

**Biblical Fatherhood**  
Grace Church Dulwich Men's Evening  
20<sup>th</sup> May 2010

**Introduction**

To be honest giving a talk on fatherhood makes me feel something of a fraud. Ideally the person you'd have standing up here would have the wise look of someone who has had seven or eight children all who have grown to be faithful Christians as well as solid and well balanced citizens in their own right. Instead you have me. I have three wonderful but slightly diabolical children and a predisposition to shirk any fathering responsibilities that I can onto my wife.

As I've been looking over what the bible has to say on the subject of fatherhood over the last few weeks, it has been very helpful for me to get a better handle on much that the bible has to say on the matter. There is great wisdom and great challenge as we consider the subject of fatherhood.

I'm conscious that not all of us here tonight are fathers. It's tempting to say that at least we all have experienced having fathers but even there we may have suffered at the hands of terrible fathers which has completely soured us to the whole concept of fatherhood.

Whether your experience was good or bad, there is much the bible has to positively encourage us and hopefully for those of us who are here with negative experiences, some of what the bible says may help redeem the idea of fatherhood.

Well we're going to start looking at a passage in Matthew's gospel in the Sermon on the Mount. Let's turn to Matthew chapter 7.

*Matthew 7:7 "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"*

**Fathers as Givers of Good Gifts to Their Children**

In the reading we've just had, Jesus speaking to the crowds knew that across the spectrum of human society, fathers have always been givers to their children. Let's look again at verse 9:

*“9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children...”*

Biblically, there is an expectation that fathers will provide for their children. In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul in explaining his attitude to his own ministry, describes the relationship of parents and children like this:

*“For children are not obligated to save up for their parents, but parents for their children.”*

The simple truth we should start with then is that fatherhood involves a real responsibility to provide for the material needs of one’s children. Food and housing are things we need to pay for so that our children may have their needs met. Working to earn the money we need to support our families is an obligation on us – our children rely on us and so we must never denigrate the value of work where it allows us to fulfill such a responsibility.

This basic tenet has a few implications then, in a society where marital breakdown is rapidly becoming the norm. In our society, many fathers after such a breakup drift away and all too often having no real contact with the children. I’d be surprised if that wasn’t the experience of even some of us here tonight.

Many of us will know people who face or will face family breakup, sadly statistically it’s even likely that it will afflict some of us here, well at that time we need to encourage those facing such an event to commit themselves such that they will never drift away from their children. Their wellbeing is our responsibility as Fathers. We must not allow ourselves to drift away from them and then simply to end up abdicating responsibility to their mothers in the craven way all too many do today.

However our responsibilities to our children are not just to their physical needs. The bible is completely clear that the fatherly responsibility extends even more to their spiritual needs. Let me read from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (let’s turn there):

*“6:1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 “Honor your father and mother” (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 “that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.” 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.”*

Fathers must see themselves as those bringing up their children in the “discipline and instruction of the Lord”. We have a particular responsibility to teach them the gospel, to instruct them in a Godly way and to discipline them when necessary too.

Notice what it doesn't say: it doesn't say hope your wives might do some of this whilst you go off and enjoy yourself with your friends, perhaps playing golf as I'm tempted to or if it's more your thing watching crystal palace somehow contrive to avoid relegation. No Paul is clear that fathers need to be involved, taking responsibility.

Paul also reminds us in Ephesians that we must be careful to do this in a way which doesn't provoke our children unfairly. Now what will provoke one child will be different from another and each of us will know our children best. But with any of our children who regularly get angry, perhaps we need to spend more time talking to our wives trying to analyse what is setting them off and see whether the provocation can be avoided somehow.

Thinking more positively about how we teach them in the Lord, Deutonomy 6 is helpful. Let me read from verse 4:

*4 "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."*

This passage is a great encouragement to us. It tells us to teach the gospel to our children both when we're at home potentially in more formal bible times but also informally when we just go about our daily lives.

When we're talking about the day ahead over breakfast. When we talk about how our days have been at the end of the day. When we're wondering around shops looking at things and chatting about what we see. All these informal settings regularly present opportunities to discuss things from a Christian perspective and we should train ourselves as fathers to take them and use them to instruct our children in the way to go. I know of one father who likes to sit down with his family at mealtimes and read a quote from an anti-Christian writer such as Richard Dawkins or a quote from a Christian book he has been reading and then getting his family to engage with the ideas from a Christian perspective while they enjoy lunch together.

From a more formal perspective, reading the bible every day with your children can be a joy as well as hard graft as they come to understand what God has done and is doing - what a great thing to be able to do. Perhaps we can explore this in the panel afterwards to share ideas about how this is done.

Finally as we think about Fathers giving to their children, Jesus reminds us that we know the importance of giving **good things** to our children. Most of us would automatically recoil from the idea of giving a venomous snake to a child, or a useless stone to a hungry toddler but how careful are we to watch what goes to them in other areas? Take TV, computers or books and magazines as examples.

TV and books can all too often lift up shallow ideals such as physical beauty, fashion and wealth whilst somehow contriving to rubbish or condemn what should be praised. The role of parents or teachers is all too easily ridiculed rather than the children being taught rightful respect.

No we musn't be weak in this area of content. We need to put the effort in here to know what our children are watching and to have considered whether it is appropriate for them yet. Just because an 11 year old child claims to have a friend at school who has seen whichever age 15 rated film, does not mean that we need to let them do so in our own home. Just because one of our children has a reading age way beyond their physical age doesn't mean they're emotionally ready for the more adult themes that will come in some of the books they can now engage with.

But of course such issues are opportunities too. One idea, may be to occasionally watch these things with our children or read the books with them. It may be unbearably dull to sit through Beverley Hills 90210, Gossip Girl, or Doctor Who, although perhaps not the last one, but it will present the opportunity to talk to your children about what you are watching. You can discuss it from a Christian perspective together and thereby train them to engage critically with the world rather than just blindly accepting whatever is thrown at them.

### **We Fathers Are by Nature Evil**

Now in one sense, for any of us who are Christian, this is no surprise. One of the first realizations we come to as a Christian is to realize how badly each of us have treated God and indeed those around us in the world. Jesus makes the point clearly in verse 11 as he rather bluntly declares to those listening:

*"11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children"*

The point I'm trying to share is not just that we are sinful in general but rather that in particular our roles, words, thoughts and actions as fathers are all too easily corrupted too.

The problem is that as we think of ourselves as carers, providers, teachers and protectors of our children, well it's all too possible to treat one's children as if

we're never wrong and to put on the pretence to them that we're somehow perfect – all in the name of setting a good example...

To properly understand our fathering as fallible, opens the door to a style of fatherhood that is humble yet still seeking to be all that a father should be. We need to follow the example of our Saviour who though ruler of all, humbled himself to serve. We too need to serve humbly but faithfully taking responsibility for our children as the heads of the household.

Realising that wrong fathering is all too normal helps us to realize that sometimes we need to say sorry to our children and seek their forgiveness. For instance when we've completely lost it with them or got fed up with perfectly innocent childish enquiries because we're tired from a long day or lack of sleep...we need to be ready to apologise, just as we rightly expect them to apologise to us and to others after the latest tantrum, rude remark or act of selfishness they've exhibited.

It is not weak to be humble, it is not a failure to admit to our children the truth about our own sin and if we're serious about leading them down the road of discipleship, should we not show them what real discipleship looks like? After all, if their great good is our aim then surely we need them to see how serious we are about the Christian life in its entirety?

Knowing that fatherhood can be exercised in an evil manner is also a helpful warning to us. It means we have to be more suspicious of our own motives. It means we must question our most heartfelt desires for them. Is the latest crazy hobby I'm trying to get them interested in for their good or for my pride? Is my pushing them to work harder and harder at school teaching them the right heart motives of working as if for the Lord or am I teaching them to worship at the altar of career?

### **God – the One True Father**

Let's move on to our final point from verse 11: God - the one true father x2. Let me read v 11 again:

*11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

Of course the central truth of Jesus' words in this small passage from Matthew's gospel is that the true Father is God himself – Our Father in heaven as he describes him in that famous prayer.

We may have had good fathers, bad fathers or no fathers that we ever knew but in truth all who are Christian here today can look to God himself to see that they have the best of all Fathers – the one who is true, the one who is good.

Though we are massively blessed in the chance to be fathers, we need to remember that our children's relationship with their father in heaven is far more important than their relationships with us.

A little later in chapter 10 of this gospel, Jesus says the following words which must have been unbelievably shocking in such a patriarchal society:

*34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father...37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

At the end of the day, what is the goal of our Fatherhood? Well for the Christian surely it must be to point to the Father in heaven. Do we tell our children that as much as we love them, they have another Father who loves them more? Do we tell them that as much as we care for our children, they have another Father who cares for them more? A Father who adopts all who call out to him in repentance and faith. Do we tell our children that they need to lose their lives for Jesus' sake? The answer to such questions can be very revealing as to the state of our own hearts and bears much consideration.

Well as hard as this will be for us who are evil, the good news is that our Father knows how to give good things to those who ask him – as we look to walk in faith following his Son, let's ask him to give us the strength to love our children, the words to encourage them and the wisdom to point them to him. And most of all let's ask for the best thing of all, that they might grow up into those who love and serve the Lord himself for no one can save them but God himself.