

FAITHFUL FATHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN

1 Thessalonians 2:9-13

INTRODUCTION

I'm going to do something this morning that I don't do very often. Normally, I work my way through books of the Bible and simply take the next passage in a book and seek to tell you what it says. This way of preaching through the Bible prevents the pastor from just talking about what he wants to talk about. It also takes serious what we say we believe: the whole Bible is the word of God not just the parts we like. However, as this is Father's Day, I decided many months ago that I was going to address this sermon to fathers in our congregation.

Now, before all the women and all the men who are not dads turn me off and start thinking about what you are going to do the rest of the day, let me give you some reasons why all of you should pay attention. First, what I'm going to say to fathers has direct application to every mother or grandparent, not just the dads. Second, the text I am going to speak from is a description of how anyone who has any interest in helping another human being grow to know and trust God can be of help. So every Christian in this room should pay attention because, if you are a Christian you are interested in helping others to know and love Jesus. All of us should want to be and can be spiritual "fathers" to other people. Third, for those of you who are children still living at home this sermon should be an encouragement to you to pay attention as your father (and mother) seek to help you to know and love Christ. Fourth, the fathers in this room need your prayers and encouragement to be faithful in their work. The temporal and eternal well-being of the 145 children in this congregation depends in large measure upon the faithfulness of these fathers. If you care about the young people sitting in this room you will want to know what our fathers are to be doing so you can pray for them and encourage them. Finally, ultimately, what I am describing this morning is how it is that God, our Father in heaven, fathers each of us through our parents and through his appointed leaders in our church. Thus all of us can grow in our understanding of how God aims to be our father through the work of human fathers and pastors and elders.

In our passage this morning the apostle Paul is describing the way in which he exercised his ministry while living among the people in the Greek town of Thessalonica. This story is told in Acts 17. If you will remember he preached the gospel in this town and helped a church get started but was run out of town fairly quickly by some really angry people, who didn't like what he was telling the people about God and how he can be known by trusting in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. When he left town an angry mob was attacking some of the leaders of this newly formed church and so he wrote this letter after he was run out of town to encourage them to not quit following Christ out of fear of trouble. As part of his encouragement to hold fast he reminds them in these first two chapters of his ministry among them and of the impact that the gospel had on their lives.

Because this passage is not addressed directly to fathers we need to ask the question: is it appropriate to describe fatherhood from a passage which describes the work of church leaders, apostles/elders/pastors? Obviously, I think the answer to that question is yes. First, as you can see in v.11 Paul says that his relationship to them is like that of a father to his children. Thus, if it is appropriate to say that the elders and pastors in a congregation are like fathers to the congregation then it is just as appropriate to say that fathers are like pastors and elders to their own children. Second, in Paul's command to fathers in Ephesians 6:4 he tells fathers to "bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord". The word "instruction" is a word that Paul uses repeatedly in describing the work of pastors and elders. It is a very strong word meaning the communication of truth with a strong warning attached to it. For example in this letter in 5:12 he says, "Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you." "Those who are over you in the Lord" is a reference to the pastors and elders in a local church. The word translated "admonish" is the same word translated "instruction" in Ephesians 6:4. Thus, as we consider Paul's description of his own work as a spiritual shepherd of the church in Thessalonica we can learn how fathers are to pastor their own children. Paul is a model of a faithful father.

MAIN POINT

Fathers are to pastor their own children by...

I. Laying aside their rights (v.9)

Clearly in v. 9 Paul is reminding these people of how hard he worked while he was preaching the gospel of Christ to them. But notice in the middle of the verse he says that he worked as hard as he did, night and day “in order to not be a burden to them”. What does he mean by that phrase? Turn a couple of pages over to 2 Thessalonians 3:8-9. Paul writes to these same people in a second letter, “...nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.” Paul has the right, by the command of Jesus himself, as a person whose life is given to the preaching of the gospel of Jesus to be financially supported by those to whom he preaches. Paul frequently talks about the fact that he has a right to financial support but he doesn't make use of that right. Rather, he works with his own hands by making and selling tents and other leather goods in order to support himself and his other co-workers.

Why does Paul not require, as Jesus commands, that those to whom he preaches the gospel support him financially? He gives at least these two reasons in his letters for not requiring financial support. First, he does it so that no one can discredit his message by accusing him of preaching the gospel to make money. There were many people who hated Paul and his message and they would use whatever they could to get people to not listen to him. Paul refused to demand support from those to whom he preached so that those who hated him and his message could not say, “You can't trust what Paul tells you because the only reason he is preaching the gospel of Jesus is so that he can get rich off from you. The message cannot be true because it is just a story he tells to make money.” The second reason he refused financial support was so that he could be an example to those who trusted in Jesus through him that every believer is to work hard to support themselves and the poor.

What does this mean for fathers? Obviously, being a father requires hard work and discipline. You will not be a good father by accident. You will only be a good father by purposefully working hard. Just as failing to work hard at a job will lead to financial ruin so refusing to work hard at being a father will lead to personal and spiritual disaster for your children. However, the main point in v. 9 is not hard work but Paul's laying aside his right to be financially supported which then required that he work during the days to make tents to sell so that he could work all night preaching the gospel to his spiritual children.

What rights must fathers lay aside in order to be faithful fathers? Let me suggest two. Many fathers work hard at a job away from the home for many hours and so when they come home they feel they have the right to relax or to do something they enjoy, like go hunting or fishing or watch sports or play video games or work on the yard. This feeling is more common among those fathers whose wives work at home with the children but I have found it also among men whose wives work outside the home. What faithful fathers do is lay aside their right to rest and relax and when they come home from work they spend time with their children. They get involved in the hard work of caring for, playing with and watching young children. They spend time teaching and working with and serving with their older children. They are involved in helping the mother of their children do the physical labor involved in managing a household. The idea that men who work to support the family have done their duty and don't have to work in the home or participate in raising the children is a wicked idea promoted by a chauvinistic culture.

Many men become resentful and thus resist the work of fatherhood because they feel they have a right to be appreciated by their wives and children. When children do not express what these dads consider appropriate levels of gratitude and respect, then they become harsh and autocratic and resistant to the work of parenting. Listen, if working for the good of your children depends upon their expressions of affection and appreciation, you will never work for the good of your children. If you only read the Bible with your children when they express eagerness to do so, you will rarely, if ever, read the Bible with your children. If spending time with your teen age children depends upon their asking you to spend time together, you probably won't spend time

with them. If you are going to be a pastor to your children, then you have to die to your demand to be appreciated and pursue your children even though they don't appreciate your pursuit of them.

How did Paul lay aside his rights? In Acts 20:35 he tells us he was able to do so by remembering the words of the Lord Jesus when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." He's not talking about the good feeling people report when they help another person. Rather, he means that you prefer God's love and presence, his blessing more than you prefer getting to relax or more than you prefer being appreciated by your children. God's promise is that you will discover the wonder of being loved by God when you deny yourself the pleasure of relaxation or appreciation in order to work for the good of your children.

II. Modeling the gospel (v.10)

In v. 10 Paul reminds these dear friends that they personally witnessed the way in which he and Silas and Timothy lived. Paul was never shy about reminding those whom he led to Christ about how he lived. In fact, he regularly told his spiritual children that they should pay attention to how he lived and they should seek to live like him. In Phil. 3:17 he said, "Join with others in following my example brothers..." As Christ's representative he was passionate in his desire to declare what a great salvation God had provided for all who would believe in Christ. But Paul supported that declaration with a lifestyle of holiness and righteousness and blamelessness. These people personally witnessed Paul's devotion to the Lord and his commitment to deal justly with other people. They had first hand, eye-witness knowledge that he was blameless in his dealings with other people and with God.

Note that he says not only did they witness his lifestyle, but that God did also. Why did he say that? Is he just trying to be super religious? Look back at v. 4. He is asserting that it is not only his behavior that is above reproach but his motives are also. He wants them to know that he is not concerned about what they think about him, he is only concerned about what God thinks about him and what they think about Christ. Paul is God-centered, not man-centered. He lives as he does because his greatest desire in life is to know, love and please God. The fact that God gave up the life of his own Son for him and that now God has come to live in him drives Paul to passionately pursue a lifestyle that corresponds to those realities. Christ is not simply an add on to his life, Christ is his life. If you belong to Christ, if your sins are forgiven then this is also true for you. Christ is your life. Your main concern in life is that Jesus be pleased and honored by how you live, not how people treat you. Your greatest desire is that when people see you they are able to see Jesus living in you because you want people to join you in loving Jesus.

You and I both know that there are many people who have rejected the message of Jesus because of how unattractive the messenger of Jesus has been. Ghandi, the famous Hindu leader, grew up among Christians and was a great admirer of Jesus. At one point in his life he said that he would have become a follower of Jesus but for one thing, the followers of Jesus. Paul demonstrated the truthfulness of the message of Christ by the quality of his life. Fathers, your children need not only to hear you talk about Jesus, they need to see you live for Jesus. The power of a life of integrity cannot be underestimated. It is one of the chief things that God uses to get our attention and to show us the beauty of Jesus. This is especially true of fathers. More than one child has been kept from turning away from Christ because they could not deny the reality of Jesus in the life of their dad. Conversely, more than one child has been turned away from Christ because they knew by personal experience that their dad was a hypocrite. This does not mean that you must be perfect. It means that you have the humility that the gospel alone gives to acknowledge your sins to your children and show them the joy that comes to all who trust Christ alone for forgiveness.

Here is a reason for every father to pursue relationships of accountability with other men. You need others to help you remain faithful to Christ, not only for your own sake but also for the sake of your children. Many of you have heard me talk about the many times I have sinned at my children's sporting events by yelling at referees. After one especially bad episode during which I dishonored our Lord Jesus and embarrassed my two sons by my anger and verbal assaults I am grateful for the fact that I had a group of men whom I met with each

week to whom I was able to confess my sins and obtain their counsel and prayers so that I was able to seek the forgiveness of God, my sons, their fellow teammates and of the other parents. I and several of the other parents then joined together in prayer before every game that we would honor Christ as fans of our sons' team. We all need the help of our brothers and sisters to fight our own sins and to live the kinds of lives that bear witness to truthfulness of the gospel. But especially fathers, you need to be involved in these kinds of relationships because your children's eternal well-being will be strongly affected by your conduct. You must be able to say to your children, "follow the pattern of life you have seen in me."

III. Teaching the gospel and gospel living (vv.9, 11-13)

It is impossible to miss the fact that the chief work that Paul engaged in was the work of teaching the gospel of Jesus and all of its implications to these people. In v. 9 he says that while he worked night and day not to be a burden "he preached the gospel of God to them." In v. 12 he says that the chief way he exhibited the character and work of a father was by exhorting, comforting and charging them to live worthy of God. These are all words describing the process of communication, of speech. In v. 13 he says that he is grateful to God because when they heard what he taught them they accepted it as God's very word and not simply the words of a man. If you are a father it is your job, your duty to verbally instruct your children in the gospel. You are required to tell them about what Christ has done and to tell them how they are to live once they have come to trust in Christ. This means that if you are a father you must be a student of the Bible and of Christian doctrine. You must make it your goal to grow in your understanding of the Bible and of the good news it contains so that you are growing in your ability to teach it to your children. Here is a reason to come to Foundations in the Faith, the Faith Training Seminar, to be in a Bible study, to read books about the Bible and Christian doctrine, to meet with men who are older in the Lord so that you can ask questions and grow. It is not primarily my job or the job of the church to teach the gospel to your children. It is not your wife's job to teach the gospel to your children. It is your job.

I want you to notice how Paul did this. First, he paid attention to each of these people individually (v.12). Each of your children need you to take time with them so that you can make sure they understand the things you are talking about when you lead your whole family in Bible reading and prayer. You need to help each one understand what they are hearing at church or in bible studies. I cannot tell you how many times I have been surprised when I have talked with someone who grew up going to church but who have no understanding of the most basic Christian doctrines because no one, not even their parents, spoke with them personally about the gospel. Your children need your personal attention if they are going to know the gospel and embrace it.

When you teach the gospel to your children, whether corporately or individually, you are to teach the truth of the Bible in the three ways Paul describes in v. 12. You are to exhort them in the gospel. This means to seek to impress on them the truthfulness of the doctrines the Bible teaches. You must be as earnest about the truth of the Bible as you are about the necessity of gun safety or learning to swim or the importance of study or hard work. You are to comfort them by the gospel. You must show them how this good news of Christ's living and dying and rising and ascending for sinners is the only true comfort to be found in life and in death. They must know how this gospel does indeed bring hope and joy and solace in the midst of life's difficulties. In the gospel alone is strength to not give up on life or love. Finally, you must charge your children to believe and obey this gospel. They must be told that the truth you teach requires a response from them. They cannot depend on your faith in Christ but must trust in Christ for themselves. They must know that an eternal hell awaits them if they do not trust in Christ but that eternal joy awaits them if they will trust in Christ.

IV. Pursuing God's goal (vv.12-13)

Paul describes the goal for which he is working in 2 ways in vv. 12 and 13. In v. 12 his goal is to teach them the gospel so that they "live in a manner worthy of the Lord." What does this mean? This word, "worthy," is used a lot in the NT. In Ephesians 4:1 Paul urges the Christians in Ephesus to live a life worthy of the calling they have received. In other words, God has called them out of the deadness of sin and slavery to the devil and

their sinful desires and given them his divine life by grace through faith. They are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works. Therefore, there is a way of life that corresponds to that calling. It's the same in I Thess. These people have been called to be citizens of God's kingdom and thus they should live as if they are citizens of that kingdom. Paul says that his goal for his "children" in the faith is that they live a life that corresponds to, that is in keeping with their profession of faith in Christ, with their being made citizens of God's kingdom.

In v. 13 Paul gives thanks to God for the fact that when they heard him teach them the gospel they did not receive his words as though they were merely the words of a human but as they actually are: the words of God. Thus their allegiance is not to Paul, but to God himself. These people know that when they heard Paul speak the words of the gospel that they were not hearing a man speak but that God himself spoke to them and thus they have come to know and love God, not Paul. Dads, our goal is not to have our children treat us like God or respect us, but to have them treat God as God and respect and fear and love and trust him. We must not take their rejection of our attempts to teach them the Bible personally. We must desire that they trust and love God, not us. We want them to be loyal to Jesus, not to us. We want them to think well of Jesus, not us.

John Paton was a well known missionary to the South Pacific Islands in the mid 1800's. He wrote an autobiography of his experiences that is a wonderful story. We have it in the library. He was a man of great devotion to Christ and of deep love for the savage peoples he met in the southern Pacific. He spent over 40 years preaching the gospel to them, suffering greatly in the process. He writes extensively about the profound impact that his father had upon him. This is what he writes about the impact of his father's prayers both private in his "prayer closet" and with the family in Family Worship: "Though everything else in religion were by some unthinkable catastrophe to be swept out of memory, were blotted from my understanding, my soul would wander back to those early scenes, and shut itself up once again in that Sanctuary Closet, and, hearing still the echoes of those cries to God, would hurl back all doubt with the victorious appeal, 'He walked with God, why may not I?'" "How much my father's prayers at this time impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out his whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen world to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Savior, and learned to know and love him as our Divine friend."

Fathers, we are going to teach our children something by our words and by our lives. Whether you are intentional or not, your children are learning from you what matters in life. May God be gracious to us so that our children learn from us that trusting Jesus and living a life of love and devotion to him is the only thing that matters in life.