

We're nearing the end of a teaching series about how a commitment to Jesus necessitates a commitment to loving relationships. Two weeks ago Pastor Keith talked about how God has made us to be spiritual family or household through our common connection with Jesus. Somehow in there, Pastor Keith also found a way to highlight how he would make a great model for a fireman's calendar! There is some really good stuff in that message, believe me – I encourage you to download his message on our website.

Today, I want to speak about the importance of spiritual fathers and mothers in the life of our church family. If our church is a spiritual family, then it needs mothers and fathers. There is an incredible need today for men and women who actively look to spiritually raise up others who are younger in their faith – those who act like a father or a mother to help and champion others to grow into maturity in the things of God. Because spiritual maturity is not automatic. It happens through the influence of the loving relationships we find in God's forever family.

What does it actually mean to spiritually father or mother someone? That is a really good question, especially when you take note of the fact that Jesus specifically told his disciples never to allow themselves to be called 'father' in the religious sense.

In Matthew 23:8-12 As he spoke to his disciples, Jesus said, 8 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. 11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Now, at first glance, you might come to the conclusion that taking on the posture and role of a spiritual mother or father is something that Jesus is actually against. You could mistake Jesus' words as being about doing away with the need for mentors and spiritual authority. But on a closer look what Jesus condemns is the desire for the status of the title, not the act of fathering itself. The key to understanding the

heart of what Jesus is saying is found in the last line as he says, "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Unlike today, in Jesus' day, there was a great desire to be a spiritual leader. A lot of honour was heaped on those who were called Rabbi, Teacher, or father in a religious sense. Today, being a pastor is sometimes the last thing you want to be called. When I meet people for the first time who aren't familiar with church, I rarely tell them I'm a pastor straight away because I want them to first know that I'm a human being. Once I do tell them, they usually give you a kind of blank stare as they absorb the shock and then ask their first question: 'Oh, but what's your real job!'

Today the issue is the need to restore honour to those who serve to spiritually mentor and guide our lives, as we follow them as they seek to do their best to follow Christ. I'm not talking just about pastors but also elders, home group leaders, ministry coordinators, and those mentoring people in God's heart in all kinds of informal ways.

What Jesus was warning his disciples about was wanting to be a spiritual mentor for the wrong reasons. Jesus is against seeking the status of a religious title. And his warning comes as part of a much longer judgment Jesus makes against the example of the religious leaders of his day, namely the Pharisees. As Jesus takes down their false spirituality, what you find in Matthew chapter 23 is a long list of what a spiritual father or mother shouldn't be. Jesus essentially says don't be like the Pharisees who: don't practice what they preach, do everything for public show, love the status of titles and position, are legalistic, are without justice or mercy, and look good on the outside while actually being corrupt and full of sin on the inside.

In this righteous tirade, Jesus essentially says, 'Don't approach being a spiritual mentor like a Pharisee, who's out to make a name for themselves. Have a very different centre of spiritual gravity. Instead, follow me as I follow the genuine and loving heart of my father in heaven.' Jesus had a very different centre of spiritual gravity; his life centered on his father.

Today is Fathers Day, a day we specifically set aside to think about and celebrate our dads. Even though none of our dads are perfect, today's a day that for many of us brings memories of our dad's love accompanied by a deep sense of gratitude for the part he has played in our life. But for others, today can be a painful reminder of a difficult relationship, a reminder of someone who hasn't been there for us in the way we needed. But whether the thought of our dad brings a feeling of joy or a sense of pain, or probably both, it's clear that the role of a father is a very special one that no one else can fill, aside from one person, God himself.

Jesus was about one person. As you look at Jesus' life, you see that he was all about the Father. Unlike the Pharisees who were consumed with themselves, Jesus was consumed with his father. In a way, every day was Fathers Day for Jesus in the sense that his entire life revolved around his Father. When questioned about why he did the things he did and said the things he said, Jesus explained, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (John 5:19-20). A little later in the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work...the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me" (John 14:10,31).

Jesus' whole earthly life was about fulfilling his father's plan to reconnect you and I to God through the forgiveness of the cross. Jesus coming to the earth to be our example and then dying on the cross to be the sacrifice for our sin was the father's plan. John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life."

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

For Jesus, it was all about the father. He lived and died to carry out his father's perfect will. Jesus' entire ministry was about being our

way, our sole point of access, to his father. Jesus lived to demonstrate his father's love by healing people, teaching people, and giving up his life for people in order to lead people to his father's heart. As we place our belief and trust in Jesus, you and I are made a daughter or son of God by the Spirit.

This is the focus of a spiritual mentor. Being a spiritual father or mother is to be like Jesus, where we live to demonstrate God's love, constantly talk about and point to our heavenly father's love, and look for opportunities to teach people how to come into relationship with him. We need to become spiritual fathers and mothers to those around us who need someone to help them begin to relate to God as the loving and active father that he is, just as Jesus did.

Through Jesus, we need to come to the knowledge deep within our hearts that God is our true father and then help others do the same.

Let's pause for a moment to pray....

Growing up I was very blessed to have had the chance to attend a great youth ministry throughout my high school years. The youth ministry I attended wasn't very large as far as numbers go, but it had something really special: dedicated adult youth staff who poured into young people. I was one of those young people. One volunteer youth staff was named Steve Hollige, who was in his early 30's at the time. He had only been a Christian for a few years, but Steve understood the value of having God in your life, coming from a rougher background. Steve poured into me as a spiritual mentor. He was honest about his struggles and continually modeled for me what it meant to trust and pursue God. Steve got me a job, had the chance to work alongside me, and did his best to be an example to me of someone who loves God in the workplace.

Steve was always looking for opportunities to have spiritual conversations with me and to challenge me to go deeper in my relationship with God. I remember on one occasion Steve inviting me to join him for a day of prayer and fasting. I had heard about fasting and read about it in the Bible, but I didn't know anyone who actually

did it. I thought that that was only for fanatics. So, at first, I thought it was a joke. But I soon realized he was serious. So, having been given the invitation, I took him up on the offer. It was the first time I had ever fasted and sought God for a whole Saturday. Let me tell you that as an adolescent male, going without food for an entire Saturday, let alone praying for the day, was a miraculous event! Steve became a bit of a spiritual father to me during my high school years. He was an instrumental part of God's plan of growing my faith.

I have been incredibly blessed to have had several mentors in my life who have poured into me, helping me to follow them as they have been doing their best to follow Christ.

I served as a youth pastor in Burlington, Ontario, for several years. In my first few years there, I ran at an incredible pace, out weeknights and weekends, involved in Sunday mornings – and I loved every minute of it. God was using me, and I was having a lot of fun. But God soon began to point out to me in some painful ways that I was often leaving him out of the action. As God began to speak to me and deal with some of the inner deficiencies in my relationship with him, my role at the church simultaneously expanded with some transitional responsibilities that were demanding a deeper level of trust and faith. I found myself in a season of life and a season of ministry that required me to go places with God where I had never been.

It was in this season of growth that God led me to a man named Russ Delmar who would become a great mentor and friend. Russ and his family were relatively new to the church. Russ had a depth with God that immediately drew me. He also had a killer South African accent that I thought was so cool. There's nothing like listening to someone pray with a South African or UK type accent. When I pray, it's good and I know God hears me. But when you hear a South African pray, you get this feeling like you're in the throne room with God!

Looking back now, I realize that Russ had been taking note of the way God was taking me deeper and recognized my need for support in helping to serve the church in a greater way. So, Russ began fathering

me in the Spirit a little. He would join me for prayer meetings, share with me some of the things God had done in his life, invited Linda and I over for dinner. Russ encouraged me and most of all kept challenging me to let God take me deeper in my life and in my ministry – not to be satisfied. Russ even introduced me to one of *his* mentors, who was a pastor friend of his from his former church.

Basically, Russ saw me as a young man in the faith that needed a mentor in the things of God. Russ wasn't a business mentor, an organizational coach, although I also had some of that. And he was more than a prayer partner. He was like a spiritual dad for me at a very pivotal time in my life and in my ministry. His focus was passing on the depth of relationship with God that he had begun to experience. That's what a spiritual father or mother does.

Since that time, God has moved Linda and I here to Vancouver and shortly after God moved us, God then moved Russ and his wife to Calgary through a job change. My time with Russ wasn't very long, just a couple of years, but the impact that he has had on me has been immense.

I want to be like Steve Hollige and Russ Delmar. I want to be like these two men who took time in a season of their life to pour into me. to help father me into a greater relationship with God.

My wife, Linda, is still in regular contact with the woman who helped lead her to Jesus at 17. Her name is Rhonda Wilson. She is a Christian & Missionary Alliance partner missionary in Manila, Philippines, serving in a women's shelter and a women's micro finance ministry. As a young church intern, Rhonda, came to serve in Linda's home church, taught her about Jesus, and has been showing her ever since how to live to demonstrate the father's love. They have a deep connection. On the one hand, their lives are very different, but on the other hand, there are some definite traits in Linda's walk with God that reflect the DNA of Rhonda's walk with God because Linda has been a daughter of Rhonda in the Lord.

Many of you have a similar story, someone who has come alongside you that God has used to help raise you and grow you, to tell you there's more of God for you. They may have even been younger in age than you. It's not about physical age, it's about passing on things, insights, you've begun to experience with God that someone younger in faith has yet to take hold of. The Apostle Paul would often send his protégé, Timothy, on ahead of him in his travels. Paul told Timothy, "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity"(1 Timothy 4:12).

Maybe you've never had someone come alongside you that way – yet. So, who are those people around you now that you may already know that you could begin to connect with, where you take the initiative in the relationship? Begin to pray, that God would send someone and then have the courage to ask someone to pass on to you the things you see God doing in their life.

Let me also encourage you this morning to begin to pray that God would begin to make you into a mentor, a spiritual father, a spiritual mother, that God would give you a desire to see others impacted by the same love of God you have begun to experience.

That can sound intimidating. Unfortunately, there can a perception that to be a spiritual mentor to someone means you have to be a bit of a guru. You have to speak in metaphors, have a psychology or a theology certificate, and spend hours, or even days, in contemplative prayer!

That's just not the case. Remember that Jesus by-passed the professionals, the Pharisees, whose knowledge got more in the way than helped. Jesus mentored fishermen, tax revenue agents, and doctors to become disciples in his father's ministry. These ordinary people, some uneducated, became apostles, spiritual fathers of an incredible move of God under the direction of the Spirit. It is about having something with God to give away but it's not about being an expert guru type of person.

The simplest definition of a spiritual mother or father is someone who is actively looking to come alongside someone younger in faith to pour into them what they have begun to experience with God themselves. Probably the greatest example of a spiritual father we can find in the scriptures is the Apostle Paul. As Paul moved from one place to another, he formed a special bond with those he introduced to Jesus. His heart was to look out for and help grow into maturity those God had given him opportunity to serve. He often wasn't able to be around physically on account of his travel or imprisonment. But he would write to those he was mentoring and fathering in the Lord.

To the new believers in the Greek city of Thessalonica, Paul wrote, "6 We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. 7 Instead, we were like young children[a] among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, 8 so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well.

9 Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, 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 to you. 10 You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. 11 For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, 12 encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory." 1 Thessalonians 2:6-12

Paul reminded them, that like a mother or a father, he and his ministry team cared for them, shared their life with them, and lived to be an example: 'holy, righteous, and blameless.' Notice, Paul doesn't say 'perfect.' Paul was not perfect. All of us have the potential to become great mentors who know the Father's heart. But none of us are Jesus. Like any biological parent, a spiritual mentor will fail us, at times disappoint us, even unintentionally hurt us. Mentors are always imperfect followers doing their best in the grace of God. Paul understood this when he said, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ"(1 Corinthians 11:1).

As any good dad, or parent, Paul sought to mentor these younger believers in three ways: 1) He *encouraged* them, knowing the determination it takes to follow Jesus. 2) He took opportunity to *comfort* them, understanding that following Jesus doesn't come without pain. And 3) He *urged* them to keep going, to live a life worthy of God.

How many of you here this morning would love to have someone championing and mentoring you in your walk with God like that?

How many of you would love to become a mentor like that?

In a few moments, we are going to come to the communion elements to celebrate the Lord's Supper, remembering what Jesus did, the ultimate sacrifice he made, to bring us to the father.

But just before we do, the most important thing a spiritual father or mother needs to know is that they themselves are a child of God. In the Book of Romans, chapter 8, Paul tells us that as we put our faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, enabling us to cry out to God as 'Abba, father' that we would know the love of God in the depth our being.

Jesus said that just as the Father sent him, his Father would also send his Spirit. He said, "the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Pray.

Speaking as a good spiritual father, Paul wrote these words about celebrating the Lord's Supper:

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

"**23** For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for

you; do this in remembrance of me.' **25** In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' **26** For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."