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# Confidence in God's Embrace

Have you ever imagined God greeting you with a warm embrace? That's how the father in Jesus' famous parable greeted his prodigal son. For many of us, however, it can be a challenge to believe in a God who is eager and ready to meet us wherever we find ourselves.

Maybe that's because we tend to focus on our shortcomings and sins and wonder how the all-perfect God can love us just as we are. We may have experienced conditional love in our past and can't imagine that God will love us when we fail. Yet what we find hard to believe is actually true: God is head-over-heels in love with us! In fact, we delight him and give him pleasure, just because we are his daughters. If we are going to live as confident daughters of our heavenly Father, we first need to be confident in God's unconditional love and limitless mercy.

Sherry had been raised Catholic, but during her turbulent young adult years she left the church. She was glad to be back but was still ashamed of some of the things she had done during the years she had been away. She knew on an intellectual level that God had forgiven her youthful transgressions and that he loved her. Still,

she was reluctant to try to get closer to him, because she had never really experienced his love in a consistent or palpable way.

When a moms' group formed at her parish, Sherry decided to join. The women often went to daily Mass after their meetings, sitting in the back pews as their young children climbed over them, and they invited her to join them. Sherry began to notice that on the days she went to Mass, she felt a sense of peace and joy for hours afterwards. One day Olivia, one of the moms in the group whom Sherry especially admired, shared about her past. Sherry was amazed at how similar it was to her own! Olivia lent Sherry some spiritual books to read and encouraged her to pray and to read the Bible each day.

As Sherry persevered in her daily prayer and spent more time with the women in the moms' group, she realized that her ideas about God had been all wrong. He wasn't a distant God who was ready to pounce on her every time she did something wrong. He was a loving and merciful God, always ready to forgive, always desiring an ever deeper and more intimate relationship with her.

## Scripture: Luke 15:11-32

<sup>11</sup>Then Jesus said, "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup>The younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.' So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup>A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. <sup>14</sup>When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup>So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup>He would gladly have filled himself with

the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup>But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; <sup>19</sup>I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ <sup>20</sup>So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. <sup>21</sup>Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ <sup>22</sup>But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup>And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; <sup>24</sup>for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate.

<sup>25</sup>“Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup>He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. <sup>27</sup>He replied, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has got him back safe and sound.’ <sup>28</sup>Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. <sup>29</sup>But he answered his father, ‘Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup>But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!’ <sup>31</sup>Then the father said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. <sup>32</sup>But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.’”

1. After spending his inheritance “in dissolute living,” the younger son never expected to be called a son of his father again. Why were his expectations so off base?

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2. How would the actions and attitudes of the older son been different if he had really known that his father loved him so deeply? What did his father do for him that he failed to perceive as acts of love?

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3. Was there ever a time in your life when you felt like the younger son? Like the older son? Were you able to come back to your heavenly Father and accept his love? If so, share what happened.

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## From the Church:

The human heart is heavy and hardened. God must give man a new heart. Conversion is first of all a work of the grace of God who makes our hearts return to him. . . . God gives us the strength to begin anew. It is in discovering the greatness of God’s love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin. . . . The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1432)

1. Have you ever experienced “the greatness of God’s love,” even for just a moment? What was it like? Was it a fleeting experience, or do you experience it regularly?

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2. How is a “heavy and hardened” heart an obstacle to accepting God’s loving embrace? What steps could you take or have you taken in the past to soften your heart toward God or others?

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3. Why is Jesus on the cross, “whom our sins have pierced,” the ultimate testament of God’s love for us? Is that how you look at the cross? Why or why not?

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### For Further Reflection and Discussion:

1. Why do you think we are sometimes tempted to believe that God loves us less because of our sinfulness? How is that a contradiction of the good news?

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2. Have the knowledge and experience of God’s love in your own life changed the way you live? If so, how?

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3. How might failing to see your own self-worth prevent you from fully experiencing God's embrace? What might the Lord say to you if you told him you weren't worthy of his love and mercy?

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4. How does confidence in God's love make us more loving toward others? How does confidence in God's mercy make us more merciful toward others?

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