrayed by analogy with the best of human fathers."<sup>5</sup>

God is not simply like a father or fatherly. God is a Father. Tim Chester writes, "'Father' is not a metaphor. We're not saying God is a bit like human fathers. Throughout all eternity God is Father because eternally he has a Son."<sup>6</sup> This is not just one way to understand God, but it's at the core of who God is. Mike Reeves explains:

"That is who God has revealed himself to be: not first and foremost Creator or Ruler, but Father...The most foundational thing in God is not some abstract quality, but the fact that he is Father... Since God is, before all things, a Father, and not primarily Creator or Ruler, all his ways are beautifully fatherly. It is not that this God 'does' being Father as a day job, only to kick back in the evenings as plain old 'God. It is not that he has a nice blob of fatherly icing on top. He is Father. All the way down. Thus all that he does he does as Father. That is who he is. He creates as a Father and he rules as a Father; and that means the way he rules over creation is most unlike the way any other God would rule over creation."<sup>7</sup>

Because Jesus is our elder brother, his Father becomes our Father. Jesus reveals God to us not just as Creator or Ruler but as Father in a unique way (Matt. 6:9; John 15:9). Our identity is as God's

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Chester, *Enjoying God*.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*.

children (John 1:12; 1 John 3:1). When we pray and approach God, we do as beloved children coming to their loving Father (Eph. 1:3-5). We receive the intimacy and privilege of adoption (Rom. 8; Gal. 4). Our Father knows our needs (Matt. 6:8, 26), provides for us (Luke 11:13; John 15:16), and protects and defends us (Matt. 18:12-14). He looks on us with joy, pleasure, and delight (Zeph. 3:17; Deut. 32:10; Matt. 3:16-17).

### **Biblical Fatherhood<sup>8</sup>**

“Human fatherhood is modeled on the fatherhood of God. As Paul writes, “every fatherhood in heaven and on earth” is named after God the Father (Eph. 3:15). What are some of the characteristics of a father described in Scripture?

- **Gentleness and compassion:** “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the Lord shows compassion to those who fear him” (Ps. 103:13).
- **Wisdom and instruction:** “Hear, O sons, a father’s instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight, for I give you good precepts; do not forsake my teaching” (Prov. 4:1-2).
- **Discipline:** “For the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights” (Prov. 3:12).
- **Love:** “Jesus answered him, ‘If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him’” (John 14:23). “For the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God” (John 16:27). “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1).
- **Exhortation and Encouragement:** “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thess. 2:10-12).
- **Protection:** “The Lord watches over the sojourners; he upholds the widow and the fatherless, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (Psalm 146:9).
- **Provision:** “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt. 7:7-11)

Being a father is a high calling, a way to image our loving heavenly Father who loves and cares for His children better than any earthly father can hope to. Those of us who are fathers should feel the gravity of this calling. When we fail to love as our heavenly Father does, let’s keep repenting and trusting in Jesus, who has adopted us into the family of God the Father. Even when we are faithless, He remains faithful (2 Tim. 2:13) . . . just like a good father.”

## **3. Aspects of God’s Love to Frame Our Understanding**

*Though more about God’s love will be unearthed each week, part of the goal here is to take a somewhat vague word today and shape and fill in the details with how the Bible describes God’s love.*

### **1) God is love.**

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<sup>8</sup> “[The Father of Fathers](#)” by Justin Holcomb at [biblicalcounselingcoalition.org](http://biblicalcounselingcoalition.org)



God doesn't simply choose to be loving some of the time, but God is love all the time and that love is part of everything he is, says, does, and plans. There is no hidden corner of God that's not fully saturated with the kind and joyful love of God. God has always been loving—and as the Triune God has always been in a relationship of love and delight—and will never not be loving. When Jesus wants us to think about God's love for us as our Father, he tells the story of the prodigal son and how the Father runs out with joy over his lost son returning (Luke 15). It is a gracious, celebratory, and affectionate love.

- “God is love.” (1 John, 4:8, 16)
- “The God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Cor. 13:11)
- “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Cor. 13:14)

“Yea, and as this love is peculiarly to be eyed in him, so it is to be looked on as the *fountain* of all following gracious dispensations... Now, this ought to be so far away, that his love ought to be looked on as the fountain from whence all other sweetnesses flow.”<sup>9</sup> John Owen

## **2) God's love is gracious.**

God's love is unmerited, undeserved, and unprovoked, meaning God does not love us because of anything good, lovely, or desirable in us. God chooses to love us despite how far from him we are as finite creatures, despite our sinfulness, weakness and frailty, and the many ugly things he sees in us each day. God's gracious love is a free and undeserved gift.

God does not love us as a response to our love to him. God loves us first. He initiates, pursues, and draws near to us when we are far from him. His love to us is the foundation of our relationship toward him. And all this is true while God has full knowledge of who you are. God is aware of who you are. Nothing is hidden from him. He sees the real you. And yet he loves you.

“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8)

“In love <sup>5</sup> he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will.” (Eph. 1:4-5)

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” (1 John 4:10)

“Love to God, wherever it really exists, has been created in the bosom by a belief of God's love to us. No man loves God till he knows that God loves him; and every believer loves God for this reason first and chiefly, that God loves him.” Charles Spurgeon

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<sup>9</sup> John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, 110.

“We didn’t ruin God’s plan; we are his plan, his eternal plan to love the undeserving, for the display of his glory alone... Those places of deepest shame are where the Lord Jesus loves us the most tenderly.” Ray Ortlund, *The Gospel*

### **3) God’s love is steadfast.**

God’s love is a committed, covenantal, unbreakable, and unchanging love. God’s love is steady. It does not wane or waver over time, depending on how we act, or changing from one day to the next. This is one of the most common descriptions of God’s love in the Bible (see Ps. 136; 63:3; Ezra 3:11-12; Lam. 3:22-23; Is. 54:10). God does not change his mind, his commitment, or his affections to the children in his family. We never have to worry about God losing his patience with us and abandoning us, throwing in the towel, or ignoring us. He is faithful. His love will never run dry, slow down, or fade away.

“For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” (Ps. 100:5)

*“Higher than the mountains that I face, Stronger than the power of the grave  
Constant through the trial and the change, One thing remains, yes, one thing remains  
Your love never fails, It never gives up, It never runs out on me.”*

“One Thing Remains” by Jesus Culture

“The only love that won’t disappoint you is one that can’t change, that can’t be lost, that is not based on the ups and downs of life or of how well you live. It is something that not even death can take away from you. God’s love is the only thing like that.” Tim Keller

“The love of God is like himself—equal, constant, not capable of augmentation [enlargement] or diminution [shrinking]; our love is like ourselves—unequal, increasing, waning, growing, declining. His, like the sun, is always the same in its light, though a cloud may sometimes interpose; ours, as the moon, has its enlargements and straitenings.” John Owen

### **4) God’s love is joyful, generous, warm, and kind.**

God is by nature a God of joy, delight, goodness, generosity, kindness, and warmth. There is intimacy and friendship in his love as the Father wraps his heart and his arms around his sons and daughters. Think of God’s love in the best, deepest, purest, and highest vision you have of that word, which would certainly be a heartfelt, passionate, joyful, warm, and kind love. If you’re a parent, think of how you feel toward your children—when you’re at your best—and then let that be a small window into understanding God’s love.

“As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.” (Ps. 16:3)

“The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” (Zeph. 3:17)

“And the sonship that God has given us is not a mere name; there is all our Father's great heart given to us in the moment when he claims us as his sons.” Charles Spurgeon

“If you’re in Christ, you always bring pleasure to the Father. He sees you and smiles with delight.” Tim Chester, *Enjoying God*

“I find the term ‘kindness’ really helpful when I’m thinking about God the Father. ‘Love’ is such a big word and it can embrace a rather formal caring. We could, for example, use it to describe a father who worked hard to provide for his family, but never showed any interest or delight in his children. Maybe this is how you think of God the Father. He’s good and he does the right thing. He loves you in the sense of providing for you. But you think of him as distant or detached. If so, think of his kindness. Let the word play on your imagination. God is kind. He shows us kindness.” Tim Chester, *Enjoying God*

“Love is the lover’s delight in his beloved. Love is an affection of the heart delighting itself in someone (or something).” Augustine

### **Examples of God’s love**

- God’s nearness in prayer
- God’s tenderness & compassion in our weakness
- God’s being with us and carrying us in trials and comfort in our pain
- God’s revelation of himself to us so he is known and there is relationship
- God’s fighting for us as his people
- God’s concern for our joy and desire to see us out of trouble or corruption
- God’s faithfulness to teach us and train us for our good and growth
- God’s sending of his Son to save and reconcile us
- God’s provision for our needs...and blessings
- God’s comfort & strength through his promises
- God’s mercy to us in our sin and compassion to us in our weakness
- God’s commitment to us in training, disciplining, and teaching us as children

### **Experiencing and Trusting the Father’s Love**

#### **1. Think rightly about God, which means, allow the Bible to inform your understanding of the kind of Father God is and the kind of love he has for us.**

Don’t let circumstances be the filter by which you understand God. (Example: God didn’t answer this prayer right away, therefore God doesn’t care about me.) Let the Bible be the authoritative filter by which you see who God is and what he’s like. (Example: God hasn’t answered my prayer yet—that I’ve seen—but I trust that God loves me, knows what is best for me, has good plans for me, and is at work in ways I can’t always see.)

Don’t let your earthly experiences of human shortcomings, failures, or cultural assumptions about love inform your understanding of God’s love. Don’t import onto God what he must be like based on an earthly figure. Fight back lies, doubts, and questions with truths and promises. Root out false

thinking about God. Work through trauma and trials in your life that you think are negatively impacting your relationship with God.

“I've spent all my life thinking God's relentless pursuit of me was to catch me in sin. And while it's true, he cares deeply about my sin, his relentless pursuit has always been to show me how much I'm loved. He isn't chasing me around for a whipping. He's chasing me for a hug.” Lore Ferguson Wilbert

## **2. Seek to know God and his love by getting to know who he is and what he's like, by listening to his voice, and by spending time with him through time in the Word and prayer.**

Every good relationship requires time, honest conversation, and getting to know what the person is like. Since God reveals what he's like and speaks to us primarily through the Bible, we cannot experience his love unless we're growing in the knowledge of who he is. As we immerse ourselves in the Bible, reading biblically saturated books, singing God-centered songs, and talking with other believers about our God, we put ourselves in the path of God and fill our minds and hearts with the knowledge of him. Religious practices, conversation, and biblical truths by themselves don't automatically or always lead to an “experience” of God's love—as many people know about God without knowing God—but we will not know him apart from these things.

Don't begin with seeking a subjective experience or waiting for an experience, but begin by learning more about who God is, believing it, meditating on it, trusting him in the daily trials of life, and living your day by “practicing his presence” through remembering him and his nearness to you at all times.

Too often we express frustration or disappointment about not experiencing God's love more, and yet, when we're honest, we haven't given a lot of dedicated, undistracted time to getting to know God.

As you read God's Word, and even as you reflect on God's activity in your life, take note of where you see his provision, mercy, grace, kindness, faithfulness, generosity, nearness, patience, and care for you. Look out for examples and evidences of his love in the Word, the world, and your life. Remember these things when he feels distant so that truth rather than feeling informs your thoughts of God and his track record.

## **3. Confess any known sin so that sin is not a barrier to fellowship with God.**

While God's love doesn't increase or decrease based upon our obedience to him, sin does get in the way of our experience of God's love. It's like a cloud that fogs our vision of who God is. [Confession and repentance](#)<sup>10</sup> that lead to clinging to the gospel are the means by which this relational junk is removed so there's nothing between us and God.

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<sup>10</sup> See “[I Confess \(It's Easy to Neglect\)](#)” by Dustin Crowe at [thegospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org)

Jesus told us that the way we abide in his love includes both remember the things he spoke to us (the Word) and by keeping his commandments. We follow Jesus and experience fellowship with Jesus, and we should not think that we can simply disobey God and choose our own way while still experiencing his love. Not only that, but obeying God's commands is in part how we reflect God, including his love. As we reflect God's love in our love to others, we experience his love to us in powerful ways.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." (John 15:9-11)

#### **4. Pray for the Spirit to direct your heart into the love of God.**

Ask God to draw near, to pour out his love into your heart, and to help you see and know him. As you spend time in the Word learning about him, take time in prayer to talk back to him. Pray back the Word or even what you learn about him in praise and thanksgiving. Talk to him about how you need him to be present in your life in specific ways tied to who he is. Wait on him in quiet, solitude, and without distractions. Get alone for dedicated time to experience the refreshment of his love, just like Jesus often did.

"In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God." (Luke 6:12)

"May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ." (2 Thess. 3:5)

"and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. <sup>6</sup> For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— <sup>8</sup> but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom. 5:5-8)

#### **5. Seek the subjective experience of God without making a feeling determinative of God's love for you.**

Knowing God isn't entirely a subjective personal experience, but that is part of knowing God. And it is the desire and longing of our heart. As Christians, we should seek the nearness and presence of God. We shouldn't settle for information about God, religious participation, or practice of spiritual disciplines without ever tasting the goodness and presence of the Lord. This is part of what we wait and pray for, and this subjective, affectionate or emotional, and experiential side of communion with God is important (though it's not everything).

But, the Christian life is first about faith and not feelings. We live by faith that God is love and that he loves us in Christ, so we believe and trust it, even when we don't see it or feel it. We might want

to experience God in more powerful or personal ways—which is good—but we can’t demand this or think our time in seeking to know God is a waste if it doesn’t happen. Most relationships consist of thousands of little, even mundane moments and interactions that build trust, knowledge, and intimacy, and the felt sense of connection can even be rare. If that’s true for human beings we see, it’s all the more true for the invisible God. Be thankful for and remember those times of God’s nearness to you, but ultimately, whether it’s there or not live by faith and trust in who the Bible tells you God is and who you know him to be from your life. Rejoice and rest on the truth of who he is—whether you “feel” it or not—and then, sometimes, the feelings follow our faith.

"Though you have not seen Him, you love Him, and though you do not see Him now, but believe in Him, you greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory." (1 Peter 1:8)

Don’t try to experience God’s love apart from knowing how God has revealed himself to us in the Bible, and then meditating on, believing, trusting, and abiding in these truths about God as a means of knowing him. Don’t make knowledge merely a matter of knowing facts about God or participating in religious activities. In other words, don’t leave out the subjective experience at all. Seek to experience God’s love and taste it (Ps. 34:8) without making that a demand or prerequisite of abiding in God’s love. Don’t over sentimentalize God’s love or make it too subjective, as if God’s love for you is dependent on your feeling it and experiencing it.

Commenting on Romans 5:5–8, John Piper explains how experiential knowledge and factual knowledge must go hand-in-hand.<sup>11</sup>

“Another way to say it is that this Spirit-worked experience — and it *is* an experience! — is given to us by the Spirit *through historical facts*. There is a *knowledge* component to this experience and there are real *facts* behind the knowledge...

Now think about this. Is the love of God *shown to us historically* in the death of Christ for us to study and think about and know as objective fact? Or is the love of God *poured out in our hearts experientially* by the Holy Spirit? And, of course, the answer is that Paul will not let us choose between these. He will not let us break these things in two.

We dare not choose between them or make them antagonistic to each other. The love of God is *experienced in the heart*. And the love of God is *demonstrated in history*. There is *fact*, and there is *feeling*. There is *knowledge in the head* and there is *affection in the heart*. There is *truth* and there is *Spirit*.

And the key question is, How are they related? On the basis of the relation between verse 5 and verses 6-8 I say, *the Holy Spirit takes the historical facts of the Christ’s death and opens the eyes of our heart to see the all-satisfying divine beauty of the love of God in it. And thus by the spiritual sight of God’s love in the work of Christ, he pours that love into our hearts.*

It is not an experience like electricity. It is a mediated experience. It has factual content. And therefore when it comes, it isn’t like some vague, New Age out-of-body experience, or some hypnotic state, or some ecstatic condition produced by emptying your head. It is being filled with the glory of the love of God shown in the God-man Christ Jesus who died because of our sins and rose because of our justification.”

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<sup>11</sup> “[How to Experience the Outpouring of God’s Love](#)” sermon by John Piper at [desiringgod.org](#)

## 6. Let earthly shadows of love point you upwards.

When you experience love at its best, let this help you understand specific examples and aspects of God's love. For example, when someone shows patience and grace to you in your stubbornness, let this lead you up to imagine how perfect God's grace and patience are to you. If you are a father (or mother), be more mindful of ways you love your children. Use that to remind you of ways God loves us, only in much greater ways. For example, if I realize the joy I have when I come home and see my children, I consider that God loves when we draw near to him. Or, as I notice my joy in blessing my daughter with things she enjoys, I consider the generous heart of God our Father who loves to give us good gifts (James 1:17; Matt. 7:11).

"You realize, don't you, that God designed the father-child relationship in order to teach us about him? Our sovereign God did not simply seize on it as a convenient illustration; he designed it with his relationship to us in mind." Jamie Dunlop in "[How God's Father-Love Could Change Your Life](#)"

## 7. Rest in God's love.

The gospel tells us that if we are in Christ by grace through faith, our sins are removed, we are justified, reconciled to God, and adopted as his children. We live by God's grace, not our goodness; God's promises, not our performance. That frees us to then rest in the love of the Father for us. We don't have to earn his favor or do anything to be welcome by him. We are welcomed and wanted because we are God's beloved sons and daughters he loves and delights in. This provides the deep exhale and soul's rest that we long for. The Father invites us to come near, not because we've done anything spectacular, but because he loves us. Find rest in abiding in God's love. Meditate on it and believe in it. Flee to it when you're fearful, weary, weak, or wounded.

"He [David] makes God his rest; that is, he in whom his soul does rest, without seeking further for a more suitable and desirable object. 'Whom have I,' says he, 'in heaven but you and there is none upon earth that I desire beside you' (Ps. 73:25). Thus the soul gathers itself from all its wanderings, from all other beloveds, to rest in God alone—to satisfy and content [or rest] itself in him; choosing the Father for his present and eternal rest. And this also with delight." John Owen

"There's no better place in all the world than in the arms of your Father." Matt Carter, *Long Way Home*

## Discussion Questions

1. What are ways your parents positively shaped your view of God? Or, if you are a parent, can you recall any times where you have felt or acted toward your kids in love and it helped you better understand a bit of God's Fatherly love?
2. What are ways your parents—or others influential figures—have negatively shaped your view of God or how you relate to him? Have you ever noticed or discovered that you were thinking wrongly about God because you were importing how an earthly person acted onto what your heavenly father might be like?

3. What are some of the ways that God acts as a Father to us?
4. When do you most need to remember that God's love is gracious? When do you need to remember his love is steadfast? How do you remember, rehearse, and apply these truths?
5. When are you tempted to doubt God's love because you're letting circumstances, fears, or feelings determine what God must be like? In these moments, how do you go back to Scripture, to your life, or to God's faithfulness in your past to ground yourself in the truth of who he is?
6. As you look at the list of ways to experience and trust (or receive and respond) to God's love, which is most applicable to you? Why? Are there things you would add to this list?
7. How can we avoid minimizing the role of experience and emotion when it comes to knowing God, while also avoiding over-sensationalizing or sentimentalizing our experience of God's love at all times? In other words, how do you walk with God in a way that seeks to experience his nearness and presence in deeper ways, and yet still lives by faith rather than feelings when the "experience" isn't always there?
8. What is one thing you can do this week to better know God's fatherly love for you and rest in it?

### Homework Assignments

- Read or listen to at least one of the following this week:
  - ["How God's Father-Love Could Change Your Life"](#) by Jamie Dunlop at thegospelcoalition.org
  - ["How to Experience the Outpouring of God's Love"](#) at desiringgod.org
  - ["Absent Dad, Present Father,"](#) by Callie Sivils at desiringgod.org
- Set aside time this week to consider what earthly influences might negatively affect your understanding of God. That could be a parent, grandparent, mentor, boss, coach, church background, legalistic tendencies, secular frameworks on God, trauma, sin, unbelief, undealt with pain, etc. As you identify any significant influences, trace out specifically how they affect your view of God, walk with God, or thoughts about how God views you. When do you most experience or think these false thoughts of God? What are you tempted to believe about God? How does this affect you? The goal is to recognize hindrances to experiencing God as a loving Father so you can combat these things with truths about God or from his Word.
- As you spend time in God's Word this week, be on the lookout for anything that helps you better understand God's love. Maybe it's a verse or passage, a story, an image, or something else. Take note of it. Also, be aware of how you notice God at work in your life, and what that reveals about him. If you're a parent, try to be mindful of ways you love your children well—in your affections and actions—and take time to consider how that might reveal something about God's fatherly love. You can also be mindful of ways you fall short of loving your children like God does, and then take joy in how perfect a Father he is.

### Recommended Resources for God the Father's Love (General)

- *Communion with God* by John Owen
- *Enjoying God* by Tim Chester
- *Objects of His Affection* by Scotty Smith
- *Delighting in the Trinity* by Mike Reeves
- *The Long Walk Home* by Matt Carter
- *Prodigal God* by Tim Keller



- *His Love Endures Forever* by Garry Willis
- *The Love of God* by Christopher Morgan
- *Knowing God the Father through the Old Testament* by Christopher Wright
- *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer
- “[How God’s Father-Love Could Change Your Life](#)” by Jamie Dunlop at thegospelcoalition.org
- “[God Loves us Like a Father](#)” by Wyatt Graham at ca.thegospelcoalition.org
- “[3 Ways God’s Fatherhood is Different Than Ours](#)” by Scott Swain at thegospelcoalition.org
- “[God is More than ‘God’: Why He Loves to be Called Father](#)” by Scott Hubbard at desiringgod.org
- “[God as Father](#)” by Gerald Bray and “[The Love of God](#)” by Sam Storms at thegospelcoalition.org
- “[10 Things You Should Know about the Love of God](#)” by Garry Williams at crossway.org
- “[5 Key Realities the Bible Teaches about God’s Love](#)” by D. A. Carson at crossway.org
- “[Absent Dad, Present Father](#),” by Callie Sivils at desiringgod.org
- “[When a Father Wound Defines You](#)” by Scott Sauls at ftc.co (For the Church)
- “[The Father of Fathers](#)” by Justin Holcomb at biblicalcounselingcoalition.org
- “[How Do We Describe God’s Love](#)” (video) at bibleproject.com; and “[Agape: Love](#)”
- “[What Do We Mean When We Say God is Love](#)” (video) at gospelproject.com
- “[How to Know God Loves You](#)” (video or audio) at desiringgod.org
- “[How to Experience the Outpouring of God’s Love](#)” (video or audio) at desiringgod.org

## Taken From “What if Your Father Didn’t Love You”

Written by Davie Powlison in *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume XII, Number 1, Fall 1993

Found online at: <https://vinechurch.com.au/media/pdf/father-didnt-love-you.pdf>

Can you know God as Father even if your human father was violent, deceptive, cold...or even just occasionally disappointing? The Bible says, YES! Listen and believe, and join in fellowship with other children of the Father!

Here is a simple summary of the way to grow in the knowledge of God your Father even if your father sinned against you.

1. Identify and take responsibility for the specific lies, false beliefs, desires, expectations and fears that rule you and poison your relationship with God.
2. Find specific truths in the Bible that counter your internal falsehoods and expectations. Let these truths contend with those lies and cravings. There ought to be a battle going on within you every day as God’s light and love battle your darkness.
3. Turn to God for mercy and help, that the Spirit of truth would renew you, pouring out His love freely.
4. Identify and take responsibility for the particular sins that you express towards your father, and, as generalized patterns, towards other people: bitterness, will-fulness, avoidance, blame-shifting, brooding, fears, people-pleasing, slander, lying, self-pity, etc.
5. Turn to God for mercy and help, that the Spirit of love would enable you to bear His fruit thankfully.

6. Identify the specific sins committed against you. Fathers who are selfish or hostile, who lie or betray trust, who duck responsibility, do evil. The love of God gives courage to look evil in the eye. Identifying wrong helps you know what to forgive. It also makes clear what God calls you to tackle constructively.

You need humility to recognize that some wrongs may be perceived wrongs—products of your own expectations—not real wrongs. Repenting of your own sins clears your mind to sort out evil done from evil merely perceived. You also need a renewed mind to understand that some things may actually be wrong that you were told or you assumed were right.

7. Ponder the good things your father did for you. Often bitterness and disappointment cloud the mind from perceiving love that was shown. There are some fathers who seem to incarnate evil. But most are a mix of love and selfishness.

8. The Father gives the power to return good for evil rather than evil for evil. He remakes His children like His Son, Jesus. Come up with a game plan for specific changes in how you deal with your father and his wrongs: forgiving, giving love, seeking forgiveness, confronting constructively, forbearing, refocusing your attention, pouring your energies into God's calling, etc.

9. Find wise believers to pray for you, hold you accountable, encourage, and counsel you. Faith in God our Father is catching. Wisdom for living as a peace-maker, a son of God, is also catching. "The companion of the wise becomes wise."

The Father is seeking worshipers and creating children who know Him. Ask, seek, knock.