

St. Paul on Fatherhood

One of the unfortunate characteristics of modern society is a crisis of fatherhood. It is evident in the men who abandon their children. It is also witnessed in those dads who fail to properly discipline their children and form them as the spiritual leader in their family. This modern tragedy prompts this essay, which explores St. Paul's teaching on fatherhood.

St. Paul wrote at a time when it was taken for granted that fathers disciplined their children. It was understood that the father's role was to prepare his children, especially his sons, so they would become productive and responsible adults. Therefore learning respect for and obedience to their parents together with applying themselves to acquiring learning and skills was vital in the formation of children. The father's role was so important that the same word was used for "child" and "servant" during the formative years.

The contemporary problem is often exemplified in the absence of paternal discipline, but in the first century the discipline of children could be too severe. This prompted St. Paul to caution fathers to avoid harshness:

"Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

This lesson is repeated in his letter to the Colossians:

"Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged" (Col 3:21).

When discipline is harsh, children become discouraged because they feel like failures.

Before St. Paul gave this pointed instruction to fathers, he introduced his lesson with a very important admonition:

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:12-14).

Here we discover key values that undergird these citations from Ephesians and Colossians? First St. Paul directs our attention to the goal – the object of the exercise. Therefore, he places the emphasis on the father's important role in the spiritual formation of his children: "bring them up in the discipline and instruction **of the Lord.**" He does not urge fathers to educate their children in prestigious universities, to make sure they become wealthy, or focus on forming them into great athletes. It's not that these achievements have no value. Rather their value has meaning only to the degree that they lead children to spend an eternity of happiness in heaven. What good are worldly accomplishments if our children spend their eternity in Hell? Jesus is clear on this point

"For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life" (Mk 8:36)?

Misdirected values are often a problem in our Catholic schools where moms and dads are the chief culprits. Parents are frequently much more focused on the academic attainment, social relationships, and athletic achievement of their children than they are with their spiritual formation. Indeed, the child's formation in their Catholic faith is often a second thought, if that. Religion teachers who demand that their students actually study and learn something are pressured to ease off so the students can focus on the important secular subjects. After all, knowing and living one's faith does not appear on ACT and SAT scores. However, it definitely figures prominently in God's accounting.

Secondly, St. Paul shifts our focus to the means a father must use to discipline his children. It is interesting that he does not address techniques of discipline, but rifles in on the changes fathers need to make in themselves: holiness, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and love. The apostle understands that no father can communicate to his children qualities that he lacks. No one can give what he does not possess. This is the challenge that strikes at the heart of effective fatherhood. It's the challenge of witnessing authentic Christianity to our children.

St. Paul also addresses fatherhood when he writes about the needed qualities of bishops. In the Bible priesthood and fatherhood are used as synonyms. This lends a biblical support for the Church's rejection of women priests. Examples abound. In Judges 17:10 Micah asks a Levite: "Stay with me, and be to me a father and a priest."

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

"For though you might have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers. Indeed, in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel" (1 Cor 4:15).

These passages highlight the spiritual dimension of fatherhood, which is more vital than biology.

Let's examine the qualities of good fathers that St. Paul teaches are also important for bishops

"A bishop must be *above reproach* [a man of integrity], the *husband of one wife* [monogamous], *temperate* [self-controlled], *sensible* [a man of common sense], *dignified* [a man who acts with nobility], *hospitable* [gracious and friendly], an *apt teacher* [gives sound instruction], *no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money*" (1 Tim 3:2-3).

"For a bishop, as God's steward, must be *blameless*; he must *not be arrogant or quick tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled*; he must *hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it*" (Titus 1:7-9).

St. Paul's instruction is a daunting challenge for every father. How many of us are able to "give instruction in sound doctrine" to our children, or "confute those who contradict it?" How many of us are "a lover of goodness, master of himself, upright, holy, and self-controlled?" None of

us has the innate capacity to be a faithful father, but St. Paul also instructs us how to acquire that capacity:

“I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:14).

Many years ago a young Indiana high school basketball coach experienced the joy of his first son’s birth. A friend sent him a poem that captured the awesome responsibility of fatherhood. The ideas in that poem were guiding principles in that coach’s life. His name is John Wooden.

A Little Fellow Follows Me

A careful man I want to be,
A little fellow follows me.
I do not dare to go astray,
For fear he’ll go the self-same way.

I cannot once escape his eyes,
What’er he sees me do, he tries.
Like me he says he’s going to be,
The little chap who follows me.

He thinks that I am good and fine,
Believes in every word of mine.
The base in me he must not see,
The little chap who follows me.

I must remember as I go,
Through summer’s sun and winter’s snow.
I am building for the years to be
That little chap who follows me.

Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>

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