

6. Knowing God as a Loving Father

Understanding how God wants to heal wounds we have experienced from our earthly parents, and make up for any lack

Although God intended everyone to grow up in a loving family that models His love, very few people actually experience this. Many are blinded to God's father-heart because of past experiences. This will block them from being able to come to God for healing of their other wounds.

The effects of this are enormous, not only affecting individual lives but that of families, even countries. Before countries can be healed, families must be healed. Reconciliation begins at home.

1) Jesus shows us the Father

Many Scriptures speak of God as Father. Some are in the Old Testament (Psalm 68:5; Isaiah 63:16; 64:8; Jeremiah 3:19) but most are in the New Testament, because more than anyone else, Jesus is the one who introduces us to the Father. John 1:18 tells us that Jesus came from the 'bosom of the Father'. He lived constantly in the embrace, the hug of the Father. In John 17:24, Jesus says He wants us to be with Him where He is, which means He wants to take us into the Father's embrace. This is why He came to earth. He said that no one comes to the Father except through Him. Jesus is the Way, and the embrace of the Father is the destination. Jesus came to pay the price for our sin and open the way to the Father, and He reassured us that the Father was just like Him.

2) What hinders us from running into God's embrace?

Jesus wants us to experience a full, loving, intimate relationship with God as a loving Father. Yet, many of us cower in the distance, being afraid to approach Him, let alone run into His arms. There are reasons for this, such as

- a) a distorted theology which presents God as a harsh dictator
- b) or seeing Him as the author of life's hurts and injustices
- c) our negative experience with our earthly fathers

This happens in all cultures all over the world. In this chapter we are going to give our attention to the third hindrance – our negative experience with our earthly father. But first, let us consider what every human being needs.

3) Basic human needs

Every human being is born into the world with certain needs: physical (food, clothing, shelter, and so on), mental (education), and spiritual. God takes all these needs seriously and so should we. Everyone also has needs of the heart, which are just as important as other needs, but are often misunderstood or neglected. What are these needs?

Security

Every child needs to know the world into which they were born is a safe place to live. Children can often feel insecure because:

- there was a lack of love between their parents.

- they were abused by their parents in some way, or their parents made excessive demands on them.
- there was disease or death in the family.
- they experienced extreme poverty.
- there was conflict in the family or community.

Jehovah Shalom, The God of Peace, speaks peace in our life every day (Psalm 91, Isaiah 41:10).

Significance, value and purpose

Significance, value and purpose are the cry of every human heart. Every person needs to know that their life has a purpose. Every child needs to know they have something to contribute to the world and that the world is an enriched place because they are here; something would be missing if they were not here. This is especially true if the child is handicapped in some way. Our value is in who we are in God and not in what we do or do not do. God has a purpose for every life.

a. How do children receive value?

They are valued through hearing appreciation, being acknowledged, being called by their name; being given a chance to choose, being asked an opinion. ...

b. How are they devalued?

Through insults, being punished in public, being denied the right to play, experiencing a brother/sister being favoured above them, being forced to sit with visitors, not being allowed to eat at the table. ...

c. How does God give us value?

By creating us in His image, giving us the right to choose, partnering with us (2 Corinthians 6:1), paying such a price for our redemption (1 Peter 1:18-19), calling us friends (John 15:15).

Love

Everyone needs to feel they are loved. The love God demonstrates to us is an unconditional love; it is not dependent upon us doing things or being a certain way. God spoke of his love (Isaiah 49:15; Jeremiah 31:3), and demonstrated it by sending His Son even before we were repentant (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4). God's desire is that we learn unconditional love from our parents.

Usually when parents have not received love themselves, they are not only unable to give it, they also do not even realise they need to fill this basic need of their child. They often try to show it by meeting material needs, but this alone is not enough to communicate the love God wants us to learn. To be credible, love needs to be expressed in verbal and emotional ways, and then reinforced through provision of physical and mental needs.

There are different ways to communicate love.

a. Through words

Children can know they are loved by hearing words of kindness, praise and appreciation. In many cultures, however, it is difficult for parents to say, 'I love you', 'I'm proud of you'. They either feel embarrassed or fear they will spoil their children if they expressed their love in such ways. The absence of sweet words can have just as negative an effect as bad words (Proverbs 12:18; 15:4; 18:21). God is never reluctant to say, 'I love you!' We are His treasured possession (Deuteronomy 7:6).

b. Through affection

God also created us with a need to receive physical affection. Again, this can be difficult in some cultures except in the case of very young children either because of embarrassment or fear of it taking on sexual connotations. This is very sad because we all need hugs.

c. Through meaningful time spent together

A father or mother who takes time to listen to, play with, or just be with their child communicates, 'you are important to me', 'you are worthy of my time and attention.' Parents communicate a message of importance and worth to their child when they show interest in him. It is especially important for church leaders to show love to their children. Often the children are neglected because the people in church get their parents' attention. It is hard for the child to feel important when he feels, 'My father gives time to everyone but me.'

4) Unmet needs

God's plan was that all children born into this world would have all these basic needs met through their parents. Sadly, most of us have experienced something far short of the glorious purposes of God for our families and indeed some of us have experienced the very opposite. For example:

- Some lost parents
- Some grew up in uncaring families
- Some parents were ignorant of the needs and how to respond
- Some parents had empty hearts (had not received love themselves)

Often we do not realise there is anything wrong, thinking our upbringing was normal based on what we know from our own cultures. But God does not call it normal!

Wounds received as we grow up

It is easy for us to understand that harsh, brutal parenting can be very wounding. But we may not realise that a deficiency or 'lack' in one's upbringing can be as wounding as a trauma – even more so if it continues for a long period of time. Not receiving the love of a parent, for whatever reason, has a very deep effect on our lives. It seriously affects our self-esteem and confidence. When we have an area of wounding in our lives it gives an entry point for the enemy to come in with his lies: 'You are not lovable, you have no worth, you will never succeed' and so on. This then often affects our behaviour so that we end up wounding other people. It can also cripple us as adults from being able to give love to our own families.

The wounding is often passed on to our children and families

Unless we receive God's healing, we usually do not know how to give to our children the basic needs we lacked. We end up reproducing the same hurts in our own families, and the cycle of wounding is repeated from generation to generation.

The effect on our country

The family should be the place where we learn what it means to love and be loved, to honour and respect one another. When families are dysfunctional, it affects the life of our communities. If children have experienced a lack of love or actual violence in their homes, they are much more prone to pick up a weapon to become involved in violence. When there is conflict and injustice in our countries, unhealed wounds from childhood can greatly hinder our ability to recover from trauma and to forgive.

The effect on our heart beliefs about God

This is probably the most serious effect. Without realising it, we develop the same expectations of God as we experienced with our earthly father. If our father was harsh and domineering, we expect God to be a harsh dictator. If our earthly father never comforted us, it is hard for us to believe God when He says, 'I am He who comforts you' (Isaiah 51:12). It never even occurs to us to go to Him for comfort, because we are used to doing without, or trying to meet our need for comfort in other inappropriate ways. If we have never experienced feeling loved, we also can doubt that God really loves us.

Lacks we experience in our childhood often become areas of unbelief preventing us from going to the Heavenly Father to receive what we need. It is like a language we never learnt to speak. Our doctrines may be very correct, but deep inside we struggle to really believe and experience God's amazing love.

5) God longs to give us the love of a perfect Father

'I will be a Father to you' (2 Corinthians 6:18)

God wants to make up to us anything that we lacked in our human experience. God says, 'I want to be your Father. Whatever you lacked, I want to make it up to you. If no-one ever said, "I love you, I'm proud of you", I want to tell you these things.' Discovering the wonderful heart of our perfect Heavenly Father heals our wounds. He is the best Father we can ever imagine. (You can find a list of some of His wonderful characteristics in the appendix.)

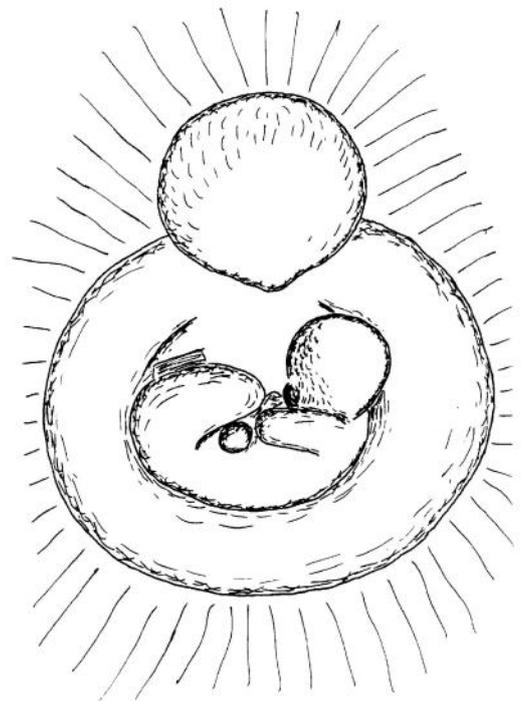
He also gives us a mother's love

(Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 49:15-16; Isaiah 66:13)

No one needs to feel disadvantaged because of receiving imperfect parenting. We need to forgive our parents for every way they were unable to meet our needs, and then come to the only One who can! Our Heavenly Father can fill the empty hole inside. He can more than make up for all we lacked.

God's Love is everlasting and unconditional

God is a God who loves us unconditionally. It seems too good to be true, but it is the clear message of the Bible. God tells us that He has loved us with an everlasting love (Jeremiah 31:3). There is nothing we can or cannot do to alter His love for us. This is the message of grace. We may have received very unbalanced teaching about God's character, stressing only His holiness, His anger against sin, His judgement, and so on, but all God's anger against sin was poured onto Jesus on the Cross.



On a cloudy, overcast day, the weather is often grey, rainy and miserable underneath the clouds. If this continues day after day, one might start to wonder if the sun has disappeared, but if you were to get into an airplane and fly above the clouds, you would find the sun is still there! The clouds cannot stop the sun from shining, but they can stop people on the ground from receiving its warmth and brightness. The clouds are like sin and unbelief in a person's life. The sun is like

God's love, which never stops shining, but unconfessed sin and unbelief in our lives, like the cloud, blocks it from reaching us.

Showing God's love to one another

One of the ways that God expresses His love to us is through one another. As a church we have a wonderful opportunity to become father or mother figures for orphans, or for those who did not receive parental love for whatever reason. But first our own hearts must be filled with God's love or we will have little or nothing to give.

Making it personal

Keys

How to find healing:

- Take time to think of what you experienced in your family.
 - What did you wish to receive from parents that you were not given?
 - How has this influenced your heart's view of who God is, and your ability to relate to other people?
 - Meditate on 2 Corinthians 6: 18; Psalm 103: 1-6, 13
 - Invite God to be your Father and receive from Him love, peace and value.
 - Forgive parents who failed you.
 - Repent of all the damage you caused to others due to your own lacks.
 - Consider if there anyone to whom you can show the father or mother love of God.
- Restoration of a strife-torn country begins with restoration of the family.
 - We were created with a need for parental love, modelling God's love for us, but as we live in a fallen creation, our parents are often unable to give us the love we need.
 - This can cause us to distance ourselves from Father God, but God is the perfect father, who can meet all the needs of the heart.

Healing the Wounds of Ethnic Conflict

By Dr. Rhiannon Lloyd
with contributing author Pastor Joseph Nyamutera

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CP 442, 1215 Geneva 15, Switzerland

Email: reconciliation@lerucher.org

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