

## 107 *The Ultimate Parent*

(Disclaimer: I don't know whether the argument I'm going to share here is valid, but I'll present it anyway, and you can make your own mind up.)

The list of people within my *oikos* is still growing; I mean those friends and fellow churchgoers whose husbands/wives/partners don't share their faith. (I think everyone has a faith in something, but I think you know what I mean.) I do pray for these people (25 of them now), and I have talked and prayed with friends about them, but I haven't come up with anything specific that I/we should actually DO.

And that's not to mention those of us with siblings, children, parents and close friends who don't share our faith. And I'm guessing that I have now included anyone and everyone reading this – and then some.

OK, so what's Paul's latest 'good idea'?!

I'm wondering if it will help to think of God as the 'Ultimate Parent', and to ask ourselves how such an Ultimate Parent views our loved ones.

God created us – in love, and for love. God loves us desperately, achingly – that theme is plain, right through the Old Testament and the New Testament. So maybe we can understand better how God views our loved ones if we use an *a fortiori* argument (woo!): if we ask how a good human parent feels and acts – a really, really good human parent – then God, the Ultimate Parent, must be much, much better than that.

I do claim some precedent for this. Jesus told what Tom Wright refers to as the Parable of the Running Father. I wonder if we can understand just how shocking that parable was to its first hearers?! We normally call it the Parable of the Lost Son, but I think that's a misnomer; we use it as a parable about how we sin, but if we repent, God will generously forgive us. But in my Bible, the heading, 'Parable of the Lost Son', is applied to all 22 verses of Luke 15:11ff – but Jesus spoke about **two** sons, not just one. (I'm struggling to stop myself "going off on one", about our individualisation of salvation, but I'll resist...)

...No, I won't! Isn't that part of why we're so worried about our loved ones?! We're saying, "I'm worried that if they don't repent of their sins, they'll go to hell." But I **certainly** hope we're not expressing it as, "...God will *send* them to hell." That's not what an Ultimate Parent would do.

Anyway, I think it's a parable more about an Ultimate Parent, than about the two sons, let alone about just **one** son. The first scandal – hence Wright's 'Running Father' – was the shock that Jesus' hearers would have felt at the idea of the head of a big household (it included a number of servants) hitching up his skirts and racing down the road. Wright likens it to the Prime Minister showing up at the state opening of Parliament in a bathing costume! (I was going to comment that it's nice to find someone who uses overstatement more than I do, but of course we have a precedent: Jesus used some heavy hyperbole.)

So the father ran down the road and hugged his wayward son who was covered in pig shit. Sorry, but we have to see how totally shocking that was, to understand what an amazing parent God is!

And we haven't finished with scandal. The ring and the robe ... and the party. That was totally and utterly unreasonable! and the elder brother was right – it was totally unfair! In view of the facts of **both** sons' wrong attitudes (our wrong attitude), God's forgiveness is totally unreasonable, and it's unfair, and we can't understand it or explain it, but – according to Jesus, anyway – it's freely available to anyone and everyone willing to trust Jesus.

We desperately need to understand how God views our loved ones. God loves them way more than we ever could, and God is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). In other words, God wants the prodigal to “turn around (repent) and come back into the family” and God also wants the elder brother to “turn around (repent) and come back into the family” – same God, same message for all.

Of course, Love can't **force** anyone to come back into those wide-spread open arms – compulsion isn't love. But an Ultimate Parent will do anything and everything possible to demonstrate their love. And that, I guess, is what we need to do for our loved ones.

Finally, what do you make of Paul's statement that: *For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.* (1 Cor 7:14)? Yes, that's what he said; you can make your own mind up about what he meant, but I take it as a real encouragement in prayers for my own family.

Above all, for my family's sake, I'm praying that I will be filled more and more with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – perhaps especially patience.

So I'm standing firm, trusting the Ultimate Parent, and together we'll do all we can to show unconditional love to our loved ones, and watch to see what God will do.

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