

Debt of Love

Genesis 45:1-15

Father's Day

19th June 2011

A few years back, down in Florida on vacation, we stopped at a gas station outside Orlando. As I stood at the pump, a woman travelling on her own got out of a car next to us and asked directions to a particular hotel in the area. It turned out that, although the hotel was some distance away, I actually knew where it was since we had just passed it a day or two before. So I started to give the lady directions. After a few moments, however, I realised how complicated my explanation was and, to make matters worse, the lady was not a native English speaker. So I said to her, "I have got a better idea. Follow our car. We'll take you there."

It took us over half an hour to get to the hotel and, after we had delivered her safe and sound, it took just as long to get back to our own hotel. On the way back, a young lady in our car wondered why we had done what we had done.

"Well," I said, "there is a reason why we did what we did tonight. It wasn't just about being Good Samaritans. It was about repaying a debt. About 6 years before you were born, your mother, brothers and I were driving along an autobahn near Frankfurt in Germany. It was supper time and, being hungry, we decided to come off the motorway and look for somewhere to eat. We quickly found a place and had a nice meal but afterwards we just could not find our way back on to the autobahn. There were no signposts that pointed in the direction we wanted to go. Your brothers were saying, 'We're lost! We're lost!' and your mother was saying, 'Why don't we stop and ask someone?'"

"Finally, I pulled over and had a good look at the map. But still couldn't see where we were. Then an angel appeared. A young man with long hair in a beat-up, old Volkswagen. In perfect English, and with a friendly smile, he asked if he could help. We told him where we were going and he said, 'No problem. Follow me'. He led us mile after mile until he got us back on the autobahn. Then, with a cheery wave, he vanished into the darkness before we could say 'Thank you.'

"So, tonight," I said, "We were repaying a debt of almost 30 years because you see the woman we helped was from Germany. She had just got off a plane at the airport and she was lost."

How far back have you ever gone to settle a debt like this? Or, even a debt of a financial kind?

Not so long ago, Prince Charles decided to pay a bill that was owed, not by himself personally but by one of his predecessors. King Charles II to be precise. The bill, which has been outstanding for 357 years, amounted to the princely sum of £453 and 3 shillings and had been incurred by Charles II to provide thousands of uniforms

for the Royalists to fight Cromwell's army in the Battle of Worcester in 1651.¹ But Charles II was driven out of the country before the bill was paid. Now, Prince Charles decided to settle his ancestral debt and, thankfully, he did not have to pay interest which would have raised the sum of money from £453 to £47,500.²

Some might take pride in being able to get away without payment of such arrears. But there is a desire in most people to settle their debts – of a financial, or a moral or social nature – if they possibly can. Most people want to do the right thing. It makes them feel better about themselves when they restore the balance in this way.

There was something in Joseph, the Old Testament character of technicolor dream-coat fame, that made him feel he had to repay a debt of a very long-standing nature. Not in this case a monetary debt but a debt of honour to his father. A debt he had carried with him for many long years while in Egypt, separated from his homeland and alienated from his brothers.

As you remember, Joseph's 11 brothers hated him because of their father's perceived favouritism, because he was good at interpreting dreams, and because of the beautifully decorated cloak of many colours. So they ambushed him, beat him up, stripped him of his coat, threw him into a pit and, telling his father that he was dead, sold him off for 20 shekels to a group of Ishmaelite nomads who took him off to Egypt. In that far country, despite being a slave, despite being accused of adultery, despite being thrown in jail, he ultimately enjoyed great success and good fortune, rising to a high position in the Egyptian government of the time.³

All through this time, though, Joseph never forgot his father and the filial debt he owed him. So when, in time of famine, his brothers came to Egypt, looking for food, and not knowing that their brother was the Minister of Food, Joseph embarked on a very complex plan to bring his father, Jacob to Egypt, to live in the prosperous province of Goshen. Though the rest of his family had treated him shamefully, Joseph never ceased to be grateful to his father that he had made him the person that he was. It was a debt of love and respect that he felt compelled to repay.

I wonder if, similarly, any of us here today might feel that there is a debt of love and respect we have to pay to our fathers. For some, our fathers might be still be alive but probably for most they are long gone from this earthly sphere of things. Yet, maybe we feel we never properly showed our fathers due esteem and affection when we had the chance. Is there any way we can still repay this debt? I think there is.

For instance, we can try and come to a new appreciation of our father's love for us, something we may

not have properly realised away back or even now. And we can do it by looking at old family photographs.

Celebrated Christian author, Philip Yancey, tells how he never really knew his father because he was just an infant when he died. His dad was, therefore, always a remote individual who was never really a part of his life, although he was the one who had given him life.

One time, when he and his mother were looking through some family photographs, a picture of himself as a little baby caught his eye, principally because the photo was all tattered and bent. All the others were beautifully preserved but this one stood out because it was so decrepit and faded.

Yancey suggested to his mother she throw this one out. But she was adamantly opposed. This was the most valuable of all the photographs, she explained, because it was the one that was attached to his father's iron lung during the last months of his life. At the age of 24, just before Philip was born, his father contracted polio and so had to be encased from the neck down in a huge, cylindrical breathing unit. It was this photograph, she explained, the photograph of his new-born child that he had never seen in the flesh, that kept him going through these difficult months. Suddenly, Yancey says, I realised through this crumpled photograph that there was one who spent all day, every day, thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me. And, there and then, I realised what a debt I owed the father I had never seen. There and then, I decided to repay this debt by loving my children as much my father had loved me.⁴

Another way to repay our debt to our fathers is to try and be like them. To look past their faults and foibles, to see the highest and best in them, and try to emulate the good that is, or was, in them.

Cal Ripken Jr., who broke one of baseball's most elusive records for consecutive games played, told once of an incident that took place between his two young children, Rachel and Ryan. One day, after bickering back and forwards for quite some time, he heard the older sister try to put her younger brother in place with what she deemed to be the ultimate insult. "You're just trying to be like Daddy," she taunted. Then her brother's little voice responded in all its childhood innocence, "But what's wrong with trying to be like Daddy?" When Cal Ripken's own father was inducted into the Baltimore Oriole's Hall of Fame, Cal Ripken retold this story, then looked his father straight in the eye and said, "Dad, that's what I've always tried to do. Be like you."⁵

I wonder if, at that poignant moment, Ripken's father felt like another father who penned this little verse:

His little arms crept round my neck,
And then I heard him say,
Four simple words I can't forget,
Four words that made me pray.
They turned a mirror on my soul,
On secrets no one knew,
They startled me,

I hear them yet,
He said, "I'll be like you."⁶

There is, of course, a better and higher way in which we can repay a debt of love and respect to our fathers. That is to endeavour not only to be like them but to become more like our Heavenly Father.

In Ephesians, St. Paul urges his hearers to be imitators of God. Literally, from the Greek word "μιμηται" mimētai, it means that we are to mimic God, to model ourselves on God, to mirror God in our lives. And, since Jesus Christ, is the incarnation of God in this world, it means that we are to base our lives on him, to copy his ways, to replicate his conduct. It means that we are to reflect, as closely as possible, his love, his compassion, his forgiving spirit, his generosity in the course of our daily lives.⁷

Unfortunately, we don't do this because we are constantly tempted to copy those who are our human heroes and earthly role models in life, celebrities, sports stars and the like. We try to replicate their mannerisms, their ways of speaking, their clothes, their values, their lifestyle, in the hope of becoming better people. But, try as we might, we so often fall short ... until, that is, we realise that it is only when we cease attempting to be like other people and start consciously reflecting God's image in our lives that we can truly become the better human beings we so long to be.

If, therefore, we want to show our earthly fathers just how greatly we love them, let us make a greater effort to be imitators of God by modelling our lives on him who is the highest and the best. When you think about it, that is the ultimate compliment we can pay our fathers by becoming more like our heavenly Father. And that is the supreme way in which we can repay them the most important debt of all. The debt of love.

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Charles II came back to the throne after the Restoration in 1660 but obviously still forgot to pay his debt to the Worcester Clothiers.

² "Prince will finally pay off debt", Monday, 9 June 2008, www.bbc.co.uk

³ Genesis 37-47

⁴ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment With God*, Zondervan, 1997

⁵ King Duncan, "For Those Who Have Received Much", Collected Sermons, www.eSermons.com

⁶ Herbert Parker quoted by Ben Strohbehn, "Like Father, Like Son," Faith for the Family, May/June 1975, p. 6

⁷ Ephesians 5:1