



Summer Family Reunion
Part – 4 No longer Slaves, But Children of God
Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today I want to share some of my story with you as we talk about *No Longer Slaves, But Children of God*. I want to talk to you about the picture of God I kind of grew up with and how I went through a faith crisis in my 20's. My picture of God started to change, I started to understand more about relationship and not just rules. I grew up in a church... I grew up a slave to rules and I truly got to a place where I believed that God's love for me was based on what I did or did not do. So, in my 20's... I think young people today are calling it deconstruction. I think that's what I was doing in my 20's just trying to figure out who God is, knowing that we get our picture of God, of our Heavenly Father, from our earthly dads. I take this responsibility very seriously in my home, with my kids when they were growing up.

We say it at this church all the time. Parents are the primary authors of their child's heart. That means are children are watching, listening, remembering, and repeating. And every day, we get to paint this picture... I don't this today to be a guilt trip for anyone. I would love for us to look at what it means to be in relationship with our Heavenly Father, to cry out to him in this intimate trust relationship, and for him to be the first one that we turn to when life is uncertain or difficult.

I know that my kids could tell you all sorts of stories about me when they were growing up. But when I think about what my kids see when they look at me, this is the first picture that comes to my mind – (Picture of young Henry Winkler) This is how I feel. Can you raise your hand if you don't know who this is? We're losing a generation is what's happening. So, that's the Fonz, like the coolest guy ever.

But I know when my kids look at me, this is really what they are seeing – (picture of older Henry Winkler). What I think they see and what they actually see is very different.

We're celebrating Father's Day and we're in the season where everybody is taking family vacations. If you've already had your summer vacation, let me see your hand. If you are still yet to take it, would you raise your hand? If you're like, "It ain't in the budget," would you raise your hand? I get it.

So, some of you are going to go on road trips and I just believe I speak on behalf of all fathers when I say let us pack the vehicle. Just bring your stuff to the car; we will pack it. Some of you are going to be flying places. A rule when our kids were growing up was don't talk to dad in the airport because he's going to be on the phone because we just missed our American Airlines connection and we're planning now with Delta. So, don't talk to me right now... Especially when we go through TSA. I'm going to be getting a pretty thorough search.

A couple of weeks ago, my shoes did not pass the bomb test that they swipe. An alarm went off and the guy walks up to me and goes, "We're going to need to go to the back." I'm like, "I prefer to do it out here where there are cameras and where I feel safe."

I've never had it where they go inside... it was like alright, okay. I told the kids, "I was scheduled for a prostrate exam, but I'm canceling that now. I would like him to tell me how it's going. I want to welcome all of our guests. If this is your first time at our church, it won't ever get any better than what you're experiencing right now."

Some of you are going on cruises. I've already seen this. My family will tell you I don't mind a cruise, but I hate... and I can't use that word strong enough. I have cruise excursions. I think they paint this beautiful, flowery image of what you're going to be doing and it's never like that. Amy signed us up for a botanical walk on an island once. We're walking and she's pointing out weeds and, "Do you have this flower here?" It's called a daffodil. I have those at home. Then this lady rushes up on the beach and tells us to rush up to see a piece of driftwood. "This came up on the beach last night." I look at Amy and I'm like, "How much did you pay for this thing?" She wouldn't tell me. At the end of our botanical walk down a sidewalk with a few weeds, are Kayaks. We're supposed to kayak over to a small island. It's blowing 50 miles an hour and Carson is in my Kayak. We're getting nowhere. We are still on the shore. My son was little, and I remember going, "What are we; Lewis and Clark here; let's turn around."

I found the perfect video this week of a dad who signed up for one of these excursions. He thought he was getting a jet pack excursion, but instead, he got a dolphin ride, and he was the dolphin. About halfway through that excursion, he was reminded that he paid \$400.00 for this thing and that's when his arms came out. Enjoy your summers, Dad. I hope you enjoy your time with family.

Again, I shared with you I had a faith crisis in my 20's where I really wanted to understand grace. I grew up singing about it but didn't really understand it. I had a lot of rules and as a rule follower, I followed the rules, but didn't really understand relationship. One author says, "*Rules without relationship equals rebellion.*" And rebellion is not always shaking your fist at god, rebellion could be just giving up and walking away. I wasn't walking away from my faith, but I remembered just thinking there's got to be a new way forward. I started reading everything I could get my hands on about grace, and what it means to walk in grace.

Chuck Swindoll was the first book I picked up called *The Grace awakening*. I want to share with you because you might be thinking about my parents. The cool thing about this journey I was on in my 20's is that my parents were on this journey with me. I would read a chapter or two and call home and discuss it, and we would walk through this together. I was really listening and leaning into grace. I came to moments where I'm like, I don't deserve this. If you ever, in your study of grace get to a place where you say, "I don't deserve this," you are absolutely correct. If you get to a point in your study of grace where you're like, "I'll never measure up," you're right. If you ever get to a point in your grace journey that you're like, "I can't earn this," you are right. It's something to be received, not earned.

One of the next books I picked up was by Phillip Yancey called *What's So Amazing About Grace?* These two lines were on the back of the book and it's all you need to know about everything going on inside the book and he just simply said,

"There's nothing you can do to make God Love you more and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less." And when I first read that, I said, "Can't be true." So, I started on this journey. And if you go to Ephesians and as we talk about salvation, we are very clear at this church. Salvation is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone... period. That's why when we get to Galatians, you're going to see Paul's passion to the Galatians saying, "Why would you walk away from living out the message in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, and return to obeying the law?"

Because what was going on in that day is the Judaizers came in, the false teachers came in and said, "Yes, Jesus, but obey our laws. Yes, keep our customs." And Paul calls that not only a different gospel, but a perverted gospel. It's not the true gospel when you add works to it. He's saying, "Why would you go back to the law?" Why would they go back to following the law? It's for the same reason you and I, when we're trying to live out grace in our lives, we will go back to things that are comfortable, predictable, things we know, things that didn't even work for us – environments and people, toxic relationships. We'll go back to the comfortable.

So, I started studying. For it is by grace you've been saved, through faith. The first question I had as I was wrestling with this was *How does my faith... and do I have enough faith, right, to be saved?* Do I have enough faith to receive this free gift of salvation. And this is not from yourselves, it is a gift. So, now I'm understanding a gift is something you receive, not something you earn, and not by works. Well, for some of you, you've grown up in church and all you know is works. And maybe you don't have a relationship with your Heavenly Father. Your picture of God is the same picture I had growing up. It wasn't really Heavenly a Father/intimate trust relationship. It was more scorekeeper God. He's keeping track of your good and your bad. So, I never really had the relationship. I had to start out with the question *how do my works...* We're not going to discredit works today. We're just not adding them to in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone for salvation. We'll see where that pays out. It's not by works so that no one can boast.

So, I started asking the question, "How do my works work when it comes to grace. I love what Dallas Willard said, *"Grace is not apposed to effort, it is apposed to earning."* And when I first understood grace... I feel like it was for the first time in my early 20's. When I understood salvation by grace, it was really the first time it gave me the desire to follow God, to follow in my relationship in Christ and to live for Jesus.

This what Paul wants for the Galatians – to understand that you don't become a child of God by obeying the law. You come receive this free gift. He wanted them to find and walk in freedom as sons and daughters of God. Now, when we say this, there are some that are going, "What about cheap grace? What about people where grace abound, sin abounds all the more. They received this free gift... and there maybe some of you in here that have had this attitude. You received this free gift, you understand it, and your thought is then *I can live however I want*. That was not my experience. When I truly understood it, it gave me a desire for the first time to dig into his Word and realize *okay, my works are the overflow of my salvation, not the source of it*. This is so important.

If Amy walks in the family room today and says, "Ted, I love you. I can't even tell you how much I love you. I can't tell you how much I want to pour my love and serving and hospitality and generosity out on you. And ted, there is nothing you will ever be able to do, nothing you can do that will change how

much I love you.” If she pours that on for five minutes, laying it on thick. And my first response is How can I take advantage of this? That’s what you would call evil. That’s not the response when you truly understand.

If someone hands you a gift today, you won’t open it and be like, “I deserve this. This is all for me now.” And then to be like, “I’m never giving you...” No. When you receive this gift, it’s like, “What can I do now as an overflow of this overwhelming generosity poured into my life?”

That’s why, in Galatians 1: 6 we read really the context... The whole Book of Galatians, this letter that Paul wrote, but not just the context, you also get the tone because he says... **6 I am astonished...** I love that word *astonished* because it combines multiple emotions. He’s shocked and confused. Why would you receive this free gift, walk in freedom with Christ, and then say, “Oh yeah, but we are going back.” “We’re going back to following the law.” He says, I’m astonished **...that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ...** To live in... We’re not just saved by grace, we live in grace, we walk in grace, we walk in this freedom that we have.

Again, I grew up in a church that had rules for everything. We had rules with our hair. It couldn’t touch our ears. We weren’t allowed to wear shorts. Women weren’t allowed to wear pants. There were no tattoos. We weren’t allowed to dance. Do you know how embarrassing it is for a 4th grader to take a note from home to the PE teacher, exempting me from square dancing? It’s embarrassing. Yeah, my friends would ask what’s going on and I would say, “Oh, it triggers my asthma.” I don’t have asthma. I was making stuff up. I remember my friends going, “Ted, even the Amish Square dance.” I was like “I know! We’re more conservative than the Amish.”

You go play baseball in the neighborhood and your friends are all taking hits on their candy cigarettes in the dugout. They’re like, “Ted, you want a hit?” “You know darn well I can’t have any of that.” That’s just how I lived my life. “Shun the very appearance of Evil.” We weren’t allowed to go to the movie theater, but then Block Buster came out? We couldn’t go to the theater, but we could go to Block Buster. You see where the crisis starts to develop. A young person goes, this just isn’t lining up, it isn’t making sense.

Paul is saying, “I want you to live in the grace of christ.” That when you open the word of God, you desire is to follow after Jesus. His ways, his words, and this is the overflow of your salvation. This is your thanksgiving. And instead, he says, “You’re turning to a different gospel and a different gospel is no gospel at all. It has no saving power.

When you get to Galatians 3: 26, Paul says, **26 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...** That’s very important because he’s really bringing home the point about works. You are children through faith. And this is where I started to wrestle. Do I have enough faith?

The late Pastor Timothy Keller has helped me process this over the years. That it’s not the strength of my faith that saves me, but it’s Jesus that saves me. That’s why he said, “It’s not the strength of your faith, but the object.” Who is the object? It’s Jesus that actually saves you. *“Strong faith in a weak branch is fatally inferior to a weak faith in a strong branch.”*

By the time we get to Galatians 4... We are going to look at just four verses today in Galatians 4, and I know that was a lot of set up for these four verses. But we read in Galatians 4 of Chapter 4, 4 ***But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son,*** (Jesus).. He's giving theology here now, so Jesus was fully God and Fully man. He wasn't 50% God/50%man, he was fully God and fully man. ***...born of a woman, born under the law...*** This is important because Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life under the law. ***5 to redeem those under the law...***

Now you are going to see his passion really start to come out to them to understand what it means to be saved and what it means to walk and live in this gospel. The word redeem there means to buy back from the slave market. And the Galatians would understand this word picture perfectly because they watched the Romans build their empire on the backs of slaves. And what he is saying is "You have been bought and redeemed from the curse of the law and from being a slave to sin. You are no longer slaves, but you are children of God and I need you to walk as children, not slaves. He's very clear. ***...that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."*** Our English equivalent to this would be Daddy or Papa. It's a term of intimacy and trust. I trust you. Calling out Abba Father. ***7 So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.***

And he is crying out to the Galatians to understand this and not just to receive this for their salvation, but to know and to walk in this for their sanctification. He is the one doing this work in you. He cries out "Abba Father, Daddy"

When my daughter was four, she escaped from her Critter Street Class out here and I was up here preaching. I was getting after it one Sunday really passionate. I saw her in the back, and I was thinking oh, she got out. We are much better at security for those of you new to our church. We are way on top of it now. We haven't lost kids for years around here. But she got out and she just made her way down the aisle. I'm in the middle of a sermon and she walks right up on stage. So, I get down on my knee and everybody hears it because my mic is on. I go "what's up Corynn?" She goes, "Can Emma come over after church?" I said, "Yeah, that probably won't be a problem. I'll talk to mom about it." I thought that would be it, but she goes, "What about Lucy? Can Lucy come too? I'm like, "Listen, I'm going to get after what I'm up here doing really quickly. But you and I, afterwards, will get with mom and..."

I finish the sermon. Ted Burden, our worship pastor at the time tells me, "You should just stop preaching right now."

I said, "What?"

He goes, "That sermon was so good."

I said, "Well, thank you."

He goes, "No, no, not that thing you prepared. It will be the best message I've ever seen is your daughter walking down the aisle, you having to stop a sermon to talk to her because you know in that moment, Corynn didn't care what was going on in here. She didn't care who you were. I'm her dad. She has access to me anytime she wants. I heard from multiple people over the years that's still the best."

A couple times a year I ask the kids to break out of class and come down to the front. I didn't realize how much mileage we were going to get out of it.

But what a picture for us. When life is uncertain for you, when you don't know where to turn, when the weight of life is just overwhelming and weighing you down, when you get that diagnosis, when you can't get that house, or you have to give up a house. Do you turn to old systems, patterns, people that didn't work for you? Or is your immediate response to turn to Abba Father, Your heavenly Father? You have access to him at any moment, any time.

My daughter was married two years ago on May 31. When I woke up that morning, there was a card sitting on my counter where I get ready in the morning. It just said, Daddy. It was three pages of a letter. You'll never hear one word off of that letter and it will never be in a book or an article. That was for me, and I mean it is... I read it on a plane the other day and it got... I get emotional every time I read it. This is exactly the relationship Paul is trying to explain to the Galatians. This intimacy. I told my daughter, who is in her 20's now. I go, "Please don't call me daddy." Every now and then, we'll be driving down the road and she'll look over at the speedometer and she'll go "How fast you going, Pastor Ted?" I'll be like, "Please still call me Daddy. You know I prefer Daddy."

You call him Daddy. Theologian George Strait says, "Let me tell you a secret about a father's love. A secret that my Daddy said was just between us. You see, daddies don't just love their children every now and then. It's a love without end, amen."

So here it is today for us. Christ set me free, and I am part of God's family. I am an heir not by anything I've done or will ever do but because of the gift he offered me, and I receive it. And that's what we want for you today.

Galatians 5: 1 Paul says, ***It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.*** You can ask the teaching team here. If anybody is ever teaching and there is a hint of legalism that creeps into the message, my lower lip starts quivering and I get fired up because I'm not returning to a yolk of slavery. I'm not returning. I want everything I do to be the overflow of all that he has done for me and my salvation. What you believe about God determines how you relate to God.

Some of you had a harsh dad, a demanding dad. There are those in our church who had a dad leave. I've been watching a documentary this week of an athlete whose dad left right after he was born. Some of you have an absent dad. I talk about father relationships and for you, it's like, "I want nothing to do with it."

The most important thing about you is what you think about when you think about God.

Mom and Dad, this isn't a time for you to go on a guilt trip today. Guilt trips lead nowhere, they are dead ends. Don't feed your regrets. Ask Jesus to redeem your remaining days. In a moment, there is going to be something I share with you that every father can do. Here's what I know. I'm not the perfect father. I think I'm the Fonz, but I'm the old guy in a salmon Columbia Fishing shirt.

So, the question before us today... and please let this settle in because for some of you, your vision of God... Dad was distant when you were born, so God must be distant and angry, demanding and harsh. Just score keeper God, demanding and harsh.

I want you to know whether your dad was present or absent, patient or demanding, kind or angry, strong or weak, you can turn and trust your Heavenly Father, no matter what earthly dad you had.

So, the question is, Is he someone you can turn to when life isn't working? When a relationship isn't working, when the job isn't working. We often, when we don't trust our Heavenly Father, we turn to old patterns, jobs, friends, finances, whatever list we want to grab hold of, something that's familiar, comfortable, predictable, that doesn't work, but that we retreat to when we're stressed. Is your Heavenly Father enough?

We were in New York years ago when Carson was very small. Carson, my youngest son, has never been a real touchy/feely kid. He wasn't a cuddler. We didn't hold hands walking through the mall. It just wasn't who he was. It wasn't what he desired. So, we were in New York.... If you've ever been to New York, when you're trying to cross the street, there are literally 100 people waiting to cross the street, shoulder to shoulder. It's okay for adults because you can see over heads and shoulders. But when you're this tall and all you see is a wall of people, it can be frightening in a mob like that. I remember getting ready to cross street after street and the first time, Carson got scared and his hand shot up immediately and grabbed mine. Because this was so rare, I grabbed it, and I was like... I turned around to brag to Amy. She busts through and grabs the other hand. We got across the street and he felt safe again. Why is that not our first response when life is uncertain?

I told you about my first crisis in my early 20's. My next one came when I was 26 years old. I called the pastor of the River in Forsythe, Missouri. I was 26 and right out of seminary. I knew everything. If you're new to our church, that's called sarcasm. I didn't know nothing. I was clueless. I entered into a mess, I created a mess, I added to the mess. It was just an absolute mess. And a guy by the name of Gary Smalley called and invited Amy and I to breakfast. Many of you know this story. I'm not going to share the whole story with you, but he came right in the middle of another faith crisis.

My first faith crisis, God turned into a faith milestone. And now God was going to use Gary to turn this faith crisis into a faith milestone. And that's my prayer for everyone in here that might be in a crisis today that it would become a milestone in your life and not something you shake your fist at God and walk away. Instead of shaking a fist at him that you would reach up and hold on and say, "I'm ready for this ride. We met at Bob Evans here in Branson and Gary sat down... I didn't know he was doing it until years later. He wrote a book on this called The Blessing. And he started to give Amy and I the blessing that day. He didn't sit down and read them off one at a time, but it was in everything that he did. Here are the five elements of The Blessing and then today I would like to speak it over every single person on campus and on every person who is watching today.

The first part is **meaningful touch**. If you were around Gary, you knew it was always a hand on the shoulder. Yes, he was a hugger, but the hand on the shoulder communicates safety, but it also communicates, "I'm near. I'm someone you can trust, and I care for you." The first day I met Gary, he's hugging me. As he sees Amy crying and I'm mad at this mess that we are going through.

And then the second part is **spoken message**. Gary believed, with all of his heart, that the tongue had the power of life and death. Today, what's sad for me in the church, what's sad for me among Christians today is it seems we're speaking more death than we are life over one another. Gary didn't know how to speak death. He only spoke life. So, he started to speak life into Amy and me, and that was the third part which is **attaching high value**. So, he was speaking honor over us, reminding us we are image bearers of all mighty God, so we have automatic, intrinsic value.

Right now, some of you feel worthless. And you need someone to remind you there's nothing about you that is worthless. You're an image bearer of All Mighty God through creation, through salvation you become a child of God, a son or Daughter of God. In the scripture we read today it says you're an heir of All Mighty God. That's a lot of value.

Then he started **picturing a special future for us**. I'll never forget him saying, "Most guys aren't blessed with that type of treatment until 10 to 15 years out of seminary. You're getting it in the first five months. He said, "You should be falling on your face, praising your Father in Heaven for this." He goes, "I don't know what it means, but God's going to do something great through all of this pain." And we've just watched, year after year, God use that pain some 23 years later.

And then **active commitment**. After doing all of this, at the end of the breakfast Gary said, "I'd like to stick with you as you go through this. I remember him telling me "It's going to take you two years to heal." And being a cocky 26-year-old, I was like, 'It's not going to take me two years. I'm going to do this and do that and get right back on.'"

He goes, "Okay, it will probably take a little longer than two years."

What I want to do as we close today is ask that you to bow your head and close your eyes. Some of you need a blessing today. Some of you never received this from your father. Some of you are dads right now who are on a guilt trip because you never gave this type of blessing to your child. If your children are still...

I talk to so many people in our church who aren't even in relationship with their fathers anymore. They don't have conversations with them. I'm going to encourage you that it's not too late. As you receive this blessing for you today, boy wouldn't it be something if all of us, maybe close to 3,000 people on campus today, would leave here today being people speaking life over others and speaking blessing over others. And I'm going to give you this blessing today.

Your heavenly Father is near. He is not distant and angry. He speaks to you through his Word. Every day, you can wake up and open the Bible and hear God speak directly to you. It is alive and active. You are highly valuable to your Heavenly Father. Through creation, you are an image bearer, through salvation, you are a child, an heir of God.

Scripture says, *In his house there are many rooms* and Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. He wants to spend eternity with you. You don't get a much more special future than that. And as far as active commitment goes, he will never leave you nor forsake you.

Father, for all of us that we would receive this blessing today, that we would go and be this blessing. That we would speak this blessing over sons and daughters, moms and dads, brothers and sisters, picturing a special future, speaking words of high value, walking alongside people to let them know your love for us. Thank you for the free gift of salvation that comes by grace, through faith in Jesus. We celebrate that.

For the one who has never placed faith in Jesus, that today would be the day of their salvation. We pray all of this in the authority of the name of Jesus and everyone agreed and said... Amen.