

RELIGION VERSUS RELATIONSHIP

And the effect of both on children

Unique to Christianity is the belief that humans can have an affectionate relationship with God. To Christians, God is “Abba, Father,” a term of affection used by children 2,000 years ago when addressing their Dads. Today, it would be like calling one’s Dad, “Papa.” Imagine calling God that!

Calling God “Papa,” however, would be close to blasphemous for some people because, for them, the emphasis is on behaviour, not affection. God’s not like a Dad who enjoys his kids, God expects his children to behave. Proper respect and submission, they say, are what God requires if one hopes to gain his favour.

I thought that too, at one time, so it came as quite a surprise to discover God loves us “while we were yet sinners (Romans 5:8).” He loves us despite our behaviour. It’s like a child discovering he’s still loved when his report card is bad! But what a relief, not having to worry himself sick if he’s fallen short of his Dad’s expectations.

But what parents do to their children instead, is reinforce religion. They say things like, “If you don’t behave, kiddo, Santa Claus won’t bring you any gifts at Christmas.” Or in Sunday School they’re told, “If you don’t behave, child, you’re going to Hell.” Everything, it seems - report cards, Santa Claus and eternity - hinges on how we behave.

What a horrible way to live. But that’s the life I put my two older children through, unfortunately. I put religion before relationship and made behaviour more important than love. There wasn’t much room for affection because I was so busy “bringing them up right,” and getting angry at them when they failed.

But when I discovered God isn’t like that, that he isn’t into grading us according to how we behave, or getting miffed when we mess up, I wondered what would happen if I lived that way with my youngest son still at home. It would mean loving him even when he didn’t do well, something I’d never tried with anyone before.

But what if he realized he’s loved even at his worst and he exploits it to slack off, or as the Bible says, he turns “grace into license?” Well, yes, that’s the risk I’d have to take, but isn’t that the risk God took with me? He loved me while I was yet a sinner. I did think I was being a bit naïve, though. Love my son for simply being my son without any expectations from me? I was surely asking for trouble!

But I kept coming back to the question, “What do I really want from my son?” Is it success I’m after, or a relationship? Is it a kid I can feel proud of, or a kid who calls me “Dad” with affection? If it’s an affectionate relationship I’m after, which it is, then I know how God won my affection. He did it by loving me to death for nothing more than being me.

It was strange getting used to a God like that, but it was lovely watching the effect on my son. He’s living in a home now, where he doesn’t have to live up to my expectations to be loved. There is no need for him to impress me, no demands he must fulfill to win my favour, no hoping for 100% on his report card to make me “really” happy, no list of things he must do before I truly love him, and no condemnation when he fails. He is free to strike out on life knowing he is loved no matter what.

The effect on my son has been rather pleasant. He seems very content. I think there’s a real affection between us, too. And for that I thank our Abba, Father, who taught me, by what he did in Christ, that it’s relationship that comes first, not religion.

