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1 Thessalonians 2:1-12

Gary Vanderet

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A PORTRAIT OF A FAITHFUL FATHER

In his book *Fathering*, Bill Cosby writes in his own inimitable way, So you've decided to have a child. You've decided to give up quiet evenings with good books and lazy weekends with good music, intimate meals during which you finish whole sentences, sweet private times when you've savored the thought that just the two of you and your love are all you will ever need. You've decided to turn your sofas into trampolines, and to abandon the joys of leisurely contemplating reproductions of great art for the joys of frantically coping with reproductions of yourselves.

On occasion I find myself relating to what Erma Bombeck says, "I remember very well how I got all my children, but for the life of me I can't remember why. I think it was a 4-H project that got out of hand."

You need a sense of humor as a parent if you are going to survive. James Dobson tells the true story of a mother of a three-year-old daughter and a five-month-old son. Mom was having one of those days:

She was on the telephone when she realized that her children were no longer in view. She hurriedly got off the phone and went looking for them. She found both of them playing cheerfully in her daughter's bedroom. Relieved and upset, she shouted, "Adrienne, you know you are not allowed to carry Nathan! He is too little and you could hurt him if he fell!" Startled, the little girl answered, "I didn't, Mommy." Knowing he couldn't crawl, the mom suspiciously demanded, "Well, then, how did he get all the way to your room?" Confident of her mom's approval, the daughter replied with a smile, "I rolled him!"

I approach our time this morning with mixed emotions. I did not have the privilege of growing up with a father at my side. My dad died when I was eleven months old. I was the youngest of three boys, and mom raised us by herself. So I know I have entered fatherhood with some gaps in my experience. I am certainly not Mr. Handyman in our home. I don't know how to fish, or hunt, or do any of those things a dad is supposed to teach his children. I didn't have a lot of healthy models as a child. However, God has given me a tremendous love for children. I can honestly say that being a father is one of the most dignified roles I have in life.

I must admit I am bothered by an observation that keeps repeating itself: it is a preoccupation and passivity among fathers. I am sure there are a number of reasons for that. Over the last few decades there has been assault on masculinity in the arts, in the world of fashion, and particularly in the media. This has had a deep effect on the family, and especially on the dignity of fathering. Television portrays fathers as airheads, absentee workaholics, or permissive nice guys who have no significant values. It is no wonder that many men have given up devoting time and energy to the role of fathering.

This decline has taken its toll. Dr. Armand Nicholi, Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, summarized findings which he made from his own study of this phenomenon:

About ten years ago, I began to study several hundred young men who had dropped out of Harvard for psychiatric reasons. Two predominant characteristics were (1) marked isolation from their parents, especially their fathers; and (2) an overwhelming apathy and lack of motivation.

The family is also affected by the lack of impulse control in our culture today. Society seems to have given up on its traditional civilizing task of controlling aggressive and sexual impulses. The deep moral confusion we have observed over the past decade seems to have lifted all restraint. During the past ten years, I have noticed a marked change in the type of problems that bring people to a psychiatrist. Previously, a great many came because of their inability to express impulses and feelings. Today, the majority come because of an inability to control their impulses.

Then Dr. Nicholi adds this very significant statement:

People in my field relate this lack of self control to the declining influence of the father in the home.

The home is without question the single most important influence in a child's life. We must come to grips with the fact that fathering is not something we can do in our spare time.

Charles Swindoll put it this way in his book *Home: Where Life Makes Up Its Mind*:

Whatever else may be said about the home, it is the bottom line of life, the anvil upon which attitudes and convictions are hammered out. It is the place where life's bills come due, the single most influential force in our earthly existence. No price tag can adequately reflect its value. No gauge can measure its ultimate influence...for good or ill. It is at home, among family members, that we come to terms with circumstances. It is here where life makes up its mind.

Though I am speaking to fathers this morning, I believe the truths that I want to share will have application to mothers, to single parents, and to others who long to have a significant ministry in other's lives.

A passage from the apostle Paul's First Thessalonian letter has meant a great deal to me in my ministry both as a pastor and as a father. This letter was written to a young church facing perilous times. Paul himself was facing severe criticism. His enemies were claiming that he ran away from Thessalonica when times got tough and that he did not return because he was insincere. They claimed he was in the ministry solely for what he could get out of it.

But here Paul defends his ministry, and paints a picture which gives us a model for ministry. In a very tender passage he opens up his life and reveals not only his motives, but his methods. As leadership in the church is to model leadership in the home, I believe the principles in this passage are critical to fathers. I think you will agree as we see them unfolded. You will notice that Paul himself uses the metaphor of both a mother and father in describing his ministry.

There are four principles tucked away in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12 that have been in many ways the foundation of my own life and ministry. I would like to phrase them as exhortations to help you apply them to your lives. Here is the first one, from verses 3-6:

I. Cultivate a Humility that Seeks to Lead as a Servant

For our exhortation does not come from error or impurity or by way of deceit; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men but God, who examines our hearts. 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. (1 Thess 2:3-6 NASB)

Paul never used flattery to conceal greedy motives. He wasn't seeking honor or glory. Although he could have asserted his authority he did not. The only One whom he sought to please was God. He knew he was but a steward of what God had entrusted to him. His responsibility was to deal with something that was not his own.

As fathers, we need to understand the nature of spiritual authority and the role of servant leadership. Most people would define authority as "the right to require obedience." That is a valid secular definition. But is an inadequate definition for spiritual authority. Spiritual authority seeks to encourage a willing response. It is not so much a right to demand, but a responsibility to exercise. It is not a position of power, but of service. Jesus told his disciples, "You know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave."

Our goal as leaders and fathers is not blind obedience but a growing love for Christ. We are ultimately concerned with commitment, not compliance. It is inner change that we desire. As many a parent has discovered to his own sorrow, you cannot require inner change. You can get your child to sit down, but he can be standing up on the inside. Our goal as fathers is to encourage a willing response.

I am not saying that there is never a place for demanding obedience of a child. In fact, it is critical that parents grab the reins early in their children's lives. I am simply saying that if the only way I can persuade my family to follow is through my position as head of the home, then I am not leading as a servant.

There are many insecure men who use authority as a club. Servant leadership, on the other hand, demands you realize that weakness is a prerequisite to power. Our power comes not for our position but from our dependence on God and the resources of the Holy Spirit. The effective Christian leader earns the right to be heard. Leadership means being more concerned about how you see than how you look. My primary role as head of my home is not to be the boss and look good, but to care about the needs of my family and help them be all that God intended them to be.

What does this mean practically? Listen to how some children shared honestly by completing 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.

I know for me it involves less barking out of commands and a greater willingness to help my sons with the tasks they struggle with. Yelling and making demands is much easier than getting involved and helping out.

Cultivate a humility that seeks to lead as a servant. Although Paul could have asserted his authority, he did not.

There is a second exhortation, in verses 7-8:

II. Cultivate an Affection that Communicates Unconditional Love

But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing mother tenderly cares for her own children. 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. (2:7-8)

What a beautiful metaphor! This masculine individual was not embarrassed to use a feminine metaphor in describing his ministry. Paul could have used a number of words familiar to his readers which would have conveyed the idea of affection, but he chooses a word found nowhere else in the New Testament. One scholar defines this word translated affection as, "to feel oneself drawn to something." The word implies a warm, inward attachment. Another scholar says it is a term of endearment borrowed from the language of the nursery.

Fathers, do you remember the feeling you had when you held your first child in your arms? Do you remember the tender affection you felt? Do you remember how you were drawn to your child?

Unfortunately, that tender affection can fade if it is not cultivated. I have worked with adolescents for much of my life and I have spent a lot of time listening to teenagers talk about their parents. I have observed that most parents love their children. It is rare to find a parent who does not love his or her child.

But I have found that many children don't feel loved by their parents. There is a breakdown between the affection parents feel in their heart for their children and the love that they communicate to them on a day by day basis. Unconditional love is the bedrock of a healthy self-image. It determines one's sense of belonging, worth and competence. The greatest gift you can give to your child is the gift of unconditional love. Fathers, how your children feel about themselves when they graduate from high school is far more important than their grade point average.

How do we learn to communicate unconditional love to our children? First of all, we must learn to use our mouths. Learn to bless your children by your speech. Words have such tremendous power. Proverbs 28:21 declares that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue." We could spend hours sharing how deeply we all have been touched by the power of words. Maybe you have felt your heart pounding, or a chill run up your spine from statements like:

"Dr. Brown would like to discuss your X-rays right away."

"Class, take out a clean sheet of paper..."

"The alarm didn't go off. You're two hours late."

"Honey, the doctor heard three heartbeats today."

"This is Officer Franklin. We have your son down at the station. He's under arrest."

"The tumor we suspected to be malignant is actually benign."

Don't tell me that "sticks and stones may break your bones but words can never harm you." Words have tremendous power. You can bless your children richly if you will learn to use your tongue to honor them. And this is what the New Testament says we are to do: we are to honor one another. To honor anything is to attach high value to it. It is not an emotion, but an act of the will. This is the essence of what we should be doing in our homes: granting honor to other members of our family; recognizing that each person is valuable and has redeeming qualities, based on who they are, not simply on their performance; and then communicating to them that message of high value by means of spoken words.

I would like you to memorize a verse that could change your communication patterns if you allow the Spirit to use it in your life. The verse is 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."

Second, use your eyes to communicate love to your children. They can tell a lot by just looking at your eyes. I can make my four-month-old son smile by looking into his 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 can 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.

When I come home in the evening, my sons Joel and Stephen immediately make eye-contact with me. They want to know if this is going to be a fun night or should they go to their room and play by themselves. We communicate so much with our eyes. Last year my oldest son Joel was playing second base on a Little League team that I coached. In the late innings of one game, the other team had men on base. I was a little nervous. A ball was hit on the ground toward second base. I had told Joel so many times to keep his glove down when a ball is hit on the ground. But he didn't, and it went right under his glove, clearing the bases. He didn't turn and run after the ball but instead looked directly into my eyes. He wanted my assurance. But I failed him. I shook my head and looked at the ground. I will always remember that incident. I could have filled his emotional tank with a loving glance, but I did not.

Let us use our eyes to communicate love to our children.

Third, use your ears. Learn to listen actively to your children. Listen for the purpose of understanding. Listening is one of the most powerful ways we communicate love. When my son Stephen was little he would pull my head to face him to make sure I was listening to what he was saying. He even did this a couple of times while I was driving! Nothing conveys to our children how much we value them more than our willingness to listen to them and remember what they said.

Eric Hoffer, the famed San Francisco dockworker, philosopher and author, tells how he was shown this kind of love by someone who listened. He inexplicably went blind at the age of seven and remained blind until his eyesight miraculously returned at fifteen. A Bavarian peasant woman who cared for him during his blindness was the one who taught him the power of listening. Here is what he says:

The woman must have really loved me, because those eight years of blindness are in my mind as a happy time. I remember a lot of talk and laughter. I must have talked a great deal, because Martha used to say again and again, "I remember you said this... You remember you said that..." She remembered everything I said, and all my life I have had the feeling that what I think and what I say are worth remembering. She gave me that.

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

Lastly, use your hands. Meaningful touching is extremely significant to children. It is one of the most important means of communicating love. Unfortunately, because of abuses in this area, many adults are afraid to touch children. But children need to be touched and loved in a meaningful way. Jesus in his ministry to children almost always held them and touched them. This was not only a means of illustrating his teaching to his disciples. Our Lord knew the inherent needs of a child. Meaningful touching can be done very casually. Snuggle up to your children while you are watching television. Put your hand on their shoulders while you are waiting in line. Use your hands to demonstrate love to them. Studies demonstrate that there is a relationship between sexual dysfunction and the absence of meaningful touching by fathers. In fact, in the book which I quoted from earlier, Ross Campbell writes, "In all my reading and experience, I have never known one sexually disoriented person who had a warm, loving and affectionate father."

The gift of unconditional love will give your children the basis for a healthy self-image. It will give them a sense of love, of belonging, and of competence. It will demonstrate to them the kind of love that God bestows upon us.

Notice that the verse ends as it began, with an expression of tender affection: "because you had become very dear to us." "Very dear" is the rendering of an adjective connected with *agape*, the specifically Christian quality of love, that quality that seeks the highest good of another person regardless of personal cost. This desire we have to give is inspired by the nature of the God who indwells us. Because of my relationship with him I can freely give that love to my children. Cultivate that affection that communicates unconditional love.

There is a third exhortation in this passage.

III. Cultivate a Transparency that Models an Authentic Spiritual Life

Verses 9-10:

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... (2:9-10)

One of the truths that seemed to leap off the page as I was studying this passage was the openness of Paul's ministry. He continually appeals to their knowledge of what his ministry was like. He has nothing to hide. Verse 1: "you yourselves know brethren." Verse 5: "as you know." Verse 9: "For you recall." Verse 10: "You are witnesses." Verse 11: "Just as you know." Paul is appealing to their knowledge of his ministry. He has no reason to hide. He can appeal both to God and to people as to his integrity. What a wonderful quality!

Notice also his unselfish lifestyle: "You recall our labor and hardship, how working night and day... how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers." This is a picture of financial independence. And it is a picture of bearing up under the strains of everyday life. My friends, if my Christian life does not work under the stresses and strains of everyday family life, it doesn't work! Paul knew that the most powerful way to teach the Scriptures was modeling the truth in his own life. You can't give away something you do not have. That was true in the ministry of Jesus Christ. Knowledge was gained by association before it was understood by explanation. That is how God intended it to be. Our children are looking for a demonstration, not an explanation. It is our lives that give credibility to our words.

Chad Walsh, in his book *Early Christians of the Twentieth Century*, writes:

Millions of Christians live in a vague sense of sentimental piety, with soft organ music, trembling in the lovely light from stained-glass windows. Their religion is a thing of pleasant emotional quivers, divorced from the will, divorced from the intellect and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. Now I suspect that Satan has called off the attempt to convert people to agnosticism. If a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is always in danger of seeing it in perspective and deciding that it is true. It is much safer from Satan's point of view to vaccinate a man with a mild case of Christianity so as to protect him from the real disease.

Fathers, let me ask you a question: Is the message of Christianity that you want to communicate a genuine thing that is woven through the fabric of your lifestyle?

When this truth hits home it's a shock because none of us is perfect. I could have preached this message much better five years ago! As we look at our lives there is a great gap between what we want to be, and what we are positionally in Christ, and how we act. Does that mean that

we can never be effective teachers of our children? Of course not. What God longs for is that we share the reality of a growing relationship with him. It is not failure that will damage our ability to teach our children, it is hypocrisy. We need to be vulnerable. Share your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

While going through my childhood photo album recently, we stumbled across my third grade report card. My son was very keen to look at it because we had just gone over his report card. I had made some strong suggestions as to how he could improve at school. His handwriting was sloppy, I thought. His talking in class was a problem, and his deportment grade was not good. As I usually do, I talked to him about a number of things. Talk, talk, talk! So he grabbed my report card from third grade and right away saw three “C” grades. Then he read my teacher’s comments: “Gary’s handwriting definitely needs to improve. He erases too much.” “Gary talks entirely too much in class.” My report card is now my son’s most treasured possession! Whenever report card time comes around, he reaches for the photo album. We had a good time going over my grades. I was able to laugh at myself, and Joel and I were drawn closer together.

Modeling has always been primary in God’s plan. Jesus revealed this to his disciples one day when, almost as an aside, he said to them “A disciple when he is fully trained will be like his teacher. We would have said, ‘A disciple when he is fully trained will know everything his teacher knows.’” Jesus did not make that mistake. He did not regard education as the transmission of knowledge alone. His kind of teaching communicates likeness of character. We see this throughout the Scriptures. Hebrews says, “Remember your leaders; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith.” Paul often writes, “Be imitators of me.” Peter writes to elders, “Don’t be little tin gods but be examples to the flock.” We become living demonstrations of the reality of Scripture.

Analyzing Jesus’ ministry of discipleship, Robert Coleman talks about this truth. It has great application to discipling our children as well. Here is what he says:

Having called his men, Jesus made it a practice to be with them. This was the essence of His training program—just letting His disciples follow Him. When one stops to think of it, this was an incredibly simple way of doing it, Jesus had no formal school, no seminaries, no outlined course of study, no periodic membership classes in which he enrolled his followers. None of these highly organized procedures considered so necessary today entered at all into his ministry. Amazing as it may seem, all Jesus did to teach these men His way was to draw them close to Himself. He was his own school and curriculum... Jesus asked only that his disciples follow Him. Knowledge was not communicated by the master in terms of laws and dogmas, but in the living personality of one who walked among them. His disciples were distinguished, not by outward conformity to certain rituals, but by being with Him, and thereby participating in His doctrine.

How true that is of the home! We must be able to say, “Follow me,” not, “Do what I say.” Truth is caught as much as it is taught.

What must be caught? Attitudes, for one thing. They are almost never learned by being taught; they are picked up by watching other people. In our homes we must be careful with the kind of attitudes we exhibit because our children will pick them up. The right attitudes toward life, toward God, toward other members of our family, toward problems, toward the world, toward church, toward authority and toward money either confirm or cancel what we say to our children. If we tell them to be concerned for people but we never invite anyone over for dinner, or we never pray for anyone, our children will learn from our actions, not our words.

Not only attitudes but character must also be modeled: kindness, generosity, compassion, forgiveness, respect, trust, love, integrity, gratitude, courtesy, appreciation.

Here is my fourth exhortation.

IV. Cultivate a Commitment to Use Your Home as a Relay for Truth

Verses 11-12:

...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. (2:11-12)

Our homes are not only laboratories where godliness is modeled; they also are classrooms where lessons are taught. Notice Paul’s commitment to pass on the truth that God had entrusted to him. He likens it to a father teaching his children: continually encouraging, continually exhorting, continually imploring. Like Paul, we are stewards of the truth that was entrusted to us.

The home is the primary place where the flag of truth is passed on. And the primary responsibility for passing it on 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 of teaching your children about God, nor is there any smooth, undisturbed section of time in which to do it. What God put in Deuteronomy 6 cannot be improved upon as to when—in the normal activities of our day, at mealtimes, bedtime, etc. This means that time is meant to be spent together.

The greatest problems in this relay of truth, as they are in any relay race, are slow starts and sloppy passes. This is where we must begin. Some of you fathers are so over-committed, so involved at work or in some outside the home project that all of your time and energy is drained away from your family. I’m not suggesting that you quit your job or abandon your outside activities. I am merely reminding you that one of the most significant tasks you have on this earth is your stewardship of the truth which must be passed on to the next generation.

But we must remember one other thing. There are no guarantees. We can do all the right things and still the baton might be dropped. I know some of you have faithfully carried the baton and have attempted the best you know how to love and teach your children only to see them reject the truth. I appreciate the comments of Paul Tournier in one of his books on grace. He writes:

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. 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 there will be times of failure. Yet God through his grace can help us learn through our mistakes.

We can be grateful for Paul’s critics. In defending himself, the apostle gives us a profound statement of an effective ministry, both in the church and in our homes. It is my prayer that God might give you the grace to cultivate the humility, the affection, the transparency, and the commitment of a faithful father.

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