



abandoned the son he had had with a slave woman; Isaac fathered twins who grew up hating each other; Moses had sons who never saw him because he was too preoccupied organising the Israelites in their journey across the desert.

In one episode of Dad's Army, Captain Mainwaring quotes the verse "*those whom God has joined together, let not man put asunder.*"

"No" says Sergeant Wilson, "*marriage falls asunder quite easily enough as it is.*"

The Bible is not filled with stories of perfect families. It never attempts to cover up the fact that human relationships are incredibly difficult to handle and that even the best people do not get them right all the time. The kingdom of heaven is about human beings, not super-humans. That is the first thing to remember.

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Jesus' teachings then, about human relationships, can be quite complex. Because on the one hand you have teaching about what should happen and on the other you have teaching about what does happen.

The stories Jesus tells about the kingdom of heaven show that a high standard of behaviour is expected in human relationships:

- a master expects his labourers to earn their money by hard, honest work
- a father expects obedience and respect from his children
- a banker who has lent money to his customers expects this money to be returned
- a man who is throwing a big party expects his friends to do him the courtesy of turning up.

Courtesy, consideration, fair play, good service, respect and loyalty- these are the standards of God's kingdom. This is how God wants us to treat each other.

But what actually does happen in these stories?

- some labourers work much harder and longer than others;
- children rebel against their father;
- people who have borrowed money fail to pay it back;
- guests let the party-giver down and don't turn up to the party?

OK, says Jesus. We have some pretty pathetic people here. What should happen now? Well, the master should pay his workers strictly by the hour, the father should reject the children who rebel against him, the banker should seize the debtors' assets and the party-giver should refuse ever to speak to his friends again. That is what the laws of morality are about: there are standards to be maintained in a relationship and if you fail to live up to those standards then the relationship is broken.

Right, but then, what does happen in Jesus' stories?

The Master ends up paying all his workers the same money; the father forgives his children, the banker cancels the debts, and even the party-giver uses his disappointment to give some poor people a good time and cheers himself up.

What should happen is not always what does happen. To a lot of people then and to a lot of people now this does not sound fair. You set high standards and you make rules, only to let people off when they break them. How can that be right? Surely you are looking at a state of social and moral anarchy?

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In the film “Pretty Woman,” Richard Gere played the part of a rich businessman who hired a prostitute to live with him for a week. He said he needed a “professional,” someone who would be at his beck and call during a rather stressful time, and he was willing to pay her three thousand dollars. The woman keeps her side of the bargain, she does everything he asks of her and she earns her fee. But by the end of the week he realises that he is falling in love with her and that love is going to cost him a lot more than three thousand dollars.

Love is going to make him vulnerable. Love is going to take him out of the comfort zone of the business world where everything can be bought for a price and where he is the boss, totally in control of everyone he employs. Love is going to cause him pain, it is going to run the risk of making him feel guilty and inadequate, it is going to demand self-sacrifice and forgiveness.

And this, taught Jesus, is how the kingdom of heaven works. God’s kingdom is about high standards and the highest standard of all is that of love.

In parenting you certainly learn about the cost of loving.

You learn about giving life but life you are unable to control. You can only guide.

You learn that your child’s pain hurts far more than your own.

You learn to how to forgive seventy times seven

You learn to pour yourself out in self-sacrifice.

The cost is higher than you ever dreamed it could be.

*But do you know what, said Jesus, you will think it is worth it. Once you experience the reality of love, it is like finding a pearl of great price. You would give everything else you own away, simply in order to keep it.*

The kingdom of heaven is like a parenting class- you learn from God what really matters to you in life and nothing can take that away from you.

Happy Father’s Day.

Amen.