

The Paternal Aspect of Godly Leadership

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:10–12

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The pattern of servant leadership didn't originate in the New Testament. It was woven into the fabric of creation, all the way back to the original relationship the Lord designed and established between Adam and Eve.

Paul emphasizes that cooperative relationship when he described his own care for the church at Thessalonica. Yesterday we looked at the maternal side of Paul's leadership. But obviously, the affectionate, self-sacrificial traits of motherhood don't exhaust what it means to be a leader. The other side of the leadership coin is equally important, and often what people associate with leadership.

While true leadership exhibits nurturing, maternal care, it is anything but effeminate. There's an indispensable balance to the equation, and it is embodied in manly attributes such as strength, valor, and boldness. Accordingly, as the apostle Paul describes his own approach to leadership, he compares himself not only to a gentle nursing mother, but also to a watchful, concerned father. In 1 Thessalonians 2:10-12 he writes:

You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.

Paul sets the mother-father analogies side by side deliberately. He is stressing the importance of a balanced approach to leadership. He is also vividly affirming the most vital principle of Jesus' teaching about leadership: that the tyrant who wants to exalt himself and be served rather than care for his people is no true leader at all (Matthew 20:25-28; 23:8-12).

What do tenderhearted mothers and loving fathers have in common? The motive that drives them is a desire for their children's maturity and well-being. A good father is no less self-giving than a nursing mother. But his role is different. The mother tenderly nurtures the infant; the father is the principal guardian and guide.

It ought to be obvious to all but the most determined feminist that the differences between men and women go beyond merely physical distinctions. Characteristics like compassion, gracefulness, and gentleness are commonly found in greater abundance among women; while qualities like courage, stamina, and strength of conviction are the hallmarks of masculinity.

Scripture recognizes and affirms these gender differences. In 1 Corinthians 16:13, Paul writes, "Act like men." The full verse makes his meaning clear: "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong." Watchfulness, strong convictions, and strength are the kinds of characteristics Paul has in mind. The context indicates the strength Paul has in mind is not merely physical strength but

toughness of character, courage and stamina, fortitude. Those are of course the very features human societies have traditionally associated with masculinity.

And those are likewise vital characteristics of every truly godly father. When Paul speaks of the paternal aspect of leadership in 1 Thessalonians 2:11, such qualities are precisely what he has in mind.

Paul introduces the father analogy by reminding the Thessalonians how he and his associates in ministry had behaved in their midst: “You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers” (v. 10). Paul’s motives were clearly not self-serving. All could see that his goal was the advancement of the gospel among the Thessalonians, not personal gain for himself at their expense. His conduct reflected the highest level of holiness and integrity.

That is every father’s duty: to set the standard of integrity in the family. That is also every spiritual leader’s responsibility.

Paul uses three significant adjectives in that statement: “holy and righteous and blameless.” *Holiness* has to do with the purity of one’s life before God. *Righteousness* has a dual focus, encompassing one’s duty to God as well as one’s duty to fellow humans. *Blamelessness* refers to one’s reputation—how others perceive his character. Paul’s behavior among the Thessalonians was the very model of what every leader’s character should be: before God, holy; before God and men, righteous; and before men, blameless.

But being a true leader (and a good father) is not just modeling; it’s also teaching. Therefore, Paul says, “Like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

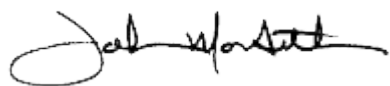
Like a wise father, the godly spiritual leader lives the virtuous pattern his children are supposed to follow. But he doesn’t stop with that. He carefully instructs and exhorts them—individually when necessary. He also encourages them and helps them along.

There is obviously a large element of authority in the father’s role, but a godly father doesn’t wield that power in an authoritarian way. He is patient, encouraging, and personally involved with his children, showing them love in the process—even when it is necessary to rebuke or discipline them.

This balance is absolutely crucial to all spiritual leadership. Christ embodied it. Paul modeled it for us. Every spiritual leader ought to aspire to maintain the balance, and not lean too far to one side or the other. The true spiritual leader is at once tender and loving like a nursing mother, as well as firm and courageous like a confident father. He maintains on the one hand a concern for the person, on the other hand a concern for the process; on the one hand a concern for kindness, on the other hand a concern for control; on the one hand a concern for affection, on the other hand a concern for authority. He is on the one hand embracing, on the other hand exhorting; on the one hand cherishing, on the other hand challenging.

It is a beautiful, robust balance that God has designed right into the fabric of our families. It is the

perfect epitome of what all leaders in the church should aspire to be. And where there is that balance in our leaders' lives, the church is greatly blessed.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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