

A MAN'S WORLD

Why was Jesus given the title "Son of God"? Wish we had time to talk about the expected relationship between a father and his son in ancient Israel. Every time I look into the subject, I am amazed. Do we assume today that a son will follow in his father's footsteps – have the same trade, take over the household, manage the land, keep all the obligations and covenants his father made? "*Honor your father.*" We do not remember most of what that phrase means anymore, except in vague and general ways. If the father made a deal, shook hands on it, and died – leaving a considerable debt, but no visible means of proving it – would a modern-day son feel obligated to pay the debt? "*Honor your father*" once had many dimensions to it, and provided justice and continuity no court system could match. I think we have only small notions of what the ancients meant by calling Jesus the "Son of God."

Is it a man's world? Many say we have been shifting dramatically toward a Matriarchal Society since the Second World War. Whether it is a man's world or a woman's world will not make very much difference to true peace and justice. If men *or* women *or* Satan hold sway, the world will be a sad and broken realm. It is God's world. We are a very long way from knowing or acknowledging that – from behaving like it or appreciating it – except for tiny pockets of us here and there. But it will remain a sad and broken world until the day comes when all of us truly know and believe that "This is our father's world."

Mother's Day is appropriately soft and sentimental – full of affection and appreciation – and the theme, wherever it starts, must end with nurturing, sacrifice, and love. It naturally follows that Father's Day should be logical, objective, nonpersonal, dry, and results-oriented. If we should want to get emotional, we could talk about how our favorite sports team came from behind to win a few weeks back. Of course, many men are very emotional, even maudlin, but they are still uncomfortable with feelings in public. On the other hand, some women seem friendly and caring in public but turn to ice in private. Well, "I don't want to talk about it."

It has become common again to think of men and women as different. Slowly but increasingly in the last few years, evidence has been mounting which indicates that it is harder to grow up as a boy than a girl – that it is harder to be male than female in our society. I'm

not sure we are any clearer today about appropriate male and female roles than we were a few decades ago, but more of us seem to be calmer about it. Lots of people today are able to distinguish between wrong roles and roles done wrongly. That was rarely true forty years ago. And while there are still large pockets of misandronists (men-haters) and misogynists (women-haters) in our society, we seem to be moving toward a better perspective again – at least for the moment. I still hear from time to time that Christianity is a male-dominated religion – and therefore invalid. I still hear that Paul hated women, and that the church enslaves females. But I hear it less and less, and usually from misologists (haters of enlightenment and reason). And though I suspect we could still start hot arguments among us if we began to discuss whether the courts today favor men or women; whether the man or the woman should be head of the household; or who should get up when, to do what – far more people today than thirty years ago believe in marriage, and they work hard to maintain strong families.

What has any of this got to do with Father's Day? What has any of this got to do with Jesus, or Christianity? Can a religion that venerates the Virgin Mary and considers celibacy the highest spiritual condition for humans have any real regard for fathers? While Peter – the first Pope – was married (I Corinthians 9:5), it is easy to claim that he was too new at the game to know any better. But Jesus and Paul were never married – they were never fathers. Origen, one hundred and seventy years after Jesus, castrated himself so it would be safe for him to teach women about the Christian Faith. (Some people are still trying to tell us that nobody cared about women or thought they were worth teaching “back then.”) Augustine had an illegitimate son, but that was before his conversion. He was certainly celibate and fatherless from the day he became a Christian. *Go thou and do likewise?* Marriage and family and fatherhood have always been *permitted* in Christianity, for second-class Christians with a second-class faith, but anybody who was *really* serious about Christianity turned away from fatherhood. It took *fifteen hundred years* for the church to begin to recover from such errors and idiocy. Most of it has not recovered even yet. Martin Luther, though an Augustinian monk in his early career, came to realize that marriage and sexuality were part of God's design – and that it was God who liked pleasure and happiness for his children, and that it was Satan who liked people miserable and grim and mean. Nevertheless, in the enlightened atmosphere of a fairly liberal Protestant church today, many of you are not yet comfortable with the connections between your spirituality and your sexuality. Do you think God likes it when you make love to your mate?

Children are beautiful and wonderful, and God loves children – but frowns on how they get here? Is there no link between how we pray and how we are designed?

Well, Jesus did not marry because He knew His time was short. It is not a loving thing to take a wife and have children if you know you must desert them so soon. And Paul did not marry because he believed the world as we knew it was about to end. There was no time to raise a family, so wait for the new age about to dawn and then there would be plenty of time for wonderful family life. But even he advised that if you were already in love with somebody, go ahead and marry – God would figure something out. This got translated into “It is better to marry than to burn,” which then many assumed meant “Better to marry than to burn in Hell.” That could not be further from Paul’s meaning. Accurate translations read “be aflame with passion” or “burn with desire.” Have we never been young and in love? Aren’t some of us old and *still* in love? Paul’s point is simple: Time is very short. If you are unattached, stay that way. But if you have found your mate, don’t worry about time being short. You will waste more time trying to stay apart than the time you will save by staying single. By all means get married, and trust God for the future. But if you are not already twitterpated, keep your eye on the enormous task of the church in these end times. Paul was not wrong about marriage. He was wrong about when the end of the age would come. He missed it by at least two thousand years.

We call priests “father” because that is one thing they are not supposed to be, except symbolically. How tragic it is that, down through the centuries, the popes did not have good wives. If they had, maybe they, and the priests under them, would not have been such total nincompoops about lust, divorce, contraception, and family counseling. Sometimes we get understandable misunderstandings, yet they are still misunderstandings. Celibacy is *not* superior to or more spiritual than married life. It is not holier to know less about love. But the point for us is this: Being married does *not* excuse you from the disciplines, commitments, or delights of the Christian Life. No priest is to be more devout or committed than you are. The real backlash of the spiritual caste system is that some folk say to themselves: “We’re just ordinary people, so Jesus wouldn’t expect us to be really and truly faithful followers.” That is precisely backward. Ordinary people are exactly who Jesus *did* expect to be the true followers. If you really believe that a priest or a nun can be more dedicated to Jesus than you are, then no matter how mistaken, you really ought to become a priest or a nun.

Nevertheless, in the vast sea of Christendom, there are pockets of us who believe that family life is one of the highest paths of spiritual pilgrimage. There are even smaller pockets of us who believe that FATHERHOOD is supposed to be an integral part of the Christian calling. Even tinier handfuls here and there believe that loving and making love are part of God's design – a great and sacred gift that God gives to those who are given love for each other. It is a gift so high, in fact, that it is easily abused and misused, but it is designed nonetheless by God to be part of the high sacrament of marriage.

In any case, Father's Day has a different significance depending on which perspective you hold about fatherhood:

1.) Fathers are a necessary evil, but they are to be tolerated if they learn to work hard, demand little, and prove themselves useful. And "it takes a really wonderful man to be better than none."

2.) Fathers are just part of the scene – the way things happen. If you are lucky, they do more good than harm, they stick around, and they end up being pretty good support. If you are not lucky, they leave before you are grown, and some of them have even learned how to leave without going anywhere. Most of them have strange habits and seem a little emotionally stunted. But they often mean well.

3.) Fathers are men of God – obedient servants of God – called and commissioned by God to love, protect, nurture, and challenge their wives and children to live the Christian Life together with them in a sacred bond of trust and love.

I have spent many years of my life in the state of Washington. As everybody there knows, Father's Day began in Spokane, Washington, on June 19, 1910. Mrs. John B. Dodd wanted to honor her father, William Smart, a Civil War veteran whose wife died in childbirth with her sixth child. William raised his newborn baby and his five children on a rural farm near Spokane with what his daughter remembered as great strength and selflessness. So Father's Day was, of course, a woman's idea – begun to honor a single-parent father. Fourteen years later (1924), Calvin Coolidge supported the idea of a national Father's Day. In 1966, Lyndon Johnson signed a presidential proclamation declaring the third Sunday in June as Father's Day.

So why should we, a group of Christians, pay attention to something so recent and so flimsy? Well, maybe as an excuse to remember some important things once in a while. Actually, *three* things this morning:

I.) WE MUST CONTINUE TO MINIMIZE THE ANIMOSITY BETWEEN THE SEXES.

I do not mean we should stop all teasing or lose our sense of humor. Satan hates laughter. But we remember that the Creator thinks our world needs both men *and* women. We should remember, appreciate, and honor this. It takes no great genius to find flaws in representatives of either sex, or in the ways any of *us* perform our roles and act out our love. I happen to believe that men have been getting a worse rap than most of them deserve, both historically and currently, over the last fifty-plus years. Probably in the end it will be good for us – good to force us to speak more clearly about what we really care about and what we are trying to accomplish. In any case, men's problems do not have to blind us to all the genuine problems of women. A lot of being a man is making sure that women are safe and protected and provided for – whether they appreciate it or not. More and more we have left this up to the police, the courts, the schools, and the social agencies. That is not good enough, and it never will be. A man who does not help to protect the women betrays both men and God. Because so many of us have lost sight of this, we deserve all the flak that has been coming our way, even if most of it is off the mark. Yet we will never recover our true manhood if we do not also recover true community. Men cannot be men all alone. They have to know each other, trust each other, and work together or they cannot accomplish their tasks. Most men have known this for the past twenty-five thousand years, at least. But lately more and more of us have been forgetting. Today the church (and its counterparts, rightly understood) is our best hope. Other organizations are too narrow or too weak to build the necessary community. God still has to be the center, or nothing works right for very long.

In any case, Christianity knows that all of God's children are precious. "*In Christ there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek*" (Galatians 3:28) – at least not in terms of worth and value to the Creator. It is a broken world and the truth is never lived-out here like it ought to be, but we can know the truth and live toward it anyway. Those who think our history never honors this are mistaken, and from time to time they should be challenged – especially if they try to take us back to the way it never was. Women have been great Christian disciples from the

beginning. They were frequently the leaders, preachers, teachers, and prophets of the earliest churches. Men do not need to be in competition with women. Only when we forget or start worrying about who *we* are, do we have to be afraid of who *they* are. Even if a few women are born with as much testosterone as we have, so what? Most of them just want to work along with us, so who is the loser for that? If we keep our eyes on our real goals, we need all the help we can get.

II.) THE FAMILY IS IN TROUBLE.

We need to remember that the family has always been in trouble, and it always will be. One of the reasons it is always in trouble is because it is the basic building block of society. That means that any flaws within the family cause enormous mayhem. If we find some dysfunctional elements in the relationship between two people at a bar, in the aisle of the grocery store, or even in an office or shop or store – maybe that is not wonderful, but neither is it a crisis; they will get over it, and either we can leave or we don't have to be there for long. But what happens *in the family* has enormous impact – on the individuals, on the children, on the neighborhood, on the society – and often the repercussions go on for generations.

What is a father? Protect and provide ... or die trying. In our society, this simple code has tentacles everywhere. How do you protect and provide if the company is not strong, or if the business does not prosper, or if the product is no longer needed, or if technology moves past us? What about the temptations? What about people without honor who don't care about real value? And sometimes the community has to band together to solve problems too big for a few to handle. The real truth is, it is amazing that anything or anyone survives. As a matter of fact, nothing and nobody does – not for very long. Nevertheless, a father's task is to see to survival – and to train the children for survival – for as long and as well as he possibly can. What the father knows of survival, of course, depends on his relationship with God, and on his faith, his values, and his awareness of the principles of life.

When I say *family* is the basic building block of society, I, like most of you, think of the so-called nuclear family: a house, two parents, a couple of kids, maybe a dog or cat. We live in a dream world. "Family" for millions of people today is one parent and two or three kids who shuttle back and forth between two or three households – with several adults (who don't like each other) making decisions from different

premises, and none of them having authority enough to maintain much of anything. Parenting falls heavier and heavier on teachers, social workers, and judges. *Father's Day*?! Father has less authority in our society today than in any period heretofore in human history. If somebody doesn't like what father says or does or decides, then police, courts, and social workers will step in instantly, with or without real evidence or cause. Father is banned from the home automatically, and we will figure out the particulars later, maybe – if we ever get around to it.

The family – the “household” – of our heritage that you hear mentioned in Scripture was normally thirty to sixty people. (The patriarch; his wife or wives; their sons and their sons' wives and children; any unmarried daughters; the household servants; slaves; and usually some folk who had attached themselves to the household by making themselves useful and because it was nearly impossible to survive for long, male or female, outside of a household – a family.) This household worked together, protected each other, celebrated together – survived or died together. It was the *bet-ab* – the house of the father. (Abraham.) Other households in the region were loosely associated in what we would call a clan (*mispaha*). Normally you went to one of the other *bet-abs* in your clan to find daughters for your sons, and vice versa. And if big trouble came, the households would band together to fight, to share food, to gather enough money to redeem somebody out of slavery, or to buy land that had been claimed for debt, so it would not be lost to the clan.

Except for special celebrations, a woman's place was in the home – for protection, and because many depended on her there. Only remember: The home (household) was *fifty people and their land (nahala)*, which had to be planted, worked, harvested. If she went beyond the household, except for a wedding or the gathering of a Feast Day of special celebration and worship – what for? A man's place was also in the household, unless he was trading with another *bet-ab* or off fighting or hunting.

The language of the Bible is filled with comments about “We are the household of God” – the *bet-ab* of God. Israel is the *bet-Yahweh* – the family of Yahweh. It is a phrase of intimacy, safety, protection, value. Jesus caps it, calling God “Abba” – the most intimate, personal word for father: Daddy. The New Testament keeps proclaiming that through the Cross, those outside of God's household have now become members of God's household (*oikos*, Greek for *bet-ab*). And we have strong obligations to our kin in the household of God – the household of faith. Everybody used to know what that meant. We each do our part, help

each other, survive or die together. We are the *oikos*, the *bet-ab*, the household of God.

Many men have made the transitions through the ages and feel these patterns still alive in their lives. But more and more men are lost today because they do not feel part of any community of men whose very purpose is to become fathers: who band together with other fathers to make sure the *bet-ab* thrives and survives – that the women may be safe and the children may grow up healthy, strong, and full of faith. Obviously it was not always possible in the ancient world either. Protect and provide, or die trying. Sometimes we die trying. The armies of plague or famine or Assyria or ignorance march, and sometimes they are too big and strong. We die trying. And then everyone we love is at risk. So men are macho, competitive, have silly egos, and have a strange yearning to watch team sports where men still cooperate together to achieve the goal – even if they lose. I am not surprised that some women do not understand. What surprises me is how many *men* do not understand. Some of them are even apologetic. And what will it take to form a strong fellowship of Christian men in this church? Christ is not yet important enough to us? I don't believe that. But most of our men do not yet believe that *this* church is important enough to Christ to justify the necessary sacrifices of time and energy required to form the bonds of Christian friendship with other men. *That* is the problem. I hope we can correct it before we start losing our other advances for want of it.

III.) WHAT IS A FATHER'S OBLIGATION TODAY?

Aside from protect and provide, it used to be a Jewish father's duty to teach his children Torah. And to get his son a wife, and his daughter a husband. And to teach his son a trade. The mother taught the daughter a woman's skills. Why did Torah come first? Because if you did not know the traditions, the Covenant we have with God, who we are, and what we are trying to accomplish, none of the rest matters.

What are a father's obligations today, beyond protect and provide? Christmas presents, birthday presents, vacations, outings. Don't ever say anything about sex or marriage to the children. Try not to influence their choice of career, or their choice of a mate. Maybe say a little bit about staying out of trouble, but not much about morals, values, who we are, what we stand for or believe, or *why* we believe it.

Some of you do far better than that. I hope all of us soon will. Here is a list of the absolute essentials beyond protect and provide. You can do more and better, but this is a bare-bones list of the six absolute essentials:

1.) Pray for your wife or one of your children every single day, in a circular (round robin) pattern.

2.) Set a mantle of protection around your family, and renew it at least every third day.

3.) Make sure the family eats at least one meal together every day (when you are not away). And be the Master of Ceremonies at that meal. Make sure someone always says grace – often you. There is always conversation at the table. Everyone gets a chance to speak, and learns to listen. No one leaves the table unless excused by you.

4.) You are responsible to see that family traditions are established, maintained, and sometimes improved. This includes but is not limited to: Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's day, Halloween, and Memorial Day. It is the woman's job to enhance; do not make her waste time and energy to establish.

5.) Talk to each child one-on-one at least once a month, in a setting where you will not be interrupted. Tell them what you admire about them and in what ways you are proud of them. Tell them where they need to improve. Ask if there is anything troubling them, and if there is anything you can do to help them. Clarify what you expect of them. If your expectations are not changing every month, you are not paying attention to how fast they are growing.

6.) Be the primary disciplinarian of your children. Make discipline fun whenever possible. The purpose is to correct and improve – not to punish. But if what it takes to correct and improve is seen by them as punishment, so be it.

Finally, never pay any attention to what anybody says on Father's Day about what kind of father you are. Always be God's man. Live to please God. If you want to know how you are doing as a father, go to your prayers. Only the true Father knows what it means to be a father. And, God knows, it is no task for the faint-hearted.