

EXPECTING DISCIPLINE

Receiving Grace

by Steve Reynolds

Remember when we were kids, how safe and secure we felt with our dads? I have memories of walking beside my dad, holding his big ol' hands, stumbling, almost falling and him lifting me up before I hit the ground. Dads are like that—strong, protective, always giving us a feeling of safety and security.

I have some other, less pleasant memories of my dad. Sometimes he was hard and exacting, unforgiving. These memories helped to color my view of God for a long time. It took a lot of God speaking to me in different ways to see the difference between God and my dad. Now, I see there is a difference, a big difference. My dad was just a man—a flawed representation of the Heavenly Father. There were some things about my dad that were very godly—his dedication to the Bible, his strength, his sense of morality. But there were a lot of aspects of God's character that were missing in my dad. Not because my dad was bad, but because he was human. Yours is too.

Your Heavenly Father

In my religious journey my view of God has changed drastically. I

went from believing that God was watching my every move, ready to zap me when I got out of line to believing that he is the most loving, patient, merciful and compassionate being in the whole universe. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention joyful—and that's a big one.

My dad was something of a strict disciplinarian. He demanded a certain behavior out of us kids, and if we got out of line, there were usually harsh words or a belt. Not that disciplining your children is a bad thing, but it can be taken too far.

Let me interject something here. My dad is not a bad guy. He has some flaws. We all do. He made some mistakes. We all do. Maybe it's because my grandparents or great-grandparents were too hard on him. I don't know much about all that. I do know that dad fell short of the model, which is Jesus. Your parents made some mistakes, too. Maybe even bigger ones than mine.

As adult children, making sense of and reconciling our relationships with our earthly parents is not about playing the blame game, though. It's about saying, "Okay, this is what you did to me. You gave me some issues that God will heal and help me overcome. I for-

give you. Now, let's both start the healing process."

So, don't spend your life hating the ones that have wronged you over the years. They were human! Some folks take their pain, and they make it into a little toxic garden and they water it and tend it and care for it. Don't do that! Let's get over it, through Jesus. Nobody was as despised and rejected as him. His family rejected him for the most part, his friends abandoned him and his enemies crucified him. And he forgave all of them.

Is God like my dad was at times—harsh, exacting, demanding, stern? For many years I thought he was. I couldn't imagine a God that lavished love on his children, because it just didn't fit into my notions of what a dad should be. I didn't know for a long time that my notions about God were all messed up.

Expecting Discipline—
Receiving Grace

I used to be so afraid of God. I guess that's not an altogether bad place to start. Some people in the world don't seem to fear God at all. They just go about their daily lives doing things that are hurtful to

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others, not really thinking about their actions, or that there will ever be a judgment day. But, although fearing God may be a good place to start, I don't think it's the best place to end. If you're a Christian, you don't have any reason to fear God's judgment for your sins. Jesus paid for that on the cross.

God is forgiving. He is ready and willing to forgive. He is literally dying to forgive. He wants us to come back home from our prodigal ways! He sits on the porch with the light on, waiting for the slightest hint of a figure on the horizon, and when he sees us coming down the road, he makes quite a spectacle of himself. He jumps up, hollers out, "Steve's home!" and runs down the road like a madman with a toothy grin the size of Texas.

Because we have never known love like this, we expect lecturing, we expect discipline, but we get something else. A party? What in the world? God throws an expensive bash for us when we return home from our wild living. We expect discipline. God gives grace.

God Our Daddy

There is a word that the Old Testament uses to bring to light the relationship that we can now have with God. In the Old Testament they didn't use the word much. The word is "Abba." It's a very, very personal word. I'm told that the closest thing to it in the English language is "Daddy."

I saw Jeffrey Dahmer's parents on T.V. recently. They really seemed like good people. I guess Jeff Dahmer was about as close to what we think a monster would be in this world as you can get. That name is

really infamous, isn't it? I mean—the very name "Dahmer" carries a boatload of baggage with it. Words that come to mind for me are sick, perverted, twisted, dirty, nasty, morbid, depraved, indecent, smutty and vulgar.

Yet, I noticed something right off the bat about Jeffrey Dahmer's parents. They still loved him. They had not disowned him. He was their son. That's unconditional love. That's grace.

God loves his children like that—times infinity. Once we become his children, God won't kick us out of the house no matter what we do!

He'll let us leave for a while if we want. But, he won't kick us out of the family house. We're his. He's our Daddy.

Do you think of God as your Daddy? If you're a Christian, he is. If you're not, he can be. Do you believe that thinking God is your Daddy is kind of—almost—sacrilegious? Is it a little too personal for you? Not formal enough? "Yes, God is loving, but we ought not to minimize his wrath," you might say. Why not? He does. He calls it his "strange work." But the word that he uses to define himself is "love."

Maybe you just can't get over the thought of all this "love" stuff! My dear friend, I used to think that way too. It hurt me a lot and caused me to hurt others. I hope you'll reconsider what is part of the wonderful good news of Christ's gift of forgiveness. God is not mad at you. He loves you. He'll never kick you out. Dads are like that. □

Steve Reynolds is a recovering legalist in Tennessee.