



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1313

Matthew 6:9-13

Mark Mitchell

June 17, 2007

Our Fathers Who Are on Earth

FATHER'S DAY

It seems I often allow Father's Day to pass without preaching about fathers. Well, this morning I'm breaking from my norm and speaking both to fathers and about fathers. But if you're not a father or you don't have a father, there should something for you in this, too.

I am going to talk about the responsibilities of fatherhood. I want to talk about what it is that a father is supposed to do. I think there is a certain amount of confusion today in our society over this question. Besides being a part of producing a baby, what do we mean when we say "father?" It's not always that clear.

I was talking to a young father this week. Some time ago I had done the premarital counseling for him and his wife, which takes about six months. He said to me something like this: "I think we should require *parenting* counseling instead of premarital counseling. The adjustment of getting married was nothing compared to the adjustment of becoming a father." He was expressing what a lot of fathers feel. And some of the difficulty comes from simply not knowing what to do.

One of the consequences of this confusion is spiritual in nature. We know that whenever Jesus prayed he called God, "Father." We might say, "Well, of course. He was God's Son. What else would he call him?" But not only did HE address God as Father, he also taught US to call God Father. He said, "When you pray, say this, 'Our Father who is in heaven.'" But there are a lot of people in our society today who have a hard time thinking of God as a Father, much less calling him that. For them, the word Father is hardly a term of endearment; it conjures up images of rejection, anger, absence, and even abuse. The spiritual fallout of confused fathers is a generation of people who are at best ambivalent about the fatherhood of God; people who kind of stutter when they try to address God as their Heavenly Father.

That's why I want us to look again at this prayer that Jesus gave us. We call it the Lord's Prayer but it's really supposed to be our prayer. In this prayer we have a model of fatherhood. In this prayer we're told what a father is to do; what's reasonable for a child to expect. And in this prayer, we learn not to judge fatherhood by our earthly fathers, but rather to judge it by our Heavenly Father. Our Heavenly Father shows us how to be an

earthly father. Not that we can ever replace God, but by reflecting his true fatherhood, we can make it so much easier for our kids to come to God and say that word: Father.

So what do we learn in this prayer about being a father? I want to offer four words that sum it up: priority, provision, pardon, protection.

I. A father's priority is God.

Jesus starts this prayer with these familiar words, "**Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name.**" This isn't what we fathers should expect our children to do for us, but this reflects the most basic priority of a father. A father's priority is God. A father's priority is for the name of God to be hallowed in his life. God's name is more than just a label; God's name is the same thing as his person; his character. When we say "hallowed be your name" we're asking that God himself be set apart as holy in our lives. It means that we don't try to whittle him down to size. There is no one like him. He's glorious, infinite, eternal, righteous, pure and just. Of course, God's name is holy whether we acknowledge it or not, but this is asking that we might keep it holy in our lives.

The most hallowed thing in our lives is the most important thing. When I was a youth pastor many years ago I used to ask the kids in my group, "What is most important to your parents?" I was always a bit surprised by what they said. Most of them said grades were most important. Some said things like money, or work, or how I do in sports. Few of them said God was most important, and most of these kids were in Christian homes! When God's name is hallowed in my life everyone, especially my family, will know that he's the most important thing to me.

Fathers, what would your kids say is important to you? Not what YOU would say, but what they would say. Is the name of God the most hallowed thing in your life? Someone has said, "Truth is caught rather than taught." In other words, you might say that God is most important, you might try to teach your kids that, but they see beneath the surface. They "catch" what's important to you in so many other ways than by what you say. They see

the choices you make with your time and your money. They see what you talk about the most. They see what gets you excited. They see what you say behind people's backs.

That's why it's so important what Jesus says next: **"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."** God's kingdom is his reign, his rule. God is hallowed in our lives when we allow him to rule as king in our hearts; when doing his will takes precedence over doing our will. I was reading this week from Rom. 12:17 where Paul says, **"Never pay back evil to anyone."** I thought, could he really mean that? In essence, Paul says, "Listen, don't take matters in your own hands. Let God take care of it." But how few of us men really do that.

I had a friend who was ripped off of a bunch of money from a former employer. To make matters worse, the guy is a Christian. Nothing happened for a couple of years. Everyone told him to sue the guy's pants off. My friend said, "NO, it would be wrong to sue a brother in Christ. Scripture warns against that. What would that do to the name of God in our community?" Instead, he wrote him a letter. He explained the toll this was taking on his family. He graciously asked him to pay what he was owed. My friend demonstrated that he was more interested in God's will being done than his will and because of that God's name was ultimately hallowed in that situation. Before long he had a check in the mail.

II. A father provides for his children.

The first word is priority. The second word is provision. Jesus says that when you pray to your Heavenly Father you should say, **"Give us this day our daily bread."** It's right for us to expect our Heavenly Father to provide for us. That's his job. Jesus said, *"Don't worry about what you will eat, or drink, or wear. Look at the birds of the air, they don't sow, they don't gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. You're worth so much more than they are"* (Mt. 6:25b-26). This is what our Heavenly Father promises us.

But this is also what an earthly father is called to do for his family. Earthly fathers are the primary means by which our Heavenly Father provides for a family. And usually the food doesn't just appear in the refrigerator; it happens because he works. As a matter of fact, Paul is rather straightforward about this in his letter to Timothy. He says, **"If anyone doesn't provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he's denied the faith and is**

worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8).

As a matter of fact, if you want to encourage your father today, one of the things you might want to say to him is, "Thanks for working so hard. Thanks for providing so well for our family." That's so much better than what dads sometimes hear: "Well, if you only made more money we could buy that or we could go there." Far too often a father is left feeling like he doesn't provide enough.

I actually have a rather traditional view of this. I know there are legitimate exceptions to the rule, but most often God ordains that the father rather than the mother is the primary breadwinner. But, unfortunately, for a lot of men, they somehow think that gives them permission to bury themselves in their work. The call to provide can become an obsession so huge that other responsibilities are neglected. It's important to notice what Jesus says here. He says, "Give us this day our *daily* bread." He doesn't ask for a freezer full of prime rib; he just asks for daily bread. But there is a tendency amongst us men to measure our worth and identity by how MUCH we provide for our families. This is actually the problem Jesus was confronting when he said, "Don't worry about what you will eat or drink or wear." As fathers, we have to balance this responsibility with our responsibility to put God first in our lives. I know men who have denied higher paying jobs or promotions because it would mean having no time left over to do some of the other things God has called them to do. Wise fathers know that their children need more than more stuff.

III. A father pardons his children.

The first word is priority. The second word is provision. The third word is pardon. Jesus says, **"Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors."** Our Heavenly Father is one who pardons, forgives. This is an expression of his love, grace and mercy. A father can provide all the bread in the world for his children, but if he doesn't provide this his children will be well fed but emotionally and spiritually malnourished. The Father pardons. This didn't come without a great cost, for the Father gave his only Son to secure our pardon.

Being a father brings a lot of blessing, a lot of joy, a lot of laughter and fun. But it also costs something to be a father. The biggest cost is not financial, but emotional. Fathers must make an emotional investment in their kids. Kids need affirmation, encouragement, expressions of love. They need to connect with us. Passive fathers, distracted fathers, bitter fathers, insecure fathers, can't do that.

At some point in every father's journey, he'll have to offer what feels like a very costly pardon. Our kids are sinners...like us! Our kids are growing up in a world where I happen to believe it's harder than ever to stay unstained

from the world. As fathers we have hopes and dreams for our kids that sometimes their own sin keeps them from realizing. What do you do then? What do you do when your kid goofed off in high school and so his grades weren't good enough to get into the right college? What do you do when he gets his girlfriend pregnant? What do you do when he gives up the sport you know he could excel at? There is always a temptation for fathers to say we forgive but to hold on to the offense and in what are sometimes the smallest of ways, to withhold love.

On the day before Father's Day, Bill Glass was in North Carolina in a juvenile prison. He ate lunch with three boys. He asked the first boy, "Is your dad coming to see you tomorrow on Father's Day?"

He said, "No, he's not coming."

"Why not?" he asked.

"He's in prison."

He asked the second boy the same question and got the same answer. He asked the third one why his dad wasn't coming, and he said: "He got out of prison about nine months ago, and he's doing good, and I'm proud of my father. He's really going to be a good dad to me, and he's going to go straight."

Bill could tell he was protesting so strongly because something was still wrong. So he said, "How many times has he been here to see you since he got out nine months ago?"

He said, "He hasn't made it out yet."

"Why not?"

"Well, he lives way, way away."

"Where does he live?"

"He lives in Durham."

Glass writes, "Durham was only two hours away. I had come 1,500 miles to visit the boy. His dad couldn't come two hours?"

What was it that kept that father away? Was it that he didn't care? My guess is that it was an unwillingness to forgive; a unwillingness to let go. Of course, the key to being able to do that is understanding how much we ourselves need forgiveness. Fathers who haven't internalized the fact that they've received forgiveness from God and continue to need forgiveness are simply unable to extend forgiveness.

A dad was having one of those evenings when everything goes wrong. The kids were cranky while he was making dinner, so he gave them some hot chocolate to tide them over. His five-year-old son, Timothy, decided to throw his marshmallows at his little sister, knocking her hot chocolate all over her. As she began screaming, the phone rang *and* the doorbell rang. He foolishly answered both—with a screaming kid in the background. He then

returned to the kitchen and hollered at Timothy, and promptly had two crying kids. As dinner began to burn and he deposited his daughter in the bath, he loudly announced that he was so angry he needed a time-out. He closed the door, none too gently, and tried to cool off. Listen to what he says, "Everything changed about ten minutes later when I caught sight of a yellow piece of construction paper sliding under the door. In the unsteady hand of a kindergartner was scrawled a message of grace that pierced my heart and turned me around: "From Timothy. To Dad. I still love you even when you're angry."

Fathers, do you know God still loves you even when you're angry and bitter and selfish? Do you know how much you need forgiveness? From God? From your own kids? If you do, let that forgiveness overflow in your own family. Create a culture of pardon in your home. You lead the way in resentment at the altar and say, "I forgive you. I still love you."

IV. A father protects his children.

The first word is priority. The second word is provision. The third word is pardon. The final word is protection. Jesus says to come to your Heavenly Father and say: "**Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.**" When we pray this, what do we mean? We know that we still DO experience temptation in this life. We know that we ARE touched by evil. So this is not asking that we never be tempted,. Rather, this is the emotional plea of one who fears being tempted beyond his capacity to resist. When we pray this we're saying, "God, I'm weak. Please keep me from the temptation that will overpower me and cause me to sin. Please don't leave me alone in the face of temptation that will overwhelm me." That's a prayer God will answer. We know that he promises, "**No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it**" (1 Cor. 10:13).

Fathers, your children need you to protect them. They need you to look out for them. This is so much more than just physical protection. They need moral and spiritual protection. They need you to be aware of the dangers and evils and seductions that are out there. They need you to be alert and aware of the world they live in. It goes without saying that they won't always see what is out there in the same way you see it. Your daughter may not see the danger in dating a guy five

years older than her, but you do. Your son may not see the danger of playing contact football at ten years of age with coaches who think it's the NFL, but you do. Your teenager might not see the danger of listening to music that is degrading and violent, but you do. And so, fathers need to be willing to be unpopular at times in their homes. We need to be willing to say, "No, I'm not going to allow you to do that. I'm going to protect you."

I started as a father 26 years ago. I was 24 years old. Like my friend, I could have used some pre-parenting counseling. I really didn't know what I was doing. One of the mistakes I made as a young father was I was way too hesitant to say no. It was way too important for me to keep my children happy.

Of course there are fathers who take that to an extreme, and their desire to protect becomes an excuse to control and dominate. There was an article in *The Wall Street Journal* a few years back that contained one of those expressions that's hard to forget: "People want to be lightly governed," the writer said, "by strong governments." Sometimes I think that's the trick to being a dad. We need to be strong, but we need to govern lightly, with gentleness and tenderness. In our protection, we need to be like a policeman on the corner tough enough to handle any neighborhood bully, but who can also hoist a child to his shoulders and help them find their way home. When evil people rise up, we want a father with the clout to back them down. Yet we never want that clout turned on us. Lots of muscle; lots of restraint.

Perhaps our kids want to be lightly governed by strong fathers because that's how God governs. The omnipotent ruler of the universe is also the one who invites us tenderly: "Come unto me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

CONCLUSION

Four words: priority, provision, pardon and protection. This is what our heavenly Father does. In some way, every earthly father falls short of this ideal. You may have or have had an earthly father who didn't even come close, but I want you to know you have a heavenly Father who wants to be for you what he couldn't.

For those of you who are fathers, this is what you're striving for. This is what we mean when we say "father." It's not rocket science, but it's hard work, maybe the hardest work we'll ever do, but with God as our Father any father can do it. The best thing about this is that if we do these things, imperfectly, with all our flaws, mistakes and sins, we can be a reflection to our kids of their perfect Heavenly Father. And they'll be far more able to approach God and say those words, "**Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name.**"