

GOD'S MODEL FOR FATHERHOOD

Becoming Better Fathers through Emulating Six Attributes of God

INTRODUCTION

How am I measuring up as a father? It's a question all of us have asked ourselves, sometimes consciously, sometimes not. The fact that you are reading the introduction to something called, "God's Model for Fatherhood" reflects a certain level of interest in the subject (or maybe a pushy Bible study leader), but it is true that *any* time we make a decision related to our relationship with our children, we are evaluating our options in relation to some standard. Because the reality is that "How am I measuring up as a father?" is an incomplete question. In fact, the only logical response is another question – *compared to what?*

And that's where we quickly run into trouble. As human beings, we seem to be wired to compare ourselves with others, which by itself is a major (if not the primary) source of our dissatisfaction with our lives. We can always find someone with better circumstances than us, and such comparisons can lead to feelings of resentment or inadequacy (frequently both simultaneously). *So what if the local Father of the Year led to efforts to totally remodel the local elementary school while holding an important, high-paying job and serving as the lay leader of his thriving megachurch? If I had all his family's connections and material advantages, I would do something at least as awesome.*

Or: That guy I run into at all the school functions sure doesn't seem to have anything going for him that I don't. So how come his son – who is captain of the school's state champion debate team – has half the Ivy League fighting over him, while my kid will be lucky to graduate from high school?

Of course, at the other end of the spectrum, we can always choose a basis for comparison that makes us feel like Superman: I may be kind of fuzzy where my daughter goes to school (or even which grade she is in), but at least I'm not a drunk running around on his kids' mother like THAT guy.

Although the preceding examples are intentionally ridiculous, the larger point they illustrate is not – comparing ourselves with others in our performance as fathers (or in any other role) is fraught with peril. Even comparing situations that appear analogous to our own lives is subject to a fundamental flaw – we can never know enough about someone else's life experiences, innate abilities, or heart to render a fair judgment of our performance versus others.

So if comparing ourselves with others is an exercise in futility, how are we to evaluate our performance as fathers? Paradoxically, the solution is to compare ourselves to the One we can never hope to emulate adequately – our heavenly Father. Though humbling, comparing ourselves to God's perfect standard can also be reassuring and motivating. Since no one can live up to God's standard (Romans 3:23 says that "*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." NIV), those fathers who make us feel the most inadequate are still just as much failures as the rest of us. For me anyway, realizing that even the most amazing men are also colossal failures somehow makes me feel better – *It's not just me, it's everybody.*

At the same time, knowing that God loves me in spite of my failures (Romans 5:8 tells us that “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” NIV) motivates me to pursue God’s plan for my life, despite knowing that I’ll never come close to doing it right. Here’s how the Apostle Paul puts it:

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:12-14, ESV)

So if we are to strive to meet God’s standards, how do we proceed? One route is to follow explicit Biblical commands about parenting, like Ephesians 6:4 – “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” (NIV) Another is to follow God’s example from the Bible. From start to finish, both the Old and New Testaments give us detailed descriptions of God’s attributes. And since we were created in God’s image (see Genesis 1:27), what better way to follow him than to emulate him as closely as we can? That is what this Bible study aims to help you do.

You may wonder why this study focuses on six attributes. There is certainly nothing magical about six – God has more facets to His being than we could ever hope to comprehend. As the Apostle John said at the conclusion of his Gospel, “Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.” The same is no less true of God’s attributes. The truth is that I chose six for a very practical reason – I was creating a six-week Bible study. That doesn’t make these six attributes the only six, or even the most important six. Feel free to study the Bible for as many additional attributes as you wish; this is a lifetime pursuit.

Finally, a note about the format of this study. The intent is to introduce each week’s attribute largely through Scripture references. You will have a number of passages to look up and record your observations about. For this purpose, I highly recommend BibleGateway (biblegateway.com). I am a strong advocate of owning a good Study Bible (if for no other reason than following the Bible readings in church on your phone might give those around you the wrong idea), but BibleGateway enables the reader to see multiple translations in parallel, something formerly confined to bulky parallel Bibles that, in addition to their heft, were also limited by the translations chosen for each particular version. This approach of reviewing parallel translations can greatly enhance your understanding of the Scripture references.

After grounding each concept in the Bible, you’ll have the opportunity to reflect on a number of application questions. These questions are intended to be thought-provoking during your preparation time and conversation-provoking during your weekly Bible study/fellowship time. They are not intended to lead you

to a certain conclusion nearly as much as to stimulate your thinking about the topic at hand. As such, you may encounter questions that are provocative or seem to contradict previous questions. **In such cases, the intent of each question is to help you think through the issues, not lead you down the primrose path to a particular conclusion.** No one apart from God fully knows your situation, your past experiences, or your heart, and this study does not presume to tell you specifically how you should behave as a father as much as ask you to be prayerful, thoughtful, and intentional about it.

The most important task as you work through these attributes of God is to wrestle with the material and come to your own conclusions about how God would have you apply what you learn to your own life. Ultimately, I believe that is what God expects of each of us – to immerse ourselves in his Word, to seek his guidance for our lives, and to ask for his strength to live out his will as he gives us the grace to understand it.