Like A Father
Scripture Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:8-13

Introduction

Today is Father’s Day and we want to honor these special men in our lives. Fathers are important. They are needed. I would like to share some things about my father, Edwin Ashley McCray. For one, my dad loved to go to Friday night high school football games, something he did even when he was much older. I would often go with him. Apparently I had a desire to play on the football field from a very early age. I do not remember this, but my dad told me that when I was very young, he was in the football stand talking with some friends, and someone on the loudspeaker said, “Ed McCray, would you please get your son off of the football field.” For some reason, I never had the desire to play on the football field again. Something I do remember doing was taking the top off of my car while driving 60Mph on the interstate, losing the top, and then having to come home and explain it to my father. That was not one of my best moments. But then, there was the time when I graduated from college. I was working at Walmart, and my diploma had just arrived in the mail. My dad brought it to my job to show me. He was so proud. And then there are many pearls of wisdom my dad taught me. We call them Ed’isms.

“I buy you books and buy you books and you just gnaw the covers off of them.”
“Never play something that backs itself against a wall and takes on the world.”
“Anything worth doing, is worth doing well. If you dig ditches, dig a good ditch.”

I loved my dad. He was not perfect, but then, no father is. I miss him and I wish he were still with us. I cherish the time we had and I thank God for him. Fathers are a good thing, but more than that, fathers are essential. Our families need good, godly fathers. Not all fathers are biological, though. There are some who become fathers through marital relationships. Others are father figures to us — they act fatherly to us. And then there are spiritual fathers, who show us the way to serve our Lord better. The Apostle Paul was like a father to the churches he planted. This passage from his second letter to the Thessalonians shows us how fatherly Paul was to the church in Thessalonica; however, I think it also reveals some characteristics of all good, godly fathers.

A Father Sacrifices for His Children

Parents sacrifice much to provide for their children. They give up their dreams to care for their children. They work hard to provide for their families. The sacrifice is not the same for each family. Some parents sacrifice more than others, but if you are going to be a father to your children, there will be a sacrifice. Paul knew about sacrifice and he sacrificed much for his “spiritual children”. Look at the following verse.

1 Thessalonians 2:8 So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.

Scripture quoted from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.
In this passage, Paul mentioned how “very dear” the Thessalonians had become to him. This is similar to the affection Paul had for Timothy, who was his “beloved son” (1 Cor. 4:17, 2 Timothy 1:2). There was a special bond between Paul and Timothy, just as there was a special bond between Paul and the church in Thessalonica. Paul had such a close relationship with them that he was ready to share his very life with them. He had an ongoing commitment to them because they had become so very dear to him. The same is true of fathers and their children. Children are very dear to their fathers. They are very much loved and a father will do almost anything for the sake of his children. Often times this is shown in how hard a father works to support his family. Paul’s love was shown by the fact that he had undertaken long hours of manual labor in order to avoid burdening the Thessalonians financially. A good father does the same. A good father’s commitment to his family will not diminish, but it will be ongoing.

A Father Shares and Models Christ to His Children

As a church, we constantly remind ourselves of the importance of sharing Jesus with other people. As disciples of Christ, we know the Great Commission, Jesus’ last command to His Church. It tells us to make disciples of all nations. We know that to make disciples of other people, we must first tell them about Jesus. As Paul said in Romans chapter ten, how will they believe unless they hear, and how will they hear unless someone tells them (Romans 10:14). The sharing of our hope in Christ is a privilege and responsibility of the whole Church, not just the pastor or other leaders of a church. This is also a privilege and responsibility of parents. It is a father’s privilege and responsibility to share Jesus Christ with his own children. This is something Paul modeled for his spiritual children in Thessalonica. Look at the following verses.

1 Thessalonians 2:9-10

9 For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. 10 You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.

Paul not only loved his spiritual children much and worked hard for them, just as any father would do for his family, but Paul also proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ to them. You might say that proclaiming the gospel to these people is what brought them into Paul’s family, which was after all, the family of God. Sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is a responsibility of all fathers. If you do not do this, then you risk your children never knowing the hope, forgiveness, and eternal life that God so graciously gives. If you really love them and sacrifice for them, like any good father would, why would you not tell them the most important truth of all — that they are sinners separated from a holy God and they are in need of a Savior, Jesus Christ?

Of course, words are important. We must tell our children the truth of God’s Word, but actions are important, too. You must give your children an example to follow. It is not enough to just speak the Word of God — you must practice what you preach. Fathers must avoid saying one thing, while living something else. Have you heard the saying, “Actions speak more louder than words”? They actually do! I think this is actually

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something Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, “Your actions speak so loudly, I cannot hear what you are saying.” Therefore, fathers, make sure that what you proclaim to your children is represented by your conduct. This leads us to the next point.

A Father Disciples His Children to Follow Christ

We have been looking at the issue of discipleship for some time now. Parents are the primary disciple makers of children. I said primary, because parents are not the only ones. Jesus’ gave His great command to make disciples to the whole Church, thus the whole Church is involved. Parents who follow Christ are a part of the Church and they are essential to the discipleship process. God has given parents the privilege and the responsibility to disciple their own children to become followers of Jesus Christ. A church should come alongside parents to help disciple their children to be a part of the Body of Christ. This passage described the discipleship a spiritual father does! Paul did not stop with sharing the plan of salvation or getting a decision to accept Christ. Paul went further, because discipleship is more than one decision. Before we continue in this letter, though, let us look at a few other passages that speak to a Father’s responsibility to “train up a child” in the way of the Lord. The first example is “Father Abraham”.

**Genesis 18:19** For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.

In this passage, God was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah and came to visit Abraham in order to reveal to him what He was about to do. As God was sort of deliberating what He was about to say to Abraham, He mentioned about Abraham’s duty to “command” his household to keep the way of the Lord. This command is tied to God’s promise to make Abraham a blessing to the nations (Genesis 12:3). The way God was going to make His chosen people was through the family, and other families, where fathers train up their children to follow the Lord. Let us fast forward a bit to a proverb that King Solomon wrote concerning the duty of a father.

**Proverbs 22:6** Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it.

This proverb, which may be founded on God’s covenant with Abraham, exhorts parents to “train” their children in the way of the Lord. This means dedicating children to God. This involves a parent teaching the kinds of things that please or displease God, and the consequence of each kind of conduct. The training would include love and instruction as well as “the rod of discipline” (Proverbs 22:15), which will drive folly out of a child. Wise parents invest in their children during their early years, because such care typically produces godly results. Of course, this proverb does not guarantee success, but it does speak to how profound a parent’s influence can be, even though that influence might be rejected. Even the best fathers can have a prodigal or a prideful son (Luke 15:11-32). Fathers can and should influence their children, but what a child does is ultimately determined by the child. Now, let us look at Paul’s instruction to fathers.

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**Ephesians 6:4** Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

Fathers should not be overbearing. They should not provoke their children to anger. A domineering and thoughtless father’s actions can be discouraging to his children. Even though a father ought to discipline his own children, this should never be arbitrary and it should never be done out of anger. On the contrary, fathers should teach their children to follow God and to keep His commandments. Fathers should bring up their children to follow Jesus. This means nurturing them and helping them to flourish. Parents are entrusted with children in order to shape them into followers of Christ. Let us now return to the passage in 1 Thessalonians to see what Paul wrote about a father’s discipling.

1 Thessalonians 2:11-12  

11 For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

The authority of the father in the family was supreme in the ancient society. The father was responsible for arranging for the training of his children. He, or someone he assigned the task, would educate and/or discipline his children as needed. Paul was speaking to a church as a father figure to impress upon the church the need to represent Christ in their daily living. Parents have the same duty. God has given parents the privilege and responsibility to train up the children God gives them to follow Christ. A father is to train up his children to “walk in a manner worthy of God”. This means to live in a manner consistent with the commands and character of God. We saw the same idea last week when Paul exhorted the church in Philippi to let their manner of life, how they lived and behaved, represent the faith they had in Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:27). Notice how Paul goes from exhorting and encouraging to charging. A good father encourages his children and provides them guidance. A father should tell his own children about Christ, faithfully model Christ to them, and then encourage them to follow Christ faithfully. If a child will not receive a gentle word of encouragement, a father should then urge, even direct, the child to do the right thing. This is a father’s duty.

**A Father Gives Credit to God**

At the end of verse twelve, Paul wrote these words, “God…calls you into his own kingdom and glory”. Paul realized that though he was like a spiritual father to the church, they ultimately belonged to God. God is our Heavenly Father. When all is said and done, an earthly father realizes that his own biological children belong to God. Our Heavenly Father has entrusted these younger people to our earthly fathers in order to raise up another generation of believers. And so, at the end of this passage, we see Paul acknowledging this truth by giving thanks to God. Look at verse thirteen.

1 Thessalonians 2:13  

And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers.

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Paul thanked God, without ceasing, that the Thessalonians received the gospel. Why would Paul thank God if it was his work and it was the Thessalonians who received it? Likewise, why would a father thank God if it is him training his own children and it is they who believe and trust in Christ? A father gives thanks to God because the credit always goes to God. Paul thanked God that those who heard God’s Word believed it. Paul thanked God that those who believed it, believed it as the Word of God and not the words of men. Paul thanked God that God’s Word was at work in these new believers. God is the One working in us by His own Word and through the Holy Spirit. Thus, fathers should thank God for His Word and His work in their own children’s lives. In fact, God is actually the Father of all fathers. He is our Heavenly Father. God cares for us. He encourages us. He exhorts us to right action. He instructs us with His Holy Word. He even sacrificed for us. Ultimately, we ought to honor God as Father.

Chuck Lawless, who serves as Professor of Evangelism and Missions at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, NC, said that there are many reasons to remember just how worthy our Heavenly God is. He recently wrote “10 Reasons To Honor God As Father”. I would like to share a few of those with you:

• God is a perfect father. None of our earthly fathers are perfect, and none of is a perfect father. God the Father, though, is. He is flawless and faultless.

• God loves us unconditionally. Even when our earthly fathers do not always love us, God does. Some of us have bad experiences with our earthly fathers whose love for us was distorted at best, and non-existent at worst. God the Father’s love is real. He loves us more than we can imagine, and He forgives us when we let Him down.

• God never leaves us. Some earthly fathers walk out on their children. On the other hand, God the Father never walks out on us, even when we tend to walk away from Him. He is the father running to His prodigal children and loving His prideful ones.

• God disciplines us because He loves us. His discipline is right, adoring, and out of His great love for us. It is redemptive rather than punitive, and reconciling more than dividing (Hebrews 12:4-11). His correction is never out of control or abusive.

• God is always available and He speaks to us every day. Our heavenly Father speaks to us through His inspired Word. He wrote us a love letter that crosses all cultures, transcends all ages, and meets us exactly where we are in life. We can even call out to Him at any time, and know that He listens.

• God gives us earthly fathers. For some, our father is the godly man in our family. For others of us, that “father” is a godly man who has chosen to walk beside us and welcome us as one of his own. Both of these men are gifts, and we should thank God for them. God even allows some of us to be somebody’s father. He grants us the blessing of being a “father”, biological, adoptive, spiritual or otherwise. This is a gift.

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Conclusion

In closing, this passage shows several things about Paul’s “fatherhood” to the church in Thessalonica. At the heart of this passage is Paul’s defense of his love and conduct to the church. He acted as any good father should. He loved the church and worked hard to see them prosper spiritually. He shared Christ with them and then discipled them to “walk in a manner worthy of God”. This included Paul lovingly encouraging, exhorting, and sometimes directing them to do the right thing. In the end, Paul knew who to give glory for the Thessalonians. It was not him or them, but it was God who was at work in their lives. All of these things are characteristics of a good father. Does this represent your father? For some, it does. For others, it may not. Let us encourage our earthly father to seek Christ always, to follow Him faithfully, and to take seriously the wonderful privilege, responsibility, and gift that God has entrusted to them — to train up the next generation. At the end of the day, there is a perfect Father who always loves, is always there for us, and always encourages and disciplines us for our good. When our earthly fathers fall short, and they will, point them to our Heavenly Father. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!