

▶ Read { My father's shirt

The Holy Spirit really dealt with my husband and me at the *Sonship Week* conference in answer to many prayers. I am seeing that as good as theology and teaching techniques are, it is the Holy Spirit alone who changes my heart. He tears down the idols and pride and replants the simplicity of faith in Christ. I realized that my greatest sin was unbelief and so lightly esteeming all God has given me in Christ.

One day when I was very young, I saw my older sister hanging up my father's white business shirts on the clothesline to dry. I was suddenly filled with the urge to hang up one of my daddy's white shirts. He was my daddy too, and I was his daughter; I loved him in my childlike way and wanted to express it. I couldn't reach the clothesline—it was too high, but I saw a wheel barrow in the yard and its handles were just the right height for me. I didn't notice how rusty it was and I rather joyfully clothes pinned the wet shirt to the handles.

When my dad got home and saw the shirt on the wheelbarrow, he became very angry with me and punished me severely for ruining his shirt. I had not realized the impact that event and others like it had made on me. However, as I was repeatedly convicted during the *Sonship* conference for not believing God concerning his delight in me and in the gracious nature of my relationship with him, this memory returned to me. Now, you cannot hardly get through 24 hours of a *Sonship* conference without realizing that your own heart is as murderous as anyone else's—so I wasn't primarily focusing on only being the innocent victim of my father's cruel anger.

As I remembered these scenes from the past, I saw that through the years I had not been believing that my Father in heaven was any different than my earthly father. I had not been listening when he described himself. In short, I hadn't been believing the gospel, that by faith in Christ and his perfect atoning sacrifice, he now loves me, and is forever for me and delighted in me. In Christ, he has made me beautiful and pleasing to him forever.

So the next morning I told our counselor that I thought I was beginning to understand. I told him the memory and said that I guess if the Father saw me standing next to the wheelbarrow with the ruined shirt on it, he would forget the shirt and

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hug me. “You still don’t understand fully,” Jeff said. “God would not overlook the shirt, but take it, put it on, and wear it to work. And when someone commented on the rust marks, he would say, ‘Let me tell you about my little girl and how much she loves me.’” I was overwhelmed with that realization.

I am beginning to realize that my Christian life has been a continual effort to earn God’s pleasure by “getting the shirts hung up right.” God would answer if my prayer was *right*. God would smile upon me if my theology was correct. And since I knew how I had failed day by day in my works, I sort of snuck them up on the line and tried to be away when God got home, so to speak. Someone at the conference said something that seems to apply here. He said, “God will not despise the tainted love-gifts of the sinner who looks to Jesus.” My entire Christian life had been oppressive. I did not know how to live day by day without an overwhelming sense of failure to perform up to what I thought God demanded. With that came a sense of God being disappointed and even disgusted with me.

How overpowering it is now to realize that because of Christ, I can experience a daily freedom to move out into people’s lives. I can love others. I can obey God with my heart because I don’t fear that he will be furious with me if I “get the shirt a bit rusty.” There is a freedom to love that I have not known since the moments before my father got home that day long ago.

I have been thinking of the “rusty shirt” and the parable of the talents. The two servants, who loved their master and trusted in his good will, served him energetically. They were not driven, but the very fact that they believed him to be what he was (faithful and generous) moved them to use the talents to the best of their ability. It was, however, the legalist—the one who viewed the master as a hard man—who hid his talent. My unbelief has led me to talent-burying. It is the fact that my Father delights even in rusty shirts that moves “this most flinty heart of mine” to really desire a life disciplined to seek him and find him, and by his power at work in me, to live a life of faith expressing itself in love.

An update: five years later

It is hard to believe that it has been five years since my husband and I attended the *Sonship* conference. Before we attended, I had worn myself out with trying to be a “godly” Christian mother and wife. I always felt that I had to be a better person than I was in order for God to be pleased with me. I had this constant weight of trying to live up to what Christ had done for me—so the Father would not be sorry he had saved me and made me his child. My husband and I tried hard to have a godly marriage and to be godly parents. In our minds, we had this ideal picture of what our family ought to look like. Reality was far different. Soon we were all becoming adversaries. My husband felt that my lack of respect and

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affection for him ruined his chances of achieving a godly marriage. I felt that if he loved me more and led our family better, then I would be able to do my part in respecting and affirming him. The kids seemed bent on destroying any resolve in us to be patient, kind instructors. We resented them for that.

So, how has the *Sonship* training made a lasting impact on our lives? It showed us clearly the gospel message: that Christ died for sinners—like my husband, our children, and me. He paid the price to get eye level with us and embrace us where we are. The first immediate impact was to take the pressure off. My husband and I were able to repent and forgive each other for the critical spirits we had and the demands we had placed on each other. We could see each other as fellow, forgiven sinners. We also began to learn to accept our children and show them Jesus as the only one who saves us from our sins. The long-term effect has been crucial to us, as we have had to deal with the special needs of our children—physical, mental, and emotional.

Before *Sonship*, we thought we had to have our acts together. We had to know the right thing to do and be able to do it. What a relief to know that God meets us where we need him. I don't have to know, I can ask. I don't have to pretend to be strong, I can be weak and come to him. I can admit my weaknesses and my worst, cruel sins, and ask others to pray for our children and me. It is here that we have seen numerous answers to specific prayers born out of our weakness and our sinfulness. What a joy to know our needs are a window to God, not an obstacle that makes him disgusted with us. We still have much to learn, particularly about God's love for us in Jesus. We stumble instinctively. But we always know who to return to. And that has been as significant a change in us as our initial salvation. ■

