

(The New Covenant Servant) 6. Being a Father to Others

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the vital role of spiritual fathers in nurturing maturity and love within the church community, contrasting it with the often critical nature of teachers.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 4:14

Topics: "Spiritual Fatherhood", "Church Maturity"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the distinction between being a teacher and a father in the church, highlighting that while it is easy to produce spiritual children, nurturing them to maturity is a challenging task. He points out that many churches today are filled with overgrown spiritual babies due to leaders who act as teachers rather than fathers, focusing on criticism rather than encouragement. Poonen urges church leaders to adopt a fatherly spirit, which involves self-denial, unconditional love, and a desire for the spiritual growth of their congregation. He illustrates this with biblical examples, including the prodigal son and King David's relationship with Absalom, to show the heart of a true spiritual father. Ultimately, he calls for a transformation from a teacher's mindset to a father's heart in order to build a genuine family within the church.

Transcript

Paul said that even if there were countless teachers, there were not many fathers, in his time (1 Corinthians 4:15). This is true even today.

Every servant of God must strive to have the spirit of a father towards the brothers and sisters in the church.

It is easy to BECOME a father, but it is difficult to BE a father. A man can produce ten children without any difficulty. But to bring up those children to mature manhood is quite another matter.

It is the same in the church. To bring people to the new birth is relatively easy. But to present them perfect in Christ to the Father is far more difficult.

Our ambition should not be to have a large church but a pure one. It is no use having many people in our church, if they are not growing up to maturity and perfection.

What is the use boasting that we have many children if they are all retarded? If all our grown-up sons and daughters are still not toilet-trained but are still soiling their clothes, and haven't learnt to walk, and are still drinking milk from feeding bottles, that is not something to be proud of.

But many churches are full of such overgrown babies. They have been believers for over 20 years. But they still have dirty thoughts, they still cannot walk in victory, and they are still drinking milk (they only know about the forgiveness of sins). The reason for such retardation is that their leaders are teachers and not fathers.

Fathers and Teachers

Paul told the Corinthians, as a spiritual father, "I do not write these things to shame you" (1 Corinthians 4:14). Teachers seek to humiliate their failing students and put them to shame publicly. But fathers are different. They cover every sin that their stumbling children commit, and continuously encourage them to a higher life.

It is far easier to be a teacher in an assembly than a father, for it costs a great deal of self-denial to carry the burdens of others on our hearts. Teachers can never build a family. They can only build classes. And many churches are schools, and not homes. Only a father can build a home and a family.

If our church is not like a family, what is the reason? It must be that we are teachers and not fathers. Do we look at the brothers and sisters in the church as students who need to be taught? Then we have the wrong spirit. If we are fathers, we will look at them as those who have to be borne with, and supported in a loving, caring and understanding way. It is good for us to judge ourselves and see what we really are - fathers or teachers.

It is no use blaming the brothers and sisters in the church saying that they are all carnal. Let us judge ourselves first.

A true spiritual father will not seek his own gain in anything, but always the welfare and the good of his spiritual children. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:14, 15, "I will not be a burden to you. I do not seek what is yours but you. Children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls". Those are the words of a true father.

It cost Paul everything to be a father. He considered all that he had gained in life as rubbish compared to gaining Christ. He also considered it worth sacrificing everything in order to be a father to those whom he had brought to Christ.

A teacher works for pay. He does not seek the good of the students primarily, but his own gain. The gain we expect may not be money, but honour. Do we want to be respected and recognised as servants of God by others? Then we are seeking a salary - of honour - from them. Then we are teachers, not fathers.

Fathers expect nothing in return for all that they do for their children. Paul did not expect respect or even submission from others. He only sought their spiritual growth. What about us? Do we seek the good of the brothers and sisters in everything that we do?

The 'pastor-system' that we find in Christendom today was unheard of in the days of the apostles. It is this unScriptural system that has given rise to numerous teachers in Christendom - teachers who have to be paid a salary each month for the classes they take, and who make their students dependent on them for

every major decision in life - whether it be marriage or employment or whatever.

The brothers and sisters in such churches never grow up. They remain spiritual babes forever, because this human system robs them of a direct connection with Christ their Head - which is their birthright under the new covenant.

How does a father care for his children? In a poor home, the father and mother will not even eat, if there is not enough food for the children. They will gladly deny themselves, and they will not even let their children know that they have not eaten, lest the children feel bad about it. A father hides his self denial from his children. Do we have such a spirit - that denies itself for the good of the brothers and sisters, and will not even let them know about it.

Another characteristic of a father is that he is eager to see his children advance beyond him in life - in education and in every other way. There are many fathers who have never studied beyond high school, who sacrifice so much to give a college-education to their children. They are happy to deny themselves the comforts of life for this purpose and they are delighted when their children graduate. No father is ever jealous to see his son advance beyond his status or his educational level in life.

That is how a true servant of God will be too. He will be delighted when younger brothers are wholehearted and get revelation from the Scriptures and are used by the Lord to be a blessing to others. He will sincerely long that they should advance beyond him spiritually, and be more useful in the Lord's hands than he has ever been.

When we see younger brothers growing up in the church, without any folly being manifested in their lives, because of good leadership that protects them, we should rejoice that they can have such a blessing as we never had when we were young. There will not be even a shade of jealousy in us, if we are fathers. On the contrary, we will be delighted. We will rejoice that it is going well with them.

If we are jealous of a younger brother's ministry or influence or spiritual advancement, we are certainly teachers, and not fathers. In a school, if a student can solve a problem that his teacher cannot solve, the teacher will be so angry and jealous, that he will seek to humiliate that student ever after in some way or the other. How do we feel as servants of God when someone points out a mistake in us?

Teachers can only build Babylon. Only fathers can build the true church - the New Jerusalem. We may understand and proclaim all the truths of the new covenant, and yet if we do this with the spirit of a teacher we will still build Babylon.

A teacher is very conscious of all the labour that he has invested in his students. He thinks of the honour he will receive if his students do well. He is always thinking of what he will gain, even when his students do well. A father however is quite different. He desires only the welfare of his children. He desires nothing for himself.

A teacher will criticise his students. A father however will encourage his children. If we keep on criticizing the brothers and sisters, we will accomplish little, even if everything we say is true. A father will accomplish much more by encouraging his children.

Only a father can continue to be kind to ungrateful and evil children. A teacher will give up on ungrateful students very quickly.

When we have problems with difficult brothers in the assembly, if we hope that they will leave the assembly, even if they destroy themselves, then it should be clear to us that our spirit is that of a teacher. A father can never wish that for any of his children.

Jesus told us to be merciful even as our heavenly Father is merciful and kind to ungrateful and evil people (Luke 6:35, 36).

As we pursue righteousness, we can very easily degenerate into Pharisees and teachers, if we don't seek to be constantly and endlessly merciful.

A Father and an Older Brother

From the parable of the prodigal son, we can learn something of the depth of God's love for those who backslide from him and even exploit His goodness towards them. There we learn so much about the Divine nature - and that is the nature that we are to partake of.

We see in that parable a striking contrast between the attitude of that wayward boy's older brother and his father. That is the contrast between a teacher and a father too.

The older brother was an upright person. But he had no love or concern for his younger brother. He only found fault with him. That is how many Christian leaders are too. They are quick to lose their temper and to criticise and scold their brothers and sisters.

But look at the father in that story. What a different spirit he had. That is a picture of what God is like. And when we partake of God's nature, we too will become like that. The older brother remembers all the evil that his younger brother has done, and delights in exposing it all. The father however, doesn't even want to think of it.

To be converted from being an unbeliever to a believer is one thing. But if we are to be servants of the new covenant, we need a second conversion - from being "an older brother" to being "a father", from being "Pharisee-like" to being "Christ-like".

Is there a brother who has rebelled against your authority as a servant of God, and who has spoken a lot of evil against you, even though you have done him only good for many years? What is your attitude towards him now? Is it the attitude of a teacher or of a father?

We are not tested through the good and wholehearted brothers in the church as much as through the rebellious ones.

One or two rebellious brothers can show us our true spiritual condition more than a hundred spiritual brothers - because those difficult brothers have a way of bringing into the light, the lusts that are hidden in the nooks and corners of our flesh.

That is why we are exhorted "to give thanks for ALL men" - and not just for the wholehearted believers (1 Timothy 2:1). Everyone we come across helps towards our sanctification in some way or the other.

Here you are, living for years under the deception that you are a spiritual father. And then a difficult brother arises in your church. And in no time at all you discover, through your attitude towards him, that you are really a teacher and not a father!

That difficult brother enabled you to see your true condition in a way that all the wholehearted brothers in the church could not show you for so many years. Shouldn't you be thankful for such a brother who saved you from deceiving yourself forever?

When we find it difficult to bear with brothers who rub us the wrong way, it is good to recognise that we ourselves must have caused inconveniences and problems for others in the same way too, without our even being aware of it. They too must have found it difficult to bear with us!

None of us are perfect. We all have a flesh. And everyone who has a flesh has to bear with others who have a similar flesh. Others who are more mature than us can see un-Christlike areas in our behaviour, which we, in all sincerity, are unable to see ourselves.

You may imagine that even though you have a difficult wife, you are still bearing with her and loving her and having no complaints against her. You may even be secretly congratulating yourself on your "Christ-like" behaviour. But you may not realise that your wife probably feels the same way about you! She may be feeling that she has a difficult husband to live with and bear with!!

And so it is good for us to dwell in low thoughts about ourselves always. It is good to recognise that we have faults that we cannot see.

The prodigal son's behaviour brought out the goodness of his father's heart in a remarkable way. If he had always been a good boy at home, he would never have seen his father's tremendous goodness.

Whenever a similar problem crops up in our assembly (or in our home for that matter), with some brother (or family-member), we should think of it as an occasion when God wants to bring out His father-heart through us, towards that erring person - whether that person be a brother, or wife, or son, or daughter.

How disappointed God is in such situations, when we manifest the heart of a teacher instead.

Has someone taken your goods, and gone away, and ruined your name and the good name of your assembly by his conduct? What will you do, if he comes back repentant, one day? How are you going to receive him? Will you put him in the servant's quarters for a few months on probation, to find out if his repentance is genuine?

Or will you rejoice like the prodigal's father and run up to him and embrace him, and give him a warm welcome home? It all depends on what you are - a father or a teacher. A teacher may also receive a prodigal back, but it won't be with a warm heart!

There's joy in heaven over every soul who repents. If we cannot share in that joy, something is seriously wrong with us.

The older brother of the prodigal had the spirit of a teacher. He said to his father, "See how I've lived all these years. I've done nothing wrong. I've been wholehearted and zealous. I've been working for you faithfully. But see how this son of yours has behaved."

A teacher is always comparing his own goodness and faithfulness with the failures of the carnal ones in the church. He is occupied more with the shortcomings of his brothers than with the riches of God's grace. That was the primary characteristic of the Pharisees in Jesus' day. All those who have the spirit of a teacher are Pharisees.

There was some truth in what the older brother of the prodigal said - that his younger brother had indeed "devoured his father's wealth". But who told him that the money had been "spent on harlots"? That was an assumption. And that is characteristic of a teacher. Whenever he is against anyone, he always assumes the worst and believes the worst about him. He also delights in exposing the sins of an offender to put him to shame.

When we accuse another, it is no use saying that our facts are 100% right? Our spirit can still be 100% wrong, because it is in fellowship with the Accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10).

When Satan accuses God's children to Him, you can be certain that his facts are all 100% right. He wouldn't dare tell lies to God. But his spirit is still the spirit of accusation.

That can be true of us too, if we are not careful. So let us not find any comfort in saying that we have carefully verified all the facts and found them to be true. Our spirit can still stink of Hell.

On the other hand, if we are fathers, we will cover the multitude of sins that a brother has committed, and rejoice that he has now repented. We will "kill the fattened calf and rejoice". This is a great height to attain to. But we must press on until we reach there. Let us not deceive ourselves imagining that we have attained to it already.

Let us ask God for His grace to be true fathers to others.

David and Absalom

There was a time in David's life, when his son Absalom schemed against him, and won the hearts of many of the Israelites and drove David from the throne.

But David still had a few friends who were first-class soldiers who wanted to fight and defend him. David knew that they were going to fight with Absalom. And so he said to his general Joab, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom" (2 Samuel 18:5).

We must have those words written in bold letters in front of our minds whenever we have to deal with difficult brothers in the church: "DEAL GENTLY WITH THAT PERSON - FOR THE LORD'S SAKE."

Later, when David heard that Absalom had been killed, he wept and said, "O Absalom, I wish I had died in your place" (2 Samuel 18:33).

David was no teacher! He had a father-heart towards a rebellious son. No wonder he was called a man after God's own heart.

God's heart has the same desire: "I wish I could die in your place." And that was why Jesus died in our place on Calvary. It is when we enter into fellowship with God's heart that we become fathers.

Jesus had the right to rebuke sin in man, because He was willing to die to deliver man from sin. We have no right to rebuke sin in another until we are willing to die to deliver him from sin.

Then only are we true fathers. Otherwise we are only teachers.

Shepherds and Hirelings

In Ezekiel 34:3-6, the Lord rebukes the shepherds of Israel.

He rebuked them for eating the fat of the sheep and clothing themselves with their wool. They had not strengthened the sickly, nor healed the diseased, nor bound up the wounded sheep. They had not gone out to bring back the scattered sheep, nor protected the sheep from wild animals. Instead they had ruled the sheep with force and severity. They were hirelings and not true shepherds.

Hirelings are like teachers. They seek their own and work for pay.

In contrast, we see in verses 11-16 how a true shepherd behaves. He cares for his sheep, feeds them, leads them to rest, seeks the lost sheep, brings back the backslidden ones, and strengthens the sick ones. A good shepherd even lays down his life for the sheep.

A spiritual father is such a shepherd to his flock.

This is our calling as servants of the new covenant.

We must not think of our ministry as consisting merely of preaching in the meetings. Maybe there is some discouraged brother somewhere who needs a visit and a word of encouragement. Someone else may need deliverance because he is being oppressed by Satan.

We have to look at all such people as lambs that have been captured by Satan the lion (1 Peter 5:8). Like David, we must go out against the lion, attack it, and deliver the lambs out of its mouth (1 Samuel 17:34, 35). That is how a true shepherd acts. When he comes across a difficult brother, he fights with Satan, and doesn't criticise the brother. Thus he delivers the lamb from the lion's mouth.

Haven't we all seen fathers and mothers sitting up with their sick children, by their bedsides the whole night, caring for them?

Teachers have no time for such self-denying care. They will only tell their sick students to come back to school after they get well.

It is when we have spiritually sick brothers in our midst, that we discover whether we are actually fathers or teachers.

If you have a difficult wife, you will soon discover whether you are a shepherd-husband or a hireling-husband. If you had a spiritual wife however, you might never have discovered your true state!

God told the shepherds in Ezekiel's time that Israel had gone to Babylon because of the failure of their shepherds.

Many of God's people are dwelling in Babylon today, for the same reason: Their shepherds have failed them.

1 Timothy 3:1 says that if a man aspires to be an elder in a church, he is desiring a fine work. Yes, it is certainly a fine work to be a blessing and a help to others in the church, as a spiritual father.

May none of us however desire the title and the honour of being known as elders and servants of God.

May God help us to take this matter seriously.

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