

The Father as Prophet



Fatherhood (Part 3)
by Derek Prince

It's good to be with you again. The theme on which I'm sharing this week is "Fatherhood."

I mentioned earlier in the week that through my first marriage I became father to nine children and then, more recently, my second wife has added three more children to our total family. So all together I stand in the relationship of father to exactly one dozen persons, most of whom by now are grown up and have families of their own.

Yesterday I explained that every father has three main ministries to his family, the ministries of priest, of prophet, and of king. I spoke about the responsibility that a father has as priest for his family, to represent his family to God.

Today I am going to speak about a father's second main responsibility as prophet for this family; that is, to represent God to his family. The first thing I need to say is that inevitably a father does represent God to his family. He may intend to do it. He may do it well. He may do it badly. But, almost inevitably, he does it.

Psychiatrists and sociologists and people like that and those in ministry would almost all agree that a child normally forms its first impression of God from its father. I believe this was intended by God. I believe one of the most solemn responsibilities that God can given any human being is to represent Himself to others. What kind of a father a person had, has a lot to do with that person's initial response and reaction to God. If a person had a father who was kind and outgoing and warm-hearted, easy to communicate with, that person will normally find it easy to think of God in those terms and to approach God in those terms. But if a person had a father who is unkind and critical and always making unreasonable and excessive demands, that person is liable to think of God as being that kind of God—always making demands which humanity can never live up to; unrealistic, legalistic and harsh.

Sometimes, alas, it happens that a child had a father who is actually cruel and vicious and very frequently such a child, without maybe consciously realizing what is happening, transfers those attributes from the natural human father to God. Consequently, he has a negative attitude to God which is not based on any reason except the behavior of the father.

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Now I want to speak about how to represent God to your family, how to be the prophet of your family for good and not for evil. In Ephesians 6:4, Paul is writing to fathers and he says:

> "And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." (NAS)

Again, in Colossians 3:21:

> "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, that they may not lose heart." (NAS)

The first thing we need to see is that the New Testament, just like the Old Testament, places the responsibility for the spiritual education and instruction of the children fairly and squarely upon the shoulders of the father. Obviously, mothers have a great influence over children and a lot to contribute to the spiritual development, but primarily it's the father who is responsible for providing spiritual instruction for his children. And if a father does not do it, there is no one else who can exactly take over that responsibility.

Today, I would say, possibly the majority of American fathers, if they're aware that they have any responsibility for the instruction of their children, are quite content to transfer it somewhere else—to the Sunday school, to the church, to the pastor, to the youth leader—and very often such a parent, if his child is in some kind of church or youth group and goes astray will blame the church or the youth group. I want to say that the father can never divest himself of the primary responsibility for raising his children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. It's one of his sacred responsibilities which is not transferable.

Paul indicates that in doing this, a father has to guard against two opposite dangers. The first danger is rebelliousness in the child and the father has to guard against that by maintaining firm discipline by not allowing children to become wayward, irresponsible, not allowing them to answer back, expecting them to do what they're told promptly, quietly, obediently. It's much easier to give instruction to children who are brought up that way.

However, the opposite extreme that a father also must guard against is discouragement. If a father is unduly severe and critical and demanding, the result may well be that the child becomes discouraged and takes the attitude, "Well, it's no good. Nothing I do ever pleases my father, so I might as well not bother to try." And the warning that Paul gives there is "Don't provoke them. Don't exasperate them."

I've dealt with many people who have severe emotional problems who came to me for help and I cannot tell you how many times I've discovered that that negative attitude, that lack of self-worth, that feeling of failure and frustration goes back to a time in that person's life when as a child it experienced a very negative treatment, criticism, being put down, being possibly scolded unfairly in front of others and that has left a mark, a wound in the soul of that child which hasn't healed maybe for twenty or thirty years. So I want to say fathers have got to be careful to maintain discipline on the one hand, but on the other hand, not to discourage, not to exasperate their children by unfair or excessive demands.

In order to achieve his responsibilities to his family, there's one thing a father has always to keep in mind and that is the need for regular ongoing communication with his children. If he does not maintain that kind of communication, then he cannot fulfill his responsibilities and the communication between a father and a child is usually most effective in a non-religious setting. If children associate the instruction their father gives them always with something rather stiff and formal and religious, they tend in the end to resent both the religion and the instruction and, again, I can think of a good many cases of people that I've dealt with whose problems went back to that kind of situation.

One thing that's essential in communicating with children is not merely to talk to them, but to let them talk. Most people that deal with wayward or delinquent children would agree that they nearly all have one complaint that's common to all of them: our parents never listen to us. So you have to cultivate the practice of listening. Let your child talk, let it express itself. Let it come out with its problem and don't do it in too religious an atmosphere.

This principle is stated already in the Law of Moses under the Old Covenant, where before Israel entered the Promised Land Moses gave them very clear and practical instruction in how to bring up their children. Turn now to Deuteronomy 11:18B21 and I will read what Moses said:

> "Therefore shall ye lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul... And ye shall teach them to your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thy liest down, and when thou risest up. Thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates: That your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which the Lord sware unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon

I was impressed once when I discovered that that phrase "heaven on earth" came from the Bible. Furthermore, that it was a description of what God expected the families of his people to be like, and I looked around our modern civilization and I said to myself, "How many families in this nation today could be described as 'heaven on earth'?" And I would say, frankly, it's a very small proportion.

One main reason for this is that fathers have failed to do what Moses said they should do. Moses said teach the Word of God, the truths of your faith, to your children. Speak about them when you sit down, when you rise up, when you walk by the way. In other words, let the Word of God be an essential theme of the whole family life. Don't simply reserve teaching from Scripture to church or Sunday school or even a youth group, but let God's Word have a natural place in your daily life and communication with your family. Let it be something natural, something practical. Let the children see how it works out in real life situations.

I'd like to just quote the testimony of the late Dr. B. Raymond Edmund, one-time president of Wheaton College, who said:

> "Looking back on the way I brought up my children, if I had to do it over, I'd spend more time with them in simple, non-religious activities."

And I would have to say "Amen." If I could live some of the time I've spent with my children again, that's what I'd do. Dr. Edmund found that the things the grown children remembered most were the informal times of just being together.

Real communication with a child is not achieved in five minutes. Often the most important things are said with a child at the time we would least expect it in a casual or off-hand way. For instance, on a fishing trip or when doing a garden chore or mowing the lawn, cleaning out the garage or finding out why the car won't run. It's situations like that that lend themselves to real communication between parents and children and it's in that kind of situation that a father should be able to transmit to his child the deep principles of the Word of God. Just having "a family altar" by itself will not necessarily do it. A lot depends on how the rest of the time is spent in the family.

Well, our time is up. I'll be back with you again tomorrow at this time. I'll be speaking on the third ministry of a father as king of his family.

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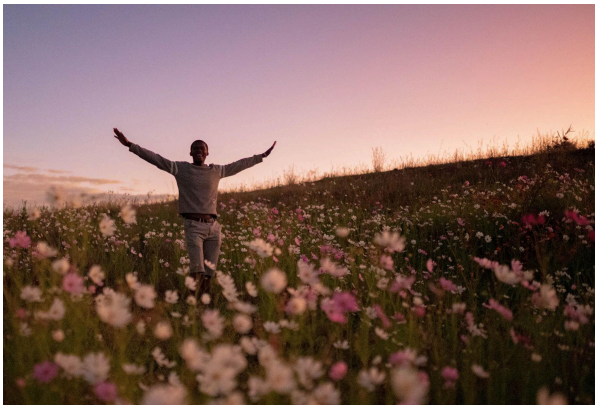

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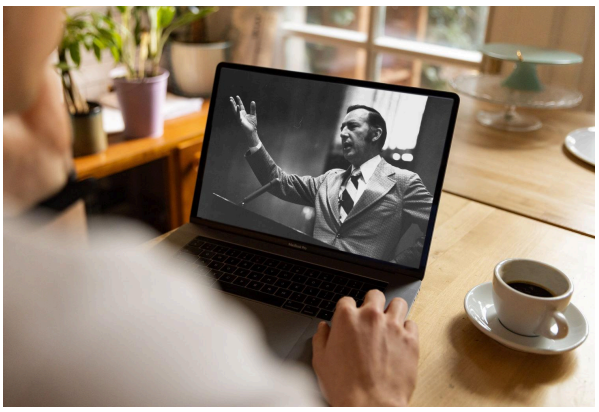

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