



## A FATHER'S HEART

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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1 Thessalonians 2:5-12

Twelfth Message

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We have many young fathers in our midst. It's easy to recognize them. They're the tired-looking ones! I smile as I watch them adjust to life with children. They try to remember why they decided to give up quiet evenings with good books, lazy weekends listening to their favorite music, and intimate meals with their brides, those long ago times when they could finish entire sentences without interruption.

Bill Butterworth shares a story from his early years of fathering. A few weeks after his wife had given birth to their fourth child, the late Joe Bayly, a gifted speaker, came to their church for a week of evenings meetings. Since Bill and his wife both couldn't attend, he suggested that she should go and he would stay home with the children. This was his first time alone with all four of them, who at the time were 5, 4, 2, and one month. I will read an excerpt from his journal entitled, "The Week Joe Bayly Came to Town":

My four-year-old wants to know why it is when Mommy goes out, the kids have to go to bed when it is still light. I tried to feed them dinner, a real disaster; tomorrow night I'll feed them in the back yard; they'll eat off paper plates, and they'll be dressed only in underwear and shower caps. The kids always want me to read the alphabet book, because they know with that book I can't skip pages. Never close your eyes when you pray with four kids. I always wanted to ask my four-year-old what it is like to sleep on the top bunk with his big wheel. 60 Minutes wouldn't even do a story on our house; they're safer in the Middle East. The kids are all mad at me now because cup cakes don't float in the tub. My two-year-old has special powers; he can look at a glass of juice and it will spill. I just made a big mistake. I lifted the lid off the diaper pail. That one act clears sinuses, kills roaches and ticks, and effectively discourages would-be burglars. I got angry. I said some things I shouldn't have. My five year old wants to know who's Joe Bayly and why do I hate him!

What does a father's heart look like? Hearing the word father, some of you feel your stomachs tighten and your blood pressure rise. Even hearing about God as your heavenly Father is difficult for you. You view God through the lens of your earthly father, a father who battered you, shamed you, abandoned you, flew off the handle at the smallest slight and never gave you the time of day. But, as many among us have learned, our heavenly Father is not like that at all. It has taken a long time to change my understanding of God. For many, the Christian life is a journey of being re-parented by God and learning about the father heart of God.

I never knew my father. He died when I was 11 months old, leaving my mother to raise my two older brothers and

me. She never quite recovered from the void left by his death, and drank quite heavily. And even though I always believed there was a God, I viewed him mainly as a judge, not a loving Father. I entered marriage and parenting with a lot gaps as a result. I didn't have many healthy role models.

This morning I want to make some observations from a passage in the New Testament that has meant a great deal to me in my ministry both as a pastor and father. My text is taken from the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians. This letter was written to a young church facing perilous times. Paul himself was the subject of strong criticism. His enemies claimed he ran away from Thessalonica when things got tough, and said he was insincere when he failed to return there. They charged that he was in the ministry merely for what he could get out of it.

In this passage, the apostle defends his ministry. His response, a very tender passage, gives a model for ministry as he opens up his life and reveals his motives and methods. Since leadership in the church is to model leadership in the home, I think you will agree that the principles we draw from this passage will be helpful to fathers. Further, Paul himself uses the metaphors of both a mother and father in describing his ministry. Though the message today is addressed to fathers, I believe that the observation I am about to share will have application to mothers and single parents, indeed anyone who longs to have a significant ministry with others.

Tucked away in this passage are three principles that have been the foundation of my life and ministry. My first observation is this:

*A father's heart has a humility that seeks to lead as a servant.*

We pick up Paul's words in verse 5 of chapter 2:

**For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is witness—nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, even though as apostles of Christ we might have asserted our authority. But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children (1 Thess. 2:5-7, NASB).**

In the previous verses, Paul had written about the purity of his motives; here he discusses the gentleness of his manner. He says it is wrong to manipulate people or dominate them. Notice the contrast between an apostle's authority and a mother's tenderness. Paul was an apostle of Jesus Christ, therefore he had the same authority as Jesus and the Old Testament prophets. Paul was not to be trifled with. He could have commanded the Thessalonians to obey, but he didn't. He wasn't hungry for prestige. He wasn't seeking honor and glory. He did not make demands on people, throwing his weight around and wield-

ing power.

Instead, using a feminine metaphor, Paul says he acted like a mother tenderly caring for her nursing infant: “we proved to be gentle among you.” This word is used but twice in the NT—the only other place is in 2 Tim. 2:24: “And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be *kind* to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:24-26, NIV).

This is exactly the exhortation Paul gives to fathers in Ephesians 6:4. But there he uses the antonym, saying, “Don’t be harsh with your children.” Don’t use a cross tone of voice. Think of a mother tenderly nursing her child. That is how we are to act with each other. We may have to say some hard words at times—we may need to be tough—but we are always gentle. We can misuse our authority by insisting on irritating or unreasonable demands, making no allowance for our children’s inexperience or immaturity. We can humiliate them by using sarcasm and ridicule, seeking to control them for our own selfish motives. But all this accomplishes is to provoke them to resentment and anger.

I am not saying there is never an occasion for demanding obedience of a child. It is critical, with young children especially, to grab the reins early. And certainly there is a place for discipline. But discipline must never be arbitrary or unkind. I find it all too easy, especially when I am opposed, to assert my authority. I can be heavy-handed and autocratic. But that is not how we should act with our children. We must not be harsh with them.

There is much confusion in the evangelical world over the issue of male headship, leading to a misunderstanding of the nature of spiritual authority. Most people define authority as, “the right to require obedience.” That may be a valid secular definition, but it is inadequate for our purposes. Spiritual authority is not about control and power. It isn’t about demanding your children be perfect. It isn’t about performance at all.

Spiritual authority seeks to encourage a willing response. Leadership in our homes is not so much about learning to make right decisions as it is about learning how to serve, how to initiate without being controlling, how to speak truth gently, how to give others freedom to fail and room to grow, respecting their individuality. That is what the father of the prodigal did. Jesus redefined authority when he told his disciples: “You know that...the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your servant” (Mark 10:42-43, NASB).

Practically speaking, what does this mean? Some children share their honest answers. Listen to how two of them completed the sentence, “If I could change my Dad...”:

- an 11-year-old girl: “I would make him less strict, make him listen to what I have to say before he answers, make it so he doesn’t assume the worst all the time.”

- a 15-year-old girl: “I would like to be able to talk to my Dad freely without being yelled at or being preached to.”

For me, this involves less barking out of commands and a greater willingness to help others in the tasks they struggle with.

Here is my second observation:

*A father’s heart has an affection that communicates unconditional love.*

Look at verse 8:

**Having thus a fond affection for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us (2:8, NASB).**

The apostle was not only gentle, he was affectionate, too. What a beautiful metaphor! This masculine individual was not ashamed to use a feminine metaphor. He could have used a number of words that were familiar to his readers to convey what he wanted to say, but he chose this word, which is not used anywhere else in the NT. One scholar defines this term translated affection, “to feel oneself drawn to something.” There is strong intensification of the feeling. It is a warm, inward attachment. Another scholar says it is a term of endearment borrowed from the language of the nursery. Fathers, do you remember how you felt when you held your first child in your arms? The tender affection that flooded your very being? That’s what Paul is referring to.

Unfortunately, that tender affection can fade if it is not cultivated. Prior to my current ministry with adults, I worked with adolescents for eleven years; consequently, I spent a lot of time listening to teens talking about their parents. I have observed that most parents love their children. It is rare to find one who doesn’t love his or her child. Having said that, though, I would also say that many children don’t *feel* loved, especially by their fathers. Something is breaking down between the affection we feel in our hearts and the love we communicate.

Parents need to learn to communicate love to their children. How can we do that? First of all, *we need to use our mouths*. Words have tremendous power. Proverbs 28:21 says, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue.” The saying goes, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” How foolish! Words are very powerful. If you don’t agree, think back to how you felt when the teacher announced in school, “Class, take out a clean sheet of paper.” I still shudder when I remember those words.

Here is what Paul says about words, in Ephesians 4:29:

**Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear.**

One man paraphrased it this way for parents of adolescents:

**Do not let any response motivated by personal need come out of your mouth, but only such a response that is directed at the strengthening of your adolescent according to his need at the moment, that it may be ben-**

## eficial for his relationship with Christ.

Secondly, *use your eyes*. Children can tell a lot just by looking at your eyes, Ross Campbell, in his excellent book, *How to Really Love Your Child*, writes this:

Eye contact is crucial not only in making good communicational contact with a child, but in filling his emotional needs. Without realizing it, we use eye contact as a primary means of conveying love, especially to children. The child uses eye contact with his parents (and others) to feed emotionally. The more parents make eye contact with their child as a means of expressing their love, the more a child is nourished with love and the fuller his emotional tank.

My eyes are the first thing my children notice when I come home in the evening. One glance at my eyes tells them what kind of night it's going to be.

Third, *use your ears*. Learn to listen actively to your children for the purpose of understanding. When my son Stephen was younger, he would take hold of my head to get me to look at him while he was speaking. Nothing lets a child know we value them more than active listening and remembering what they said.

What a tremendous blessing to give your child—knowing that his words are worth remembering! One reason why parents don't listen well, especially to their adolescent children, is that they confuse understanding with acceptance. They feel that if they show any degree of understanding in conversation with their children, the kids will think they are agreeing with them. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your children know you like a book: what you believe in, your likes and dislikes. What parents must do is listen in order to understand, and then communicate that sense of understanding.

Lastly, *use your hands*. Meaningful touching is an important means of communicating and a significant part of one's emotional health. Unfortunately, because of abuses in this area, people are loath to touch children today—and that caution is certainly valid. But children need to be touched in meaningful ways, particularly by their fathers. In his ministry to children, Jesus almost always held them and touched them. This was not only a means of illustrating his teaching to his disciples; our Lord knew a child's inherent needs. Meaningful touching can be done casually. Snuggle up to your children while you are watching television. Put your hands on their shoulders while waiting in line. Use your hands to demonstrate that you love them. A number of studies have been done on the relationship between sexual dysfunction and the lack of meaningful touching by fathers.

A couple of years ago, there was a story in *Sports Illustrated* about Greg Norman, the professional golfer who intimidates most other professional golfers with his ice-cold stoicism. The article said he had learned his hard-nosed tactics from his father. "I used to see my father, getting off a plane or something, and I'd want to hug him," he recalled once. "But he'd only shake my hand." In talking about his aloofness on the Professional Golfers Association tour, Norman responded, "Nobody really knows me out here." After leading golf's most prestigious event, the 1996 Masters, from the start, Norman blew a six-shot lead in the last round, losing to rival Nick Faldo. Rick Reilly, the *Sports Illustrated* columnist, wrote, "Now, as Faldo made

one last thrust into Norman's heart with a 15-foot birdie putt on the 72nd hole, the two of them came toward each other, Norman trying to smile, looking for a handshake and finding himself in the warmest embrace instead. As they held that hug, held it even as both of them cried, Norman changed just a little. 'I wasn't crying because I'd lost,' Norman said the next day. 'I've lost a lot of golf tournaments before. I'll lose a lot more. I cried because I'd never felt that from another man before. I've never had a hug like that in my life.'"

Fathers, I pray that will never be said of any one of us. Our children need our love. The gift of unconditional love, demonstrated in all these ways, will give your children a sense of love, belonging and competence.

This brings me to my third observation:

*A father's heart has a transparency that models and communicates an authentic spiritual life.*

Here are Paul's words, from verses 9-12:

**For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are our witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory (2:9-12).**

Ministry is simple, really. It's making friends and imparting truth. Being a father involves the same elements: it's loving our children and teaching them. Paul thought of his message in terms of two elements: He both *embodied* the truth and *imparted* it. That is where our authority and credibility come from. Paul says he behaved devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly. His life was consistent with what he knew to be true. And he was blameless. Not sinless, mind you. He is not talking about perfection here, but of the attitude that we should have toward holiness, our desire for it, the hunger we have for righteousness and progress. That's what gives us authority. Paul knew that the most powerful form of teaching the Scriptures was modeling the truth in his own life. You can't give away something you don't have. It is our lives that give credibility to our words.

And not only should we embody the truth, we should impart it. We ought to teach people the word of God, which implies that we are spending time in the Scriptures and gaining knowledge, growing in our apprehension of Biblical truth and using it to encourage and exhort others.

The home is the primary place where the flag of truth is passed on—and the primary responsibility for this rests with fathers. Truth is to be passed on from generation to generation in a perpetual relay. This takes time, thought and effort. It does not happen by osmosis. There is no easy, push-button method for teaching your children about God, nor is there any undisturbed section of time in which to do it. What God put in Deuteronomy 6 cannot be improved upon as to when we should do this. It is to be accomplished during the normal activities of our day—at mealtimes, bedtimes, etc. This means we must spend time together. The greatest problems in this relay of truth, as is

true in any relay race, are slow starts and sloppy passes. This is where we must begin.

And the purpose of it all must be kept in mind. Paul says in verse 12, "so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." Why should we minister to our spouses and children? So that they will make more money or have an easier life? No. God's purpose must override every other purpose in life. We need to help people grow in their likeness to Christ, to become more and more a visible representation of the invisible Christ. What do we want for our children? To do all the things we couldn't do, athletically and academically? Do we try to relive our lives through them, or do we want them to grow in their likeness to Jesus Christ? Oftentimes that is where we get lost. We forget that the purpose for which every other purpose exists is to create living reminders of Jesus Christ. And that is what we need to ask ourselves when we sit down to talk to our mates and our children. Whatever situation we find ourselves in we desire to be successful so that when we leave, people are more and more like Jesus Christ.

But we must remember one other thing: there are no guarantees. This is where grace comes in. We can do all the right things and still our children might drop the baton. Some of you have faithfully run with the baton and done your best to love and teach your children, only to see them reject the truth. If that is what has happened with your child, be encouraged by these comments by Paul Tournier in one of his books on grace:

Many parents are extremely authoritarian and many parents are extremely permissive. Most parents are in between those extremes. But whether parents are extremely authoritarian or extremely permissive or somewhat in between, if their children turn out all right, it's by the grace of God.

I believe that with all my heart. It's all by the grace of God. Even in our failures, God in his grace can teach us great things. And he can "restore the years that the locusts have eaten." As we attempt to train and discipline our children we will fail at times, yet God in his grace will use our mistakes for his good purposes.

Let me say also that no father has the natural resources to lead in this way: to serve humbly, to love unconditionally, to model a genuine Christian life. It takes God to do all of those things. And that is exactly what God wants to do

as he lives his life through us. Our part is to allow him the freedom to work inside us. That is where it all starts, with a heart that asks God to change us and make us into the men he desires us to be.

I spoke to my oldest son on the telephone last week. He is away at college, and he shared with me that he doesn't know what he wants to do in life. He is scared, because he thinks everyone else has a career path all mapped out. After I assured him that I had no fears about this, that he was going to be fine, I told him that what I wanted for him more than anything else was that he fall in love with Jesus. If he has that relationship, then everything else will fall into place. Nothing else matters.

As we close, I want to leave you with a powerful image of a father's love for his son.

In the Summer Olympics of 1992, Derek Redmond was the favorite in the 400 meters. He had trained all his life for this race. He had the world record time in the event, and he had won all his earlier heats, but he had never won the gold medal. In the final, he shot out of the starting blocks in an unbelievable start, and was on a world record time as he rounded the last turn. But suddenly, he went down in a heap on the track. He had torn his Achilles tendon. The crowd gasped, stunned by what had happened. Slowly, Derek rose to his feet and began to hop agonizingly on one leg to the finish line. The entire stadium was perplexed. No one knew what to do. Suddenly, an older man made his way out of the stands. He pushed past the security guards who tried to stop him, and ran to Derek's side. It was his father. He put his arm around his son and said, "You don't have to do this." But Derek said, "Yes, I have to." "Then we'll finish together," said his father. In an unforgettable scene, these two men, father and son, walked to the finish line together. Derek Redmond never did get that gold medal, but he has the memory of his father who shared his pain and finished the race with him.

If you did not have a father like that, know that you have a heavenly Father who loves you. Perhaps life has been hard for you. You feel there is no way back, that you can't recover. Well, know that your Father in heaven loves you. Despite all that has happened in the past he wants to accompany you on the rest of the race. He died for you to save you, and rose from the dead to empower you to live now for him, to give you the heart of a father. May God in his grace do that for every father here this morning.

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