

## FATHER AND SON HEALING

By Dennis Belkofer

“You want me to tell Dad that I love him when he’s never said that he loves me! It isn’t fair.”

That was my immediate response to the Lord speaking to my heart and saying if I wanted a relationship with my father I was going to have tell him that I loved him.

Ten months earlier in August 1966, as I was preparing to enter my junior year in college, I received Christ through the witness of my sister, Rachel, herself being only three months old in the faith. Immediately, the Holy Spirit birthed in me the desire to serve and obey the Lord. Telling my father that I loved him, however, was something I didn’t want to do. All my life I harbored deep resentment toward him and I simply did not want to deal with it.

It was not that my father was abusive or not a good provider. The bitterness that I felt toward him was projected on me by my mother and I owned her feelings as if they were mine. Psychology calls it transference. Starting when I was only three or four years-old, Mom repeatedly let me know that she didn’t love Dad and wished they had never married. Unable to process my feelings because of my young age, I grew to mistrust Dad and shut myself off from him emotionally, thinking that he was a villain who wanted to hurt Mom.

Facing all of that confusion and bitterness, and telling him that I loved him, seemed like the most difficult thing I had ever been asked to do. Again, I told the Lord that is didn't seem fair.

He answered with, "Was it fair that I first loved you?"

The power of that truth began to melt the hardness that had shut Dad out of my heart. I told the Lord I would do whatever He wanted.

The following evening, I was scheduled to take a date to see the Supremes in concert. That morning as I prepared to leave for class at the university, I noticed a piece of paper sticking out of my wallet. It was a note from Dad wrapped around a five-dollar bill telling me to have a good time. (Back then, two people could eat out on \$5). That was a first for Dad and it melted my heart even more. For sure, God was at work.

Later that evening, Dad helped me carry my stereo upstairs to my bedroom. I knew it was time to tell him.

As he turned to walk downstairs, I threw my arms around him and told him that I loved him. As we stood face-to-face, I saw something in his eyes that took me by surprise – deep hurt.

It had never occurred to me that my father suffered emotionally. Did the wall that separated us hurt him too?

Squirming to release himself from my embrace, Dad mumbled something that sounded like "thank you" and walked down the steps.

Alone in my room, I crumpled in a heap on my bed and cried uncontrollably for nearly 15 minutes as the Holy Spirit washed my heart of bitterness and filled it with love. It was a new beginning for Dad and me.

During the years that followed, Dad and I grew to respect and enjoy each other. I even had the privilege of leading him to saving faith in Christ.

Dad died on Palm Sunday 1985. The last thing that he told me was that he loved me. I would not have that sweet memory to cherish today had I not been obedient to the Lord and told Dad that I loved him.

How God feels about fathers and children restoring their relationship is found in Malachi 4:5-6:

*“See I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.”*

(NIV)

By turning my heart to my father, God graciously removed the curse of bitterness that had separated us. Some twenty-five years later, I would see God move in a similar way, as I turned my heart to my own son.

In April 2006, *Christianity Today* featured *My Dirty Little Former Secret*, my reaction to *Brokeback Mountain*, the movie about a homosexual affair between two cowboys, and the account of my own struggle with homosexuality. The article mentioned that I married a girl who also struggled with homosexuality and that our hasty decision ended in divorce.

Our son, Chris, was born from that brief and turbulent union. We were living in North Carolina, and after we separated his mother took Chris and moved to Missouri. I returned to my family in Ohio and worked as a teacher. Distance, child support and my

limited teacher's income prevented me from visiting Chris apart from Christmas and summer vacations. For all practical purposes, he grew up without me.

*My Dirty Little Former Secret* also mentioned that I lived a gay lifestyle after the divorce was final in 1974 until I recommitted my life to the Lord in 1981. His mother also embraced the gay lifestyle after our divorce, living with another woman as lovers – today it is referred to as partners. I feared that our gay tendencies would be passed down to Chris. But that wasn't the case. Chris, now thirty-three, is happily married.

My mother separated me emotionally from my father. Ironically, now as a father myself, I was separated from my own son. I wasn't there to teach him to ride a bike. Play ball. Attend report-card pick up. Help him with his homework. Discipline him when he needed it. Or read him a bedtime story. I knew that my absence left a void in his heart, along with anger and confusion. And I knew that it was my responsibility to help heal his hurt.

I began by telling him that the reason his mom and I divorced had nothing to do with him. I also assured him that it in no way did it mean that we didn't love him. As Chris progressed into his adolescent and high school years, I confessed my sins and failures to him, as they related to me personally and to my role as his father. And I encouraged him to express the anger and resentment he felt for me. It wasn't easy for him, but over time he did forgive me. The hardest thing both of us faced was that we didn't know each other. Could a father-son bond be formed between us? And how much more work would it take? Both of us decided it was worth the try and it paid off.

In 2001, Chris moved to Chicago to attend graduate school. It was the first time that we lived in the same city and it provided us the opportunity to spend time together.

It didn't take long for us to learn how much we are alike – in both good and not so good ways. We also learned just how much we enjoyed each other's company. Time seemed to fly as we talked about everything from music to his girlfriends.

For the first time, I knew how it felt to have a son and Christ knew how it felt to have a father. And it didn't take long before both of us could honestly say what we needed and loved each other. Now that Chris is married, I can share my father-love with his beautiful wife, Liz, as well. God has given to me everything that I never had with my own father and more. And he is giving Chris the father-care that he missed in childhood.

Was it easy? Not at first. But we remained open and willing and the Lord did the rest.

As I began thinking about writing this and how it relates to Malachi 4:5-6, the Holy Spirit seemed to impress on my mind that societal problems, such as the break up of the family, teen violence, and sexual addiction, are often the result of fathers being estranged from their children and children estranged from their fathers.

He also seemed to be saying that many of these same problems are manifested in the body of Christ because men have not taken their rightful place as fathers of the faith and given struggling believers the care and attention they need. God's word tells us that the burning, purifying and restoring spirit of Elijah is here.

Fathers, are you willing to turn your hearts toward the children? Children, are you willing to turn your hearts to the fathers?

I am living proof of what can happen if you do.