

On Fatherhood

Today is Fathers' Day, which was first celebrated early on 19th June 1910 in the USA. There was already an annual Mother's day celebration. Mrs Sonora Dodd daughter of Henry Smart who had been brought up by her father after her mothers' early death, felt there should be a similar day to honour fathers. It is a day "*honouring fathers and celebrating fatherhood, paternal bonds, and the influence of fathers in society.*" (Wiki)

While some may slam the commercialisation of Fathers' day, it does enable us to focus on expressing appreciation to dads for their fatherhood, in a way that their birthdays don't. In this fallen world some dads are actually so bad at being fathers that their children have very little to celebrate or appreciate. Fatherhood for such men is little more than a single act of fathering a child. But true fatherhood is massively more than this. Thank God that there are many very good fathers in the world who take their role seriously and are totally committed to being great dads.

The best Father of all, of course, is God the Father. Why is God called the Father? Is it because in some ways God is like a human father, or because human beings have the need for a supreme father figure up in heaven? Not at all! God is in his very essence and nature a perfect father. He made humanity in his image; and so human fathers are created to reflect what he is in his fatherhood. So human fatherhood is a shadow of the real eternal fatherhood of God.

1. Fathering

The first obvious aspect of fatherhood is fathering. Fathers father children. The Bible calls Jesus the Son of God. He is also called the 'only begotten' of the Father, which the NIV translates as 'One and Only'. It could mean the Unique One, which Jesus certainly is. But 'only begotten' means more than 'unique'. It means an only child - son or daughter, like the widows' son and Jairus' daughter. If Jesus was God's only son, how could God the Father have fathered him? Does that mean there was a time he didn't exist? And what about the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son? The teaching of the early church fathers was that Jesus has existed from all eternity and yet he derives his existence from his Father and so they said he was 'eternally

begotten' by the Father. Paul calls Jesus the 'first-born of all creation,' but that doesn't mean he was the first being born or created by God. 'First born' in Greek means the heir. He has always existed as God, but his existence is eternally derived from his Father. Similarly the Holy Spirit has always existed and he derives his existence from both the Father and the Son. It is not possible for us to fully grasp the true nature of the eternal relationship between God the Father and The Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son never had or needed a mother, until he was born into this world as Jesus. Today we are looking at fatherhood and there is something quite profound about the relationship of father and son that is different to a mother-son relationship. Jesus of course knew both. He was eternally the Son of God the Father, and then was born into a human family, with a human mother and an earthly stepfather, and a shed load of brothers and sisters. Jesus experienced every aspect of human relationships, and although he never married, his church is his bride and the way Jesus loves his church is how a husband is intended by God to love his wife.

2. God has Many Children

No longer is Jesus the only Son, because he has now become the first of many brothers and sisters. God his Father has become 'Our Father'. This happens to us when each one of us is '*fathered from above*'. We are probably more familiar with this as being 'born again', but that is not a particularly accurate translation. It is not about birth but conception. The Holy Spirit plants inside us God's own seed (*Greek - sperma*) by virtue of what Jesus did for us on the cross and in his resurrection. So now we are fully the children of God.

Also, we can too easily misunderstand what Paul means when he writes about us being 'adopted as sons'. If we think of adoption, as we know it in the UK, we can think of ourselves as the devil's spawn, mercifully adopted by God into his family, yet still retaining our evil parentage and nature. Being 'fathered from above' means that God has implanted in us his own seed. We all have God's spiritual DNA. We are no longer sinful beings that have merely been adopted into his family. Our very nature has been changed; the Spirit has given us new hearts and spirits that are perfect, just like Jesus is. We are fully his brothers and sisters, not adopted children of different parentage. When Paul speaks of adoption he is referring to our *status*, and not our *nature*.

In our culture, although a son or daughter calls their adoptive father, dad, someone else fathered them. In scripture the word adoption does not imply

this at all. In Gal 4 Paul describes how in a more affluent Greek household children were looked after by their mother and her slaves including a private tutor, and the child's status was little more than that of a slave. When a son came of age, around 12 or 13, he was considered old enough to take on adult responsibility. His father then took responsibility for his education, teaching him the family business giving him full status as his son. Some think that this is what Paul had in mind when he uses this word 'adoption' that literally means 'accepting as a son'. All God's children are 'accepted as sons', and have the status of a son, whether we are male and female, and we are taken on by God our Father and are all being trained for the family business. Remember how Jesus, when he came of age at 12, told Joseph and Mary, *'I must be about my Fathers' business.'* He didn't mean carpentry! Adoption in the Bible is about each believer being recognised as having all the privileges and the responsibilities of one of God's sons who has come of age, and is not about being adopted in the British sense.

3. Training & Discipline

Fatherhood is secondly about teaching, training and development. A father's task is to prepare his children for life. Mum has the main role of teaching her children when they are small, but God gives dads the overall responsibility for their training and discipline, particularly as they get older. The whole of the book of Proverbs is a father's teaching and wisdom being passed on to the next generation, and in scripture this is a major characteristic of fatherhood, as we see in Deuteronomy 4:9, 6:7 and other passages, e.g. Psalm 78:3-6.

Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Deu 4:9

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. Deu 6:6-7

What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us, we will not hide from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD, his power, and the wonders he has done. He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children, so that they

should set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments. Ps 78:3-7

What does this teaching and training involve? Fathers teach their children the ways of the Lord and show them how to live consistently in God's ways. Eph 6:4. *"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."* Dads need to be great examples, of godliness, knowledge of scripture and prayer. But many dads are not.

Today there are far too many absentee fathers, about a quarter of all children in the UK today live with a single mother, and that doesn't include those children who have had a succession of different 'fathers' who did not actually father them. Too many fathers show little interest in or love for their kids. Dad's work, sport or their own personal interests take priority over their kids; some dads abdicate, leaving all training and discipline to mum, while others discipline too strictly and are selfishly motivated, and some are controlling or abusive fathers. All of these scenarios make children insecure, fearful, angry and bitter inside. If this was the way your dad treated you, how might such experiences have affected you? It wounds the spirit and gives grounds to all sorts of bad stuff in our lives that only the Lord's healing can properly deal with.

Only God is the perfect father. His discipline is perfect. His perfect love is committed to seeing that we become the holy people he has created us to be; it drives out fear from us, it fills us with self-esteem, and total trust in him; his grace teaches us to say no to all ungodliness, accepts us unconditionally and lifts us up at every point of failure and even in our deliberate sin. Our Father knows how to give us good things, to provide for us, to bless us, to encourage us to affirm us, to correct us, to train us become everything that we know deep within us that we want to be - to be like Jesus, who is our elder brother. He is our example of perfect humanity, to be like him is to be like the Father.

By the Spirit's power we can be like him, we can be conformed to his image, we can follow his example, because the Spirit has put God's very own nature inside us and helps it to grown within us as we die to self and put to death the sinful desires and actions of the flesh. If we walk in the Spirit and live by the Spirit, Paul wrote, we will not fulfil the desires of the flesh, but instead will be like Jesus, filled with his love, his joy, his peace, his patience and kindness and goodness, his fidelity, his gentleness and self-control.

4. Conclusion

Some years ago when I first became an elder, I made comment to my friend who was the senior pastor of the church we were leading. He said that in one particular way 'I was determined not to be like my dad'. 'What has that got to do with anything?' he asked. 'What do you mean?' I replied. "We neither have to be like our parents or not like them; we have to be like God; He is our model," he told me. For me, that was a really important thing to understand. We may have had model parents. But if we merely do things like our parents did we will go well off track. Similarly if we recognise the failings of our parents and deliberately try not to be like our parents we will also seriously go off track. Instead we need to allow the Spirit to make us like our Heavenly Father. Then, if our father had godly traits, we will end up being like him in the ways he was like God, and if our fathers were pretty ungodly, we would not even think of behaving in the ways that our dads did.

This may seem strange to say, but we need to cut off the spiritual ties between ourselves and our parents in order that our relationship with God as our Father is not hindered. Our fathers may have taught us godly ways and if we walk in these ways we will not go wrong, but we do have to make a mental shift from seeing these as 'this is the way my dad did it' to 'this is God's way'. We have to train for our jobs, but so few ever do any training for fatherhood. If we live just 'by instinct' we will not do it God's way, we will end up living with an unholy mixture of good and bad attitudes and behaviours. Living God's way requires us to study and give attention to how we are, how we behave, how we live, what attitudes we have, how we react and submit all of this to the Lord and his word.

To be a godly dad or just a godly person requires:

1. Commitment to Christ as our Lord and Saviour, expressed in water baptism.
2. Commitment to live God's ways instead living for ourselves.
3. Maintaining a healthy ongoing relationship with our heavenly Father through prayer.
4. A teachable heart, that is concerned to learn how to be a godly person, which involves time reading scripture and helpful Christian literature, and time spent with an older Christian friend with whom we share honestly.
5. Being filled with the Spirit every day with God's power to live a godly life.
6. Healing and deliverance from all the bad stuff we inherited from our earthly parents and picked up in our early years.

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