



# NURTURING FATHERS

SERIES: THE RESTORATION OF MANKIND

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In May of 1979, I was ministering in the town of Egbe, in Nigeria, Africa. Christianity, I discovered, had made one of its first inroads in this very village in 1898. At the center of the town stood a high school, which was staffed by Christian missionaries, and I taught the Scriptures there during my visit. Whenever I entered the room where the students were assembled, all of them in uniforms of bright blue cotton, I was struck by the beauty of their faces and their warm smiles of greeting. Their sense of joy and anticipation was heartwarming as I prepared to open up the Scriptures to them. One afternoon, I attended a school soccer game. It was only then I noticed the almost complete absence of men in the town. When I inquired from one of the missionaries where the men were, he replied that they had all gone to Lagos. Apparently, the men married wives at a young age, had multiple children (up to 10 in most families), then, after a number of years, the men left to work in the capital city, never to return. The children of the town were left with their mothers to fend for themselves.

Sadly, as the weekly news magazines have been reporting recently, families are suffering the same fate here in America today as fathers are abandoning their children. I will read from a recent account in *Time* magazine one little girl's story:

"I don't have a dad," says Megan, 8, a tiny blond child with a pixie nose who gazes up at a visitor and talks of her hunger. "Well, I do have a dad, but I don't know his name. I only know his first name, Bill."

Just what is it that fathers do? asked the visitor...

"Love you. They kiss you and hug you when you need them. I had my mom's boyfriend for a while, but they broke up." Now Megan lives with just her mother and older brother in Culver City, CA.

What would you like to do with your dad?

"I'd want him to talk to me." She's hurting now. "I wish I had somebody to talk to. It's not fair. If two people made you, then you should still be with those two people." And she's sad, "I'm not so special," she says, looking down at the floor. "I don't have two people."

"I wish it would be just like that commercial where the kids play doctor with their daddy and say, 'Daddy, are you all right?'" She smiles, dreaming. "The kids show the daddy that they care for him. They put a thermometer in his mouth. They think he's sick because he came home early. They are sitting on the couch watching TV, and it's like, wow, we can play with Dad!"

Megan thinks her father is in the Navy now. "One day when I get older, I'm gonna go back to Alabama and try to find him."

Isn't it astonishing that despite the pain inflicted upon them by their fathers, children still carry a deep longing to reconnect with them? Describing what a home should be like, this little girl said: "two people made you, and two people are supposed to stay with you and love you..."

Now the good news of our text this morning from the apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians is that in Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit reconnects fathers to daughters, and mothers to sons, creating in the process homes of love and acceptance. Our text begins with a word about reconnecting children to their parents, and

then moves to reconnecting fathers to children. Paul writes:

## I. Reconnecting Children To Parents (6:1-3)

**Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.**

It is apparent from these verses that in the family of God in Ephesus, adults treated children with dignity, as equals. How very different from the Roman and Greek worlds of the apostle's time, as we learn from this insight in John Stott's commentary on the book of Ephesians: "It was a radical change from the callous cruelty which prevailed in the Roman Empire, in which unwanted babies were abandoned, weak and deformed ones killed, and even healthy children were regarded by many as partial nuisance because they inhibited sexual promiscuity and complicated easy divorce." We remember that Jesus said, "Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:14).

In these opening verses of chapter 6 now, Paul addresses the children of these house churches in Ephesus, offering in the process four extremely helpful points.

### (a) The Command to Obey

**Obey your parents in the Lord, for this right.**

The phrase "in the Lord" should not be interpreted as a qualifying statement, as if children should obey their parents only if they are Christians, but as the spirit in which obedience is rendered. These words could well be translated, "because of the Lord." Such obedient behavior by children pleases the Lord and helps develop the spirit whereby they can obey him.

And there is a two-fold basis for this kind of behavior.

### (b) The Basis of Obedience

First, obedience to parents is proper because it reflects the created order. Parents are the source of their children's life, therefore obedience is to be granted to them, not grudgingly, but from the heart. Children are in their parents' debt, therefore they should never be callous or indifferent towards them.

Second, children's obedience to parents fulfills the fifth commandment that they should "honor" them. This word means, "to make heavy, to give someone social weight"—quite the opposite of treating parents in a light or casual manner.

In the OT, parents had two roles, thus they were to be honored in two ways. First, they gave physical life to their children, therefore the children were to provide for them in their old age by feeding them, clothing them, nursing them, etc. This is what is meant by "honoring" parents. And second, parents taught their children spiritually, instructing them from the Torah. As children obeyed their parents, therefore, they demonstrated obedience to God, and thus brought their parents high social esteem in the community of faith.

Children might well ask here how long were they required to obey their parents, and how far should that obedience extend?

### (c) The Extent of Obedience

The Greek word for child refers to children in relation to their parents who bore them. This relationship ends when the child leaves home. Thus, obedience ends at this point, although we should honor our parents throughout our lives.

And how far should the child's obedience extend? We must balance this teaching with the word of Christ, who said, "You cannot be my disciple unless you hate your mother and father." In this statement, Christ was conveying the notion that obedience to him might appear as though believers were neglecting their parents, but what Jesus was inferring was that children should obey him and refuse to do anything their parents asked of them if it was in conflict with Scripture.

Personally, I have always delighted in obeying my parents. Their dream for me was that I attend business school, and when I decided to enter the ministry full-time, my decision grieved them. I did not like disappointing them, but I was leaving home, and I wanted to follow Christ. There is a proverb, however, that says, "A wise son makes his father glad." Although my obedience to Christ created problems with my parents in the short term, in the long run I believed it would bring them honor and esteem. This has been borne out over the last twenty years. Today, my parents look to me for financial advice, and my father, who was a surgeon, even comes up here from Southern California for his medical treatments. Our relationship is founded on solid ground and affection.

Next, we come to the promise inherent in the command for children to obey their parents.

### (d) The Promise of Obedience

**...the first commandment with a promise, that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth.**

The home is the first realm where obedience is practiced. Far from inhibiting a child's life, his choice to honor his parents enhances his life and leads to greater opportunity: "...it will be well with you, and that you may live long..." says Paul. "Length of days" in the OT referred not to life on this earth, but to eternal life. In contrast, an undisciplined life brings death and disaster.

An obedient life is the ultimate expression of honor to a parent, and such obedience fulfills the law of love. If children are not willing to obey their parents and honor them by giving them the social weight they deserve, this is a sign that they are not really interested in the discipleship of Jesus Christ. Even if they profess to be, they will have a hard time submitting to his rule in their lives.

Thus we have the apostle's instructions to children.

His word to fathers follows immediately.

## II. Reconnecting Fathers to Children (6:4)

**And fathers, stop provoking your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**

### (a) Do Not Provoke Your Children to Wrath

You may be wondering why Paul addresses his remarks only to fathers. It is because fathers in the Roman world of the apostle's day were very abusive, and they were protected by law despite their behavior. William Barclay, in his commentary, explained: "At the head of the Roman family...was the *pater familias*, who exercised a sovereign authority over all members of the family...A Roman father had absolute power over his family. He could sell them as slaves, he could make them work in his fields even in chains, he could take the law into his own hands, for the law was in his own hands, and punish as he liked; he could even inflict the death penalty on his child."

Given these facts, it is hardly necessary to say that Christian fathers who came from a background like this needed to change

their attitudes towards their children. Every child bears the holy image of God, therefore he or she deserves to be treated with respect and dignity.

Furthermore, a child's personality is delicate and fragile and needs to be nurtured with care and protection. Fathers, says Paul, should not breed resentment in these little ones by "provoking [them] to anger."

I believe fathers can be guilty of this in a least four different ways. The first and most obvious way that fathers provoke their children to anger, I feel, is when they mistreat them by disciplining them in anger, by ridiculing, teasing, or publicly humiliating them. Scripture teaches that parents do not have the right to use anger to change their children's behavior. If parents cannot control themselves, how can they expect their children to be in control? In the Garden of Eden, God had dealt with the disaster caused by his children's disobedience. In a mere moment in time, Adam and Eve turned all of creation over to Satan, destroying the whole human race in the process. We can only imagine what we would say if it were our universe! But not God the Father. He did not get angry. He responded by asking questions. He was more grieved than angered by his lost relationship with Adam and Eve and the cost to him to redeem the damage.

Second, fathers provoke their children by being controlling. Rather than developing them for their own sake, fathers use their children to try and live out their own unfulfilled dreams. The story of the former University of Southern California quarterback, Todd Marinovich, has been widely publicized. From childhood, this young man was driven by his obsessive father to be a star football player. The father's obsession resulted in divorce from his wife, but he still pursued his dream of living vicariously through his son. To this day, failure looms as the most threatening monster on the horizon of Todd's life.

Third, fathers provoke their children by being too restrictive. They won't allow them freedom of expression or exploration, lest their spontaneity or sense of adventure infringe on their own sense of order. Unlike Adam and Even in the Garden of Eden, where there were so many yesses and only one no, there are homes today where the word no is the only word that is heard. Some children ought to ask their parents, "Are we living in a home or a museum?"

Fourth, and probably most painful, some fathers provoke their children by neglecting them. They never take time to enter their little world to interact with them in their daily activities. On the contrary, their only response to their children is anger when they are interrupted by them. Sitting at dinner one night last week I asked my daughters to tell me how I provoke them. One of them said that whenever she asks for help, I always have the "right" way to do something, and she has to do things my way. My analytical mind takes over and I stifle their creativity when I respond in this way.

"Fathers," says Paul, "stop provoking your children to anger."

What should they do instead?

### (b) Love Them

**...but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**

The words, "bring them up," would be better rendered "nurture them." John Calvin put it this way: "let them be fondly cherished."

This word is so rich in meaning it is used to translate many Hebrew words in the OT, covering a wide range of images. Take the case of Joseph, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. When at last, because of famine, Joseph came face to face with his brothers, he used this very word in his remarks to them: "And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance...there I will provide for you..." (Genesis 45:7, 11). Joseph

saw himself as a privileged provider who cared for his own family in famine times despite their mistreatment of him. His privilege of being a provider overcame the pain of his rejection. "You meant it for evil, God for good," was his word to his brothers. There is a famine of love abroad in our world today, yet men and women who have suffered rejection by their own families have been led to Christ through that very suffering and rejection. God sent fathers ahead to create storehouses of love and tenderness in order to preserve a remnant of life.

A second image in the OT for how this word was used is that of a shepherd. Psalm 23 describes God as a shepherd who, in the words of David, "...leads me beside still waters." We are helpless, so God tenderly takes us by the hand and guides us through dangerous territory, finding for us cool waters of refreshment.

A third image is that of a bridegroom who *nourishes* and cherishes his bride. (We saw this in our last study in Ephesians, where Paul gave instructions to husbands and wives.) The verb there was linked with "cherish," which means, "to soften by heat, to keep warm." It refers to nurture, born out deep affections.

These images give a picture of closeness, tenderness, and warmth, coupled with expressions of touch, even in the midst of threatening times (like famine), or while traversing dangerous territory. Fathers are to be nurturers, and the key thing about nurturers is that they are *there*, plain and simple, with a ready, tender touch, to nurture and cherish. Being nurturers benefits fathers, too, as the *Time* magazine article which I quoted from went on to say: "As much as families need fathers, men need their children...to learn from them all the secrets that children, with their untidy minds and unflagging hearts, have mastered and that grownups, having grown up, long to retrieve."

There is a second thing fathers should do for their children.

#### (c) Train Them

...bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

The words, "discipline of the Lord," usually bring to mind verses like that from the Book of Proverbs, "He who spares his rod hates his son, But he who loves him seeks Him diligently (at the dawn) with discipline" (Prov. 13:24). You may have seen the recent television program where parents who spanked their children for their misbehavior were interviewed. It was as if "spanking" was all that was meant by "the rod and discipline." But this word "discipline" has a much broader meaning than that conveyed by spanking. It speaks of nurturing a moral and spiritual life that doesn't come naturally, but requires diligent training, like the disciplines of music or athletics.

I learned the secret to this kind of training from a non-Christian man. Bob Munson was a carpenter who "sought me diligently" and came into my world. Bob was a tall man, a former football player, and a craftsman. He was everything young boys want to be when they grow up. I met him when he worked on a project in our home. Every day I waited by my window for his yellow pickup, eagerly anticipating his arrival, because I knew that Bob was coming into my world and I would learn from him. After two weeks the project was finished, and I was depressed. But he promised that the following year he would take me deer hunting, and I would enter his world! Now, when the yellow pickup up arrived at my home, it was to take me into his world. We built things together in his garage. We fashioned a gun box, and we shortened the stock on my rifle. He taught me how to fish, how to camp, and how to shoot. In four years hunting together, we never took a shot at a deer, but I didn't care; I was with Bob. I listened attentively to his many maxims for life. (He told me once, "If you ever leave my tools out, you're flirting with death!")

I believe Bob Munson set me up to receive Christ later in life, because he taught me how God trains people. In high school, I yearned for God, because I sensed that God was like Bob: He cared about me, about my school, my grades, girlfriends, sports,

etc. I felt that God would get in his yellow pickup truck and show up in my world if I asked him. He came, not in a pickup, but in a chariot, and every place I asked him to come with me, God walked with me in high school. But that was not all, he would then take me to his world, one much bigger than my own, to places I had never been before, to see his works. I came up to the Bay Area to attend university and I met people at PBC. I got to travel overseas and I saw God building his kingdom—and he let me have a part in it alongside him.

So training means that fathers are to enter into the world of their children and walk their turf, then they can take them into their world.

There is something else fathers must do with their children.

#### (d) Instruct Them

There was a time when I thought about how I might instruct my children, and I imagined that my family would sit around the dinner table, like Jesus' disciples, and ask me to teach them. As a pastor with about five thousand sermons in my files, I imagined they would ask me to teach them about prayer, how to avoid sexual pressures, and other critical issues, but in my 17 years as a father, they have never once asked me to teach them! And if I attempt to, they complain, "Dad, that's your teaching voice!"

The lesson is obvious: Fathers should not be lecturers. Nor should they act like Moses, the lawgiver, coming before their children with a holy writ that no one among their peers is paying attention to, and smash it on their desks. Teaching ethics will not change anything. No, fathers should not act like lawgivers; they should be storytellers. Telling stories graces children with dignity, but lectures on ethics and edicts are always condescending. How much of Scripture is imperative? How much is storytelling? Look at Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Esther, Job, 1 & 2 Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts—all of these books are stories. They don't illustrate the gospel, they *are* the gospel! So tell your children the stories of the Bible. Be a storyteller!

In his book, *Reality and the Vision*, Philip Yancey has an excellent word in this regard. He interviewed 17 writers who shared with him the author that changed their lives. Walter Wangerin, Jr., a former pastor who is himself now an author, said:

When my father bought a thick, pictureless book containing all the tales of Hans Christian Andersen and began to read them to his children, he did me a kindness more profound than mere entertainment. He began to weave a world which genuinely acknowledged all the monsters in mine, as well as all the ridiculous situations and silly asides which I as a child found significant.

So, then, this is the way it is: Dad sits in a chair beside my bed, one lamp low at his shoulder, his pipe clamped between his teeth. Mostly the room, an attic with slanted ceilings is in darkness.

"Ready?" Dad asks.

I nod. I curl tight beneath the covers.

"Once upon a time," Dad read, "there lived in a village two men who had the same name; they were both called Claus..."

Night after night my father's baritone voice reads to me, gently the voice invited me. Slowly I accepted the invitation and delivered myself to a wonderful world, and I looked around, and lo, it was confident with solutions, and I was a citizen with some authority and reputation. I was no longer alone, no longer helpless.

Night after night I live the adventures that order my turbulent days and shape my waking self, my instincts, my faith, my adulthood to come. Optimism grows in me, and hope in the midst of suffering, and this third thing too, perhaps the most difficult thing of all: forgiveness for my own most self-

centered and wretched sins. Not the doctrine of forgiveness. Not the concept. Forgiveness in fact, as a mold to my experience ever hereafter. Andersen's world is a dramatic enactment of theologies which the child simply cannot grasp in the abstract.

My father reads in a murmuring voice, so softly that the words resolve themselves into spaces and things around me...when my father reads the final sentences of a story (about forgiveness) I am crying. I am tingling. For I am not learning, but rather I am experiencing the highest truth of our faith. Not in doctrine, but in fact it is releasing me from my own sins (of my childhood)...In the depth of my bones I know and believe in forgiveness, for I have lived it. By Andersen's stories I was shaped in it—and the shape remains, forever.

Fathers: Read stories to your children! Tell them Abraham's story, Joseph's story, Israel's story, David's story, Jesus' story, *your* story. Then make it their story. Tell them their story! A couple of years ago, my wife suggested I fly to Paris to meet my daughter, Becki, who was an exchange student, and join her for a father-daughter time. I met her in Paris and we traveled to Lucerne, Switzerland. I asked her to choose any restaurant she liked and I would take her to dinner. Afterwards, I told her a story. Twenty years earlier, her mother and I were in Lucerne, and I proposed marriage to her beneath a covered bridge. We went into a jewelry store and found a beautiful ring (it was even affordable!) Our hearts were pounding with excitement, and we decided we should think about it over dinner. We agreed our parents might be a bit upset at our getting engaged at 19, so we decided to wait a year, and I bought her a gold locket instead. Then in the restaurant I took from my pocket a heart-shaped gold locket and gave it to Becki. I told her I loved her, and that she should keep the locket and give it to her husband one day as a symbol of her purity. Then she could tell him her story.

There is one other point here. Fathers should keep themselves in the story, not above it. Adults, too, are always in need of instruction and guidance, so we should maintain that sense of humility over what God is teaching us. So remain a child, and refuse to play the role of professor!

God has ways of humbling professors, doesn't he? I taught my daughter to drive recently, and I made full use of all the imperatives—what to do, what not to do, etc. One evening, when I was out of town, I called home, and my eleven-year-old got on the phone and said, "Dad, Becki backed your car out of the garage and pulled the bumper off!" Upon my return, I took the bumper and assembly and put them in my wife's car, and took my daughter with me to the auto repair shop so that she could learn how much these things cost. As we drove there, I lectured her on driving and safety. Then I came to a right hand turn. I stopped at the sign, and my wife, who was following me in my car, rear-ended me, demolishing another bumper! There went the lecture! Becki laughed, and I said something I cannot repeat! Fathers, the moral is, keep yourselves in the story as learners.

The home should be the showcase of God's school of discipleship, but our country has become like Egbe, hasn't it? There is a famine of love. A hungry world longs for fathers who will nurture children.

In case some of you older men are feeling that it's too late for you to learn how to nurture like this, I will close by reading a letter someone wrote to me in July of this year:

Dear Brian,

Just a few years ago I was in a card shop selecting a birthday card for my father. You were there buying one for your sister. You spoke to me and asked what I was looking for. I said I was getting a card for my dad, then added "It's real hard to find a card for your dad when you don't have much of a relationship." Then you fixed your eyes on me with that gaze of yours and said, "Never underestimate a father's love for his daughter."

That phrase was like water for my dry heart. My parents divorced when I was two, and my father and I spoke only once, when I was 18. For the next 22 years he and I had no contact at all. Then when my own marriage failed, I called my father for emotional support and shared with him a precious childhood memory of him at a soda fountain, but he was silent, unable to respond. Since then we have exchanged cards and a phone call or two.

Last week, I flew back East for a family funeral. I called my father and we met face to face for the first time in 28 years. He told me of his regret that he, "didn't grow up," with me. He spoke of coming to my high school graduation and of his pride at my awards.

Then to my amazement he recounted my childhood memory of him which I had shared with him seven years previous. I was in a drug store with a friend, as my friend turned around he saw my dad with one of his daughters from his second marriage sitting at the soda fountain, eating an ice cream. My friend said, "Look, Carol, that's your daddy." My dad's eyes filled with tears as he looked me in the eyes and said, "Honey, that's the saddest thing I've ever heard." Brian, in that moment through those tears I saw the truth of your words. For all of my life my father has kept a secret, tender place for me in his heart though he could never express it. He ached for the gulf between us.

We hugged often in that two hour talk. He kissed me on the cheek and told me he loved me. I believed him. I am praising God for that time with my dad. I am grateful that we could have those two precious hours to see the love that flows between us. I want to shout it from the rooftops and sing it to the skies—"My Daddy loves me!" My father is a believer. In heaven, he and I and our precious Savior will dance in jubilation, unhindered by earthly restraints, and will fully experience the love of a father and a daughter.

So men, if you think it's too late, it's never too late.

Amen.

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