

Spiritual Parenting

Rich Nathan

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1 Thessalonians 2:6-12

This morning I want to continue in a series that I started last week on Christian leadership. And I think I mentioned last week that there are probably very few subjects that I have thought about more in the last ten years than the subject of Christian leadership. I have read literally dozens of books on leadership, both secular leadership and management books as well as Christians books on leadership. I have attended I don't know how many seminars and conferences on leadership. So, as I am speaking about some of these things, this is not coming out of a vacuum.

But I have noticed a fairly consistent thread running through most of the literature on Christian leadership, especially those written over the last ten years, and that is a model of Christian leadership primarily drawn from the corporate world. And what we find in literature is a paradigm, a model that tends to emphasize the secular values of quantifying, of numerical goals, of clearly drawn mission statements and a statement of objectives. And so most of what I have received in conferences, and so on, is primarily modern corporate management principles. The paradigm is Christian leader as CEO.

Now, understand that I have a great deal of respect for maintaining the corporate side of church life. You don't have a church of several thousand without paying fairly close attention to the corporate side, the administrative side, of church life. We couldn't pay for a church plant in St. Petersburg, Russia or the bills here without paying attention to the bottom line. Somebody paid for the chairs that you are sitting on and pays for the lights that are on Sunday mornings. Somebody pays the salaries of the staff. I hope that someone, in part, is you, if you are a member of the church here. I hope that you do take your responsibility seriously to regularly give. Somebody is caring for your children in children's church and that the rooms needed to be paid for and the toys need to be paid for and the supplies need to be paid for. All of that needs to be taken into account. And we do a very poor job of stewarding the cause of Christ or being enabled to marshal our resources for world mission, if we don't pay attention to the corporate side of things.

The problem is that whenever a new metaphor is introduced into the church's life like Christian leader as chief executive officer; Christian leader as business leader; we really fail to appreciate the cultural captivity of the gospel to the modern spirit of the age. Now, it is easy for us standing at a distance of some time to look back at various models of Christian leadership or even of Jesus and say those things don't really reflect the Jesus in the Bible.

For example, in the 1960's, Jesus was popularly portrayed as a political revolutionary. As someone who really sought to change the political environment in which lived. And so, you had Jesus as the Marxist Guerilla, the Ché Gueverra,

the Lenin of his day. And Christian leaders were urged to be heavily involved in politics, especially leftist politics.

In the 1970's Jesus became the therapist, a specialist of a client-centered therapy. And Christian leaders were called upon to be enablers and to be able to lead group therapy sessions because that is what it meant to be a Christian leader. We need to realize that in every decade the church has attempted to subordinate the claims of the gospel and really the portrait of Christian leadership to the spirit of the age.

The classic example of what I am attempting to communicate was a very, very popular book written in the 1920's by a marketing executive named Bruce Barton who was the founder of one of the world's largest advertising agencies of the 1920's. Bruce Barton wrote a book called *The Man Nobody Knows*. It was a runaway best seller in the 1920's and was a portrait of Jesus as a modern businessman.

Somehow Barton, in looking at the gospels, said that what has been neglected in all the former portraits of Jesus is the fact that Jesus was essentially a modern business man, employing all the best of modern business techniques. You say, "Well, where did he get that from?"

At the beginning of the book, Barton introduces Jesus as a child in the temple. You recall as a child in the temple Jesus spoke to his parents and he said, "I must be about my Father's business [that's right, business!]." From the earliest age Jesus understood that he was on earth to do business. He says, "A prosperous carpenter's shop employing the most modern marketing techniques was precisely the place that God used to train Jesus in business methods."

And Barton points out that the problem with Jesus' predecessors, like John the Baptist, was that they were not good businessmen. John the Baptist's great failing was that his message was not a positive message. He didn't know how to smile or tell jokes. He didn't use irony or warm up the crowd.

In addition, he points out that John the Baptist couldn't organize. He said the same thing led to Samson's failure. His failure to be able to organize a large company. But Jesus had great modern organizational skills.

In fact, Jesus was one of the great positive thinkers of his day. This is a direct quote from Barton's book, "The health and positive thinking of the teacher was irresistible. When he looked at the sick man, who had been bed-ridden for years, he seemed to cry out, 'Nothing is impossible if only your will power is strong enough.' And the man who had so long ago surrendered to despair rose and gathered up his bed and went away healed like hundreds of others in Galilee by strength flowing from the over flowing fountain of the strength of will power."

Now, we look at all of Barton's thoughts and we say, "What a bunch of nonsense." But it made perfectly good sense, somehow, to the hundreds of thousands men and women who read his book and praised it in the 1920's. Jesus was a modern businessman.

Well, I believe that the church suffers from a very similar kind of cultural captivity today in attempting to employ, primarily, a corporate model for Christian leadership. Again, let me underline very strongly that I believe the corporate side of church life needs to be very though. We ought to be excellent in our

administration and excellent in our stewardship of money and thoughtful resources and personnel.

But corporate organization is not the major metaphor for church life in the New Testament. The metaphors and pictures of church life in the New Testament are mostly organic, living metaphors and not organizational dead metaphors. The church is pictured as a living body with Jesus as its head. The church is pictured as a garden in 1 Corinthians 3. It's God's garden, God's fields. And the church is pictured as a family.

See, we have organization and we have organism. And I love John Wimber's helpful way of putting this all together when he says that "organization must always follow organism" in the same way that a cart must always follow the horse. The problem that we have is that some people want to put the horse in the cart; and some people want to put the cart in front of the horse; and some people want to put the cart on top of the horse; but, we want the horse in front and the cart following. Organism leading organization.

What I am going to be speaking about today is the family relationship that spiritual leadership exists in over against the mind-set of bureaucratic functional leadership. Of leadership that comes at a person with quantitative goals entirely. With charts and with graphs and with ways of classifying people. You're this and you're that. That is not the major New Testament emphasis of leadership. Christian leadership is born out of our family relationship with each other.

And the model that we are going to explore today for Christian leadership is that of spiritual parenting. Simply and only being goal setters, and bean counters, and organizational genius isn't enough. We add this dimension that is a Bible dimension of learning to become, as leaders, spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers. Let's pray.

Let me envision you for a moment about this issue of spiritual parenting. How many of you were assisted to really move forward in your Christian life by an older person who took an interest in you and who taught you how to feed yourself from the Bible and how to pray? Encouraged you in your spiritual life? How many of you can look to an older person and say, "I had a spiritual parent in my life when I was a young believer."

Let me put several different spins on this for you. You know, we are in the United States right now, in the midst of a crisis of family breakdowns. Something like 40% of all children will be raised for at least some period of time in a single parent family. I won't ask for a show of hands regarding how many of your children have gone through the crisis of a divorce or how many of you were or are being raised in a single parent family, but I am sure it is a high number here.

And the church has an answer for the problem of single parent families. It has an answer that the government cannot offer and that is the provision of spiritual parents. A spiritual father or spiritual mother who will come along side a teenager or a young person in their early 20's who cannot look to their own father or mother for consistent care or leadership. A young person who would appreciate direction or counsel or suggestions about the future. Connection with God. I know there are some of you who are called specifically to work with

teenagers and some of the younger people in our congregation. You need to rise to the occasion and become spiritual parents.

How about those of you who are in, now, your 30's and 40's, solidly middle-aged, saying to yourselves, "I have been at this thing called the Christian life for fifteen years, twenty years—and I will focus on one other person who is younger to assist their development in the faith."

You know there is a precious promise and this promise is particularly significant for folks, for women or men, who are without your own children. Not all of us in our 30's or 40's have children at home either because we have never had children or couldn't have children, or we're single. Isaiah 54 speaks about spiritual children when it says,

"Sing, O barren woman, you who never bore a child; burst into song, shout for joy, you who were never in labor; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband."

I want to say to you, especially those who have never had your own children, some of you women—there is an ache in your heart as you think about never having had your own child. The promise of scripture is that God will give you spiritual children more numerous than any you could have had if you focus on being a spiritual mom or father. The satisfaction derived, the comfort, the sense of fulfillment promised to you to be similar to having your own physical children.

But, as I begin to discuss with the issue of spiritual parenting, I must tell you right off the bat that like every other truth in the Bible, this truth of Christian leadership as spiritual parenting must be understood in a balanced way. See, one of the ways that you can discern truth for yourself, is to listen for the balance in the presentation of a concept.

Is this truth of God's sovereignty, his control, being held together with the other truth that the Bible teaches of human responsibility? Is the truth of God's kindness being held together with the other truth of God's holiness? Spiritual parenting is one of those truths that to maintain requires walking a tightrope. There is a negative edge to spiritual parenting that can distort the whole concept turning it away from the healthy biblical balance of what is appropriate in Christian leaders as spiritual parents. We must maintain the balanced view of the Bible as we look at spiritual parenting.

So what I want to do first of all is to speak to you about the negative edge. What we cannot allow in a spiritual father or spiritual mother. And to do so, flip over to Matthew 23. Here is the negative edge of spiritual parenting. Jesus says in Matthew 23:8-12:

"But you are not to be called 'Rabbi' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called 'teacher' for you have one Teacher, the Christ..."

Whenever we begin to speak about something like spiritual parenting, we must hold that concept in check by a number of things that Jesus is attempting to communicate here. And the first thing that he wants to communicate to us is that the basic relationship, the foundational relationship of leader and people is not that of father to child, but of brother to brother. He says in verse 8:

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi’ for you have only one Master and you are all brothers.”

In other words, any concept of spiritual parent must be utterly devoid of that kind of obedience of child to father that you should find in a family, but you must not find in the church. It is completely inappropriate for a Christian leader to call for obedience as a spiritual parent in the way that a father or mother would call for obedience from a child for 2 reasons. Jesus says, we have one Master to whom we render obedience namely God and second of all, our most basic relationship with each other is one that of brother or sister.

I will talk more in a talk that I am going to give next week on spiritual abuse, regarding some of the fundamental problems that we have in understanding spiritual authority. But suffice it to say, for now the authority structure of a church is not that of parent to child. And the power of a spiritual leader’s authority is going to be seen in the power of example and the power of persuasion, but not in the power of command and obedience. Again, we have one Master and we are all brothers and sisters if we’ve given our lives to Christ.

But there is something else that verse 9 hints at that also distorts the concept of spiritual parenting when he says,

“Do not call anyone on earth ‘father’ for you have one Father and he is in heaven.”

You know, another way I have seen this teaching on spiritual parenting get distorted in a church’s life, is that very often there is created in church a dependency upon a leader that is quite unhealthy. It is really reminiscent of unhealthy family systems. One of the things that you see in unhealthy parenting styles is the fostering of long-term dependency of a child upon their parent long past the time that a child needs to make responsible decisions of their own in areas of the selection of friends or making choices regarding how to think through a negative situation or how to use their money. You see parents who absolutely will not cut the apron strings. That parent invades the child’s space and invades the child’s privacy. The kind of invasion that would be appropriate in the case of a three year old or five year old or nine year old is not appropriate in the case of a 17 year old, 19 year old or 24 year old. The art of healthy parenting is the art of knowing when to invade space and when to let go and give room for your child’s responsible decision making.

In church life you see this bent corrupted parenting style in the fostering of unhealthy dependencies of a needy person upon a spiritual leader. That dependency can degenerate into a sick relationship where an individual cannot work through crisis without immediately contacting and consulting with their spiritual leader. They cannot make decisions without getting it approved by the leader or enter a new relationship or change jobs without checking first, because if they don’t check first maybe they’re unsubmitive or even worse, uncommitted.

Now I believe that an unhealthy sort of mutual benefit society insists in these long-term, dependent, sick relationships in churches. On the one the spiritual parent derives the benefit of flattery and the fawning of the dependent person. The dependent person says, “You are my spiritual father, you are my spiritual

mother, I need you to meet all of my needs.” That is very flattering to be thought of so positively and to be needed for counsel and correction and direction.

The dependent person in the meantime gets to be burden free from decisions in the area of finances or relationships or job or vocational decisions. All of my decisions are made for me by my spiritual parent.

Of course, this whole sick dependency cycle becomes very exhausting for the parent who now is being continually harassed and asked for more counsel and more advice and more help. It is also very debilitating and weakening for the spiritual child who is kept in this place of permanent dependency. And, yet, you see this go on all the time in church life. That is called spiritual fathering.

Listen to me. The goal of spiritual parenting is the same goal in natural parenting. Paul declares his goal in Colossians 1:28-29 when he says,

“My goal is to present every person mature in Christ...”

From day one, from the earliest infancy of a new born believer in Christ, a spiritual parent is trying to disciple a person to be mature, not dependent. That means that they’re teaching that person from day one to live apart from their leadership and their teaching and their counsel.

From day one the goal of discipleship is to teach that new born baby to feed themselves from the Word of God and how to go to God themselves to hear what God’s will is for them rather than having everything run through the leader. I want folks to be able to go to God themselves and be able to hear from God for themselves. To rest in God; to learn to work through crisis and to learn to depend on the Lord.

Now this raises the ultimate issue in unhealthy spiritual parenting. The ultimate issue is not just that it fosters an exhausting kind of dependency on a leader or that it keeps a person in a permanently debilitated weak state, permanent immaturity. The ultimate problem of sick spiritual parenting is that it is idolatrous in that it replaces dependency on God with dependency on another human being.

See, there is a reason why Jesus tells us to not call anyone on earth “father.” The reason is that you have one Father in heaven. The issue for Jesus is not the title simply that you would give to another person, whether you call someone “father” or you call someone “teacher.” Those terms may never be used. The church may use the title elder or bishop or reverend. The issue is not titles but rather the authority that you give to a spiritual leader that undercuts the authority of Father God. Listen to me. Sick spiritual leadership intrudes itself between an individual and God and says, “Look to me as your father and not God, the Father. Listen to me and my authoritative teaching and not to God and his voice in your life.”

Do you understand, spiritual leaders, those of you who have ever been drawn into one of these dependent relationships where somebody, perhaps even in a flattering way, comes up to you and tells you how much you mean to them. And you sense that they are putting you in kind of a wrong light. They are putting you up on a pedestal. That if you accept that praise and dependency, what you are accepting is idolatrous worship. I don’t want anybody in this church to be

dependent on me or Danny or one of the women's leaders or anyone else. I want us all to be dependent upon God.

It is no feather in anyone's cap to have long-term dependent relationships. We ought not to want, as human beings, what belongs to God. We ought to desire God to meet each other's needs and to assist each other whether it is in long-term counseling, which is perfectly justified in some cases, or long-term relationships. We assist one another in going to God. That is how we present people mature in Christ.

Well, we've spent enough time on the negative edge now let's look at the positive side of spiritual parenting. Turn with me to 1 Thess 2, beginning in verse 7.

Now, as a man who doesn't often think in feminine terms, I want to say that what the apostle Paul suggests in verse 7, that he as a male leader, acted as a spiritual mother for those under his care, that that metaphor is a challenge to me. It loops in from left field. Talk about a totally new concept for male leaders in the church.

You know, not only do we have in the church very often a corporate functional model, but you have this macho model, as well, of leadership. You know the "take the mountain" gung-ho for Christ, no prisoners taken captive, no holds barred, let's go for it, men...charge! And Paul comes along with a statement that is absolutely radical and stunning when he says, "My leadership style, in part, was like a mother."

And here I think about the apostle Paul who for me has always been a man's man—shipwrecked. You know, this man lived this incredibly adventurous life. He was marching in wilderness places and suffering. He was beaten and stoned and let down in a basket. He escaped over a wall. This is a man's man. Strikes people blind. Raises the dead.

And this man's man said, "One of the components of my spiritual parenting is that I acted like a mother." What a rebuke to the macho leadership style, the unemotional Mr. Spock. Totally objective, totally reasonable, totally masculine—what a rebuke. Where did Paul get this feminine thing from?

I think he got it from God. You know, the Lord is not ashamed of referring to himself in feminine terms. In Isaiah the Lord, referring to himself, said, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has born? Though she may forget, I will not forget you. I have engraved you on the palms of my hand."

You know, one of the titles for God in the Old Testament is "El Shaddai". El Shaddai. In the English translation, it is often translated, "God Almighty." But the English translation is more of a reflection of the Greek Septuagint version of El Shaddai than the likely original Hebrew etymology of the word "Shaddai". If you look into this word "Shaddai," it is actually very difficult to uncover the exact origin of that word. It is a very ancient word.

But it is quite possible, and many scholars have written on this, that the word "Shaddai" is derived from the Hebrew word "Shad" which means "breast." And if that is the case, then the title "El Shaddai" is not only referring to God's power, his sovereignty, but it may also be referring to God's nurturance, his sustenance. The one who feeds us with spiritual milk.

The apostle Paul, in any case, says that his spiritual leadership carried with it, surprisingly, an aspect of spiritual mothering. And he refers first of all to a mother's gentleness in verse 7.

"We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children."

This is, I believe, a lesson for Christian leaders that can't be bypassed. One of the things that I have prayed for as much in myself as almost any other quality is to grow in gentleness and kindness. I was not raised in a gentle or kind environment. My own home life and upbringing was a model of fighting and survival of the fittest. It was an extremely aggressive environment. And on top of just the home, I also grew up in New York.

And so I find myself, now, as a New Yorker from a home environment that was anything but nurturing and gentle, in the Midwest where people are a little more subdued than they are in New York City. And I find myself as a pastor called to not simply get ahead or survive, but to care for people. And I often, often pray, "God, make me gentle." Because gentleness is one of those qualities that consistently shows up on leadership lists in the New Testament. It is a requirement of eldership. It is a requirement of pastoring. Paul tells young Timothy that the Lord's overseer must not be over-bearing, but gentle. And those passages are continual sources of challenge to me.

You know, this word "gentle" is the Greek word "epios." There is a first-class manuscript of problem as we look back over what the original was that translated this word "gentle" because the oldest and best manuscripts don't say "epios"—gentle. The oldest and best manuscripts say "nepios"—baby.

Follow me here. The oldest and best manuscripts say we were like a baby among you, like a mother caring for her little children. And somewhere along the line, that mixed metaphor, "We were like a baby among you, a mother..." was too confusing for the copiers and they dropped the letter and said, "We were gentle among you, like a mother..."

But you know Paul is fond of mixing metaphors. He has no problem with being fairly loose with language and syntax. And I believe that he is actually saying "like a baby, we were like a mother." Have you ever seen a mother relate to a baby? The willingness to get down on the floor to where the baby is characterizes motherly affection. A mother is someone who is willing to be simple, to get down. I think Paul is not just referring to a mother's gentleness, but a mother's willingness to play and to get down to the level of a child. You see moms on the floor with their babies. The mother is on her stomach and the baby is on her stomach and they are eye-ball to eye-ball. They are licking each other. And the mother is saying, "goo-goo" to the baby and making baby noises. They play roly-poly with each other as the baby gets to be a toddler. They tickle one another.

That is the picture of the Christian leader who doesn't simply try to impress the crowd with how much he knows and quoting philosophers left and right. "Let me display for you the exhaustive nature of my knowledge so that you might all be impressed." A Christian leader gets down there eye to eye and speaks simply.

One preacher in the past said that a pastor ought to sound like they have asthma, using short little words. Another famous statement was that a preacher

ought to remember Jesus' words, "Feed my sheep" not "Feed my giraffes" preaching over the heads of everyone— "Feed my sheep."

We are told of a mother's play and simplicity. And also of a mother's relationship in verse 8.

"We loved you so much that we that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our own lives as well because you had become so dear to us."

The difference between a spiritual parent and a functional corporate leader has to do with the spiritual parent's willingness to offer relationship. "I don't just offer you a service," the apostle Paul says. I just don't have you come in for an hour of counseling, see you later, good-bye. A spiritual leader also offers relationship. A man may have many guardians, many people offering you service and expertise, but Paul says that you don't have many fathers in 1 Corinthians 4.

I remember several years ago, Marlene and I saw the movie, *Little Man Tate*, maybe some of you saw that movie. But it is a story of a boy genius being raised by his mother who was a high school drop-out. His mother finally becomes convinced that she is not doing him any good and she ships him off to this world-class expert to assist in developing the boy's genius. And the expert could offer so much that the mother couldn't in terms of stimulating questions and puzzles and challenges to learn and to grow.

One night the little boy has a nightmare and runs out and comes face to face with the experts. In this particular instance the expert is completely at a loss because the expert cannot find in herself the willingness to hug the little boy who is scared. She gives him a piece of advice and sends him back to his room. And you see in that moment the superiority of a mother to any expert when it comes to the offering of comfort and relationship to a child. No expert can offer relationship.

Now, obviously, people's ability to offer relationship is limited. The span of a spiritual leader's capacity to offer relationship may only be to ten or fifteen or twenty people. And that is why we cannot have a situation where a pastor or even staffs of pastors are viewed as the spiritual parents of 2000 people. Because whereas we may offer counsel or teaching to many, we can only offer relationship to a few.

And it becomes incumbent upon the church to take up verse 8, not only offering the gospel, but your own lives as well. That is what we are trying to do in small groups with kinship leaders and women's group leaders. We are ultimately to multiply spiritual parents – mothers and fathers who offer relationships – not just lead a meeting or give a teaching. That's what small groups should be all about in the Vineyard – sharing family life, relationships offered from one person to another.

We see a mother's work in verse 9, where along side of a mother's relationship we see a mother's work.

"Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order to not be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you."

As spiritual mothers, a Christian leader's job is never done. It says in verse 9, "...we work night and day" and I shudder at that phrase, "night and day." How many of you mothers are able to say, "Well, it is 5:00, time off now. It's Miller Time. Time to relax. My time."

The point is when you are a mother, you are on duty 24 hours a day. Your kid cries at 2:00 a.m., you're up. They get sick or fall down or need to be driven somewhere, your child needs to talk—when you're a mom, you're always a mom. And you are never off duty where you say, "I'm just not a mom anymore."

And when you are a spiritual parent, you don't get to stop being a spiritual parent. You're on duty. You are not just fulfilling a job description in a corporation. It is all right to work in the evening as a Christian leader, to work on the weekend as a Christian leader, to work in the early morning as a Christian leader. That is what parents do. Parents do parent things. That's what parents do.

Let me complete this thought about spiritual mothering with this idea. Paul doesn't mention it here, but when I think of spiritual mothering, along with a mother's gentleness and simplicity and hard work and relationship, I can't help but think about a mother's prayers. There is something about a mother's prayers for her child that goes beyond anything that a stranger a functional leader or even a dad understands or knows. I have seen my wife, Marlene, on numerous occasions burst into tears before God as her burden and concern for our children, a spiritual problem in their lives, or something that they are going through emotionally, or relationally just overwhelms her. She brings it before the Lord, not just as a request, but as the unloading of her heart.

There is an aspect of that motherly burdensome, tear-filled, prayer that is part of spiritual parenting of another. You watch someone that you have invested dozens of hours in making a huge mistake and slipping back into the same patterns that you thought they had escaped from falling into all the old traps and you get so burdened. You watch someone being unwilling to embrace their own faults, to hold a mirror up to their own face. You watch someone make regular accusations toward another but cannot look at their own problems, whatever the issue is for you as a spiritual parent. As a spiritual mother, you learn how to pray.

Paul says, "On top of everything I have the burden of the church, a mother's burden." And then he moves on and speaks about not only being a spiritual mother, but of course being a spiritual father. In verse 10 he says,

"You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed."

Christian leader, he is speaking here about a father's example. There is something that is powerful about a spiritual parent's example. Christian leader, others are watching the way you do what you do. Whether it's how you show affection to your spouse, how you discipline your child, the words you use, how you react to crises, how you pray. Paul says, "You yourselves are witnesses." He understands that there is tremendous power in the example of a consistent Christian life.

And that is what we are called to as spiritual fathers. To not simply have written on our graves, "Here lies Dad. If he lived as well as he talked, he would have been a good man." But, here lies Dad who lived what he preached. He acted on his Christian beliefs.

The man who was my first spiritual father was a man named Warren. An old, not very well educated Pentecostal preacher who spent most of his life in bi-vocational ministry. He never had a church large enough to support him in full time vocational ministry until he was in his 60s. So he worked at the steel mills in Cleveland during the day. And then on the weekends, he preached. He was my first spiritual father in the Lord. And what did I find that was compelling in Warren?

It was the power of a consistently godly life. There was one lesson that Warren laid in my foundation. And that was the idea of a sold-out life for Christ. Over and over again, what I saw in him was a man who was totally sold out, completely sold out for Christ.

And I understood from day one just from being around this guy, I understood that being a Christian was not a half-hearted deal. It wasn't a matter of just putting my toes in the water and saying, "Well, I've felt the water. Now it's time for me to go home." Being a Christian for him and now for me was a matter of diving in totally with all of my money and all of my time and all of my energy. I was to dive in totally. I wouldn't swim very well. Sometimes I would sink. Sometimes I would try to rush for the shore. But I wasn't a Christian unless I bet everything on Christ. We see in a spiritual father the power of an example.

And we also have in a father, a father's encouragement. "For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children encouraging." That word "encouragement" means to be called along side. What a father does is that he puts his arm around a spiritual child and assists that child to accomplish what God wants for them to do. How many spiritual children are in the church, are out there in the world, who need someone to come along side of them and to put courage in them. For that literally is the meaning of the word "encourage"—it means to put courage into somebody, to embolden.

You know, as I look out at the church, I see a lot of spiritual children hanging back standing on the outside looking in staring at various ministries or involvements, but not jumping in. And it is my belief that many, many spiritual children hang back from full participations in the church, whether we are talking about being involved in a small group or being involved in children's ministry or being involved in evangelism, being involved with the poor at Fruit of the Vine. I believe that many spiritual children hang back not because of a lack of commitment, but because of a lack of confidence. Generally, people hang back because that's the safest thing to do. Many, many of us are afraid to move forward in ministry because we are racked by feelings of shame and inadequacies.

"How could I do this thing? What if I fail? What if they reject me?"

You may have been in spiritual environments where you didn't meet the expectations of your former spiritual leaders there and they yelled at you. They criticized you. They rejected you. They occasionally were not good spiritual

fathers because they didn't put in you courage to overcome your failures. Rather than embolden you, they shamed you. They didn't come along side of you and say, "Yes, you can do this. You can be a leader. You can teach the Bible. You can pray for the sick. You can do it. I believe in you despite this setback." And a spiritual father is somebody who does that consistently with people. I believe you can do it, even if you messed up this time.

They not only encourage, but they comfort. Encouraging and comforting. It is not enough to call people on or just come along side of an individual and tell them that they can do it. A spiritual father is also a comforter, which means a spiritual father is somebody who is not afraid of another person's pain. To offer comfort means that you are a person who will move toward another individual's pain rather than away from it. Most people run away from pain, but not spiritual fathers. Spiritual fathers see someone in pain and not only do they put their arms around, walking side by side, but they put both arms around and they embrace.

This was Paul's MO in following the Lord Jesus. He was a wonderful comforter. Paul learned to be a spiritual father who comforted people in pain, the broken-hearted. He says in 2 Corinthians 1:3,

"Praise be the God and Father, our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of compassion and the God of all comfort who comforts us in all of our trouble so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God."

Do you realize on any given day, any Sunday, that sitting around you are many, many people who are broken-hearted, who are in pain, who need to know the comfort of the Lord? I have talked with individuals who have said that they feel more comfortable going to secular recovery groups than being in a church because people in churches run from their pain. There is as much need for comfort as there are causes of pain.

There are some parents here, your children have broken your hearts. There are parents here, your children have been arrested for a crime. You need comfort. You need the embrace of a spiritual father. There are some of you whose children are using drugs; whose children are in rebellion; whose children are sleeping around; you need the ministry of comfort. There are some of you who are going through a divorce. There are some of you who have never told anyone that you were raped or sexually abused. There are some of you whose husbands are unemployed. Some of you have recently suffered the loss of a loved one through death. Some of you know the heartache of discovering that you have cancer.

It is not enough to simply put one arm around a person's shoulder in encouragement. As spiritual fathers, both arms need to be around someone in pain in an embrace as we speak to a person words of love and words of affection, words of comfort. We pray together. We read scripture together. We are there for somebody else. A father's embrace.

Last of all, Paul speaks of a father's urging. Verse 12,

"Encourage, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory."

We are talking about using our arms in three different ways as a dad. When we encourage, we stand along side someone and we put our arm around their shoulder and we say, "You can do it, go ahead." When we comfort, we wrap both arms around the person and we hold them and we say to them, "It will be okay. I understand your pain." But when we urge someone we take our arms off of them and we point forward and we say, "Here is the direction that God wants to call you to."

"Encouraging, comforting, and urging to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory." When we are urging, we are pointing forward as dads. We are pointing into the future.

Now, let me tell you what that means, spiritual fathers. When you point someone into the future, as a spiritual father, one thing that you are saying is, "I will not use you. I will develop you." Fathers think about a person's future. Too, too often Christian organizations think about what they can get from a person in the present.

Over the years, I have sat down with literally dozens of Christian men and women who have been used by people who were not spiritual fathers. The leaders saw someone in their early 20's who could work cheap and they sucked the energy out of that person for their particular goal, their group, and their organization. The person was single, didn't have many financial needs, and was willing to work for literally nothing to serve God. And then I have watched those people as they become age 27. They get married. Age 30 they have their first kid. Now they are beginning to say, "Gee, you know, I really need to make a little more money." But the organization has no future for them and the pay is so low that there is no place to move.

Now they are 35 or 40 and they have no health insurance and no place to really grow into and they have developed no career skills, and they are bitter at the Lord and bitter at the church. Because the Christian leaders they met in their 20s were not fathers. A spiritual father cares about a person's future and wants to develop them. A spiritual father is somebody who will sit down with a person and say, "You know I care about where you are going to be in five years, not just now. In ten years. Here are some of the things I think you need to do to prepare for five or ten years from now."

Spiritual fathers, in those conversations, are not flatterers. As Paul says in verse 5,

"You know we never used flattery."

How often our conversations as leaders are cloaked with flattery, just maneuvering around speaking frankly to a person about a situation or a problem. Patting them on the back and saying, "You know, you really are doing good" when they are not really doing good or this area of their life needs correction. Fathers don't do that. They care too much to treat people in a political way. They have many, many hard conversations with their children because they love them.

So in urging we don't use people and in urging we don't flatter people. We call them away from me-centered living to kingdom living. Urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you to his kingdom and glory. A spiritual father comes

along to a child and says, “I know that this act of service is hard. I know it is difficult for you to divide your group. I know it is difficult for you to be in a growing church. I know it is hard to tithe your paycheck. I know it is painful to stretch in an area of obedience. Do it anyway. Because this life is not about you, it is about the King.” They urge people toward kingdom centered living rather than me centered living.

It is not good enough to say, “This is very difficult.” Say, “Yes, but do it anyway.” I speak to many, many of you – embrace God’s call on your life to be a spiritual mother or father. That is the essence of Christian leadership. Let’s pray.