

THE FATHERS ARE BACK

It's Father's Day. Let's start out with the big picture. We are each born into this world. Somewhere between eleven and fourteen years of age, most of us realize that we are individuals with a will of our own – in biblical language, we have eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil – and we know we have free choice, though we do not know how much or in what circumstances we want to use it. We then have one lifetime to figure out how to use our free will, how independent we want to be, and whether or not we want to turn our lives back over to our Creator. From then on, turning our lives back over to our Creator only counts if we *want to* – not if we are just afraid or think we *have to*.

Meanwhile, we run smack-dab into all the curses that come with this independence and individuality – not only on our part, but on the part of all those around us. Some people love you one day and hate you the next; some people do good to you one day and hurt you the next. Groups of people gather in families, organizations, and nations and try to make rules to cut down the mayhem that comes with the anarchy of individual free will. They put prices on breaking the rules, to encourage some kind of order and consistency. But the trouble with free will is that it can always *choose* to break the rules. So we get “the curses” of “The Fall”: SIN (alienation) between humans and God; between humans and each other; between men and women; between humans and nature; even between all the institutions, organizations, and nations that humans build to make life better for each other. It is all spelled out in the early chapters of Genesis, and it has all been playing out ever since.

Jesus came to reverse the curses: To invite us back into relationship and harmony with God. To build a bond of love between us and God – and between us and Himself – that would spill over into a bond of love between us and each other. Wherever the Spirit of Christ is present, these love-bonds form. But it is still tricky in a broken world, because the Spirit of Christ increases animosity between those who are returning to a trust and love for God and those who are still keeping hold of their own lives in their own way.

It is dangerous, but I recommend it anyway: If you see people or principles that support and build up love-bonds between Christ and His people, the Spirit is probably in it. If not, the Spirit is probably not in it. “*By their fruits ye shall know them.*” (Matthew 7:16-20)

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The whole story of Jesus – preaching, healing, the Cross and Resurrection, all of it – is seen in context when we see Him as the Reconciler: the One who comes to reverse the curses, to heal the breach between us and God, to take us from The Fall back into the Kingdom. Hence Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son on God’s altar – and God outlaws child sacrifice forever. But God prepares to sacrifice *his* Son on Man’s altar – and we are still too blind and lost to return the favor. The parallels are endless. At the Tower of Babel, the languages are confused and nobody can understand his fellows – and the work is a shambles. At Pentecost, the Spirit descends, and every person hears and understands in his own language – and they pool all their resources and hold all things in common.

Jesus was reversing the curses: Bringing health where there was sickness. Returning a son to his mother. Teaching people to share food. Forgiving, and showing a way to forgiveness. Reclaiming the Sabbath as a blessing instead of an ordeal. Inviting us all to a love-feast and back into the Kingdom of God. We do not always follow well, but we can feel the power of it. And we can feel the power of animosity and hatred from those who were entrenched in the way of the curses and alienation. “This is not the way it works,” they said. “We have to be practical and realistic,” they said. And who can blame them? They had worked hard to figure out how the world runs, and Jesus was trying to change all the rules on them.

Now, all these years later, we see how hard it is to change the rules. Partly it is because The Fall is necessary to our training for the world to come – necessary to our growth and conversion. And each new generation comes through this training ground all over again. Circumstances change, but the basic principles remain the same. Some of us catch on sooner, some later, some not at all. Most of us catch on in some ways, in some areas of our lives, but we struggle hard to apply our faith to the rest.

So what has this got to do with Father’s Day? What has this to do with building a Godly home? Or with loving your wife and children, or keeping them safe, or providing for them? Just about everything. First of all, if you trust the Bible at all, you know it is not going to be easy. Everybody knows that, or thinks they know that, going in. But you are biblical men, and you better know it a lot deeper than most. To carve out a loving home, a safe place, a caring place, a nurturing place in a world embroiled in the curses of The Fall is not going to be easy. If it were easy, you probably would not have wanted to try it in

the first place. And if it were easy, all those homes “out there” would be filled with light and peace, and it would not be a broken realm.

So we should believe Genesis: stay alert; do not get careless; learn to relax without letting down your guard. That is pretty obvious for men of honor if we are talking about the outside – making a living, taking care of houses, cars, and insurance, and all the rest. And this is all very important no matter what anybody tells you. This you *must* do. This is your obligation. If nobody else thanks you for it, God will thank you for it. Especially if you are doing it in awareness of his authority and his caring for you and your family.

But the inside is sometimes more difficult for us men. I mean, if you are taking care of the outside, will there not automatically be peace and harmony and appreciation on the inside? And haven't you earned a few pleasures, hobbies, and quirks – without question or resentment? Of course! And so, who do you think repealed The Fall? There will be automatic harmony? There will be no communications problems? You will always have the same goals in mind and agree on the methods for reaching them? The children will always be well-behaved – and never eat from the fruit of the Tree of Free Will themselves?

If you do not lead your whole family toward Christ, what chance do you have of building a Christian home? Only, you cannot do it by coercion, because that is not His WAY. Oh yes, this is going to be tougher than we thought. And far more beautiful and meaningful and wonderful. So stay alert. Do not get careless. Learn to relax without letting down your guard. Never be surprised at the evidence of the curses, and always try to be conscious and aware enough of Christ's presence with you that you can keep helping Him to reverse the curses. “It is necessary for us as Christians to pray every day” And if you are a father/husband, once a day will not come close to cutting it.

A few year ago, on another Father's Day, I asked the question: Where have all the fathers gone? I suggested that if you look around, you can spot some great ones, but that in our society overall, it seems like they have mostly disappeared. A lot of men commit very slowly to any relationship that might demand any long-range loyalty or love on their part. A lot of men get into marriages yet spend little time or energy building or nurturing the home or family, leaving that mostly to their wives. Of course, some wives do not leave them much room or authority in such matters, consciously or unconsciously guarding that

territory for themselves. A lot of men are leaving marriages, or are being driven from them. We have no way to assess most of it even when it happens to people we are acquainted with. (Not that this keeps us from our opinions.) In any case, divorce seems ever a blight and an epidemic in the land. And there is no way to fully appreciate the damage of broken relationships on individuals, children, friends – and ultimately the whole society.

And then there are quite a few “successful” marriages in which a man, having found a woman he loves and respects, simply lives out his role as husband and father according to what he thinks the woman wants from him. I should not be too quick to “knock” this arrangement. Clearly it has much to recommend it, and some very good things can come from it, including wonderful children, stability, and a certain amount of peace and tranquility in the home. However, there are still some problems to this pattern. It leaves the woman carrying all the responsibility, and often feeling like she has no true man by her side. It leaves the man with less and less zeal and energy to contribute, since he is not truly invested but is only taking orders from the woman. And I have never talked to grown children coming out of this pattern who did not have much appreciation for their parents, yet also a sadness that their father had not been stronger – not really part of it – and that somehow they never got to know who he really was.

A strong family, in my view, does not just have a mother and a male aide, or a father and a female servant. Mother and father both have essential, crucial roles. Both know it, and they defer to each other’s authority. And from time to time they adjust the roles to match better and cooperate better, but they try not to interfere too much in each other’s responsibilities. (Questions and communications clearance are not interference, by the way.) They do not decide everything together or do everything together – though of course there are certain items they choose to do together on purpose. But two people doing the same task and taking care of the same responsibilities that either one can handle alone takes far too much time and energy away from play time and outings and church and friends and the enjoyment of children.

So the fathers need to come back: fathers who know they are fathers, who want to be fathers, and who have a strong sense of their worth and role as fathers – men who have chosen to be family men on purpose, and who will not abandon their families short of death, a court order they cannot stop, or a woman who absolutely does not want to be wife to them any longer.

What is the pattern or model for such a father? Where would one come from? How would I know? I was not a good father in many ways. Sometimes the little buggers just grow up no matter what you do to stop them. And you are sad for your mistakes and the impact they have, but everybody who comes here has parents who make some. And while some mistakes are far worse than others, some of our best people come out of harsh and blighted homes. And some of our worst people come out of the best ones. Besides, some of our evaluations here are not the final word. There are realms to come. It ain't over til it's over – and we never get to see that part of *anything*, though sometimes we forget and pretend we do.

In any case, the first thing a true father needs to know is his own true Father. I suspect we should never mention fatherhood or Father's Day in the church without at least mentioning the great transference, which is supposed to be one of the binding experiences that every Christian shares with every other Christian. It does not matter whether your own father was incredible or terrible or mediocre; for all of us, the day must come when we transfer the vast bulk of our parental needs, and all that goes with that, from earthly parents to God. The relationship between children and parents may remain, or even become wonderful after that happens, but it does not change the mandate. Somewhere between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, a human parent, no matter how gifted and wise, becomes inadequate for all the guidance, support, needs, discipline, love, and correction that a growing human soul requires. If the major support system does not shift from earth to Heaven – and from human parent to God – then the development becomes increasingly stifled and warped. So the first thing a true father needs to know is his own true Father.

To know and spend time comprehending what you learned and received from your earthly father is also a very good idea. Anything you do not consciously evaluate is very likely to be repeated in your own fathering. Some of that may be wonderful, and some of it may not. But if you are a man and you intend to become the protector/provider and *head of the house*, the most important thing to know is that your fatherhood comes from God. You do it for God, your authority comes from God, you stay with it because of God – and your wife and children all belong to God. Without that awareness and conviction in place – and at the top – it is very unlikely that any man will stay clear or effective in all the mayhem and confusion of real life, with its swirling moods, hurt feelings, and conflicting demands, and all the crossfire (however pleasant at times) of work, friends, wife, children, and personal goals and desires.

Having mentioned the horrible phrase “head of the house,” I need to clear for visitors what we mean here by “head.” Jesus is head of the church; a man is head of his house, if he is a true man and husband. There are two words in Greek for “head”: *arche* and *kafale*. *Arche* (like archbishop, or patriarch) is the ruler, the one in charge, the one in authority whom you must obey. Often we think of “dictator” – the one who is lord over us and who lords it over us. *Kafale* is also “head” but with a very different flavor: it is the one who takes the lead, who breaks trail so it is easier for those coming after. *Kafale* labors tirelessly for you but does not lord it over you. *Kafale* has authority, but it is not used to control you; it is used to try to keep you safe or sheltered or protected, or to point the way.

In the entire New Testament, Jesus is never spoken of as *arche* – only as *kafale*. Jesus is *kafale* of the church. You only have to think for a few seconds to realize that Jesus never straight-arms, never coerces – He always takes the lead, but you decide whether or not to follow. Sometimes church officials *do* take on the *arche* role, but Jesus never does. Jesus is a trailblazer, and He certainly is always first in line for the pain and flak and trouble, in the hope of sparing us some of it. But our Lord never “lords it over us.”

A father is head of his house – but always as *kafale*. That is also the New Testament teaching. No true father asks about this or tries to get permission from anyone to be this or to do this. *Kafale* is what you do and who you are *because God asks you* to love this woman and take care of these children. It has nothing to do with how much you are pleased at the moment; it has nothing to do with whether anybody else likes it or dislikes it, including the wife and the children. This is who you are. This is who you are *under God*. So you may not always do it right and you may not always do it successfully, but this is what you do: provide, nurture, love, protect, care for your family – because God asks you to. And you do it whatever it costs you. And you do it until you die. And if nobody else ever thanks you, God will. And not that it matters, but I will. And I do. Thank you, and Happy Father’s Day.

If you are father, you are also priest of your home. I certainly do not mean that nobody else is allowed to help or that they don’t sometimes do it better than you do. But it is *your* responsibility to see to it that God is honored in your home. Grace at meals. Times of prayer. Times when you remind your children, and even your wife, how much God loves them and cares for them, or sometimes that

they are forgiven. You must make sure that there are special family celebrations and that these celebrations match the flavor and meaning you believe in. You may have to redesign some family traditions a bit, and maybe design a few of your own, just for fun. There should never be a birthday party in your home that does not lift up the wonder of the gifts and destiny and identity of the child of God whose birthday is being celebrated.

Your wife should never have to fight to get these celebrations to happen – that is a job for *kafale*. Then she can spend her energy enhancing it and making it beautiful and meaningful and special and many-dimensional.

Of course, it all takes time, thoughtfulness, and prayer to keep alert and to keep designing such things. And the primary responsibility – to protect and defend, and the work that takes, as well as keeping things organized and in good repair – takes enormous time and energy. So a father struggles to prioritize and make some kind of sense out of an always-too-busy life. If you spend ninety-five percent of your time on work, recreation, and friends, you know you are no father, whatever your desires and intentions. If you spend fifty percent of your time on your family, you also are no father. You are in your wife's way – not letting her run the house, nurture the family, and hone the relationships – and you are neglecting your vocatio.

But somewhere in between, you must figure out the pattern you want and then not allow life to steal it away from you. It certainly will if you let it. And *none* of it should happen because your wife complains or your children sulk. It must be because this is the role and the task you have chosen under God – the way you honor and show gratitude for the Fatherhood of God, and the way you yourself are son to your true Father.

Now, many of you have wonderful wives, and you can never live up to their patterns and faithfulness. But you are not supposed to. You are supposed to be paying attention to your own. Nevertheless, if that is your situation, it is wonderful – unless you get lazy with your own role. Yet some of you have partners who disappoint you or who disappoint you in some areas. You find it difficult to go on trying as hard, and you tell yourself that it would be fun and easy if you had a true mate by your side.

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If you are a father, never ever try to fix a mother. All you will do is make her anxious – steal her confidence, make her resentful, make her feel unappreciated – all of which saps energy, thereby making everything worse and worse. The more you see her failings, the more you should concentrate on your own role – including nurturing and caring for her. You cannot walk both sides of the street no matter how you try, so keep focused on your own side. Get caught being faithful! Let the Lord work it out.

With rare exceptions, a woman wants to be a good wife and mother even more than you want her to be. With a little space and support and love, she will fix herself – and with God’s help, far better than you could ever fix her. And then you get to go on loving and appreciating and cherishing her more and more, which is all you have time for anyway. If you want to be a psychiatrist, do it right: switch vocatio; don’t just dabble. By the way, how many psychiatrists do you know who have great family lives? (There are a few.)

What if she never responds – never tries to come into her own or be a true mate by your side? Again, get caught being faithful. Let the Lord work it out. In time, even this will come to light in a way that presents a different solution. And if you keep your prayer time, the door to that solution will open in a way you will not mistake. Keep focused on your own part, or you will soon have no idea who you are, what you are doing, who you love, or what your real role is.

Many of you know all this, and know it far deeper than one little Sunday sermon can reveal. But some of you do *not* know it, or you have not heard much about it, or you don’t ever get to a men’s retreat. So I thought I would just put a little of it out there as a teaser.

In any case, the fathers are coming back. I know quite a few of them now. I do not know if they are coming back across the land – I surely hope so. But they are coming back in the fellowship of this church. And I do not know any women who are complaining about it. That must mean we are getting clearer about the difference between *arche* and *kafale*. Nobody ever imagined that men could do it without the women, and in the last twenty years, we have started to realize that the women cannot do it without the men. Anyway, and once again: Happy Father’s Day. I am so glad the men are coming back. And I am particularly grateful that some of them are coming back to this church.