

Father's Day

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[0 : 00] Several weeks ago, I received an email from one of those many companies that seem to live under the conviction that, as the general public, we just love receiving daily marketing.

But with this particular email, which on this occasion I did actually read before deleting, it was a bit different. It was from a, shall we say, a well-known supermarket, a branch of which happens to be located just over the road from one of the two churches where I'm a minister.

The message went something like this. Dear valued customer, we know you love to be kept up to date with our amazing offers and deals. Well, naturally.

However, with Father's Day on the horizon, we do understand that this can be a difficult time for a lot of people. So if you would prefer to opt out of our Father's Day promotional emails, just let us know and we won't send them to you.

Well, as they say, every little helps. For all kinds of reasons, Father's Day can be difficult. There are so many complexities in our lives.

[1 : 20] There are absent fathers, bereaved fathers, fathers who have passed away. There are estranged fathers, fathers with estranged children, fathers with sick children.

There are abusive fathers. There are men dealing with miscarriage, navigating IVF, infertility or fostering and adoption or the cultural taboo of choosing to not have children.

And look, that's just a handful of reasons why Father's Day can be a bit raw for lots of us. So my question is this. Should we still mark Father's Day?

My answer to that question is absolutely yes. My reason for that answer is simply because fathers and fatherhood is too important, both for life in general and in Christian faith in particular.

We can opt out of marketing emails, but it won't do to just opt out of what is a vital theme in life and faith. And there's two reasons for me saying that.

[2 : 32] The first reason why I think we cannot and should not try to opt out of this theme is that it's right to pray for dads. Now, bear with me on this, but here's my attempt at a very quick history lesson.

The modern Father's Day came into existence just over a century ago. There's more than one story behind it. But the most prominent one is that of someone called Sonora Louise Smart.

When Sonora was 16, her mum died whilst giving birth to her sixth child. Sonora was the only daughter, and she shared with her father William in raising her younger brothers.

In 1909, she was in church in Washington for what was one of the earliest modern Mother's Day services. And she felt something should be put into place to celebrate the contribution of fathers as well as mothers.

She approached her minister and proposed the date of the 5th of June, which was her father's, her own father's birthday. However, the minister said he needed a bit more time to get ready.

[3 : 44] So the third Sunday in June was eventually arrived upon. Now, as a few years before, it made its way across the Atlantic to the UK. And yes, today, along with most calendar events, it's been commercially hyped.

But let's not forget that it all started simply because about 100 years ago or so, someone somewhere recognised some of the broken situations within which a lot of parenting often happens. Being a dad is, well, it's an awesome privilege. There's no doubt about that. But it can also be pretty messy. And that's because life is messy.

Dads, along with mums and all those people who play a role in bringing up children, need our prayer. And that's what we do this day. We pray for dads because dads need our prayer.

The other reason why I think we shouldn't be too ready to opt out of Father's Day is theological. It's an important reminder that, and I say this at the risk of maybe sounding a bit simplistic, but it's a

really important reminder that God is our father.

[5 : 04] Whatever emotional experience comes our way when we hear the word father, that term is indispensable if we are to really understand and experience Christian faith.

If we try to opt out of it, we deny ourselves something that is essential in being a Christian. There are loads of reasons for this, but here are just two.

First, if God is our father, then that makes us brothers and sisters. Perhaps that sounds like a bit of cliched rhetoric.

But in our broken world of division and hostility and suspicion, we must not allow ourselves to become over-familiarised with the basic, simple message that we are to regard one another, not simply as fellow human beings, but as brothers and sisters who share one father.

Second, if God is our father, then that tells us something critical about how God is to be approached and related to.

[6 : 16] Our Bible passage today from John chapter 14 tells us that when we see the person of Jesus, we see the God who is our father. All the unconditional love and grace and goodness that we see in the character and teaching of Jesus is a revelation of the God whose children we are.

He wants us to know that we are his children and to know him as the one who never stops loving us and to live in a real and deeply conscious awareness that he is indeed our father.

Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me. You see, it's one thing to say we believe God exists, but the only way we can know that God as our loving personal father is through Jesus.

Now, if that claim is true, it changes everything. It's not just some small aspect of Christian doctrine to which we can say we'll take it or leave it.

To opt out of seeing God as that sort of God would be to deprive yourself of the personal relationship that lies at the very core of what it is to experience being a child of God.

[7 : 37] Now, there's a story that's been around on the Internet for some time, which I actually only came across quite recently, a story about Bill Gates. I'm not sure whether it is actually a true story or if it is a true story, which of the several versions of it is the most accurate.

But for the purposes of what I want to illustrate now, that doesn't really matter. The story goes that Bill Gates was being interviewed and he was asked, what's the secret behind your success?

At which point he took out his checkbook and invited the interviewer to name the figure that she would like him to give her. Apparently, she got a bit embarrassed and said, I didn't mean it like that. So he gave her a check from his checkbook and told her to write down the amount she wanted. She pushed it away and repeated her question to him, but in a different way.

Apparently, then he took the check and tore it up and said to her, the secret of my success is that I don't miss opportunities as you just did.

[8 : 50] You could have been the richest broadcaster in the world. I don't know how true that story actually is, but I do know that it's true that we can too easily miss out when we choose to opt out.

Jesus said that if we get to know him, then we get to know God as our Father. Why would anyone opt out of that?

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