

Followers of the Way

Lessons in fatherhood

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John 14:5-14

The first human father was Adam, and he maybe didn't do too good a job, when you think that one of his sons murdered the other. But maybe also that just demonstrates the dangers of sibling rivalry and the difficulties in parenting. Cain, after all, was jealous of Abel, because he thought his brother was unfairly preferred. We read that when God rejected his sacrifice, Cain was very angry and his face was downcast (Genesis 4:5). So he attacked Abel out in the fields and killed him.

Every child, when they feel unappreciated, can behave badly, and it's not always easy for parents to know what to do. Sometimes a child is justified in feeling undervalued and rejected, and sometimes they're very greatly valued, but they need reigning in or disciplining. Either way it can be difficult ... because human beings are difficult, both children and their parents. We all have weaknesses, needs, and vulnerabilities, and we all sometimes get it wrong.

So what is the job of a father? How does a man – who's supposed to be the grown-up – be a good father? What does the Bible say? This is a vast subject, and inevitably I can touch on only a few aspects. Also I'm going to be talking specifically about fathers, of course, but a lot of this applies equally to mothers ... but whatever I say, I think you'll be able to think about areas I've ignored, so please bear with me.

When it comes to parenting, in terms of express guidance the Bible is maybe a bit thin. Proverbs has a few handy tips, but they're mainly about discipline and not sparing the rod. For example, Proverbs 13:24 says, 'Whoever spares the rod hates their children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.' While along similar lines, Proverbs 19:18 says, 'Discipline your son, for there is hope; do not set your heart on putting him to death.' Well, okay, but let's be honest, the idea of putting your child to death, because they've annoyed you, sounds a little extreme – so we perhaps prefer Paul's advice in Colossians 3:21, 'Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.'

Elsewhere, a little more helpfully, the Bible makes it clear that a father is to bring up his children in the ways of the Lord, which includes not just discipline, but encouragement, comfort and instruction. Deuteronomy 6:6-7. 'These commandments that I give you today are to be on 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.' Or compare Ephesians 6:4, 'Fathers, do not exasperate your children, instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.' Which suggests, to me at least, a real awareness of the danger of overstepping the mark and being a bit harsh, so that you end up doing rather more harm than good. Don't do that, the bible says!

But if we really want to know what the model for a good father is, we have to look at God. Throughout Scripture, God is referred to as 'Father'. In the beginning He makes Adam and Eve in His own image - the procreative act of a father. And we read that He delights in them, meeting regularly with them in the Garden and talking with them. When they succumb to temptation, He's grieved and He has to take action - because as a result of their actions, things can't continue the way they were before. But God isn't 'angry', as such. He doesn't take up a big stick and beat them. Instead, he spells out for them the consequences of what they've done, making it impossible for them any longer to live in Eden. But, even in the punishment, He doesn't give up on them. Instead, He makes them garments of skin, so that they'll have some protection out in the hostile world that will from then on be their home. And, as any good Father, He begins from that moment to work out how to rescue and restore them, freeing them from Satan's hold.

The point is, even while men and women remain in bondage to sin and shut off from direct relationship with Himself, God *never* abandons them or simply casts them loose. On the contrary, there's never a moment when God's not looking out for them ... teaching them, and helping them. Getting them ready for the moment when He can finally act to win them back and restore them - which, by the way, they're wholly incapable of doing for themselves. In all of this, He acts as Father, with constant and unwavering love.

A little bit more specifically, in Exodus 4:22, when the Israelites are in exile in Egypt and at that point very far from being a nation, God tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, "... Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son." We see here a God who is angry at what has been done to His child, and who is going to act to protect and free him. So we have another element added here to our model for parenting. A father is not just someone who disciplines and trains his child, but someone who watches over and protects him or her, taking action to prevent another from doing them harm. In the same way, we see from this that part of the role of a human father is to protect and defend his child from outside harm. So a father must be vigilant to guard his child from others who intend the child harm or are trying to exploit them - and if he sees that kind of thing happening, a father must take action to stop it.

What does this mean in practice? Does it mean that a father must physically go and deal with a bully who's terrorising his child? Maybe, though equally he may want to equip his child to defend him or herself - after all, it's a rough old world out there, and a child has to be taught to stand on their own two feet, so a father has to exercise proper judgment in when and where to intervene. But there are other, more insidious, forms of attack against which a child is powerless and from which they must be protected, and it's here that the father's role is vital.

For example, in education today children are being routinely and inappropriately taught about sex, and that they can choose their gender. These kinds of teachings cause huge damage, because children have no way of assessing for themselves the validity of what they're being taught, and so it's very easy for them to be influenced and led astray. So, it's up to the father to keep an eye out so that he knows exactly what it is his child is being exposed to, and then, if necessary, he must take action to defend them. Similarly,

a father must do his utmost to make sure his child learns basic values and truth – for Christians, that children learn the foundations of our faith. And where that faith and our values are being undermined or even dismissed, he must take action. Many today say that doesn't really matter, and that we just need to fit in with the values of society – but actually this is a child's whole future that's at stake, and the difference for them between life and death. God entrusts children to us for their care, so it's the duty and responsibility of a father to ensure his child receives proper teaching, and is kept safe.

Coming back to the Bible, throughout God's dealings with the Israelites in the Old Testament, we see Him leading, encouraging, and disciplining them to make them 'a people for Himself', but in Jesus we see something new in that relationship. Jesus called God 'Abba' – Daddy – and we see an intimate relationship based on direct communication, with absolute and unquestioned trust, combined, on the part of Jesus, with absolute obedience. Jesus taught that that's the relationship God wants to have with every one of us. He wants us to trust Him, and that, when we live in obedience, God will provide for all our needs. All we need do is ask. Mt 7:11, '...If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!' So a father instructs, disciplines, protects ... but above all perhaps, he loves, and provides.

But of course throughout the Old Testament, and indeed today, we see men and women behaving badly and being faithless – rejecting God's oversight and care, and trying to do things their own way. Once mankind had been banished to the wilderness outside Eden, in His love, God gave them rules to live by ... that would protect them from being totally lost while He put in place plans for our redemption. The commandments and rules set out in the Bible are a gift, designed for our protection. So naturally, when the Israelites failed to live up to those rules, putting themselves at even greater risk, He disciplined them, and took action to bring them back into line. Yet this was never harsh, reflective judgment intended solely to punish – rather, it was necessary action to save them becoming so far lost to sin that they would become beyond redemption. This is perhaps the most important lesson of all. A good father will never cease to love his children, and it's important that children know that, but at the same time a father must not indulge children in such a way as to support and affirm them in doing wrong. Because this can only harm them.

God is our model, and the love He demonstrates is a costly love – which is literally willing to sacrifice everything to win back the children who are lost. This is the lesson that men who are fathers need to learn today. Children are given to us as a gift, to teach and watch over them as they grow towards maturity. It's not a soft, self-indulgent love that says whatever the child does doesn't matter, because all that's important is that they're happy and they have what they want. Anything for a quiet life! That is not love. Weakness and indulgence of wrongdoing, of sin, denies a child the chance to become fully what God has created and intends them to be. And, presumably, what all fathers generally want their children to be.

Being a father – and indeed a mother – is not easy, but God is our template. The love fathers are called to exhibit demands that they be intimately involved with every stage of their child's life, that they teach them values and truth – but also that, in their own

lives, they demonstrate that good behaviour, self-restraint and uprightness that puts duty and the wellbeing of others before self and personal gain.