

“I Don’t Feel Like God Cares About Me Personally”

Luke 15:11-24, 1 John 3:1, 1 John 4:10, Romans 5:5, Ephesians 2:4-5

Good morning, men. My internet service, television, phone, too—I’m on VoIP—all went out so I was on my cell phone to call the cable company, and I was on hold and I waited so long that everything came back on again and I hung up.

Well, we have a shout-out this morning that we’re going to do to some guys at River Oaks UMC in River Oaks, Texas. At River Oaks United Methodist Men, there are 5-10 guys and they’ve been meeting for a couple of years on Mondays at 5:30 p.m. – and thanks to Corky Makarwich, who put this together and sent the photo. So I wonder if you would join me and give a warm welcome to these guys. Welcome. Hoorah! Glad to have you with us.

We are doing this series Man Alive, and what we are doing is looking at the most common inner aches and pains that men express. There are seven of them and they correspond to a God-given, primal, instinctive need that has been built into us by our Father. Those seven symptoms, those seven inner aches and pains, are...

- First, I just feel like I am in the middle of this thing alone.
- Secondly, I don’t feel like God cares about me personally.
- I don’t feel like my life has purpose. It feels like things are random.
- I have these destructive behaviors that keep dragging me down.
- My soul feels dry.
- Many of the most important relationships – they are not helping; they aren’t working.
- And finally, number seven: I just don’t feel like I am doing anything that is making a difference and that is leaving the world a better place.

This morning we want to take a look at the second of these. Each of these messages can stand alone so you don’t have to be part of the whole series; each message will stand alone. This morning we will look at this common complaint, and men tell me all the time in different ways, one way or another, “I just don’t feel like God really cares about me personally.” That’s going to be the title of the message. I don’t feel like God cares about me personally.

Right now, one of my favorite texts—how many favorite texts do you have? You probably have hundreds. When I say one of my favorite texts, it’s like the text de jour. It’s the one I’ve been focusing on for the last few weeks. It’s Galatians 2:20, where it says: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me.” I’m at that point personally where that is the most resonant of all ideas in my life right now. However, it hasn’t always been that way. There will be, I’m sure, undulations where I don’t feel that way at some point in the future, too. I hope not, and I guess not, but it could happen.

What I want to do this morning is ask you – Do you feel that way? I know that many of you do, but I also suspect that many of you do not. I have an overly ambitious goal for this message this morning. I am hoping that you will be able to walk out of here in complete resonance with Galatians 2:20 – that I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. The life I now live in the flesh, in the body, I live by faith. Jesus loved me and he gave his life for me.

Not long after I graduated the 10th grade, my father and I got into this terrible argument and I ran away from home. I moved into an old house that had been converted into a rooming or boarding house in downtown Orlando. There were three rooms upstairs and we all shared a common sink, a common stove and a common bathroom. I got a job scraping dried cement off of metal scaffolding down on Robinson—and there was an old paint store down there at that time—and then I took the old scaffolds with another guy and we would dip them in a tub of chrome-colored paint that reflected all those ultra violet rays off the paint; my eyeballs got sunburned! It was grueling work. There was a bowling alley across the street that just got knocked down this year. It had been some kind of church for the last few years. It just got knocked down. But I'd go to that bowling alley every night for dinner and have a grilled cheese sandwich. That was my standard dinner. I hitchhiked wherever I went. Life was great.

I don't know exactly what I had in mind but I certainly didn't have a plan. At the end of two weeks, a friend of mine came over and brought two 6-packs of beer. We drank our way through them and he threw up on my rug. The next morning I woke up and my head was throbbing, cans were strewn all over, and it hit me – I ached. I ached to go back home. But I didn't know what to do about that because as a young teenager, I assumed that once you severed your ties, then you were gone—that it was over—so I didn't really feel like I had a way back. I was starting to feel very alone.

Later that morning, I heard a knock at my door; I opened the door and there was my dad. There was my dad. I have no idea to this day how he found me. Hesitantly, I invited him in. He looked around – didn't appear to judge a thing. Then he looked at me and he said, "Pat, your mother and I just want you to know that we love you very much, and we were wondering if you would be willing to come back home?" He barely had that out and I had all my worldly possessions in a brown paper bag and we were out of there.

Because I had such a hard time believing—*really* believing—that my father cared about me, I had started hanging out with the wrong crowd and doing all of the wrong-crowd things. We fought. I left, because I didn't really feel like he cared about me. Now that I'm a parent myself, of course, I realize that sometimes a father must withhold some things from his son that his son thinks he can't live without, and make his son do some things he doesn't really want to do. But at the time, it was devastating to me. As an adult, because of that experience, I have struggled all of my life to believe that God really cares about me.

By God's grace, after decades, I do believe that God really does care about me. He loves me and He cares. He knows me; He loves me; He cares about me. But it has taken decades, and frankly, every now and then I *still* wonder why He would care about me. In my work, I've discovered that we are all asking the same question. *Does God really care about me?* That's what I want to talk about in this message.

A FATHER WHO JUST WON'T GIVE UP ON YOU

The first thing up here we are going to talk about is a father who just won't give up on you. As men, we have a primal need to believe that God really cares, that he loves us, knows us, and really cares about us. Not to melodramatize this, but I would go a step further and I would say that men are desperate to believe that God really cares about them. And that He really does forgive our sin, and that He really does know what we are going through.

Most men, however, struggle to accept this reality about God. We are going to look at Luke, Chapter 15. We are going to start at Verse 11. Let me tell you a little bit about the story – a familiar story about the prodigal son. There is a young man who has a squabble with his dad and he basically asks his dad for his share of the inheritance, which his father gives him. He loves him so much he's willing to give him this inheritance, and then he goes away to a foreign land and squanders it on wild living and prostitutes.

Once he is out of money, but not before, there is a famine in the land. (You know, why couldn't the famine come when he still had some money? But the famine comes when he runs out of money.) He decides to hire out to a pig farmer. We don't do so much of this here because this is an application-oriented Bible study, but if you think about the cultural situation, do not let it be lost on you that a Jewish boy was now feeding pigs. He would look at the pig food and long to be able to eat the pig food because he was so hungry, but nobody offered him any help.

Let's read together Verse 17. "When he finally came to his senses..." If you don't think God is sovereignly orchestrating all human events to bring you into right relationship with Him and right relationship with each other, this would be a very good proof text for that. There are hundreds of examples of that in the Bible, but this is as good as any. "When he finally came to his senses, he said, 'At home even the hired servants have enough food to spare. Here I am dying of hunger. I know what I'd do. I'm going to go home to my father and say: Father I've sinned against both heaven and you and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Please take me on as a hired hand.' So he returned to his father. But when he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming, and filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. His son then said, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Kill the fatted calf, get the ring, get the sandals. We are going to celebrate. My son was lost and now he is found.'

I'd like you to see today one thing in this passage—maybe two things. Notice that when the son came home and the father saw him, he was filled with love and compassion, and he ran to his son and embraced and kissed him. Notice, however, that this took place before the son ever said one word. Before you and I say a thing—before we open our lips—God is filled with love and compassion for us because we are his sons. He created us. He made each one of us. Everything about us, God knows. This is biblical proof of God's unconditional love.

What happened next depended on the son's response. If the son had been all huffy, then the father might have had to do something different in interacting with him. When my father showed up at my hideaway apartment, if I said, "Who needs you anyway," he would have taken a different course of action, but he wouldn't have stopped caring. He wouldn't have stopped being my father. He would alter the nature of the relationship. God loves you so much, so unconditionally, that he is willing to orchestrate a worldwide famine if necessary in order to get you to come home.

I was on Facebook emailing a guy because I'd said something—I don't remember what I said—but he has some health issues and you can feel the pain coming back on the Facebook post so I said, "Send me your email and we'll talk about it." I sent him some additional messages and thoughts and links to some messages that we'd done right here leading up to this series. The reason that this whole idea—*Does God really care about us?*—is so incredibly hard to get our minds and hearts around is because all the pain and suffering there is. Look at the last four messages leading into this Bible series: The Purpose of Disasters, What is Crippling You, When You Suffer for No Apparent Reason, and Why the Blind Man Could See What the Others Could Not See. Think about it – so much of what we do is how do we adapt and cope and survive in a world that is prisoner to sin.

The other thing we see in this text is what the foundation of receiving God's love and care is. God loves you and He cares about you and knows you no matter what your situation is. But notice that the foundation of *experiencing* that love and care is repentance. The son decides to repent – to change his mind. You could look at this some other time, but I'll give you the verses; this whole Luke 15 is about repentance. In Luke 15:7, in the same way, there is more joy over one lost sinner who repents and turns back to God. Jesus is setting up the prodigal son story; in Verse 10, he says there is joy in the presence of God's angels when one sinner repents. This is after the one lost sheep and coin parables that Jesus uses to lead right into this parable. It's a story about repentance. It's about repentance. Faith and repentance are the foundation of a powerful transformed life. Faith and repentance are the foundation of all of this, the very foundation of all this.

I'm going to ask you now to close your eyes and listen. **Because you are his son, God really does love you. He cares. He actually likes you. Take it into your heart. You've never been loved, not really, until you've been loved like this.** You can open your eyes.

You can write this down if you want. It's like the world's longest Big Idea. But it's what I just said to you and I believe I am saying it to you on behalf of God Himself, because God really loves you and cares and likes you; you can take this into your hearts.

I was at breakfast with my friend Cameron, and I was all revved up, and I said, "By God's grace, I am absolutely convinced that God loves me, but it's more than that. Not only does God love me, but I am pleasing to God. God actually delights in me. God likes me. He even likes me." Well Cameron looked at me like I was from Mars. He thought about it for a second and he said, "You know, I do believe God loves me, but I cannot believe he likes me – not after all the things I've done. Love me? Sure. Like me? Not a chance."

And Terrence Reel, who is a gender researcher at Harvard, has observed that men don't feel worthy, but unlike women, men tend to deny that they don't feel worthy. So we just try to pretend that we feel worthy when in fact, we really do not feel like we are worthy of God actually liking us.

There was this man on the Florida coast whose son graduated from high school; he was a good kid, but got arrested. In the eight weeks after high school, he got addicted to cocaine, stole a rifle and got busted. Because of some quirk in Florida law, he was sentenced to a mandatory 10-year sentence, because this rifle was involved and it was not recovered. Because the rifle was not recovered, there was a 10-year mandatory sentence. That ripped his father's heart right out. Dad spent the next year and his \$50,000 of life savings trying to rescue his son. When he was out of money, he was in despair so he decided to... and this is obviously logic of the heart, not a very good legal strategy. He thought if he could recover the rifle, he could get some leniency for his son. He entered the world of drugs and he bought information from drug dealers, and somehow he found the drug dealer to whom the son had sold the rifle. He was able to buy it back. He got a mitigation hearing with the judge and so the father was explaining to the judge how much he loved his son and how important it was that his son be given another chance, and how he retrieved the rifle, and he pleaded for mercy. The stenographer is bawling like a baby, and the court clerk is sniffing, and even the judge got a little misty. Because of the impassioned love of the father, the judge had leniency and set the son free for time served.

Do you have a father that would do that for you? One thing I know for sure: you do have a father in heaven who already did that for you. **The big idea today: Because you are His son, God really does love you. He cares – he actually likes you. Take it into your heart. You've never been loved—not really—until you have been loved like this.**

HOW CAN I BE SURE?

How can I be sure that this is true? I'd like you to take out your wallet and take out the largest bill. If you don't have any bills in your wallet, then watch. I have a fifty. I want you to take the largest bill that you have. Hold it up. Now take the bill and wad it up in a little ball and smash it. Now unwad it. It's looking a little tattered. Do you still want it? Of course you do. Why do you still want it? Because the condition of the bill doesn't alter its value. That's the gospel. No matter how good you are, you will never be good enough for God to love you. You never have to be worth more. You never have to think, *How do I buy \$2 worth of goods with a \$1 bill?* You never have to be better than the bill. Likewise, no matter what you have done, you can't do anything to make you bad enough to make God not be willing to love and forgive you – no matter how tattered you look to outsiders. Do you get this? Do you understand this? No matter how tattered you look to anybody else, you are of the same value to God as the day He conceived you in your mother's womb. This is the gospel of Jesus.

God has done for love what He would do for no other reason. The Bible doesn't exalt any one attribute of God above any of the others. Nevertheless, God has done for love what he would do for no other reason – not His power, not His holiness, not His omniscience. There is no other attribute of God that can explain why He would send His most beloved, only begotten Son Jesus – let His beloved Son die to save the rest of His children. There is no other attribute of God that can explain this.

These other verses written down on your outline, the addresses... “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called the children of God!” 1 John 3:1. 1 John 4 says, “This is love: not that we love God but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” The Ephesians 2 passage: “But because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, has made us alive together with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions and sins – it is by grace that we are saved.” And this one—I didn’t put it down—John 15:9; Jesus is speaking and He says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” Just think for a moment about how much love that is – *as the Father has loved me*. Think about how much love that must be – *as the Father has loved Jesus*. Think about how much the Father must love Jesus, and Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.” The love that Jesus has for you is the exact same love between the Father and the Son. That’s hard to take in, isn’t it? That’s hard to take in, isn’t it? **This is the Big Idea: Because you are His son, God really does love you. He cares about you. He actually likes you. Take it into your heart. Take it into your heart. You’ve never been loved—not really—until you’ve been loved like this.**

COMING HOME

Then coming home. We’re out of time. God does want you to be a man who is fully alive – alive together with Christ. I know from experience that whenever we get this many men together there are some men who are here because you want to believe. You have even prayed some kind of a sinner’s prayer before but you don’t feel like it has taken. The message for you this morning is to come in faith and repentance. Remember what I said? Faith and repentance are the foundation of a powerful life transformed by God. Come in faith – faith is yielding yourself. Repentance is saying, “Okay, I changed my mind.” Now the Holy Spirit is the one who does this so this is going to happen for you right now. It’s not going to be because I said anything clever; in fact, like Paul, I don’t come with clever speech and persuasion but I depend on the Holy Spirit. It’s going to be the Holy Spirit Himself who will do this for you. But if you need to take your Christianity from merely head knowledge and take it into your heart, the way you’re going to do that is by putting your faith in Jesus and repenting of all of your sins. And believe the gospel. Believe this truth that God has... The whole story of the Bible, from beginning to end, is one simple plot: A loving Father who is relentlessly pursuing His children. Maybe He’s been orchestrating a world of famine for you to bring you to this point.

In a moment I’m going to pray, and if you really want to believe that God cares about you, you can do this this morning by putting your faith in Him and repenting that you’d been unwilling to believe what the Bible says about the gospel. And receive this. You can receive this today. By the way, even if you’re walking with the Lord, even if you do love God, and even if you have surrendered to His will, it’s still possible that you don’t believe that God really cares about you. You believe that he *loves* you, but *like* me? No, not a chance. He does. Take it into your heart. You’ve never really been loved until you’ve been loved like this. Let’s pray.

CLOSING PRAYER

God, I want to believe. I cannot believe without your help. So God, I’m asking You humbly to make me believe. God, I cannot repent or turn from my wrong ways without Your help. God, I’m asking You to

help me repent. I'm so sorry that I have not believed all of these signs You've been giving me that you really do care about me. I receive it by faith. (And then, still in prayer, let's say out loud together the Big Idea and change it to the first person.) **Because I am Your son, God, I believe that You really do love me. You care. You actually like me. I take it into my heart. I have never been loved—not really—until now that I'm loved like this.** Amen.

Let's pray and close this session, in Jesus' name. Father, I pray that this would be transforming for those of us who really need to be able to take it into our heart. Lord, I know that from the stories that—none here—but from the stories I've heard, that there are men who seek after you for decades but never really come to this place where they really believe that you care about them. Lord, do you really care about us? Yes, You do. Thank you for this. I pray that men would be changed forever because of your Word and Spirit. Amen.