

Session 14

Role of Men in the Church

Man as Father – The Father of the Prodigal Son

Luke 15:11-32

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.” Luke 15:20

“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Ephesians 6:4

- I. The role of fathers in the world today.
 - A. Fathers have lost much of their traditional role in today’s society.
 1. They are not necessarily the primary providers in the family.
 2. They are not looked to as moral authorities.
 3. They are not looked to as “keepers of meaning” in our society. They no longer ensure that the oral traditions of society are passed on from one generation to another. They no longer tell the stories of the culture.
 - B. Perhaps the greatest change in the role of fathers, however, is the loss of their place as role models.
 1. Most fathers wish their sons and daughters to accomplish more and have more than they have accomplished and acquired in the world (and this frequently is the case).
 - a. Better education.
 - b. Better social standard.
 - c. Better job.
 - d. Perhaps a better marriage.
 2. Fathers many times wish to be “relevant” to their children (especially their teenage children), but during the process become ridiculous.
 - a. They can’t truly relate to the music.
 - b. Attempts at speaking “teenage talk” fall flat.
 - c. They don’t understand all that children face in terms of peer pressure and other challenges.
 - d. Fathers are usually not as facile with computers and video games as children.
 3. Many fathers don’t possess good images of themselves (as evidenced by the many other lessons during the series on the role of men in the church). Current times are not easy times for men. The lack of self confidence and security render many fathers poor role models.
 4. Fathers too often lapse into behaviors which undermine their potential as role models.

- a. Fathers may let their guard down at home, losing their tempers at the slightest problem.
 - b. Fathers may not be able to control their tongues and therefore become models for the use of bad language.
 - c. Fathers may not exhibit discipline in habits around the home (too many hours before the TV, poor eating habits, not getting the grass cut).
- C. Busy schedules limit the time fathers spend with their children. Though shared responsibilities for child rearing are much more common in marriage, mothers continue to interact with their children much more than fathers.
 - D. Personal problems faced by fathers today may interfere with their relationships with their children.
 - E. Many fathers of younger children today did not have good experiences with their own fathers (fathers who were raised during the 60s and 70s when discipline was breaking down and children were rebelling en masse against their parents).
 - F. Few admirable images of fathers permeate our media, unlike TV shows such as “Leave it to Beaver” and “Father Knows Best”. In contrast, such sitcoms seem strange to us today (single life is the frequent portrayal).

II. The role of men as fathers in the church.

- A. As with the role of men as husbands in the church, evangelical groups have attempted to counteract societal constraints to good fatherhood.
 - 1. Promise Keepers emphasizes the importance of being good and responsible fathers (if you father a child, you must keep your promise to that child).
 - 2. James Dobson has written a recent book *Bringing Up Boys* which not only emphasizes the importance of fathers in raising their boys but also the importance of getting boys on the right path so they may become good fathers.
 - 3. Many church activities pair fathers with their children, such as Youth to Leaders.
- B. Yet the church falls short at times in emphasizing the critical role of men as role models for children within the congregation.
 - 1. Men are not encouraged to be teachers of younger children. (Frequently when our men do attempt to teach young children they feel unprepared and frustrated. They subsequently are ineffective as teachers.)
 - 2. We highlight relatively few role models for boys in our church activities (that is, we don't emphasize for our boys the good qualities of many of our men). Except for preaching, leading singing or making announcements, men often are absent from our children's experience at church. For example, there are all too few men who play basketball with their kids at the church or involve their children in activities associated with the church.

- C. The church emphasizes, but remains vague about, the role of men as spiritual leaders of their children at home.
 - 1. The church, unlike the world, desires its men to take not only an active but a leadership role in the spiritual upbringing within the family. Few women in the church actually desire that men not take spiritual leadership and responsibility seriously.
 - 2. Most of our injunctions for men as spiritual leaders at home are either negatives or good general fathering activities.
 - a. Don't drink, smoke, spit, run around, sit around, etc.
 - b. Become a soccer coach, scout leader, good buddy, etc.
 - 3. We provide little guidance for fathers in character building, spiritual instruction and spiritual discipline.
 - a. Though we don't say it aloud, we assume that the character of a child is little influenced by our interactions with that child. In other words, it is not at all clear that we truly believe a father can, for example, teach his children through instruction and example the importance of responsibility.
 - b. The idea of a serious family devotional taught by fathers is foreign in most Christian homes.
 - c. We hear all too infrequently of a father who takes upon himself the responsibility of teaching his children to pray.

III. The father of the prodigal son (and other scriptures).

- A. The father of the prodigal son. Luke 15:11-31
 - 1. The father has typically been relegated to third place in this parable.
 - a. We focus upon the prodigal son (who squanders his wealth and later repents).
 - b. We next focus upon the elder son (who is jealous of the salvation of the younger son after his life of sin).
 - c. The father, who is the "heavenly Father figure", seems so perfect that we don't consider him.
 - 2. The parable, however, begins with a focus upon the father (he had two sons, one of whom presents to him an unwanted challenge).
 - 3. The father, surely knowing the potentially negative results, nevertheless divides his property. He must have wanted to reign in his son. Yet somewhere down inside, he trusted that, despite the current circumstances, he had taught this younger son some valuable lessons which he would not forget. He trusted his efforts as a father even when everything seemed to be falling apart.
 - 4. The father was right, for even before the younger son returns home, the son knows his father will not turn him away (though the son does not realize how gracious the father will be).
 - 5. The father never forgets his son, constantly looking for him to return.
 - 6. The father loves his son to the point that his love transcends his hurt over the lost wealth and the son's rejection of him as a father.

7. The father honors as well as cares for the prodigal son when the son cannot care for himself.
 8. The father does not feel hurt at the anger vented by the elder brother (remember, the father was hurt far more than the elder brother by the behavior of the younger brother). Rather, the father teaches the elder brother the essence of Christian love just as he teaches the younger brother.
 9. In sum, this parable reflects the nature of Christian love as it manifests itself in the love of a father for his children.
- B. “These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up... Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.” Deuteronomy 6:6-9. Moses commands what the father of the prodigal son practices. This father surely recognized the importance of teaching the law (and love) of God to his two sons. If he had not impressed upon his son the everlasting love of a father for his sons, the younger son would probably never have returned home. Good fathering begins with spiritual instruction, instruction which permeates all aspects of life in the home.
 - C. “After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.” II Corinthians 12:5. The father of the prodigal son was not the one in need, but rather the son himself. One way a Christian father shows love for his children is to maintain a level of financial stability such that he does not find himself forced to call upon his children for help. Regardless of age, the father maintains the attitude that help primarily flows from father to children, not the other way. (As fathers and mothers reach advanced ages [or become frail], children will necessarily help their parents physically and perhaps financially. Yet this reciprocal help goes down much better when the father has exhibited an attitude of helping the children over many years.)
 - D. “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Ephesians 6:4. A good father (like the father of the prodigal son) must blend firmness with gentleness, discipline and acceptance. The father who is too harsh would have denied the prodigal son his inheritance and perhaps would have angered him to the point that he would have left home in anger and never returned. Fathers have authority, but the Christian father is most careful not to abuse that authority.

IV. Growing Christian fathers in the church.

- A. Just as with marriage, the Christian father enters the parent – child relationship as he would enter a contract. If you “make” a baby, then as a Christian, you take the responsibility of parenting that baby. Parenting (as we see with the prodigal son) is a lifelong responsibility.
- B. The beginning of Christian fatherhood, however, is love, that is, sacrificial love (just as it is the beginning of becoming a Christian husband). Love puts

the needs of the child always in the forefront. Love for our children is not always easy.

1. We may be proud of our children, yet that pride may hinder the needs of the child by substituting the needs of the parent. In other words, we may use our children to fill our own needs (such as living vicariously through our children). We may wish our sons to be great basketball players because we never could play well ourselves. We may wish our children to attend a college we attended (or wished we could attend).
 2. We may tire of our children. The needs of children never cease and they, obviously, can be very demanding. In such cases, Christian fathers may be tempted to escape. The loving father will face the needs, set limits where limits should be set and not turn away from the child.
 3. We may become very disappointed in our children (we may assume this was the case with the father of the prodigal son). Perhaps nothing exasperates us as much about our children as when they don't live up to our expectations and when they waste their opportunities.
 4. We may find the burden of child rearing interfering with our own personal needs and perceive an unsolvable conflict between our needs and the needs of our children.
 5. If fathers neglect their love for their children and permit their natural feelings to overcome them, the child is in danger of neglect and possible abuse.
- C. A key to Christian fatherhood is recognizing the balance between control and release (firmness and gentleness). We witness this balance from the outset in the parable of the prodigal son. The Christian father, if he errs, should err on the side of gentleness (though he should not neglect firmness and discipline). At some point, Christian fathers must trust that seeds of love and concern they have planted with their children will bear fruit, even when it appears those seeds are about to be choked permanently by the cares of this world.
- D. The Christian father realizes that there never is truly an "empty nest". We always are looking after our children, concerned as to how they are doing and always having a place for them to return. For example, many children greatly desire their parents to keep their rooms relatively unchanged, even after they have left home for many years.
- E. The Christian father controls his feelings toward his children. It is easy to feel angry, jealous, disappointed and rejected in relation to our children. When these feelings emerge, fathers often wish to give vent to these feelings. Of course, we do not just suppress our feelings, yet the father-child relationship is different than, for example, the marriage relationship. The burden of responsibility for controlling feelings falls to the father. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father is forced to deal with self-centered feelings on the part of both of his children. The father does not vent his own feelings but rather shows love and gives instruction to each son as that son is in need.
- V. The role of the church in growing Christian fathers.

- A. First and foremost, the church must teach fathers the contractual obligations of fatherhood. The Christian father must accept these responsibilities, such as providing for the family and constantly exhibiting an example of love and care.
- B. Once again, the church should be a training ground, an environment where young fathers can learn from more experienced fathers through both instruction and example. We are far more likely to witness opportunities for young mothers to learn than for young fathers to learn.

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