

Not Many Fathers

by Fred Tomlinson

This sermon emphasizes the crucial role of fathers in affirming their children's identities and the impact of fatherlessness, both physically and spiritually. It delves into the concept of fatherhood within the Christian church, highlighting the difference between being a father and being a dad, focusing on the unique relationship between spiritual fathers and their spiritual children. The speaker draws parallels from the Apostle Paul's relationship with those he called sons, emphasizing the importance of ministering life, not just information, and the distinctive characteristics of true spiritual fatherhood.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:15, Romans 8:14, Philemon 1:10, Galatians 4:19, Romans 16:7

Topics: "Fatherhood", "Spiritual Mentorship"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the crucial role of fathers in affirming their children's identities and the impact of fatherlessness, both physically and spiritually. It delves into the concept of fatherhood within the Christian church, highlighting the difference between being a father and being a dad, focusing on the unique relationship between spiritual fathers and their spiritual children. The speaker draws parallels from the Apostle Paul's relationship with those he called sons, emphasizing the importance of ministering life, not just information, and the distinctive characteristics of true spiritual fatherhood.

Transcript

Well, if you'd like to open your Bibles with me, or as the YouTube channel says, turn to the Scriptures with me, that would be to 1 Corinthians chapter 4. Before I look down there at the Scripture, I'd like to say a few things first of all. A father's role in the development of his children is crucial for many, many reasons. An area that can't be understated is his masculine part in the affirming of both his son's maleness and his daughter's femaleness.

This is one of a father's great privileges and responsibilities. In our Western culture today, we're in the midst of a pervasive and deadly plague. It's not an invisible virus, but rather it's a glaringly obvious curse, and it's a curse of fatherlessness.

Obviously, the word itself doesn't make any sense at all. Every single child has a father. And I'm talking about fathers who either are physically absent, some because they're passed on into eternity, I'm sure.

Those who are physically absent, or those who are abdicating their divinely designed role. The impact of fatherlessness upon children is most certainly enormous, and it often imposes lifelong consequences. This

is obviously a topic demanding more attention, but that is outside of my mandate today.

The theme that is on my heart in this session is not that of natural fatherhood, but of fatherhood within the context of the Christian church. There are some very obvious real differences, but there are, on the other hand, some clear parallels. To set the focus for my theme, let me state the obvious, and that is that there is a world of difference between a man fathering a child and being a dad to that child.

Not all fathers are true dads. Earlier in the week, I was just looking through some papers I have, and I came across something which just caught my attention. I already had some sense of direction.

No sooner do I finish one session than I'm thinking about the next one. I had a general idea of the direction I was planning to go, and I felt I should go on. Then I found this piece of paper, and I have it in front of me right now.

It was actually something that my wife, Sheila, wrote many years ago now. She is listening right now, but she has no idea that I have this note in front of me. I didn't mention it to her during the week, and I'd like to read it to you.

Richard Nixon, that's with a different spelling to another Nixon, N-I-C-K-S-O-N, Richard Nixon. She goes on to say, Words fail me to describe my outstanding and excellent father who so indelibly impacted my life. I was two years old when my mother died, which left my dad with three little girls.

At that time, various family members offered to take one or more of us to live with them, but my dad firmly refused, not wanting us to be separated. Such was his love for us. My personal memories are that he selflessly created an environment in which I was completely secure.

Never for a moment did I have cause to fear that he would leave me. He lived his life exclusively for us. He had no hobbies or interests of his own.

He was always there, always available. He fulfilled the role of both mother and father to me, and diligently attended to every aspect of my life, practically, emotionally, and spiritually. I was confident that he loved me, and always had my best interest at heart.

In his life, he faced very many difficulties, and often needed someone to talk to. In my later teens, it was often my privilege to be his confidant. I remember many times when he would come to my bedroom and sit on the side of my bed and talk about his problems.

In turn, I was always able to discuss any subject with him, and felt completely safe to do so. By nature, he was gentle, gracious, and a long-suffering man, who also possessed a good sense of humor, but above all, he was a godly man. His faith remained strong, and he remained true through many hard years.

Without question, he taught me the ways of God, not only by his words, but also by his life. To illustrate my adoration for him, I remember an occasion when I was in the yard when he slipped and fell. It may sound a little strange, but as I saw him fall, I was so upset.

It seemed as though God was falling. I was very privileged to have such a wonderful father, and I'm also grateful to the Lord for the unforgettable relationship I was able to share with him. Amen.

Now, that's a father who was also a dad. You'll discover as I proceed, this is not really the main subject that I want to move to, but I feel I must add something to this, and that is I am fully aware that there are

those listening to me, women who did not have the same experience. And the wonderful news, of course, is that there is a solution that can be found, and found only in a personal knowledge of and a personal experience of the Lord Jesus Christ coming to you and meeting your needs.

I said these things to emphasize just the uniqueness of true fatherhood. A man is a father even if he runs off and is absent, or neglects his responsibilities. But what a wonderful aspect, somehow that very simple, common, almost quaint little word, dad, conjures up for us.

That there's something, it's not something more than fatherhood, it's just something that lies right at the heart of it when it's true and right. I love the words, when Sheila said, I was confident that he loved me. For the rest of us, I hope it provides some inspiration and encouragement to recognize that the standard is high, and the expectations are very real, so far as children are concerned, although they don't understand the issues that I've just been referring to, but they certainly know the benefit of it when they feel the security and the warmth and care of true love.

That's really what we're talking about. Now let's just turn to that scripture. You know, the Apostle Paul, there's a little bit of dispute in ideas as to whether he ended up being a married man or not.

I'm not interested to go down that road. The scriptures themselves give us no record of such a relationship, and certainly no record of the fact that he had children. But what we do know, and we can't miss from even the most casual reading of his letters, is that there were those in his life that he called sons.

Let me talk a little bit more about that relationship. In 1 Corinthians chapter 5, the Apostle himself writes, and of course there's a context for this, which I'm not able to take time to read now. I encourage you to do that.

We catch him in verse 14 saying, I write not these things to shame you, but as my beloved sons I warn you. For though you have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet have you not many fathers. For in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers or imitators of me. Amen. In the context there, the Apostle Paul is actually defending his apostolic authority.

He has been the human instrument that God has used to bring this assembly here into existence. He has accomplished that, as he says himself in the 15th verse, through the gospel. The product of that experience of leading these people into a real experience of God in their own personal lives has clearly given to him a very unique relationship with them.

Leading someone to Christ, as we usually term it, it doesn't tie me to that particular person or give me some kind of privileged authority to say what I feel to say into their lives. But what it does do is it establishes a very privileged relationship that can't be denied. I can remember now many decades ago in Ontario being in a prayer meeting early one morning with a group of people.

We had some very memorable and wonderful very early morning prayer meetings in those days. I'm thinking of one man who travelled 20 miles from the city near the centre to be in that meeting. And when it finished he'd grab a piece of toast and a cup of tea and drive 20 miles back for a responsible job he had in the city of Toronto.

But such was the desire to be together. But it was in one of those meetings where I heard a young man praying. And I've never forgotten his words.

I can't remember any other words that were spoken in any of those meetings. I just know they were rich times. But I remember this particular brother and he prayed and he said this verbatim.

He said, Lord, never let me forget the experience of leading a soul to you. Those words have lodged in my memory. I've made reference to them on a number of occasions over the decades.

I've said how easily we miss out on that experience that he said, Lord, never let me forget it. There's so many who've never even experienced it, let alone to not forget it. But how easily we can replace that experience with just simply inviting someone to come to our church or to join our Zoom meeting or whatever.

But there is a unique relationship which is brought into place as we kneel with someone and pray with them as they open their hearts up to God and surrender themselves to him. And may that be our experience more and more in these days. In this 15th verse, Paul says, For though we have 10,000 instructors in Christ, yet you have not many fathers.

Let's just dig into that just a little bit here for a few minutes. Although you have 10,000 preachers and teachers, yet you have not many fathers. The Apostle establishes there in that statement, I don't know, a fascinating distinction.

The teacher contributes information. The father contributes life. In the natural realm, a true father will contribute life and information as he teaches the child that is born.

But we have the privilege in terms of our ministry not to impart life, I cannot do that, but to minister it. And there's a distinction that we need to recognise between the two. Years ago I learned something which I think was very vital.

And it was a distinction between two things. First of all, that you can preach what you do not know. Let me put it a different way.

I think this is a better way to say it. You can preach what you know, you can preach what you don't possess, but you can only minister what you are. Do you see the distinction? You can preach what you don't possess, you can preach it as so much information, but you can only truly, truly minister to others what you are yourself.

And spiritually, what you are is in fact what you possess. Paul the Apostle, he ministered from the life that he received. Many people, evidently, received that ministry with faith, and that produced in them a relationship where they became children of God.

They were born into the family of God. There are other references that we could take some time to look at. It's certainly alluded to in the 15th verse where he says, I have begotten you through the gospel.

He's telling us plainly that's how it all happened, it's through the gospel. He ministered the gospel which was real in him. He ministered from the life that God had imparted in him, this truth.

So it was living truth, living word, it was rhema, word of God. Faith comes, Paul tells us in Romans again, by hearing the word, hearing the rhema, word of God, it quickens faith. And the result is someone is

brought into a living relationship with God.

You could also read some interesting statements in Philemon 1.10 and Galatians 4.19, if we had more time we'd look at them. I can't do that in this session. The word father or fathers presupposes a male, and it presupposes, I think, a degree of maturity.

The word dad or dads, if you will, that presupposes, as I came through in what I read to you earlier, it presupposes affection, it presupposes care, it presupposes example, it presupposes teaching, certainly. Amen. And this now, if you're able to follow my direction, it touches on a huge deficit which exists, I believe, in leadership, or in the leadership role in the churches.

We have teachers galore, teachers with technical knowledge, intellectual knowledge of the Bible, and technical abilities to communicate the messages of Scripture. And, yes, at the same time, in so many cases, that certain thing, that, if you like, certain sound, that dad's supply is in short supply. And so when I read this, and Paul says, then we have 10,000 instructors in Christ, yet not many fathers, not many fathers, not many who fit into this, in the physical realm, it's a very practical role.

In the spiritual sense, it's kind of a mystical role, but that in no way reduces it to be less real. It's just on a different level, on a different plane, involves different features, and so on. And, you know, I think to talk further about this subject also, I mean, it's the kind of subject, topic, which would be great material for a leaders' gathering or a leaders' conference, to talk about this mystical element, which we know that only the Holy Spirit can fill, or the Holy Spirit can produce.

But having said that, so now we're sort of moved from natural fathers and how that is supposed to work according to God's design. We've talked a little about the fact that within the church leaderships, the leaderships of the various assemblies and churches, there are those who have all the right information and the right skills to teach that information, but question, do they have this mystical feature? And that then becomes another topic very worthy of a lot more consideration, and the challenge that it would naturally present to men in leadership. But now I want to pivot again from that, and at this point, if you like, reach the very core of the message that I feel God put on my heart, and I want you to think deeply about this.

At first it will sound paradoxical to you, while I fully understand that not every one of us have the same call on our lives. We don't share the same gifting that God imparts. This is certainly true, but let me put it this way.

Every characteristic of an authentic father, symbolically seen in the natural world, but very real in the spiritual dimension, every aspect, every characteristic, has an application to everyone, not merely to certain men, males in this room. This is a truth that has an application to every single one of you listening to me, and this is important to really grasp as I see it. The Apostle Paul, for example, will write to Timothy.

We've been dropping down into Timothy a few times recently, that is into the epistles that Paul wrote to Timothy. Timothy, it's speculated, was probably about 30 years of age at the time when Paul met him. Paul was, when he was writing, certainly in his last epistle, was probably around about 70 years of age.

But the fact is he's writing to this young man Timothy in the first and second epistles that he wrote to him, and Paul knows that the call of God is on this young man, and Paul is concerned to give Timothy encouragement and instruction and present to him some particular challenges in the course of writing. The

second epistle, of course, carries an extra element of challenge because of the finality that's involved in it. Paul knows that he's shortly going to be executed, and Timothy is going to lose the benefit of that man who has been such a tremendous example to him.

But the fact is Paul knew that this man, this young man, Timothy, will be a dad in this spiritual sense. In other words, he will be a man who will minister out of his own heart, out of his own union with the Spirit of God within him. He will minister both life and information.

It will be words, not just words as an end in themselves, but there'll be words quickened by the very Spirit through which and by which he is ministering and preaching. And by the same token, having talked about a young man who is not an old and mature male, I'm thinking about others, and there are plenty to draw on. I'm thinking about Priscilla, isn't it? Priscilla and Aquila, remember? Interesting how her name comes first.

You can form your own opinions about that. I'm thinking about Priscilla who was able with her husband to show Apollos the way of God more perfectly, and so much more. They became treasured friends and colleagues and partners with the Apostle Paul.

Or I'm thinking of Phoebe that we'll read about in the book of Romans. I'd love to go to these texts. Maybe I'm inspiring you to look at them.

Or again, he has a whole list there in chapter 16 of Romans, and in verse 7 he speaks of Adronicus and Junia and it's generally agreed that they are both female names. And it's in that 7th verse of chapter 16 where the Apostle Paul, having mentioned their names, he says that they were of note among the apostles. That's interesting, isn't it? The fact of the matter is that God is ministering by His Spirit through time, and now here with you and with me, seeking to bring us all, whether we're male or female, whether we're young in the things of God, or whether we've been on the road for a long time, the fact is that there are these unique characteristics and features of true and genuine fatherhood which are to find expression through our lives as we fellowship with other people and as we minister to other people.

Amen. And I suppose having said some of these things I could raise a question and say I wonder if you, whoever you are that I'm speaking to today, if you have truly met some authentic fathers, they won't all be male, they won't all be senior in age, but have you met these people? According to the Apostle Paul, he said that those in this particular category that he was referring to are few in number. We've got plenty of teachers, but so far as this category is concerned, there'll be few in number.

Which raises then a question, how then should we expect to recognise these people? I want to suggest to you that it may be difficult at first to recognise them, but I do know this, that many of them in this category will have commonly opted to break with many things which are considered the tradition for Christianity. Many will have opted to break free from the image of people involved ministerially and the lifestyle which is common. They will never be pretentious people.

None of them, young, old, red, yellow, black, white, male, female, whoever they are, they will never be pretentious people, these deaths. They're never trying to be something. They're never trying to convey an image of some kind of cleverness or superiority or I've got it all together or I'm so greatly qualified and so on.

They're just content. They're at rest. They're self-effacing people.

Glory to God. They retreat. They will always retreat from success or successes.

They will not be running after success. They're not chasing status. They're not chasing salaries for their great ministries or activities.

Paul says, my Bible is still open to 1 Corinthians 4, the chapter opens, Let a man account of us as the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. We could turn to other scriptures where Paul speaks about himself. He even refers to himself and his colleagues as the very outcasts of society.

I hope you're seeing what I'm trying to communicate. There's something different. There's something unique.

There's something that's almost mystical about the men and women of God who are pressing through into the fullness of the life that God has made available for them. They may not be immediately obvious when you meet them, but they'll quickly become obvious as you are involved with them. I think they're happy to be, as Paul puts it here in the first verse of 1 Corinthians 4, he said, we're ministers of God.

The better word is we're slaves. He doesn't even use the word, contrary to what so many people suggest. He doesn't mention the slave being a bond slave.

He's just a common slave. My whole life is just listening to my master, listening to the Spirit of God and obeying his word. I'm not looking to promote myself.

I'm not looking to be somebody. I'm not looking to create an image. I'm not looking to create some kind of organization where I'm the CEO and where I'll be noticed when I'm moving around town as a somebody.

Paul was never that kind of man, nor were his close colleagues. They were the off-scouring. They were nobodies.

Paul says on one occasion, you remember this, he says, though I be nothing. And he meant it. He wasn't trying to be humble.

It was who he really was inwardly. Amen. But you know, I can't go through the kind of list of things that I may be able to think about as being features or characteristics of this life that I'm thinking about right now.

But I can say this to you, that be they male or female, they will all universally have this one outstanding feature about them. And it will be this. You will detect quickly when you're in their presence the distinctive perfume of Jesus.

Amen. You know, as I speak to you, you may be young, you may be old, you may be male, you may be female, you may be red, you may be yellow, you may be black, you may be white. You may never have been to Bible seminary.

I certainly have not, and that is probably obvious. You may never even have led a soul to salvation in Christ. You may live in a mansion, you may live in a tent on the street.

But if you're filled with the Spirit of God, the very life of Jesus will be increasingly becoming manifest in your life as you walk in humility and in surrender before Him continually. You know, in closing this talk, I don't think I can do any better than to read something else to you. This time, they're my words.

I was very, very privileged to be asked to provide a tribute to a true dad. I'm trying to think how to describe him. A man who was a genuine spiritual father He never lived a married life.

He never had any children of his own, but he was a true spiritual father. He lived, as I say, a single life. He said to my wife and myself on one occasion that his dream had been that maybe he could have obviously been married and had two boys.

We had two boys, we have two boys and two girls and a lot of children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren now. At that point in our lives, we had the two boys and that would be the desire in my heart to have two boys like these boys you've got. We had the privilege of living in the same house as this brother for four years.

He was an elder in the church along with three other men before me and then I and another brother, younger men, were invited to join the leadership. And so I had the privilege of not only living in the house where he lived, it was a fellowship church house and there was a group of us living there, but this dear brother lived there as well. Let me read to you, a little bit long, I hope you'll appreciate what I'm saying, but this is what I said at the funeral as a tribute to this brother.

For those who are interested, his name was David Weatherly. So this is how it goes. David Weatherly experienced a disadvantaged introduction to life.

He was conceived out of wedlock. His mother, whom he loved and diligently cared for, attempted to abort him while he was still in her womb. He never knew his father.

He was raised in an orphanage, yet his funeral was attended by hundreds who gathered to bid him farewell. We knew many more hundreds around the world would have dearly loved to have attended. By the Lord's grace, he was a brand snatched from the burning.

The invitation to publicly reflect on the life of Dave Weatherly is, I said, a high honour, but it carries with it an almost impossible challenge. I feel myself a beggar as I attempt to describe a man whose identity dwarfs every adjective available to me. Dave was a man unlike any man I have ever known.

Concerning my spiritual life, he provided an essential key that allowed me to discover a deeper, richer experience of Christ in dwelling. He has been a constant inspiration and one of my dearest friends. From that memorable day in the summer of 1966 when I first met him, until the last occasion in his presence a few weeks ago, he never failed to excite and sharpen my love for the Lord Jesus.

I owe him a debt I can never calculate. One of my friends described the same sentiments this way, quote, when I first met Dave up close and in person, I was stretched and expanded beyond what I knew or thought I knew about love and acceptance. A trait of Dave was to use the word our, in that quaint English way, our John, our Pete, our Sheila.

But this endearing term, if it should be applied to anyone, surely it would be to Dave Weatherly because in the truest sense of the word he was our Dave. He belonged to us all, equally. Although he succeeded in making each of us feel as though we were his greatest friends, it would have been the height of folly to imagine we held a monopoly on his friendship.

He was our Dave and with his great heart he gave himself to us and loved us unconditionally, every last one of us. In virtually every area of his life he was the epitome of extravagance, ranging from his

expressions of affection and appreciation down to the style of his handwriting. Working with him in eldership and living in the same house for four years allowed me to observe this man at close range.

He was possessed with a fervent love for Jesus and was an enormous asset in every meeting graced with his presence. Could we ever forget his characteristic praying and prophesying? He was constantly vigilant to maintain a testimony of moral purity and never allowed himself to be found in a compromising situation. He chose to live a remarkably simple life and seemed drawn to the tiniest quarters available.

He had no time for small talk or anything that would waste his precious time. He would never be found speaking ill of any, no matter what the circumstances. He didn't represent a position or an opinion.

He was committed to unity and harmony. He succeeded in avoiding trouble and division. Somehow he was above those things and bigger than them.

Doubtless this fact is reflected in the large and diverse gathering today. I believe that to a man we would agree that Dave Weatherly was one of the biggest men any of us encountered in our journey of our lives. Like the Apostle Paul he was faithful to the faith, faithful to the fight and faithful to the finish.

An elderly man in a hospital bed drifting in and out of consciousness without a trace of murmur or complaint he never ceased to express the sweetness of Jesus. Little wonder that for many days his friends eagerly volunteered to sit with him, hold his precious hands and assure him he was not alone. But perhaps the greatest tribute to his unfading witness was paid by an unknown nurse who minutes after his departure laid a rose upon the body of that saintly man of God that said it all.

Amen. He was a true father in the things of God and in the sense in which I've been explaining it he was a true dad. May God inspire every one of our hearts.

There's more ground to be taken. There remains very much land to be possessed said one of old and we'll never possess that land while we remain stationary where we are at this particular point in time. Someone once said without sacrifice there is no progress.

Somewhere we've got to discover what it is to pay the price and go forward with God and it's never too late no matter how old you are or what your health condition is or whatever. The race is not over yet my brother and my sister. Keep running and keep running hard.

May we run together in lockstep and thank God for these great examples that he gives us along the way. We can find them in scripture and if we're very privileged we may find them in our daily lives today. Amen.

Amen. As I close let me encourage you to visit the mckenziefellowship.com that's our website and maybe you'd like to subscribe on our YouTube channel. It's just wonderful to have these opportunities to be together in this strange way but to be able to talk and share our hearts.

I've shared mine with you today. May God bless you. Amen.

Video: <https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/d66PV1V-uvQ.mp4>
Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/fred-tomlinson/not-many-fathers/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net