

Never Underestimate the Power of a Hug

This past week I led a men's conference in coastal Colombia, a nation with a high rate of fatherlessness. Colombian men rarely receive affection from their fathers because the macho culture requires guys to be tough, harsh and emotionally closed. On the first night I taught from the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15. I reminded the guys that Jesus told this story to paint a vivid picture of the Father's unconditional love.

We all know what happened to the wayward son. After dishonoring his family by leaving home and moving to a Gentile country, the repentant son returned to his father—fully expecting that he might be disowned or forced to become a house servant. But the father was waiting patiently for his son's return, and when he saw him from a distance, he “felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

This was certainly the most powerful hug in the Bible, because it perfectly illustrates how our merciful Father feels about any sinner who returns to Him. The father didn't recoil in disgust, or look smugly at his son with self-righteous anger. No, he threw his arms around him, even though he smelled like pigs! Then he gave him a robe, a ring and sandals—emblems of a restored family inheritance—and he invited the young man back into the house. The affectionate father even threw a party for his son in a lavish display of forgiveness.

After I preached that message last Friday night, nine young men came to the altar to give their lives to Jesus. I had asked several pastors to pray for them, and they offered big hugs to remind them of the Father's merciful embrace. I ended up praying for a guy named José, who I later learned had

decided that night to leave behind a life of sin.

In a testimony two days later, José told all the men at the conference that when I hugged him, something broke. An invisible weight of condemnation, shame and worthlessness lifted from José's soul. "It was like Jesus was hugging me," he said. That hug, combined with prayer, began a miraculous healing process.

Later in the same event I hugged a young man named Elkin who had come to the altar for prayer. I knew nothing about him. But later he told me, "My father died two years ago, and he never once told me he loved me. When you hugged me, I felt God was hugging me."

I've seen this quiet miracle happen many times since I met author and preacher Jack Frost more than 20 years ago. Jack had asked me if I could help him shape the manuscript for his book, "Experiencing Father's Embrace." I told him I would need to hear him teach his life message, so I traveled with him to Toronto, Canada, and soaked for a week in his powerful teaching about the Father's love.

If you ever heard Jack speak, or if you read his books, you know he didn't have a good relationship with his father. He struggled with deep brokenness because he didn't get the affirmation and affection he needed from his dad. He became demanding and performance-oriented until the Holy Spirit brought deep healing to his soul. He then spent years teaching people how to receive God's unconditional love, and he and his wife, Trisha, founded a ministry in South Carolina called Shiloh Place.

At the close of every one of Jack's meetings he would invite his ministry team to join him at the stage. Then, when people came to the front of the auditorium for prayer, Jack and his intercessors would not only pray for each person, but they would also offer big hugs. That was the first time I ever saw

prayer ministers giving hugs at a church altar.

Initially I thought the concept of hugging people like this was awkward. But as I listened to the testimonies in Jack's meetings, I became convinced that there are times when the Holy Spirit will direct us to show godly physical affection to people who are starved for it. Before I left Canada on that trip, I joined Jack's prayer team and actually gave some hugs myself. I realized that people who struggle with abandonment, rejection, depression and other emotional issues can find incredible freedom from this type of ministry.

Jack died in 2007, but his message lives on in his books, and Trisha carries on his work through teaching and retreats. Jack also left a deep impression on me. I discovered that a hug is a powerful gift in this love-starved world that is so full of fatherlessness, abuse, child neglect and other forms of family breakdown.

✘ The church has become such a cold and clinical place. Even though we have modern buildings, high-tech sound systems and powerful preaching, we lack New Testament-style love. We teach biblical truth, but we leave out the heart. If we want to reach a rejected generation, we need to reclaim the warmth of God's overflowing affection.

His love is not just a doctrine to understand. It's also a warm hug to experience.

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