

Parental Priveleges

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Date: 14 March 2010

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[0 : 0 0] Today is Mother's Day. Now, that may have passed you by. I appreciate that not all think that these days that we're given and sometimes feel are imposed upon us are of great importance.

Certainly in the past in Scotland, Mother's Day was not a big deal. Just to share, anecdotally, how it's very different in Peru, whereas many of you know we have served in the past to fail to preach a suitable sermon on Mother's Day in the congregation there in Moyabamba would be akin to forgetting about the birth of Jesus at Christmas or the resurrection on Resurrection Sunday. It was a must that there be some suitable sermon related to the theme of Mother's Day. And while that seems to have influenced my psyche and so a suitable, I trust, sermon has been prepared. Now, in the passage that we've read there in 1 Thessalonians, and I'd invite you to have your Bibles open there in 1 Thessalonians 2. In that passage, Paul compares himself to a mother caring for her little children. He also compares himself to a father dealing with his own children. We notice that there in the passage that we've read. And this morning we want to learn from these images that Paul employs, the image of a mother, a nursing, caring mother, and of a father.

But before we do so, we have to comment briefly on the background that places in context Paul's employing of these parental images. It's very clear from the reading of the letter, and indeed even the reading of the portion of the letter that we've read already this morning, it's very clear that there were those who were critical of Paul's ministry, that there were those who were questioning his integrity and unfavorably comparing him to others, perhaps comparing him to others who were guilty of unworthy motives in the work that they did. And in this part of the letter, Paul identifies the nature of the criticism or perhaps gossip. We don't know for sure what form this criticism took. He identifies it, and he demonstrates himself to be not guilty of the charges, if you wish, that are being leveled against him. We can just notice briefly those things that he makes reference to. And though he doesn't explicitly say, people are accusing me of these things, I think it's very clear that this is what is behind the references he makes. For example, we notice there in verse 3, he speaks of how his work was not from impure motives. He notices also that in the work that he did, he didn't employ a trickery.

He notices in verse 4, or notes in verse 4, that it was not his intention to please men. He was not a man-pleaser, as some would perhaps accuse him. Rather, he was seeking to please God. In verse 5, he reminds them, you know, we never use flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed. So, there's a series of implied criticisms that were being made of Paul, and Paul makes it clear, this is not true of me.

And indeed, he says, you know that it's not true, for you know me. You were witnesses of the manner in which I conducted myself amongst you. But the basic defense of Paul, if we can call it a defense, is not so much saying that he wasn't these things, though he does say that, that he wasn't guilty of these charges. His basic defense is rather to compare himself to a loving mother and a dedicated father in his ministry to the Thessalonians. He says, I wasn't like all these things. No, quite the reverse.

[5 : 03] Rather, I was among you as a loving mother and as a dedicated father. And in verses 6 to 12, we have these two images employed by Paul, the image of a mother and the image of a father. And what I want to do this morning is to explore what it is that we learn from the manner in which Paul uses these images. What do we learn about motherhood and about fatherhood? This is our primary concern.

Now, before we launch in to consider this, it is only right to make clear that though our primary concern this morning is to discover what we learn about motherhood, about fatherhood, this is not Paul's primary concern in employing these images. He is simply using these images to vividly express the nature of his ministry among and concern for the Thessalonians. He is not giving a lecture on parenting. That's not his purpose. Rather, he is simply using these pictures to illustrate another important truth for him. But he does.

In the passing, in the passing, as it were, by employing these images of a mother and of a father, he does provide us with instruction on the subject, even though that isn't his primary intention.

And we do recognize that. Perhaps to illustrate, and it's maybe not necessary to illustrate, but bear with me to illustrate what I'm saying here. If you were watching the rugby yesterday in what was so very nearly a victory for Scotland, or indeed, depending on your nationality, we could say so very nearly a victory for England. But anyway, if you were watching the rugby yesterday, imagine if the commentator had said, which he didn't, but imagine if he had said something like this, Ewan Murray is as strong as an ox.

Now, would the purpose of the commentator have been to tell us something, to teach us something about oxen? Well, evidently not. The purpose of that comment would be to tell us something about the physical strength of said rugby player. But in the passing, he would, in fact, be telling us something about oxen, that they are very strong beasts. Not his primary intention, but in the passing, as it were.

[7 : 48] If anybody who was listening didn't know that, as I presume most people would, but if they didn't, then they'd be able to learn something about oxen. So with the parental imagery used by Paul on this occasion. It is not his primary intention, I repeat, to lecture on parenting. And yet, in the passing, he does helpfully throw some light on the subject. And it is this light that we are specifically interested in today.

So, in summary, it's a very, if you wish, modest objective that we have, to notice these images and see what light they shed on the subject of being a mother, of being a father. And so, as we proceed, we will learn about being a mother, what is involved in being a mother. We will learn, indeed, what is involved in being a father. We will also learn about the nature of Christian leadership, which is Paul's primary concern. And indeed, I think the principles, or some of the principles, can be applied even more broadly to the nature of Christian service and love one for another. As a further note of caution, we should stress that given what we have said already, Paul is not expounding on the subject of parenting, and so we ought not to expect, nor will we find, exhaustive instruction on the subject. Had that been his purpose, had it been a lecture on the subject, then maybe we could have hoped for a very systematic, exhaustive treatment. But that is not what Paul is about, and so we won't find here exhaustive teaching on the subject. Let that also be clear before we proceed.

But now, let us proceed. In the verses that we've already highlighted and read, but particularly from verse 6 through to verse 12, we have then these two images employed by Paul, that of a mother and of a father. And while it would be difficult to be certain that Paul has these images in mind in all that he says in these verses. You know, we've already read the passage, but if we were to read again these verses from verse 6 to verse 12, we'll find the images of a mother and of a father, but it's maybe not altogether clear if throughout these verses Paul has the images in mind, or whether only in parts of this section. That is not altogether clear. I am going to proceed on what I think is the reasonable assumption that he does have in mind. But he does have the image of a mother in mind in verses 6 through to verse 9, and then from verses 10 to 12 he switches and employs the image of a dedicated father to illustrate his ministry and relationship with the Thessalonians. Another thing that we should say before looking at the images themselves and what they teach us is that what Paul says, or what light Paul sheds on the subject of being a mother and of being a father, what he says about mothers, for example,

I don't think we should necessarily understand that what is being said is exclusively true of mothers to the exclusion of fathers. So, we'll notice some things that he says about mothers. It's not to be understood that Paul is saying, well, that's only true of mothers and not of fathers. Maybe particularly true of mothers, but it can also be true of fathers, and equally when he turns to the image of a father.

I think that will become more evident once we proceed to actually see what he does actually say and how he uses these images in this passage. What is clear, and I think this in itself is instructive, though we're not going to develop it or dwell on it at any great length, what is interesting is that Paul simply takes as a given that there are distinct roles for mothers and for fathers. No doubt a great deal of overlap, and yet he just takes as a given that there are distinct roles. And I say that's significant because we live in a day when many would challenge that affirmation, and many would say that there aren't any distinct roles for mothers and for fathers, and Paul evidently has a different point of view. Let's look then at the first of the two images.

[12:57] Paul comparing himself to a mother, and we'll read again from verse 6. We read there, We were not looking for praise from men nor from you or anyone else. As apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you, not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship. We worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God. Like a mother caring for her little children. I think in these verses, and again, working on the assumption that all that we've just read revolves around, as it were, this image of the caring, nurturing, loving mother, I think we can notice three things about motherhood, about being a mother in these verses. The first one is a mother's motivation. Then we'll notice a mother's manner, how a mother performs the duties that she has, and then a mother's task. What is this role that a mother has towards her children? So, a mother's motivation, a mother's manner, and a mother's task.

Firstly, a mother's motivation. What is it that motivates a mother? What is it that drives a mother? What is at the heart of her motherhood, as it were, that Paul usefully employs to illustrate his relationship with the Thessalonians? Well, at the heart of a mother's motivation, it is clear, is love. In verse 8, we loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you. All that we did, our sharing the gospel with you, our ministering to you, our pastoring of you, the motivation, it was love. We loved you so much like a mother loves her little children, as if Paul is saying, how can I demonstrate to you how deep my love is? Well, I can think of no better way than saying that my love is like the love of a mother to her children. This was Paul's motivation for serving the believers in Thessalonica, because he loved them. He loved them like a mother loves her children.

And this is at the heart of being a mother, the love that a mother has for her children, that deep and heartfelt love. This is what we, who have the privilege of enjoying that love, are grateful for, and why not celebrate, particularly on a day like this, though we don't need or should not need a specific day for that. A mother's motivation is the deep love that she has for her children.

And in that regard, before moving on, I would just say something, perhaps I hope that will serve as encouragement. We are going to move on to fathers, and so I will be pointing the finger at myself in due course. But as we think about mothers, what I would say, if as a mother you sometimes feel you're struggling, maybe you think, I'm not a very good mother, I'm a hopeless mother, I don't do a good job. What I would say to you is this, if you love your children, then that is the heart of the matter.

Yes, no doubt you make mistakes as a mother, as fathers also we make many mistakes, but at the heart of who you are is this truth, that you love your children. And if you love your children, then you can be sure that God will bless that love and will help you to, in love, perform the duties that you have been given by God. So a mother's motivation is love, but also Paul's employing of this image which throws light on the matter of the manner in which a mother performs her duties. And particularly we notice one or two things in that regard in verses 7 and then in verse 9. We read in verse 7, as apostles of Christ, we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you. First of all, this expression, we were gentle among you. The contrast, it would seem, is with the word burden.

[17 : 31] Paul is saying we could have been a burden to you. We had the right. We're apostles. We could have demanded of you. It was within our rights to do so, but we chose not to. We chose rather to be gentle among you, like a mother. We were gentle among you. Not burdensome, but gentle. And here what this points to is, it's not simply a matter of what you do, but the manner in which you do it. A mother is engaged, in the instruction of her children. A mother is engaged in correcting her children. A mother will be engaged, as a father also, in, when necessary, the punishing of her children. These are all tasks that need to be performed. But the manner in which even these tasks are to be performed is to be molded by, or instructed by, or instructed by this matter of gentleness. Paul was gentle among the Thessalonians, like a mother caring for her little children. It may be also instructive to note how Paul speaks of himself as being gentle among you. He was amongst them. He wasn't lording it over them. Yes, he was an apostle. Yes, he could have, if he had so chosen, lorded it over them. He had a God-given authority.

But he says, no, I was gentle among you. I didn't cling to my authority to impose my will upon you, but among you I was gentle. So, too, a mother, and indeed a father. As parents, we do enjoy, we have been given God-given authority in our homes. We have a responsibility to exercise that authority. And yet, this language of Paul, comparing himself to a mother gently caring for her children, warns us against an abuse of that authority, or an exercising of that authority in a despotic, or in an aloof manner. The manner in which a mother deals with and tends to her children is with gentleness. But there is more in this passage that we can notice. In verse 9, we note another aspect of a mother's manner, if you wish, and it is this, that her work is one of sacrificial giving of herself on behalf of her children. Paul says that that was so of himself, like a mother in dealing with the

Thessalonians. Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship. We work night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone. And he goes on. His was a sacrificial giving of himself. He wasn't simply performing a function, communicating a truth, and saying, well, job done. No, he gave of himself in his service to the believers. Like a mother. A mother who gives of herself in nurturing, and in raising, and in loving, and in attending, and in caring for her children. It involves toil and hardship.

If as mothers you are often tired, well, yes, that is the way it is. It is a very tiring job. It is a very physically demanding job, an emotionally draining task that God has given you. It is not easy. Toil and hardship. Night and day. Especially those who have small children. And indeed, the image Paul uses of a mother caring for little children, caring for infants. Night and day. That is the job description. 24-7.

Middle of the night. There is the need to care for and attend to our children. Those of us who are children, and we all are sons or daughters. Those of us who are husbands, it would do well to recognize and be grateful for such a motherly sacrifice. So, a mother's manner, gentle, gentle, humble, not imposing her authority, though she enjoys authority, and sacrificial.

[21 : 56] But we said also that in these verses we have not only light cast on the matter of a mother's motivation, a mother's manner, but also a mother's task. Very specifically, in the image used by Paul, he speaks of a mother caring for her little children. This is the specific task that is mentioned, to care for her children. It's not all that a mother does, but it is this that Paul makes reference to. And it's interesting to note that the word that Paul uses literally means or is derived from the idea of keeping somebody warm, keeping warm. And that is, I'm sure you'd agree, a beautiful maternal picture of tender care and protection of keeping warm your children.

The picture of a hen gathering her chicks under her wings comes to mind, of caring, of keeping warm. A mother is to be her child's refuge, to whom the child turns in time of trouble, in times of fear, in times of difficulty. The child turns to her mother, because the mother is to care for her child.

The task of caring, even if we simply limit ourselves to that word, the task of caring is, of course, multifaceted and varied. To feed and to clothe, to educate, to nurse in sickness, to drive, to football or to hockey, and we could go on and on and on. Caring is a broad task. It's a big job that God has given to mothers. And indeed it is so. Being a mother, and those who are mothers will know this much better than those of us who are not. Being a mother is a big job. It requires time commitment and dedication. And I would encourage all parents, father and mother together, if indeed that is your situation, to ensure that such time is being given, the time necessary to care for your children. It would be wrong and unwise for me to be prescriptive on this matter, and carte blanche draw the conclusion that all mothers should dedicate themselves exclusively to their children while they are at a certain age or stage of development, and so forgo paid employment. And I'm not saying that that is what all mothers should necessarily do. What I would say, and what I would counsel, is against imagining that these maternal duties that Paul casts light on, these duties and privileges can ordinarily be delegated to others. This is what a mother has been called by God to do, to care for her little children. Now, before we move to consider the second image of a father, do take note that much of what is said of mothers also applies to fathers. We have stated already, and we insist with Paul, that mothers and fathers indeed do have a distinct God-given role. But in the matters that we've noticed even so far this morning, we can also quite legitimately state that fathers also should be motivated by love in their care of their children, that the manner in which they deal with their children should be gentle and sacrificial, and that they also, as fathers, should be involved in the care and nurture of their children.

Before we do move on to consider the second image that Paul employs of a father, it is worth remembering and noting, though it's not our primary concern, that Paul's primary purpose in using this image is to illustrate the manner in which he, as a Christian leader, relates to and serves the believers. And so, in all that we've said, there is a challenge and an application to those who do, amongst us, exercise leadership in this congregation as to the manner in which that leadership is exercised. I leave each to apply that as appropriate.

But the second image, moving on quickly, like a father, Paul goes on in describing the manner in which he dealt with the Thessalonians in defending his ministry against the attack to which it is being subjected. He says, you know, not only was I like a mother, I was like a father. In verse 10, you are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you who believe.

[26 : 54] For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory like a father. And again, we can notice three elements that are highlighted by what Paul says with regard to what is involved in being a father, and the three elements are these. There is a father's goal, a father's authority, and a father's task. First of all, a father's goal. In the second half of verse 12, if we begin with Paul's concern for the Thessalonians, the ultimate concern of Paul for the Thessalonians was that they would live lives worthy of God. This is his concern. This is what he explicitly says there at the end of the verse, that you would live lives worthy of God. This is what Paul wants for them.

And he acts like a father towards them precisely with that intention and goal in mind. In order that he would help them live lives worthy of God, he is like a father to them. And I ask the question, and it's a reasonable question, is the goal of a Christian father any different? Is this not our great desire for our children? That they would live lives worthy of God, as those who, as covenant children, very especially, have been called into his kingdom and glory? This is our great desire, is it not?

Christian father, is this not your highest desire for your daughter, for your son? Not academic success, laudable though that is, not sporting prowess, exciting as it is to witness it, not a glittering career, though there's nothing wrong with that. Rather, as Christian fathers, our ultimate desire and goal is that our children would live lives worthy of God. And if that is so, that will be evident in the manner in which you father your children. Necessarily, that will be reflected in the way in which you conduct yourself as a father. This is a father's goal. But also, Paul makes reference to a father's authority. If we are right in presuming that from verse 10 through to verse 12, Paul has in mind the father image, even though it is only explicitly mentioned in verse 11, if in verse 10 he already has that in mind, then we can notice what is found in verse 10 as a description of a father's authority.

Now, we'll note in a moment that part of the task, sorry, that part of the task of a father is to correct and exhort his children. Just in one moment we'll notice that. But the question that we make at this stage is this, will they pay any attention? I've often spoken to fathers and they say, well, my kids don't pay any notice to me. They don't obey me. They do what they want. Many children don't pay any attention to a father's exhortation and correction and instruction. What will determine if our children listen and pay heed to what we say? Well, in great measure it will be a function of the authority that we have. And I'm not talking here in the first instance about that intrinsic authority that is ours by the very fact of being fathers, though that is true, but the authority that is earned by the lives that we live before our children. You see, Paul had authority to correct, to exhort the Thessalonians. Why?

Because we read in verse 10, you are witnesses, you know, and so is God of how holy, righteous, and blameless we were among you. That is why they listen to him. That is why they pay attention to what he says. That is why they are willing to be corrected by him. Why? Because they see in Paul a man who is holy, a man who is righteous, a man who is blameless, and so his instruction carries authority. And so, fathers, I say to you, if your desire is that your children would live lives worthy of God, and if you recognize that for that to be so, it is necessary for them to listen and to pay heed to what you say. And what about your authority to instruct them? What about your authority to exhort them? Are you a holy man? Are you a man who is concerned to live a life worthy of God?

[31 : 33] Are you a righteous man? Are you careful to do that which is right? Are you a man who is careful to avoid doing all that which is wrong and forbidden by God? Because your children are the first witnesses of the life that you live. Our children are the first to see our hypocrisy between the discourse that we have, the instruction that we give, and the life that we live. And so, Paul helpfully reminds us and challenges us. Yes, you have authority, but part of that authority is earned by the life that you live.

But then, thirdly, in what Paul says, and in Paul's employing of this paternal image, like a father, he also highlights for us a father's task. Three verbs are used by Paul to describe his father-like treatment of the treatment of the Thessalonians. And before we turn to just notice them without developing them in any detail, we just make two general points. First is that there is an assumption, and even the fact that Paul simply assumes this is telling, the assumption that fathers should and must be actively involved in the bringing up of their children, and that they do have a distinct role to play. Just a general point. But also, secondly, note how the language of Paul points to the importance of, as fathers, dealing personally and individually with our children without favoritism.

In verse 11, we read, For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children. There was a personal, individual concern for each of the believers in Thessalonica, and so as fathers for the children that God has given us. Working fathers, take note. You are very busy. You have many duties to perform, and yet that does not free you from your God-given duty as a father towards your children.

Children, you must not, we must not delegate the task of parenting to our wives. You have a distinct role that only you can play. Now, we know that in a world where there is loss and where families don't always work out as we would wish, mothers often have to take on that role. But there is no father, and we pray God's strength to such. Equally, there can be occasions when fathers have to take on a mother's role. That is so. But where there is indeed a mother and a father, then let each play the part that they have been given. What are the tasks of a father? Well, we notice these three words that are used. Encouraging. A father deals with his own children. Encouraging. It's interesting that Paul begins with this duty to encourage. We might say, ah, he's turning to a father. Now he'll talk about correcting and instructing and punishing. It is no. As a father encourages his children. This is not a mother's job to encourage. It is also a father's job. As fathers, we are to be encouragers of our children. They are to think of us and consider us as those who encourage them. What else does Paul say?

Encouraging. Comforting. Again, comforting. Interesting. It's not mother's work. It's not woman's work. To comfort. No, this is a father's job as well. To comfort his children when they have problems and difficulties and concern. Encouraging, comforting, and then thirdly, urging. Urging his children. Paul urged the Thessalonians like a father. This is a serious word to describe a serious task. And the word can be variously translated to solemnly implore, to charge, to urge. Now, in the case of Paul and the Thessalonians, this may well refer to his solemnly urging the believers as to the demands of the gospel life, of rebuking them when they fell short. So, with fathers, we must encourage, we must comfort, but we must also implore and rebuke when necessary. And to the fathers amongst us,

[36 : 02] I would ask, do you do this? Do you fulfill this God-given task of rebuking your children, of imploring with them as to the manner in which they live? If we truly desire that they would live lives worthy of God, then we cannot abdicate this responsibility. So, being a father is also a big job. How do we match up? But perhaps as we think of as fathers, what's the best thing we can do for those of us who are blessed with wives? And we think of a day such as this on Mother's Day.

We can give them flowers, we can give them gifts, but the best service we can render to our wives as fathers is to fulfill our distinct role as fathers. So, there's much to consider then for fathers, but also, as we've noted, Paul's primary concern is to illustrate his own Christian ministry and how Christian ministers should indeed engage in this ministry. Christian leaders, we should all, like a father, be involved in this work. Our ultimate goal is that God's people might live lives worthy of God. Our authority not hanging on the fragile thread solely of our office, but grounded in holy and righteous lives as we would fulfill our God-given task of encouraging, comforting, and urging the people of God. So, let us be up and doing. Let us pray.