

INTRODUCTION

Today is Father's Day. Therefore, I chose a passage in the Bible that describes a father's love for his two sons. By coincidence I also have two sons at home. When I was preparing this message I asked my kids in what ways they can feel my love for them. My older son responded: "It is when you buy me stuff." He has come to an age that realizes the power of money. In comparison, his younger brother told me: "Perhaps when you offered me assistance when I needed help with my homework or other things." Different persons interpret love in distinctive ways.

In the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 the father in the story loved his children in a unique way. We should be familiar with the plot. A rebellious son was tired of living at home. He thus packed his belongings and went away to experience the outside world. The father waited patiently for his son's return. The story has a happy ending when the wayward child came back, confessed his wrongdoings and was admitted back into the family. Jesus told the parable in response to the allegation from the religious leaders that He associated with tax collectors and so-called "sinners." Those people lived an immoral life, and they might be the people whom the teachers in those days would not get close to. Jesus not just taught one, but a series of three parables. There is a progression in the story line – 1 out of 100 sheep went astray, 1 out of 10 coins was misplaced and finally one out of two brothers left home. The moral of all three parables is the same. If a person was so happy about reclaiming a lost item, how much more joyful our Heavenly Father would be when a sinner repents. To the religious leaders the tax collectors and "sinners" were people they tried to keep a distance with. However, to our Lord they were the people He sought after and invited into God's Kingdom. That shows our Heavenly Father's heart. He loves every one of us simply because we are His children. As we study the parable there are some important lessons we as parents can learn from. In particular, since today is Father's Day, I would like to share some mutual encouragement to the dads among us.

EXPLANATION

1. 超越我們的叛逆 Overcomes Our Disobedience

What kind of love our Heavenly Father has for us? First of all, His love overcomes our disobedience. The younger son in the story disobeyed his father by asking for his share of the inheritance. He said in **verse 12**: "... 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them." This is an outrageous request. Normally a person would not make any estate planning unless he believes his life is coming to an end. This young son was literally wishing his father to die soon." But the father did what his son asked for anyway. With money, this child could not wait to chase after the freedom he had dreamed of. Let us read the **next verse**: "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living." For a person who never had much money in his pocket an instant wealth proved to be a bad thing. He went as far away as he could and spent money like pouring water down the drain. This youngster gathered some party mates to enjoy a good time. But when his money was gone so were his friends. This fellow thought home was a

place with restraint. He wanted to have freedom, but he ended up as someone's slave. **Verses 14 to 16** tell us a quick downturn in his life: "14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything." This may be the lowest a Jew can get. He used to be a young master at home. Now he had to serve a foreigner in a pig pan. That was an insult for a Jew, because pigs are unclean animals according to the Law of Moses. He was so hungry that he even drooled at the pigs' feed!

Disobedient children are not exception to the norm. In England there was a shocking court case where a disobedient son sued his father for not giving him enough money. Dave Dawes won a \$128 million dollars lottery jackpot. He gave his son Michael \$2 million. Michael then bought a house, and wasted the rest of the money away in a month. He soon quit a well-paid job too. In the following months Michael kept asking his dad for more money. Eventually, Dave told his son that he agreed to pay off part of his debt but there would be no more fund. This ungrateful son testified in the court that his parents became arrogant and stingy after they won the lottery. The judge finally decided to dismiss the charge, stating that Dave had no obligation to keep bailing his son out, and that no rational human being should think that he could go back to his parents for more money whenever he wanted to. This judge concluded that Michael could have lived a comfortable life but he chose not to take that opportunity.

This child in the parable could have enjoyed a good life at home. But he chose the wrong path. Regardless, his father still loved him. His love was so great that it overcame the son's disobedience. As a father I cannot guarantee that my sons would not be disobedient. They will disobey me, and they will definite disobey God. I teach them God's truth, but eventually they have to make their own decisions in life. I have to learn to let go, like the father in the parable. For example, my older son insists to wear short pants even in the cooler season. At first I got mad when he did not obey me to put on long pants and a jacket. But then I thought: "Why the big fuss? Just let him feel how cold he can bear, and if he thinks it's too cold then he knows what he should wear." I told him that from now on I would not force him what to wear. If it gets really cold I would remind him of the weather but still give him the freedom of choice. Your children may disobey you in other ways. We have to distinguish between unintentional mistakes and deliberate sins. You should stop them if they want to try drugs or rob a bank. But for many other choices in life it may not be a life and death situation. Your love for your children has to be great enough to overcome their disobedience.

2. 喜悅我們的悔改 Overjoys at Our Repentance

Our Heavenly Father loves every one of us simply because we are His children. His love overcomes our disobedience. Moreover, His love overjoys at our repentance. The son in the parable was broke, hungry and lonely. Not even the pigs showed him any pity! Suddenly, he realized that there was a solution. Let us look at **verses 17 to 19**: 17 "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! 18 I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' He reasoned that it would be better off to work for his dad as a servant, than to

starve to death slowly under the hand of a cruel boss. The prodigal son came up with a confession in his mind. By saying that he “sinned against heaven” it meant that he sinned against God. To the Jews the name of God was too sacred to utter. He did not make any excuse for his sins. I can imagine that he could be rehearsing his line over and over again on his way home: “Dad, I sinned against heaven and you. I don’t deserve to be your son. Please allow me to work as your servant.” He had no idea how dad would react. We know the result in **verse 20**: “...But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Even before the son could say anything the father showed his acceptance by actions. It was quite unseemly for an elderly Jewish man to run. But the father was too joyful to care about his demeanor. He was so excited that he interrupted his son’s confession. Before the son came to the part about working as a servant, his father quickly ordered his servants to bring over three items for his son – the best robe that covers his rugged clothes, a ring that signifies authority and a pair of sandals that conveys a sense of identity because in those days servants did not wear shoes. All the privilege of a son was restored. The father even prepared a homecoming party with a fattened calf. He gave his reason in **verse 24**: “‘For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate.” The son’s former life of indulgence in pleasure was no more, in came with the birth of a newly repented life. He was once lost to sins but was now found. That was an appropriate cause for the family to celebrate.

Very often there is little you can do to a disobedient child except to leave him/her to the hands of God and wait for his/her return. Pastor Johann Lai can fully identify with that. He is a well-known Bible teacher among the Chinese churches. He has three grown children. His oldest son Caleb has always been an obedient child in the family. When he went to college he did well in his first semester. But since then his grades dropped to the bottom. Pastor Lai and his wife tried every possible way to find out the reason behind the change. But Caleb remained silent. There was nothing the parents could do except to pray for him. But Pastor Lai reiterated their love for Caleb: “Dad and mom do not know what happens to you. But we still love you with the love of Christ. Whenever you turn back we will still be here waiting for you.” It was not until the senior year when Caleb finally woke up and barely made it to graduation. He later confessed that he was addicted to computer games. He ignored school and skipped his sleep to play all day and night. At a summer retreat a speaker invited the participants to rededicate his/her life to the Lord and not to waste time on unworthy things. Caleb repented of his sins. He cried all night while destroying over 2,000 game CDs. It was God’s amazing work that saved Caleb.

Our Heavenly Father overjoys at our repentance. The father in the parable loved his son more than the money that was wasted. He delighted in the son’s return more than any compensation for the loss of wealth. He did not need to know what his son had gone through after he left home. He cared about his child as a person and he cared about his relationship with the son more than anything. That is the love of our Heavenly Father. As parents we need to keep in mind that we do not “own” our children. They are gifts from God that are on-loan to us temporarily. We may feel helpless when our children disobey us. We have to trust God that He will use His means to bring back a wayward child. We can teach our children Biblical truth, but only the Holy Spirit can convict them in their hearts. We allow God to work in their hearts and lead them to repentance. We should be ready to react with joy when they turn back from sins.

3. 不計我們的表現 Overlooks Our Performance

Our Heavenly Father loves every one of us simply because we are His children. His love overcomes our disobedience and overjoys at our repentance. In addition, God's love overlooks our performance. The father welcomed the prodigal son back to the family. However, the older brother was so mad that he would not enter the house and join the celebration. He thought his brother deserved punishment, not acceptance. Once again, the father did an extraordinary thing by going out to meet with the older son and gently reasoned with him. The older son presented his arguments in **verses 29 to 30**: “29 ...Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!” The older son felt that the father was being unfair. He addressed his brother as “this son of yours.” The older son grumbled that he was never rewarded for his faithful service in the family, but his brother did all the bad things and still got a feast. The argument was based on performance. But that is not how God's grace operates. His love overlooks our performance. In fact, He loves us despite our lack of performance! The father explained in **verses 31 and 32**: 31 “My son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” The father reminded his older son that the prodigal was his own brother. He did not need to earn his status and privilege in the family. It was right to rejoice, not because the prodigal son deserved it, but because he was admitted back to his original standing in the family. The father did not love his older son more because he was faithful, and he did not love his younger son less because of his disobedience.

I can see such principle at work in how Josh McDowell raises his kids. Josh is a well-known Christian author. When his son Sean was twelve he played baseball. One day Josh gave the coach a stack of ice-cream vouchers. The coach thanked Josh and promised that he would take the boys for a treat at their first win. But Josh corrected the coach: “No sir. Please take them to the ice-cream shop at the team's first loss.” The instructor was dumbfounded. Josh explained: “I want to acknowledge the effort of my kids as much as their success. No matter how they perform I would still love and accept them.” That was profound! Once I tried to model Josh's example. My older son was a little kid then. His birthday was coming and I bought an expensive gift for him and hid it in a closet. For some reason he was being rebellious during that period of time. I had an urge to present him the gift at the worst of his performance. Though I ended up not doing it the lesson was etched in my mind. Since God loves me while overlooking my performance I should love my sons the same way.

We live in a performance-oriented world. Raise and bonus all depend on our performance. But instead of following the secular value system we should imitate after God's value system at home to overlook our children's performance. Most Chinese parents like to compare the performance of their own kids with their friends and relatives'. In my childhood even when we kids got good grades our dad would still look down on us in front of our relatives. He might comment to this uncle or that aunt: “My kids did so poorly in school that they would never catch up with yours.” Somehow my dad believed that his “humility” as well as a lack of affirmation on our performance would motivate us to do better. In retrospect I can attribute my low self-confidence to that mentality. But don't get me wrong I still love my dad wholeheartedly. Parents:

don't compare your children with others, especially don't compare their performance with their siblings'! Don't ask Johnny: "Why can't you be as good as your sister in math or play well in sports like your brother?" Our home should be a safe haven for our children. We have to make them feel secure that they are fully accepted no matter how God shapes and molds them. Our kids do not need to earn their parents' love. Our love for them should overlook their performance.

CONCLUSION

Our Heavenly Father loves every one of us simply because we are His children. The father in the parable displays God's love for us. His love overcomes our disobedience, it overjoys at our repentance and it overlooks our performance. The prodigal son went home. The father called for a celebration. Jesus concluded the parable with a suspense in the air. How would the older son choose? Would he continue to stay mad or would he rejoice with his brother? After the religious leaders heard the parables they also had to respond in their hearts. Would they agree with Jesus to accept the tax collectors and the "sinners" into God's Kingdom? After all, Jesus did not come to look for righteous people. He came to seek after sinners. Your children may continue to grieve your heart with their misconduct and bad choices in life. Being a parent is a risky business. There is no guarantee of a bright future for your kids. However, our hope is in God. He has prepared a party to welcome any prodigal child back home. Will you be there to receive your children?