

Sunday June 19th, 2022

Father's Day

Ephesians 6:1-4

“Dad; You're Pushing my Buttons!”

I think, like all of you, that the continuing report of shootings involving young men in North America is a sign that something deeply fundamental is wrong in our society. It is further disturbing that a group of young men recovering in hospital from gunshot wounds, would rather hide their attacker's identity, than help police apprehend the one who killed their friend. So, what do you think is going on in the neighbourhoods and homes of this city?

There may be many causes of this violence, but I think Bill Glass is right when he wrote in *Christianity Today* the following article about the state of youth in the US...

“What is our country's biggest problem? A lack of a father's blessing. The FBI studied the 17 kids who shot their classmates in towns like Paducah, Kentucky; Pearl, Mississippi; and Littleton, Colorado. All 17 shooters had one thing in common: they had a father problem.” Glass continues, *“I see it so much; it's just unbelievable. There is something about it when a man doesn't get along with his father.*

It makes him mean; it makes him dangerous; it makes him angry. On the day before Father's Day, I was in North Carolina in a juvenile prison. I ate lunch with three boys. I asked the first boy “Is your dad coming to see you tomorrow on Father's Day? He said, “No, he's not coming.” “Why not?” I asked. “He's in prison.” I asked the second boy the same question and got the same answer.

I asked the third one why his dad wasn't coming, and he said: “He got out of prison about nine months ago, and he's doing good, and I'm proud of my father. He's really going to be a good dad to me, and he's going to go straight. I could tell he was protesting so strongly because something was still wrong. So, I said, “How many times has he been here to see you since he got out nine months ago?”

He said, “He hasn't made it out yet.” “Why not?” “Well, he lives way, way away.” “Where does he live?” “He lives in Durham.” Durham was only two hours away. I had come 1500 miles to visit this boy. His dad couldn't come two hours.” Glass concludes, “There are a lot of fathers who are really deserters. When I'm in a prison, I always challenge inmates to bless their kids. If you want to keep your kids out of prison, bless them.” (Christianity Today, January 2006, page 48)

It might be presumptuous of me to suggest that all this violence is directly connected to a lack of fatherly presence, but I suspect it is a major contributing cause. There seems to me to be a great number of very angry young men in our society, who will use whatever methods they deem necessary to build significance into their lives, even if that means killing off a rival. Where are the fathers who bless these sons, and daughters?

I think it is imperative that I reveal something to you today that you may not be aware of.

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When Jesus came and shared the gospel, and later the apostles continued this ministry, what they were preaching was a fundamental shift in their society and in their culture.

Much of the instruction given by Jesus, the Apostle Paul, and other early leaders in the church; called believers to a lifestyle and relationship model that deviated dramatically from Judaism and Roman society. Nowhere is this more pronounced than in Paul's words that we read today regarding children. Notice, if you will, that Paul does something startling in addressing not the parents in verse one but whom?

He addresses the children, and this is significant, because as we know, this letter would have been read publicly to the congregation, and that begs the question of who was present in the fellowship; children. Children are in the midst of whatever the church was doing. This in itself may be radical, because children in Roman society, and Judaism, were often relegated to being outsiders looking in.

Remember Jesus welcoming the children the disciples tried to drive away. It was as if the disciples were saying, "Stay back children. This is adult stuff. Don't bother Jesus when he is speaking to adults." The presence of children reveals to us that the gospel was beginning to break down social barriers between people. In these early churches: men, women, children, rich, poor, slave and free: mixed freely or were at least beginning to.

This free interaction among groups, that in Roman society would have been separated, caused no end of strife in the emerging churches. If you read Paul's letters carefully, it is clear that a great majority of his instruction is directed at the Christian culture clashing with the Roman or Jewish culture. Questions over issues like circumcision, eating food given to idols, treatment of slavery, and for today's consideration, family relationships.

In the early church, which had no written gospels, much of its written instruction came from where? The Old Testament, and as time went on, Paul's letters as well as others were used for instruction. The learning of the Ten Commandments was a fundamental task of all believers, and so in the instruction of children the command, "Honour your father and mother" was stressed.

There was a problem however, as Paul reveals, in just what does it mean to honour one's parents. It is a problem we have even today in trying to understand just what honour or the Hebrew word "*tima*" means. What do you think it means? I think if I surveyed those gathered here, the most common response would be that "honour" means "to obey". So, to rephrase the commandment we might say, "Obey your father and mother."

Such a definition has led to some interesting developments in family dynamics. If, as a Christian you believe your children should obey you to fulfill a commandment, you have some preconceived expectations. As a parent, if I say to my child, "do the dishes", then I expect such a command to be honoured. If the child refuses, we can get angry at such defiance, and might even quote the commandment to get them to respond more favourably to our orders.

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The problem is however, that translating honour to mean “obey” is inaccurate and misleading. There is of course an element of obedience implied here, but the Hebrew word “tima” or honour, means so much more.

The word “honour” here means more accurately respect and esteem. Our friends from other cultures, primarily from the east, will understand this without any difficulty. Honouring one's parents or elders is a natural part of social custom, where failure to honour, brings disgrace to the individual, or to one's family. Lenski writes that honour means “The form of love one assumes toward those who are placed above us by God.”

So, when we obey our parents, what we really are doing is showing our love to the ones God placed over us in authority. However, this does not give parents a license to abuse their authority. In Paul's day, children were often treated like chattel. They were commodities to be used, and sometimes abused, for the gain of the parents. In Roman society, a father was the supreme authority, and was never to be questioned.

Paul doesn't question the structure, but he questions the motives and attitudes of fathers. In Roman society a child's opinion or feelings were irrelevant, but Paul speaks to this by saying a father must now consider the feelings of his children. This is radical stuff. If you want your children to respect, esteem, and even love you; then you better try and make it easy for them to do so.

In Paul's writings, and in Jesus' example and words, when you are the stronger one in the relationship, you have certain obligations to the weaker person. In Matthew 25, Jesus even links judgment to our care of “the least of these”. Elsewhere he warns of not abusing “little ones”, especially causing them to sin. Specifically, Paul warns fathers to not goad, exasperate, or make your children angry by making unreasonable demands.

The point Paul is trying to make is, that if a father was to over correct, or constantly make unreasonable demands of his children, they may despair or loose heart. For an example of this, all we need do is examine the life of one of the biggest names in manufacturing history; Henry Ford. Ford's introduction of the model T automobile shaped not only the economy but the values of the 20th century in America.

In a 2005 biography of Ford by Marjorie Kehe, we can read how a “gifted man was undone by his own success.” She writes,
Ford loved the ordinary folk and they loved him back. By 1920, half of all cars on US roads were Fords. But it wasn't just cars that Ford was selling. He preached a new gospel to a public raised on Puritan ideals of delayed gratification and self-control. Ford believed that money was for spending, and that workers should use their incomes to buy products to improve their lives-products like his Model T.

Seen as a hero for making it possible for the average family to own a car, Ford's opinion was sought out for every area of life: from world peace, to marriage and child care. Kehe continues in her biography of Ford with these words,

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The adulation of others ultimately convinced Ford that he was infallible and led him to ruinously bad decisions. It blinded him to his own hypocrisy as he preached family values and old-fashioned virtue and yet kept a mistress. It may also have driven him to destroy his only child...

The older Ford-offended by his son's gentle style and superior education-ruthlessly undercut him at every turn, only to mourn grievously when his son Edsel died young. Ford's last days were sorrowful. On a visit to the house where he had lived as a newlywed, he told his chauffeur, "I've got a lot of money, and I'd give every penny of it right now just to be here with Mrs. Ford." ("The Giant Who Shrank Before our Eyes", The Christian Science Monitor, 8-16-05)

I am convinced that we are in grave danger as a society of raising a whole generation who are exasperated by fathers. A generation of young men and women who are driven to despair by fathers who respond to the children entrusted to them in one of two ways. They either drive them to despair by placing unrealistic expectations on them to achieve goals that are simply not attainable, or they are simply absent either physically or emotionally.

Is it any wonder that there are a growing number of people in this society that find Father's Day one of the most difficult days of the year? Not only do we have people who don't know who their father is, but even if they know their dads, they cannot relate in a healthy way to them. I have heard grown men and women talk about how their own fathers drove them emotionally away, because they could never be good enough to meet their father's expectations.

I have tried to comfort adults who to this day, many years later, cannot think of their fathers without experiencing gut wrenching pain, and tremendous bouts of sorrow. Not because their father has died, but because of how their fathers treated them. Dig a little deeper into these troubled souls, and you discover that loving their fathers is not the issue, since even the most abused kids still claim to love their parents.

The problem is that they are so emotionally scared that they cannot move into the future without first reconciling the past. The sad part is that even with extensive therapy some never learn to cope with their personal pain. In his book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, author Mitch Albom tells the story of Eddie, a maintenance worker at a seaside carnival.

After Eddie's death, he journeys through heaven, and as he sees his father, the memories of a painful relationship came flooding back. Albom describes the effects of fathers on their sons.

All parents damage their children. It cannot be helped. Youth, like pristine glass, absorb the prints of its handlers. Some parents smudge, others crack, a few shatter childhoods completely into jagged little pieces, beyond repair. The hands-on Eddie's childhood glass then was hard and calloused and red with anger, and he went through his younger years whacked, lashed, and beaten.

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This was the second damage done, the one after neglect. The damage of violence. It got so that Eddie could tell by the thump of the footsteps coming down the hall how hard he was going to get it. Through it all, despite it all, Eddie privately adored his old man, because sons will adore their fathers through even the worst behaviour.

It is how they learn devotion. Before he can devote himself to God or a woman, a boy will devote himself to his father, even foolishly, even beyond explanation. (Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*-Hyperion Press 2003) As fathers, mothers, grandparents and as a church; we have an enormous responsibility to our children and I mean all the children entrusted to this community called Norfolk County.

Our calling includes the gospel's command to care for those who are younger, smaller, and more vulnerable and whose feelings are easily damaged. This is especially true of our children. Can we not commit ourselves this day to stop exasperating our children by driving them to despair over our unreasonable demands? Can we not also stop exasperating our children by being absent both physically and emotionally?

It is time for us as Christ's followers to step up to the plate, because the world isn't going to. No child is expendable in God's Kingdom, nor should they ever be expendable in our hearts. May this Father's Day be a new beginning for young men and women, so that the biggest issue they ever have to face on Father's Day is what ties or chocolates to buy?